

Life & Times Exhibition

The EY Exhibition Van Gogh and Britain

Tate Britain, London,
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VINCENT IN LONDON

London seems to have been the springboard for Vincent van Gogh's creative genius. He trained as an art dealer at Goupil & Cie in The Hague, coming to the company's Covent Garden office in 1873, aged 20. He lodged in South London, initially in Brixton, and for a short time stayed at 395 Kennington Road, just a few minutes from my old practice in Lambeth Walk. He soaked up London life and loved to read Zola, Balzac, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and, above all, Charles Dickens. This intriguing exhibition opens movingly with a version of *L'Arlésienne* (image right), in which Dickens's *Christmas Stories* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* lie on the table.

He became familiar with the work of British illustrators and printmakers, and also that of Gustav Doré (below is van Gogh's only painting of London, inspired by Doré's engraving of Newgate Prison and said to reflect his own spiritual isolation)

Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *The Prison Courtyard*, 1890. Oil paint on canvas, 800 × 640 mm. © The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.



and his monumental *London: a Pilgrimage*. Whistler's *Nocturnes* and Constable's country landscapes also made a considerable impression on him. Yet he did not start painting until he had unsuccessfully tried his hand at teaching and preaching.

He returned to the Netherlands at the age of 23, where, in 1880, after further unsatisfactory forays into theology and missionary work, his art dealer brother Theo encouraged him to start drawing and painting.

Van Gogh's earliest paintings were almost pastiches of Dutch landscape masters, but, as he absorbed other influences such as Japanese painting, ukiyo-e woodblock prints,



Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *L'Arlésienne*, 1890. Oil paint on canvas, 650 × 540 mm. Collection MASP (São Paulo Museum of Art). Photo credit: João Musa.

and post-impressionist techniques such as pointillism, his style became freer and more vigorous, culminating in the astonishing series of masterpieces that are familiar around the globe.

In his 2 years at Arles he produced around 200 paintings and during his last months, in the asylum at Sainte-Paul de Mausole, in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, he was extraordinarily prolific.

Reflecting its title, the second half of the show examines van Gogh's place in the post-impressionist period and the influences he had on early 20th century British painters, such as Matthew Smith and the Camden group including Walter Sickert and

Harold Gilman. Provence started to become a place of pilgrimage and Augustus John was such an admirer that he took a rented house near the asylum.

There is a slightly fanciful room in the exhibition in which the sunflower paintings are linked to British flower painting more generally and, finally, some garish and unprepossessing canvases by Francis Bacon who was also, apparently, a fan.

It's a pleasure to walk around this exhibition, although I thought it asked more questions than it answered about the dreams, sensibilities, and demons that drove Vincent van Gogh along his extraordinary journey from Stockwell to Saint-Rémy.

Roger Jones,
Editor, *BJGP*.
Email: roger.jones@kcl.ac.uk

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