

VAN GOGH AND THE STARS

01.06.—
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Starry Night, which Vincent van Gogh painted a few metres from here in September 1888, was the fulfilment of a long-held desire. The previous spring, he had written to his friend Émile Bernard: "A starry sky, for example, well – it's a thing that I'd like to try to do," then a few days before painting this masterpiece, he wrote to his sister: "I definitely want to paint a starry sky now. It often seems to me that the night is even more richly coloured than the day". This long planned painting expresses Vincent's interest in the night, an inclination he had developed by reading poems and studying the works of painters he admired.

This exhibition explores the visual culture of the period in which Van Gogh painted this *Night* – on loan from the Musée d'Orsay for this very special occasion – and examines the similarities

Vincent van Gogh – Juliette Agnel – Jean-Michel Alberola – Dove Allouche – Jean-Marie Appriou – Giacomo Balla – Anna-Eva Bergman – Lee Bontecou – Djabril Boukhenâïssi – Antoine Bourdelle – Charbel-joseph H. Boutros – Victor Brauner – Gillian Brett – Frédéric Bruly Bouabré – Carlo Carrà – Frédéric-Auguste Cazals – Maurice Chabas – Jean Chacornac – Gaëlle Choïsne – Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis – Lucien Clergue – Caroline Corbasson – Camille Corot – Tony Cragg – Gustave Doré – James Ensor – Félicie d'Estienne d'Orves – Camille Flammarion – Robert Fludd – Lucio Fontana – Helen Frankenthaler – Gloria Friedmann – Akseli Gallen-Kallela – Augusto Giacometti – Jean-Jacques Grandville – Wenzel Hablik – Thomas Houseago – Victor Hugo – Louise Janin – Eugène Jansson – Vassily Kandinsky – Anish Kapoor – Anselm Kiefer – Paul Klee – Yves Klein – Ivan Klioune – František Kupka – Alicja Kwade – Bertrand Lavier – Kasimir Malevitch – Arturo Martini – Charles Marville – Paul Mignard – Jean-François Millet – Adolphe Monticelli – Mariko Mori – Edvard Munch – Georgia O'Keeffe – Meret Oppenheim – Lioubov Popova – Enrico Prampolini – Ferdinand Quénisset – Odilon Redon – Evariste Richer – Lord Rosse – Raymond Roussel – Warren De La Rue – Franck Scurti – Alexandre Séon – SMITH – Léon Spilliaert – August Strindberg – Bruno Taut – Daniel Tremblay – Étienne Léopold Trouvelot – George Frederic Watts

between this work and those of later artists. The first part is devoted to starry skies and the astronomical culture of the artists, while the second looks at the metaphysical or spiritual ideas that influenced Van Gogh and others who followed him. This exhibition invites us to consider what the Dutch master was suggesting when he wrote to his brother: "but you should know that I'm in the middle of a complicated calculation that results in canvases done quickly one after another but calculated long *beforehand*. And look, when people say they're done too quickly you'll be able to reply that they looked at them too quickly."

Curated by Jean de Loisy and Bice Curiger,
assisted by Margaux Bonopera and Maurine Roy

DARKNESS

Darkness, that original state so close to nothingness... It is the absolute blackness that predates "creation". In the name of the "secret pact between death and night" evoked by Diderot in his essay on painting, enthralled romantic painters made it the subject of a restless revelry. Darkness embraced this journey in anticipation of the burst of light that Van Gogh's century would bring, when the dark veil of the cosmos, probed by the telescope, was torn away before the eyes of artists. From then on, their works celebrated the stars and meteors – observed or imagined, messengers of infinity or evidence of a greater order. Matter from what was once thought to be the void coalesced in the blue; planets appeared, their processions continues to set the pace for human life.

FIRMAMENT

“Things grow larger – there’s
the evening star
Diamonds fill the sky”

Jules Breton cited by Vincent van Gogh
in a letter

Then the stars appeared, that illuminated guide that shepherds, farmers and those familiar with nature observe and know how to read: in it they discovered omens or forecasts, and followed the seasonal calendar of work in the fields. Artists celebrated this cosmic ballet, capturing the rising or setting sun, the two thresholds of the night that signal either rest or the start of work in the fields. Van Gogh admired the painters of nature, who were moved by this permanence, depicting rural scenes as if modernity posed no threat to these timeless cycles.

For the symbolists, the firmament represented an ideal – one that artists should strive to achieve in their verse or on the canvas – in order to reach a higher truth, free from the material world and the sad representation of reality, or worse, of the modern society they wished to oppose.

COSMOS

In the nineteenth century, speculation about the cosmos and its philosophical repercussions reached an ever-wider audience. Amateur astronomical societies multiplied, scientific illustrators became virtuosos, and photography added a decisive pillar to knowledge. This new visual culture became popular, stimulated by the acceleration of discoveries, from the understanding of the structure of the Milky Way at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the popular emotion sparked by

the passage of a comet in 1843 and the discovery of Neptune in 1846, to the mapping of Martian canals in 1877, which gave rise to vast debates on the existence of other inhabited worlds. At the turn of the 1880s, the encyclopaedic *Popular Astronomy* by the "apostle of astronomy" Camille Flammarion enjoyed international success and inspired many artists.

While it is impossible that someone as curious and cultured as Van Gogh could have escaped this scientific fervour at the time he painted his *Starry Night* on the Rhône, there is no evidence that he read Flammarion's texts. However, we do know that he admired Jules Verne and his voyage to the moon as much as Victor Hugo and his cosmic poems.

LIGHTING

“I believe that an abundance of gaslight,
which, after all, is yellow and orange,
intensifies blue, because at night the sky
here seems to me, and it's very funny,
darker than in Paris. And if I ever see Paris
again, I'll try to paint effects of gaslight
on the boulevard.”

Letter from Vincent van Gogh
to his brother Theo

Street lighting became widespread during the middle of the nineteenth century, part of an urban safety issue. By 1840 the whole of London was illuminated by gas; in Paris, it wasn't until 1855 that the capital gained a worldwide reputation as the City of Light. In Arles, work to install urban lighting began in 1881 and was still underway in 1888. Vincent van Gogh painted the banks of the Rhône at a time when these modern lights and their reflections were a novel sight for the people of Arles. In Arles and then in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, he produced a number of paintings depicting the coloured diffraction of artificial light at night.

This new intensity fascinated futurist artists, who celebrated the invigorating potential of the synesthetic city made up of sound, smell, light and movement. Today, the unreasonable proliferation of urban lighting is held responsible for the disappearance of starry skies and the disruption of the biological clock in many living creatures.

THE ASTRONOMER'S CABINET

Imagine yourself in an astronomer's study, accompanied by their thoughts, images and memories... In celebration of daydreaming, with a cup of coffee and a galaxy, Gloria Friedmann's work *Les Images du monde* (Images of the world, 1995) alludes to the fleeting, magical moments when researchers capture the complexity of the universe in an everyday situation.

Reference books, signed engravings, astronomical photographs, a few distinguished objects and works of art reveal the shared fascination of those who have delved into the immensity of the universe since the nineteenth century... But who haunts this panelled cabinet? Is it the great Camille Flammarion, who influenced so many artists and to whom Gustave Doré dedicated a drawing? Or the American astronomer Henrietta Swan Leavitt (1868-1921), of whom artist Jean-Michel Alberola painted two portraits? She went completely unnoticed by her laboratory director, who did not even pay her. Her work on the luminosity of the stars made it possible to measure the distance between galaxies, paving the way for astrophysicist Edwin Hubble, who was able to demonstrate the expansion of the Universe thanks to her...

SPIRALS

In 1846, the learned amateur astronomer William Parsons, alias Lord Rosse, was the first to make accurate drawings of spiral nebulae. His sketches, which have been reproduced in numerous works (notably those by Flammarion), bear a striking resemblance to the sumptuous effect of the *Starry Night* of 1889 – the one at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Although the swirls it displays are very similar in shape to those of Lord Rosse's galaxies, there is no evidence that Vincent was aware of these famous drawings. And yet, the infinite vitality of the universe that he expressed so well still impresses the minds and imaginations of artists today.

Following in Van Gogh's footsteps, avant-garde painters turned their gaze skywards. The orbs and circles they traced would in turn evoke the movement of mysterious heavenly mechanisms, and were often inspired by Vincent's vision.

ETERNITY

**“That doesn't stop me having
a tremendous need for,
shall I say the word — for religion —
so I go outside at night to paint the stars”.**

Letter from Vincent van Gogh
to his brother Theo

Van Gogh's spiritual relationship with the starry skies seems to perpetuate the age-old idea, expressed in numerous theogonies, which sees the cosmos as a divine creation and a dwelling place for the spirits of the dead. In the same vein, one of the most famous astronomers of the nineteenth century, Camille Flammarion, set out to prove the habitability of the planets by the souls of the dead and wanted to create a religion of science. His theories, which combined the fictional and the scientific, met with great success and influenced many artists. They resonate with the words Van Gogh wrote to his brother:

**“Why, I say to myself,
should the spots of light in the firmament
be less accessible
to us than the black spots on the map
of France. Just as we take the train
to go to Tarascon or Rouen,
we take death to go to a star.”**

Many artists, influenced by the writings of Flammarion or by the authors who adopted this theory, depicted this possible celestial migration in their works.

EPILOGUE

Van Gogh's work has taken us on a stellar adventure. Artists and astronauts alike have dreamt of those starry skies! Arthur C. Clarke, in his novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) was drawn, chose to end his hero's journey in a strange room where one of the walls was adorned with a work by Vincent – an indication of just how important the artist has been in defining our common celestial imagination.

Jean-Marie Appriou's *Nebula Watcher* depicts Van Gogh as an astronaut or psychonaut, immersed in the sky or in his thoughts. Like the figures in Egyptian statuary, he brings his leg forward because he was the one who took a decisive step forward in our consciousness, in the image of Neil Armstrong, on Monday 21 July 1969, treading for the first time on previously unknown and inaccessible territory – precisely what artists are supposed to do.

VINCENT VAN GOGH

1853–1890

Vincent van Gogh was born on 30 March 1853, in Groot-Zundert in the Netherlands.

At the age of 16 he moved to The Hague to join the art dealers Goupil & Cie; he went on to work at the company's branches in Brussels, London and Paris. He gradually lost interest in the commercial art world, practising as a lay preacher in Belgium between 1878 and 1879.

In August 1880 Van Gogh decided to become an artist. He wanted to be a painter of everyday life, and, above all, of peasant life, following in the footsteps of artists such as Jean-François Millet, and Adolphe Monticelli from Marseilles, among others. Landscapes and still lifes also became an important part of his practice. He discovered Japanese prints in Paris in 1886 and mixed with the artists involved in the Impressionist movement.

Convinced that colour was the key to modernity, Van Gogh moved to Provence in February 1888. In Arles, he was able to paint in the midst of glorious nature and vibrant light. But he also

wanted to capture the night; six months after his arrival, in September 1888, he produced *Starry Night*, one of his greatest works. The following month, Paul Gauguin joined him in his "yellow house", fulfilling Van Gogh's dream of creating an artistic community in Arles.

But by the end of December their collaboration was over, following a violent argument that led Van Gogh to self-harm. In May 1889, disillusioned and ill, the Dutch painter committed himself to an asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. He stayed for a year, continuing his search for an expressive art based on colour and brush-stroke, and painted a second version of *Starry Night* there. During his 27 months in Provence, he created more than five hundred paintings and drawings.

In May 1890 he moved to Auvers-sur-Oise, where in just over two months he produced the final 74 paintings of an oeuvre that includes more than two thousand works. He died on 29 July 1890 at the age of 37.

FONDATION
VINCENT
VAN GOGH
ARLES

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Open every day, from 10am to 7pm
Last admission at 6.15pm



This exhibition is being held to mark the 10th anniversary of the Fondation Vincent van Gogh Arles. Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, on display until 25 August, is on loan from the Musée d'Orsay as part of the national celebration of 150 years of Impressionism organised by the French Ministry of Culture and the Musée d'Orsay.