

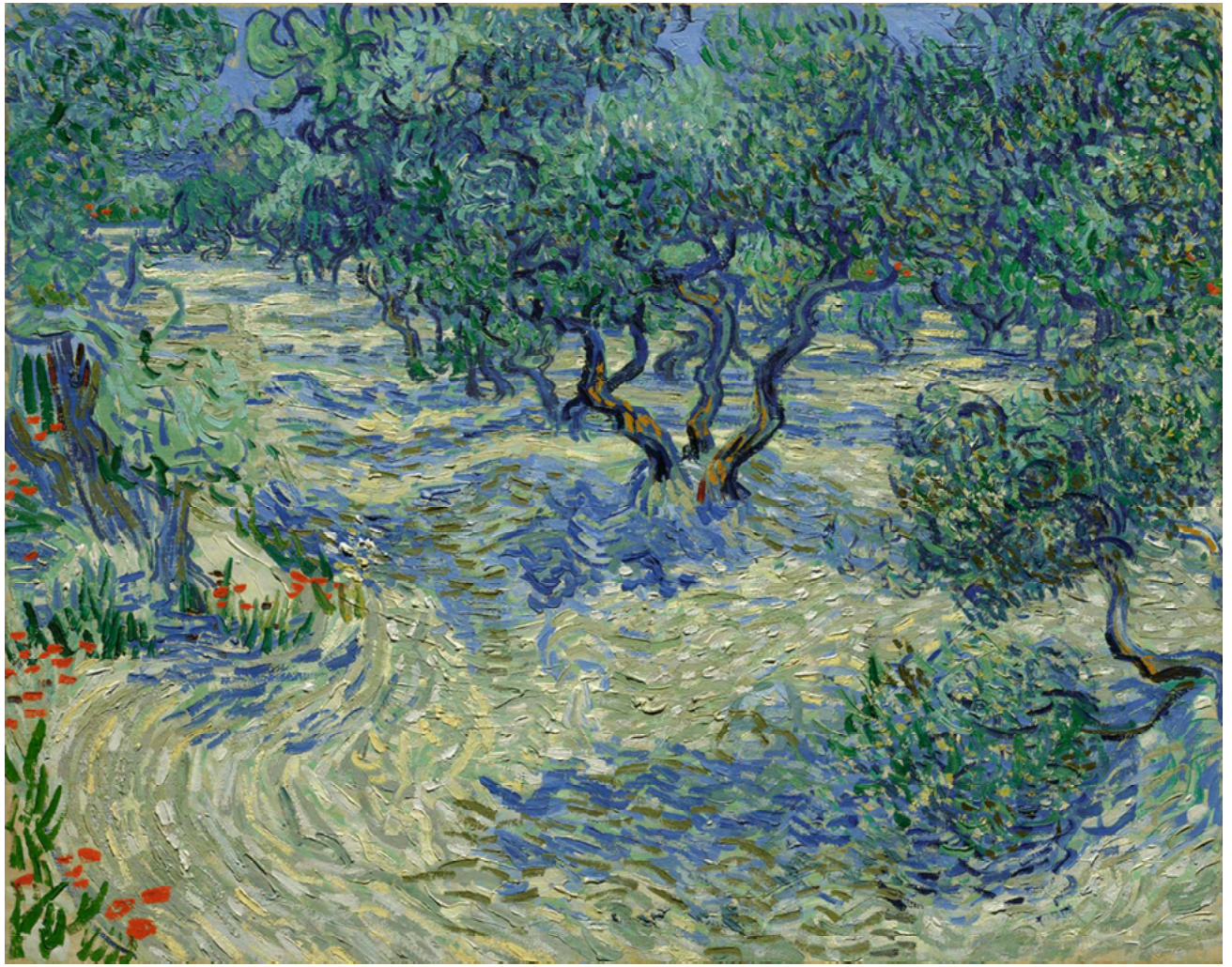
# French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945

The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Editor



4525 Oak Street, Kansas City, Missouri 64111 | [nelson-atkins.org](http://nelson-atkins.org)



## Vincent van Gogh, Olive Trees, June/September 1889

<b>Artist</b>	Vincent van Gogh, Dutch, 1853–1890
<b>Title</b>	<i>Olive Trees</i>
<b>Object Date</b>	June/September 1889
<b>Alternate and Variant Titles</b>	<i>Oliviers; Les Oliviers, effet du matin; Olive Orchard</i>
<b>Medium</b>	Oil on canvas
<b>Dimensions (Unframed)</b>	28 3/4 x 36 1/4 in. (73.0 x 92.1 cm)
<b>Credit Line</b>	The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 32-2

doi: 10.37764/78973.5.738

### Catalogue Entry

#### Citation

##### Chicago:

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, "Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees*, June/September 1889," catalogue entry in Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, ed., *French Paintings, 1600–1945: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art* (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.738.5407>

##### MLA:

Marcereau DeGalan, Aimee. "Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees*, June/September 1889," catalogue entry. *French Paintings, 1600–1945: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, edited by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2021. doi: 10.37764/78973.5.738.5407



Fig. 1. Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Grove*, July 1889, oil on canvas, 28 1/2 x 35 15/16 in. (72.4 x 91.9 cm), Collection Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, the Netherlands, KM 104.278. Photo by Rik Klein Gotink



Fig. 2. Vincent van Gogh, *The Olive Trees*, November 1889, oil on canvas, 28 5/8 x 36 in. (72.6 x 91.4 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1998.325.1. The Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg Collection, Gift of Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg, 1998, Bequest of Walter H. Annenberg, 2002

On or about October 8, 1889, Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) wrote about his *Olive Tree* series to his artist friend Émile Bernard (1868–1941), lamenting, “I haven’t been fortunate this year in making a success of them, but I’ll go back to it; that’s my intention.”<sup>1</sup> Van Gogh painted two groups of olive tree paintings in the summer and fall of 1889 while recuperating at the mental health facility of St.-Paul-de-Mausole near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, in southern France. There, in the last year of his life, he



painted almost 150 works, at least fifteen of which form part of the *Olive Tree* series.<sup>2</sup> The summer pictures, to which the Nelson-Atkins canvas traditionally belongs, include a closely related canvas in Otterlo (Fig. 1). Their overall shared palette of blues, greens, and yellows in loose gestural brushwork reflects the spontaneity of painting directly from nature, as well as the warmth and onset of summer. In November, Van Gogh started a second group of olive tree paintings, including canvases that are now in New York (Fig. 2) and Amsterdam (Fig. 3). Uniting these compositions are their autumnal palette, stippled brushwork, and stylized passages of broken color.<sup>3</sup> Like many other Post-Impressionist painters, Van Gogh built up layers of different colors side by side and on top of one another, allowing two distinct yet closely related colors to mix in the viewer's eye rather than on the canvas. Other than the shared subject matter, the summer and November/December paintings are completely different in their palette and approach. What happened between these periods, and in the course of age-related changes to the Nelson-Atkins painting, has significant bearing on the dating and understanding of its composition.<sup>4</sup>

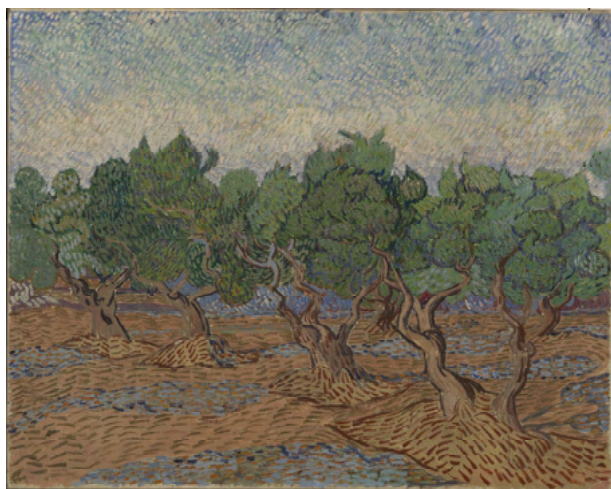


Fig. 3. Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Grove*, second half of November 1889, oil on canvas, 28 5/8 x 36 5/8 in. (73 x 92.5 cm), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), s0045V1962

Van Gogh had painted variants of the same subject before, as he did with the blooming trees and wheat fields in Arles prior to his move to Saint-Rémy in May of 1889. He experimented with style, technique, and color in an attempt to capture the essential features of these subjects, just as he later did with the olive trees. He saw olive trees as emblematic of Provence, but they also held spiritual significance for him.<sup>5</sup> In the expressive power of their ancient and twisted forms, Van Gogh found a

manifestation of the divine force he believed resided in all of nature. The previous summer of 1888, while in Arles with his friend Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Van Gogh had attempted to depict this force literally by painting two canvases featuring Christ with an angel in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Both times, he scraped them off.<sup>6</sup> Van Gogh believed that “thinking and not dreaming was [his] duty,” and he ultimately found a way to depict these trees that carried religious associations without painting something he did not see.<sup>7</sup> It could be said that he looked to nature directly and found his salvation there.

While at Saint-Rémy, Van Gogh was under the care of Dr. Théophile Peyron, a former naval doctor. For the first month of the artist's stay, Peyron insisted he remain inside to rest, so Van Gogh looked out his window to the garden and painted the irises, butterflies, and poppies he saw there.<sup>8</sup> For him, budding flowers symbolized the cycle of life; he saw trees, the landscape, caterpillars, and the emergent cicadas as representative of transformation, something he hoped would happen to him while recuperating.<sup>9</sup> Van Gogh longed to paint outside, beyond the confines of the facility's enclosed courtyard. By the first week of June, Peyron lifted the restrictions, and Van Gogh got his wish.

With a fresh supply of materials from his brother, Theo, Van Gogh started at least five paintings featuring olive trees in or around June 1889, including the Nelson-Atkins picture, which he painted on a commercially pre-primed, standard size 30 canvas.<sup>10</sup> Verdant olive trees and a meandering path rendered in long, curving brushstrokes of gray-green and yellow are bordered by a brilliant row of red poppies. These elements invite viewers into the composition. The vertical wet-into-wet brushstrokes of the path are met by horizontal brushstrokes that articulate the ruggedness of the terrain beneath the trees (Fig. 11 in Conservation Technical Entry). In other areas of the composition, in particular at the far right in the trees (Fig. 17 in Conservation Technical Entry), Van Gogh applied short dabs of fresh yellow paint over longer strokes which had already dried. This is one indication that he painted the composition in two distinct sessions.<sup>11</sup> Dappled spots of sunlight shine between the olive trees, making the heat of southern France feel almost palpable. Without painting the sun, Van Gogh transmitted its energy to his canvas.

The relationships between colors, and how they interact to intensify tones and create harmony, mood, and emotion, were essential to Van Gogh; he was particularly interested in the juxtaposition of complementary colors



(red/green, blue/orange, violet/yellow). He learned about these pairings by looking at the work of Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) and reading Charles Blanc’s *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (1867).<sup>12</sup> Some of these color relationships appear in the Nelson-Atkins canvas: red poppies are set against or in close proximity to green foliage, and brilliant strokes of yellow/orange run alongside blue outlines of select trees.<sup>13</sup> Seemingly missing in this group of complementary pairings, however, is violet and yellow.

Mapping Van Gogh’s palette in the Kansas City picture—tracking the locations where he used specific pigments—is essential for understanding the artist’s original intent. One of many findings through recent X-ray fluorescence spectrometry elemental mapping (MA-XRF), conducted by Mellon science advisor John Twilley and Nelson-Atkins paintings conservator Mary Schafer, revealed that the artist used a mixture of “geranium lake” and zinc white with cobalt and ultramarine blues in the shadows at the base of the olive trees. Because Van Gogh knew that geranium lake had a propensity to fade, he compensated by applying it in greater concentration.<sup>14</sup> This strategy, however, was not sufficient over the long term.<sup>15</sup> Only the blue and zinc white components remain visible, thus yielding blue shadows beneath the trees, where violet was intended to serve as a complement to the nearby yellowish orange strokes in the tree trunks.<sup>16</sup> The discovery of the once-violet shadows connects the painting more firmly to a letter the artist wrote to his sister on June 16, 1889, about a landscape of an olive grove he had “just finished” with gray leaves, “their cast shadows violet on the sun-drenched sand.”<sup>17</sup>

The phrase “just finished” proves troubling.<sup>18</sup> We know that Van Gogh was only allowed to paint outdoors in the first week of June, and this does not seem to allow enough time for him to have realized two successive campaigns of painting, with the earlier layers of paint left undisturbed and no evidence of intermixing of colors. In other words, evidence of wet-over-dry brushwork indicates that Van Gogh applied paint to the canvas again after it was dry (Fig. 14 in Conservation Technical Entry). While it is impossible to determine precisely how much time would be needed for the paint to dry between the artist’s initial campaign, begun no earlier than the first week of June, and a second campaign, it is highly unlikely this could have occurred by June 16, when he wrote the letter to his sister that he had “just finished” the picture. Determining when Van Gogh may have painted the second campaign of the Nelson-Atkins painting is critical to understanding how the picture fits within the *Olive Tree* series.

Many scholars argue that Van Gogh’s more stylized approach to the *Olive Tree* series, associated with the work he undertook in the fall of 1889, was in reaction to a group of imaginative religious paintings recently shared with him by Gauguin and Bernard.<sup>19</sup> It is this author’s contention, however, that Van Gogh’s shift in thinking about approach started earlier. Van Gogh suffered a mental relapse between the first (summer) and second (fall) group of *Olive Tree* pictures. From July 16 until August 22, he could neither write nor paint. By September 5–6, he still had not set foot outside, but he was back at his easel “retouching some studies from this summer . . . with renewed clarity,” as he wrote to Theo.<sup>20</sup> This timing could work for a second campaign of paint on the Nelson-Atkins composition, allowing enough drying time for him to include it in the third group of paintings he sent to Theo (his art dealer as well as his brother) on September 28.<sup>21</sup> Van Gogh’s period of reinvigoration came at the same moment he received an invitation to exhibit with Bernard and Les XX, a group of twenty avant-garde artists founded by attorney Octave Maus, in their next exhibition in Brussels.<sup>22</sup> The exhibitions of Les XX also included a number of symbolist and Neo-Impressionist painters such as Theo van Rysselberghe (Belgian, 1862–1926), Maximilien Luce (1858–1941), Henri-Edmond Cross (1856–1910), and Georges Seurat (1859–1891), all of whom exhibited in the 1889 exhibition and many of whom painted in a pointillist style, with tiny dabs of pure color.<sup>23</sup> In that same letter of September 5–6, Van Gogh continued, “I would really like to exhibit there, while feeling my inferiority alongside so many Belgians who have an enormous amount of talent.”<sup>24</sup> A few days later, on September 10, he revealed to Theo how his newfound clarity affected his approach to painting, his brushwork in particular:

*What a funny thing the touch is, the brushstroke. Out of doors, exposed to the wind, the sun, people’s curiosity, one works as one can, one fills one’s canvas regardless. Yet then one catches the true and the essential—that’s the most difficult thing. But when one returns to this study again after a time, and orders one’s brushstrokes in the direction of the objects—certainly it’s more harmonious and agreeable to see, and one adds to it whatever one has of serenity and smiles.*<sup>25</sup>

All of these ideas, along with the invitation in September to exhibit with Les XX (and his ensuing trepidation about it), were with him at the precise moment he returned to retouch the Nelson-Atkins picture, which includes many passages of short, stippled brushwork. Ordering his brushstrokes “in the direction of the objects,” while a

continuation of his earlier approach that summer, became more definitive in the fall *Olive Tree* paintings. The final state of the Nelson-Atkins composition reflects the artist's effort to work through these ideas well after initiating the project in early June. This positions the Kansas City picture as a transitional painting within the *Olive Tree* series, belonging more to the paintings he completed in the fall rather than the summer pictures.

Regardless of his approach in the *Olive Trees* series, Van Gogh found something eternal in the continuous rhythm of their twisted forms. His undulating brushstrokes of color make the soil come alive with the same energy that animates the branches rustling in the wind. The brushwork in the Nelson-Atkins painting, and in the *Olive Tree* series in general, communicates in a physical way the living force that Van Gogh found within the trees themselves.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 4. Unknown photographer, Adolf Kohner's music room, 1911, photograph, reproduced in Simon Meller, "Köhner Adolf Művészeti Gyűjteménye," *Vasárnapi Ujság* 58, no. 18 (April 30, 1911): 363

The painting remained with Theo van Gogh's widow after his death in 1891 until at least 1905, at which point it went to Berlin and then Vienna by way of two commercial dealers, Paul Cassirer and Carl Moll. By 1910, it was acquired by Hungarian collector Baron Adolf Kohner (1865/6–1937), who hung it over the piano in the yellow-wallpapered music room of his Budapest home, alongside works by Alfred Sisley, Gauguin, Claude Monet, and Eugène Boudin (Fig. 4). When the Nelson-Atkins Museum acquired Van Gogh's *Olive Trees* in 1932 from the dealers Paul Rosenberg and Durand-Ruel, it was only the second public art institution in the United States to obtain a work by the master.<sup>27</sup>

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan

## Notes

1. Vincent van Gogh to Émile Bernard, on or about Tuesday, October 8, 1889, in Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, no. b634 V/1962; published in Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, eds., *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters*, online edition (Amsterdam and The Hague: Van Gogh Museum and Huygens, 2009), <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let809>. All English translations are from this publication.
2. Eleven of these are on size 30 canvases, including the Nelson-Atkins painting.
3. Van Gogh read about the "ton rompu" (broken tone), the "ton vif" (strong tone) and "les tons voisins" (neighboring tones) in Charles Blanc's essay on Delacroix: Charles Blanc, *Les artistes de mon temps* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1876), 65, 69–71, as cited in Van Gogh's letter to his brother Theo from mid-June 1884. See Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let450>.
4. The initial inquiries into this question began with NAMA former associate curator of European painting Nicole Myers, paintings conservator Mary Schafer, and Mellon science advisor John Twilley.
5. In a letter to Theo in April 1889, Van Gogh remarked "Oh my dear Theo, if you saw the olive trees at this time. . . . It is something completely different from one's idea of it in the North—it's a thing of such delicacy—so refined. It is like the looped willows of our Dutch meadows . . . , that is to say, the rustle of an olive grove has something very intimate, something tremendously old about it." Vincent van Gogh, Arles, to Theo van Gogh, April 28, 1889, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let763>.
6. Vincent van Gogh, Arles, to Theo van Gogh, September 21, 1888, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let685>.
7. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, September 21, 1888, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let685>. See also Samantha Friedman, *Van Gogh, Dalí, and Beyond*:

*The World Reimagined*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 15–17.

8. See Vincent van Gogh, *Irises*, 1889, oil on canvas, 29 1/4 x 37 1/8 in. (74.3 x 94.3 cm), J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; and Vincent van Gogh, *Butterflies and Poppies*, May–June 1889, oil on canvas, 13 3/4 x 10 in. (35 cm x 25.5 cm), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
9. One year before checking himself in at Saint-Rémy, Van Gogh referenced Émile Zola's *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*, an 1875 novel about a monk who finds solace in an overgrown garden where a young woman nurses him back to health. This sheds light onto his interest in gardens and his belief in their restorative effect. Jennifer Helvey, *Irises: Vincent van Gogh in the Garden* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Publications, 2009), 96.
10. See the accompanying technical entry by Schafer and Twilley.
11. For further information on this aspect of Van Gogh's painting, see the accompanying technical entry by Schafer and Twilley.
12. The first color of each pair is a primary: red, yellow, and blue. Mixing them produces a secondary color: for example, red and blue make purple. That secondary color is complementary to the primary color that was not used in the mixture. Those primary and secondary colors, such as red and green, reinforce each other when juxtaposed. This phenomenon, known as the law of "simultaneous contrast," was first described by the physicist Michel Eugène Chevreul in 1839 and practiced by the artist Eugène Delacroix. It had a tremendous impact on Van Gogh's palette. See Charles Blanc, *The Grammar of Painting and Engraving*, trans. Kate Newell Doggett, 3rd ed. (1867; repr., New York, Hurd and Houghton, 1879). See also Michel Eugène Chevreul, *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colours and their Applications to the Arts*, trans. Charles Martel (1839; repr., London: Bell, 1916). Van Gogh cites Delacroix numerous times throughout his letters, referencing his interest in Delacroix's use of color. Van Gogh wrote to Theo on April 18, 1885 (Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let494>) and copied a passage out of Charles Blanc on Delacroix that ties these interests together. The passage Van Gogh copied comes from Blanc, *Les artistes de mon temps*, 64–66, 69, as cited in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let494>, n10.
13. Information on the specific pigments was obtained from Schafer and Twilley. See their accompanying technical entry for palette analysis.
14. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, on or about Wednesday, April 11, 1888, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let595>: "All the colors that Impressionism has made fashionable are unstable, all the more reason boldly to use them too raw, time will only soften them too much." Original emphasis.
15. Geranium lake fades more completely when mixed with zinc white, as Van Gogh did at the base of the trees. See the accompanying technical entry by Schafer and Twilley.
16. The more extreme effect of fading occurs in the now mostly white mixtures of the foreground. These and other newly revealed complementary pairings, based on technical analyses of the painting, can be found in the accompanying technical entry by Schafer and Twilley.
17. Ronald Pickvance was the first scholar to associate this letter with the Nelson-Atkins painting. See Ronald Pickvance, *Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, and New York: Abrams, 1986), 293. See also the accompanying technical entry by Schafer and Twilley. Previously, many scholars believed the letter related to an olive tree study the artist painted in June of 1889 (National Gallery of Scotland) that the artist sent to his brother on consignment a month later.
18. Van Gogh felt the canvas was finished on June 16. He set it aside, having either rolled it or stacked it with other unstretched work while still somewhat wet, as evidenced by the presence of canvas weave impressions in the impasto. See accompanying technical entry.
19. In a letter sent to Émile Bernard on or about November 26, Van Gogh chastises him for his imaginative approach to his subject matter and



advises him to start with nature. This is based on a number of religious compositions Bernard had recently shared with Van Gogh. In their respective object labels online, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Van Gogh Museum suggest that their fall *Olive Tree* paintings, with their stylized brushwork, are in response to Gauguin's and Bernard's recent compositions; however, these artists did not send their works to Van Gogh until well after he retouched the Nelson-Atkins composition with short, stippled brushwork. See <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437998> (accessed August 24, 2020) and <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0045V1962> (accessed August 24, 2020). Vincent van Gogh to Émile Bernard, on or about November 26, 1889, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let822>.

20. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Thursday, September 5, to Friday, September 6, 1889, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let800>.
21. Van Gogh sent seven consignments to Theo during his time at Saint-Rémy. The first, on July 15, did not include the Kansas City painting. Scholars including Jansen, Luijten, and Bakker contend that while Van Gogh mentions sending an olive tree composition in this first batch of paintings, it was not a size 30 canvas and therefore could not have been the Nelson-Atkins composition. See Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, to Theo van Gogh, Sunday, July 14, or Monday, July 15, 1889, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let789>. Van Gogh sent the next two batches to Theo in short succession on September 19 and September 28. While it is possible he included the Kansas City painting in the consignment on September 19, this would have only given the canvas a little less than two weeks of drying time, making it more plausible that he included it in the September 28 shipment. See the accompanying technical entry by Schafer and Twilley.
22. He mentions this invitation in the same September 5–6 letter in which he talks about having renewed clarity (Vincent van Gogh to Theo

van Gogh, September 5–6, 1889, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let800>).

23. Theo van Rysselberghe met with Theo van Gogh in Paris in 1889, and Theo showed Van Rysselberghe many of Vincent's paintings. This may have precipitated the invitation for Vincent to exhibit with Les XX the following year. See letter from Theo van Gogh to Vincent van Gogh, Paris, Tuesday, October 22, 1889, in which he mentions this meeting, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let813>.
24. Van Gogh singles out Belgian Symbolist painter Xavier Mellery (1845–1921), who he felt had an enormous amount of talent. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, September 5–6, 1889, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let800>.
25. Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, to Theo van Gogh, Tuesday, September 10, 1889, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let801>.
26. For more on the dynamic force and spiritual essence that Van Gogh saw in trees, see Ralph Skea, *Vincent's Trees: Paintings and Drawings by Van Gogh* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2013), 15; and Vincent van Gogh, Auvers-sur-Oise, to Joseph Isaäcson, May 25, 1890, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/RM21/letter.ht>.
27. The honor of the first goes to the Detroit Institute of Arts, with their 1922 acquisition of Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat* (1887). For more on the history of the Van Gogh painting entering the Nelson-Atkins collection, see my introductory essay, "The Collecting of French Paintings in Kansas City," in this publication.

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## Technical Entry

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### Citation

#### Chicago:

Mary Schafer and John Twilley, "Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees*, June/September 1889," technical entry in Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, ed., *French Paintings, 1600–1945: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art* (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins

Museum of Art, 2021),  
<https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.738.2088>

**MLA:**

Schafer, Mary and John Twilley. "Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees*, June/September 1889," technical entry. *French Paintings, 1600–1945: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, edited by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2021. doi: 10.37764/78973.5.738.2088

*Olive Trees* was executed on a tightly woven, plain weave canvas that corresponds in size to a no. 30 figure standard-format support.<sup>1</sup> While painting in Saint Rémy, Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) would often cut a segment of primed canvas from a larger roll and attach it to a temporary, working frame. Any evidence for this process was removed with the tacking margins when the Nelson-Atkins painting was glue-lined, sometime prior to the 1932 acquisition. Paper now covers the outermost edges, and it is unclear if the current six-member stretcher with mortise and tenon joins is original. The thin, off-white ground layer was commercially applied using lead white containing small additions of both crushed natural barite and lithopone, colored by traces of silica and iron oxides (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 5. Detail of pale mint green layer beneath the foliage on the center left, *Olive Trees* (1889). Courtesy of R. Bruce North.



Fig. 6. Detail of blue painted outlines in the upper trees and additions of light blue paint that expand areas of sky, *Olive Trees* (1889). Courtesy of R. Bruce North.



Fig. 7. Element maps for cobalt (left) and iron (right). Detail of the central tree of *Olive Trees* (center). The elemental maps show the use of cobalt blue to define the central and right tree trunks in the early stages of painting, followed by final outlining strokes of Prussian blue that modify the central trunk.

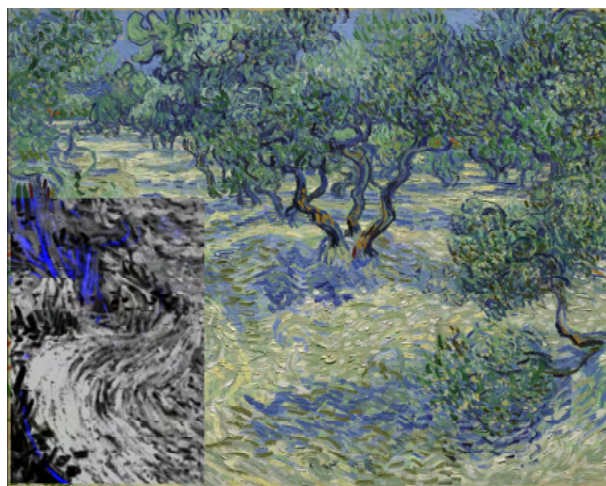


Fig. 8. Element map for cobalt superimposed on that of zinc (lower left), showing the cobalt blue stroke that marks the lower left path





Fig. 9. Detail of a red-violet stroke in the lower layers, visible beneath the blue-gray outline of a distant tree, *Olive Trees* (1889). Courtesy of R. Bruce North.

Above the ground, Van Gogh's first paint applications included an initial lay-in of color to the foreground and painted lines that position several compositional elements.<sup>3</sup> Using thin, pale green paint and loose brushwork, Van Gogh roughly blocked in the lower half of the painting without a reserve for the path, left foliage grouping, or the base of the central trees (Fig. 5). The ground layer remains exposed in the foreground, confirming that this pale green, which varies slightly in color, was not applied as a continuous layer. A number of guiding strokes of fluid, blue paint were used to loosely outline the upper trees. Many of these blue strokes lie on top of light blue sky, indicating that passages of sky were also established in this early stage of painting (Fig. 6). Evidence from XRF elemental mapping suggests that additional components of the composition, now covered by subsequent paint, were similarly outlined.<sup>4</sup> The centermost trunk of the central olive tree, for instance, was initially painted with two linear strokes of cobalt blue, before Van Gogh transformed the trunk into a more angular, twisting form, with final outlines in Prussian blue (Fig. 7). XRF mapping also confirms that a painted line of cobalt blue marked the sweeping, outer edge of the path at the

lower left (Fig. 8). Although the upper half of *Olive Trees* is more densely covered by overlapping strokes, there are occasional glimpses of underlying paint that range in color from pinkish-gray to brighter red. These paint strokes may relate to early positioning of the upper trees and the base of the central tree (Fig. 9). For example, a forked shape beneath the paint of the distant trees may correspond to a tree trunk that was never fully realized.



Fig. 10. Detail of the energetic, curving paint strokes that make up the upper trees, *Olive Trees* (1889)



Fig. 11. Detail of wet-over-wet paint applications in the vermillion poppies at the left edge of *Olive Trees* (1889). Courtesy of R. Bruce North.

Using loose, painterly brushwork and thick, viscous paint, Van Gogh produced a lively, tactile surface in his representation of the olive grove (Fig. 10). Wet-over-wet paint applications are evident throughout the landscape (Fig. 11). While there is intermingling of colors that occurred during their separate applications to the canvas, there are also paint mixtures that were incompletely blended on the palette prior to being applied on the canvas together. The foreground was constructed using somewhat linear, directional strokes whose angles create movement and depict an



undulating terrain. The winding path at lower left is indicated similarly. The viewer's eye is drawn forward along the path and deeper into the trees by their trajectories, creating a sense of perspective in the absence of straight lines or planes. Short, horizontal strokes in the middle distance produce the alternating patches of sunlight and shadow that lie across the ground. The upper trees consist of long, curving strokes, often applied in groupings of a single color (Fig. 10). Dark blue painted outlines, a mixture of ultramarine and Prussian blue, appear to have been added to reinstate definition that had become less distinct over the course of painting (Fig. 6). Collectively, the extensive wet-over-wet brushwork and the presence of debris lodged in the paint indicate that *Olive Trees* was, at least initially, painted en plein air. Plant material encased in paint is evident in several locations (Fig. 12), and a tiny grasshopper is visible on the lower foreground with the aid of magnification (Fig. 13).<sup>5</sup>

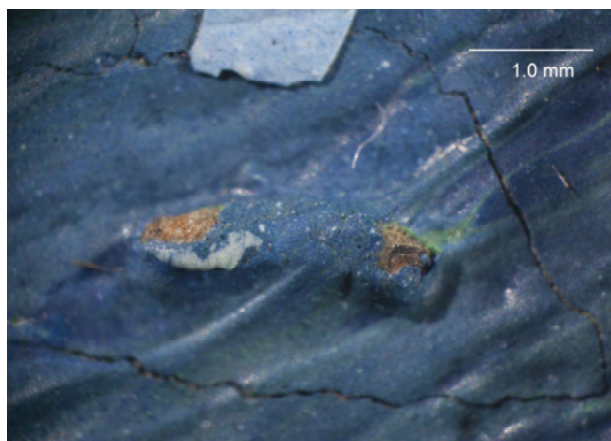


Fig. 12. Photomicrograph of plant material encased in paint, *Olive Trees* (1889)



Fig. 13. Photomicrograph of a grasshopper embedded in the paint of the foreground, *Olive Trees* (1889)

Over the course of painting, Van Gogh made several modifications to the composition. He applied light blue paint on top of existing trees to add or expand areas of the sky, and the width of the lower right tree was cropped on its left side. Distant trees, located near the left horizon line and continuing toward the central trees, were reinforced and adjusted with gray-blue outlines, applied wet-over-dry (Fig. 9).



Fig. 14. Detail of dark olive green, applied wet-over-dry, in the second phase of painting, *Olive Trees* (1889). Courtesy of R. Bruce North.



Fig. 15. Detail of numerous paint losses among the right trees, *Olive Trees* (1889). Courtesy of R. Bruce North.

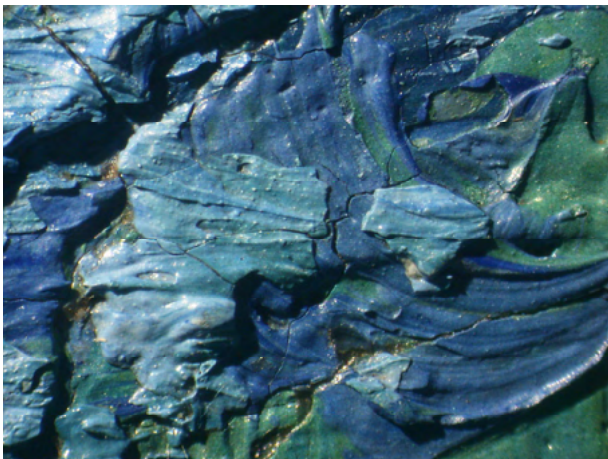


Fig. 16. Photomicrograph of a paint loss and the gritty appearance of the second phase paint, *Olive Trees* (1889), 6x

Other significant artist changes occurred during a later stage of painting. Although Van Gogh began this landscape in June of 1889,<sup>6</sup> the presence of numerous

wet-over-dry additions, paint losses, and a stylistic shift in Van Gogh's brushwork suggest that *Olive Trees* was painted in two distinct sessions and completed in the fall.<sup>7</sup> These later additions had no effect on the impasto of the earlier paint strokes, indicating that the paint surface was solidly dry by the time Van Gogh returned to the canvas (Fig. 14). Poor adhesion between the first and second phase paint is also prevalent (Fig. 15), resulting in losses which expose underlying paint colors. Light-colored mixtures associated with the second phase paint are also characterized by a gritty texture (Fig. 16).<sup>8</sup> While second phase painting in the foreground introduced additions of white, pale blue, yellow, and dark teal, there is no noticeable shift in brushwork from one phase to the next. In the trees, however, Van Gogh disrupted the long curving strokes with later dabs or dashes of paint, a manner of painting that resembles the tighter brushwork and smaller dabs of paint found among his later olive tree paintings produced in the fall of 1889 (Fig. 17).



Fig. 17. Detail of the lower right tree, showing the dabs of paint added in the second phase of painting, *Olive Trees* (1889). Courtesy of R. Bruce North.



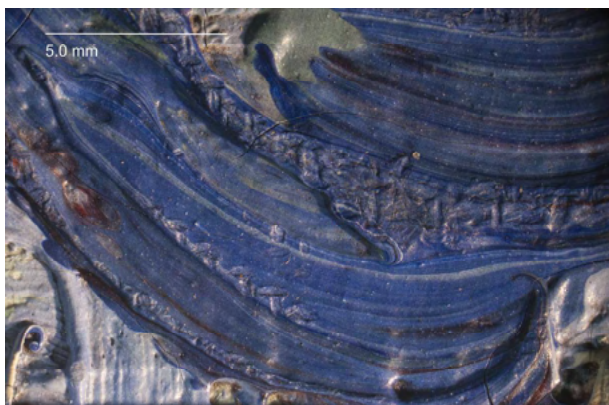


Fig. 18. Photomicrograph of a weave impression made in the first phase paint, located in the shadow of the central tree, *Olive Trees* (1889)

Several canvas weave impressions in the impasto indicate that the painting was rolled or stacked with other works before its surface was fully dry (Fig. 18). These impressions seem to occur exclusively in the first phase paint, reinforcing the observation that Van Gogh set *Olive Trees* aside and resumed painting at a later date. The evidence of two painting phases strengthens the possibility that the Nelson-Atkins painting was shipped with a later consignment of canvases sent to Theo van Gogh in September of 1889.<sup>9,10</sup>

Van Gogh's palette for *Olive Trees* included geranium lake,<sup>11</sup> red lead oxide, vermilion, chrome yellow and chrome orange, viridian (hydrated chrome oxide), emerald green (copper acetoarsenite), synthetic ultramarine, cobalt blue, Prussian blue, and zinc white (see Table 1). Although his paint mixtures for works in the olive trees series incorporated both zinc white and lead white,<sup>12</sup> he used zinc white almost exclusively in this case. Lead white occurrences are so finely dispersed as to suggest that it was a manufacturer's additive in some of the tube colors, probably to enhance the drying of the oils with slow drying pigments, such as ultramarine. Calcite, gypsum, and white clay also occur as additives rather than primary white pigments. Charcoal is used very sparingly in drab greens. Several other pigments are notable for their absence. For example, cadmium yellow was not used, and yellow ochre is encountered only in very dilute yellow mixtures. Red lakes involving alizarin or carmine that he used in other works of the period were omitted.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to producing violet colors, geranium lake was added to blue-green mixtures to render them nearly black. However, it was not the sole means of producing violet shades in a painting that employed no violet pigments. Red lead, used sparingly in the painting, was

mixed to produce dull violet and gray-violet shades that have not faded like those formulated with geranium lake. Often the red lead occurs in the tree trunks in combination with Prussian blue, a mixture that appears flatter, and more opaque, than the mixtures incorporating geranium lake with ultramarine or cobalt blue.

XRF mapping of individual elements offers insights into Van Gogh's use of mixtures but often must be supplemented by other techniques such as scanning electron microscopy (SEM), Raman spectroscopy, Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), and polarized light microscopy (PLM) to differentiate pigments that either share the same elements or are not detectable by XRF mapping (see Table 1). Chromium is present in both chrome yellow and viridian, for example, and a lead response can originate from red lead, lead white, or chrome yellow. Ultramarine, a very important blue within the landscape, has no heavy elements and cannot be mapped under these conditions. PLM was particularly important in locating unfaded remnants of geranium lake.

Pigment Name	Composition	Formula *Elements Detectable using MA-XRF in red
Geranium lake	Eosin dye (tetrabromofluorescein) on aluminum hydroxide	$C_{20}H_{16}O_5Br_4 + Al(OH)_3$
Red lead	Lead tetroxide	$Pb_3O_4$
Vermilion	Mercuric sulfide	$HgS$
Chrome yellow	Lead (II) chromate	$PbCrO_4$
Chrome orange	Basic lead chromate	$PbO \cdot CrO_3$
Yellow ochre	Iron (III) oxide-hydroxide	$Fe(OH)_3$
Viridian	Hydrated chrome (III) oxide dihydrate	$Cr(OH)_3 \cdot 2H_2O$
Emerald green	Copper (II) acetoarsenite	$Cu(C_2H_3O_2)_2 \cdot 3Cu(AsO_2)_2$
Ultramarine (synthetic)	Sodium aluminum silicate zeolite with intercalated sulfur	$3Na_2O_2 \cdot Al_2O_3 \cdot 6SiO_2 \cdot 2Na_2S$ (No elements detected with MA-XRF)
Cobalt blue	Cobalt (II) oxide-aluminum oxide	$CoO \cdot Al_2O_3$ (trace Ni detected)
Prussian blue	Iron (III) hexacyanoferrate (II)	$Fe_4[Fe(CN)_6]_3$
Zinc white	Zinc (II) oxide	$ZnO$
Lead white	Basic lead (II) carbonate	$2PbCO_3 \cdot Pb(OH)_2$
Barite	Barium sulfate (precipitated)	$BaSO_4$
Natural barite	Barium sulfate (crushed rock)	$BaSO_4$
Lithopone	Coprecipitated barium sulfate and zinc sulfide	$BaSO_4 + ZnS$
Calcite	Calcium carbonate	$CaCO_3$
Gypsum	Calcium sulfate dihydrate	$CaSO_4 \cdot 2H_2O$
White clay	Kaolin	$Al_2Si_2O_5(OH)_4$ (No elements detected with MA-XRF)
Charcoal	Carbon black	C (No detection with MA-XRF)

Table 1. List of pigments present on *Olive Trees*, including those in the ground layer, with their compositions and chemical formulas. The elements that can be detected using MA-XRF are shown in red.

XRF mapping demonstrates that viridian and emerald green were seldom combined in the strongest greens, with most foliage being depicted by clusters of strokes based upon either one or the other (Fig. 19). Another important finding is that greens in *Olive Trees* were seldom formulated from yellow-blue mixtures. Only drab olive greens were based upon mixtures of chrome yellow



and ultramarine (with charcoal and red lead). Because zinc white was used for the principal white pigment rather than lead white, the distribution of lead in the paint correlates most often to chrome yellow. The lead map, therefore, helps to differentiate those greens that were modified by blending chrome yellow with viridian from those in which the chromium was introduced solely with viridian.



Fig. 19. Element map for copper (left) and chromium (right). Differences in how Van Gogh employed emerald green (copper map) and viridian (chromium map) are evident by comparison with the green paint strokes in the painting.

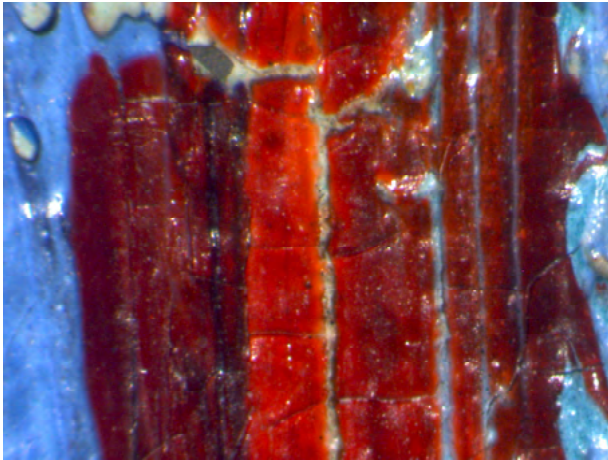


Fig. 20. Photomicrograph of a vertical red stroke of pure geranium lake, *Olive Trees* (1889), 18x

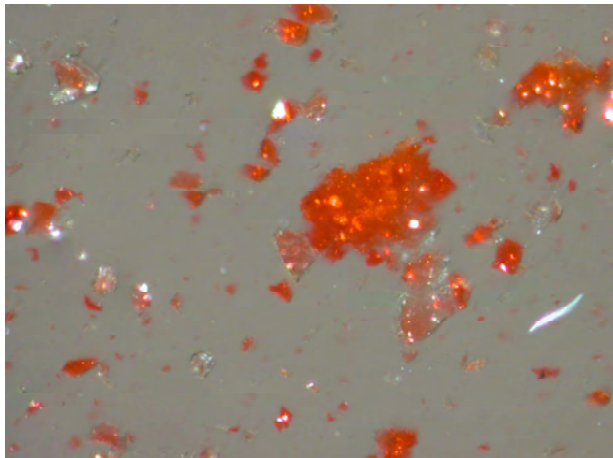


Fig. 21. Dispersed geranium lake with minor lead white additions, transmitted light with crossed polars, 200x

Geranium lake became a component of Van Gogh's palette following his arrival in Arles in 1888, and the importance of this brilliant red cannot be overstated.<sup>14</sup> On the Nelson-Atkins painting, geranium lake, formulated with alum, was used in its pure form to depict a few flowers, vertical shoots (Figs. 20 and 21), and accents on the trunks of the central tree. The red lake is also visible where it was incompletely mixed with other colors, such as the medium blue paint in the shadows below the central tree (Fig. 22). Pigment microscopy, however, has shown that where Van Gogh used geranium lake in mixtures, it has faded nearly completely due to light exposure, resulting in present-day colors that differ substantially from the artist's intentions (Figs. 23-25).<sup>15</sup> They are now dominated by the more stable pigments in the mixture whose colors the geranium lake once modified.

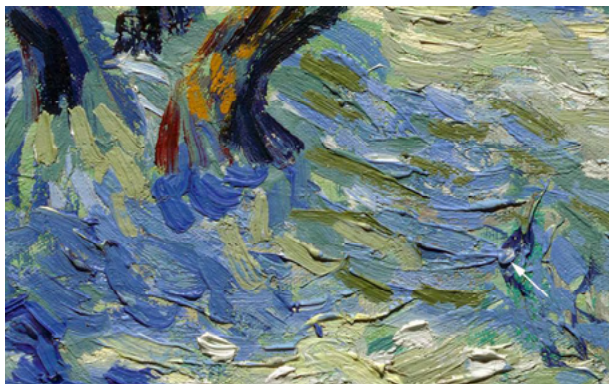


Fig. 22. Detail of blue paint in the shadow to the right of the central tree, *Olive Trees* (1889)

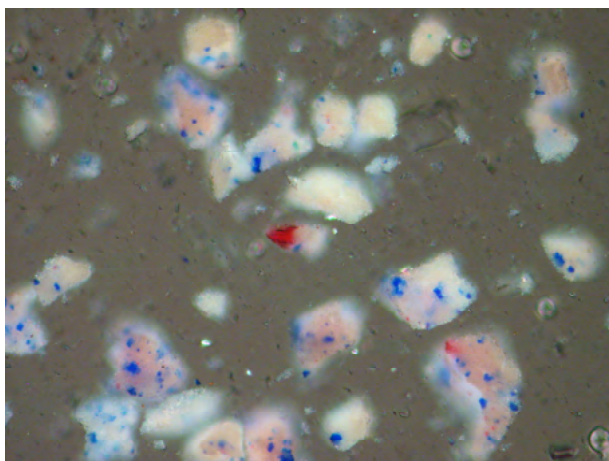


Fig. 23. Dispersed pigments showing ultramarine and geranium lake in zinc white with traces of viridian, used in the shadow strokes in Fig. 22, transmitted light with crossed polars, 200x

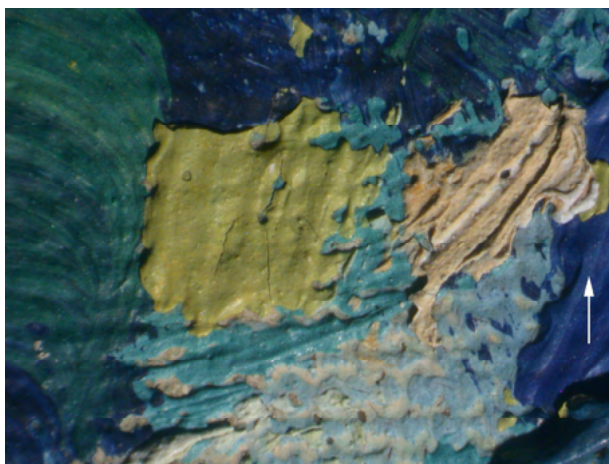


Fig. 24. Photomicrograph of tree foliage on the lower right corner, *Olive Trees* (1889), 6x

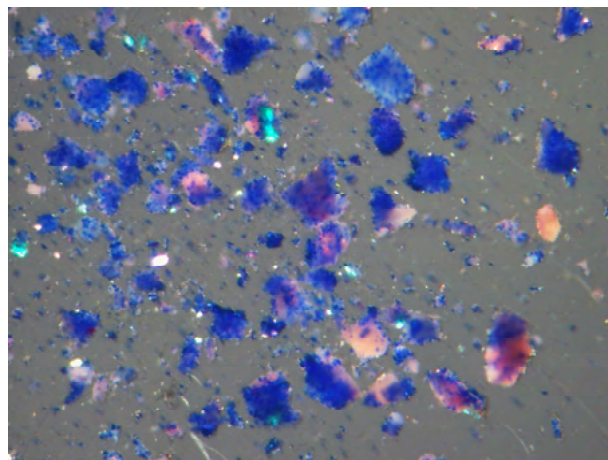


Fig. 25. Partially dispersed pigment from the intense blue stroke in the foliage shown in Fig. 24, a mixture primarily of ultramarine and geranium lake with minor amounts of zinc white and viridian, transmitted light with crossed polars, 100x

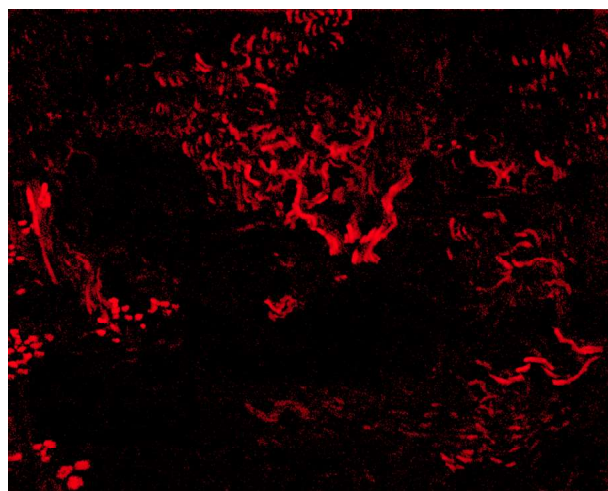


Fig. 26. Elemental map for bromine, showing the distribution of geranium lake, both faded and unfaded, where it can be detected in amounts sufficient to differentiate from admixed pigments.



Fig. 27. Detail of the lower right corner, *Olive Trees* (1889). A loss in the pale blue paint stroke exposes its original, unfaded pink interior.



Unlike some published examples of Van Gogh's work in which geranium lake remains protected under the frame edge, from which its color could be virtually extrapolated to other parts of the painting, *Olive Trees* has no surviving lake mixtures to provide these visual cues. To evaluate the impact of the fading on the color relationships of *Olive Trees*, XRF elemental mapping was conducted to determine the distribution of bromine across the painting. Bromine, prevalent in the eosin dye<sup>16</sup> molecule that is responsible for the color of geranium lake, remains in place in proportion to its amount in the paint mixture even as the color fades (Fig. 26). Pale blue paint strokes throughout the foreground contain this fugitive red lake, and Figure 27 reveals the preserved pink color beneath the paint surface, beyond the reach of light. The juxtaposition of this now-faded pink among the various green brushstrokes of the foreground would have produced a striking interplay of complementary colors and broken tones.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, the blue shadows at the base of the olive trees were once violet in color, a detail that closely connects the Nelson-Atkins painting to a description in Van Gogh's June 1889 letter: "I've just finished a landscape of an olive grove with gray foliage more or less like that of the willows, their cast shadows violet on the sun-drenched sand."<sup>18</sup> These violet shadows would have heightened the yellow tonalities on the adjacent sun-splashed ground.

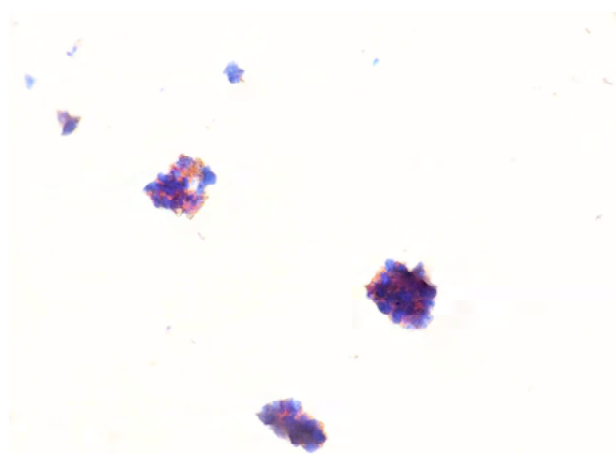


Fig. 28. Partially dispersed pigment from a dark blue stroke in the trees, located at the center of the top edge, showing its high content of unfaded geranium lake in ultramarine, transmitted light, 200x

The fading of the red lake from the paint surface also affects the dark blue paint strokes of the central trees at the top edge, which contain mixtures of ultramarine and geranium lake in nearly equal proportions. This blue

color was once dark violet (Fig. 28). The use of complementary colors to achieve a sense of vibrancy is evident in the tree trunks where pure chrome yellow was placed beside a violet mixture of ultramarine and geranium lake with a small amount of viridian (Fig. 29). Fading of the lake has diminished the optical effect, as ultramarine blue is the dominate color today. A microsample of the violet paint, sheltered from fading by the overlying chrome yellow, reveals its original color (Fig. 30).

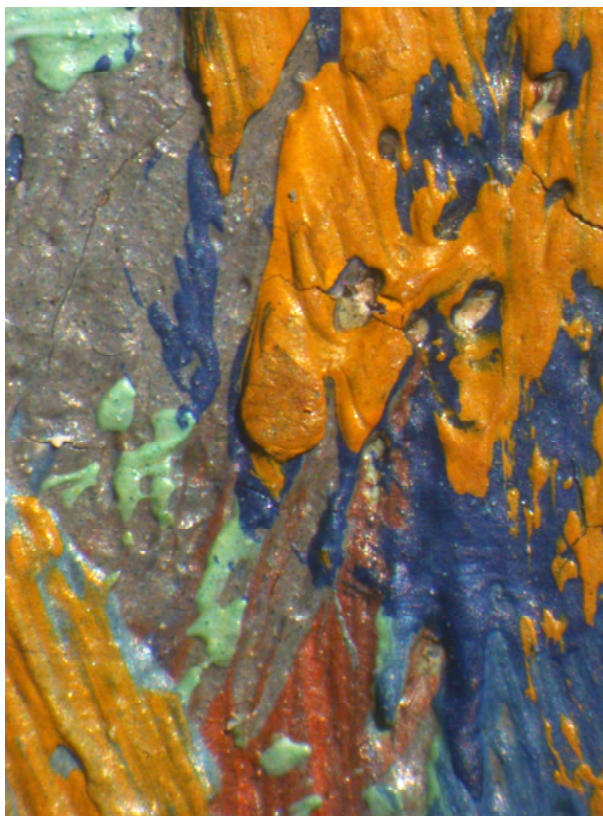


Fig. 29. Photomicrograph of rightmost trunk of the central tree, *Olive Trees* (1889), 12x



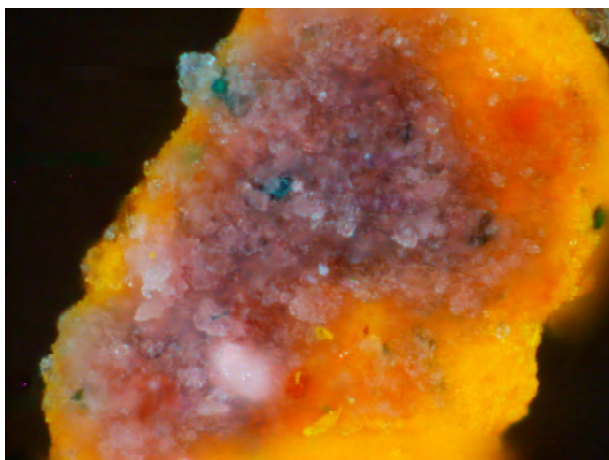


Fig. 30. Microsample of the gray paint protected by the overlapping orange stroke on the central tree trunk, revealing the unfaded, complementary violet color, reflected light, 200x

Numerous paint losses, the majority of which are part of the second phase of painting, are evident across the landscape, concentrated in the lower foreground and upper and right trees. In some cases, the detachment of the paint caused the loss of multiple strokes applied during the second phase (Fig. 15). The highly textured surface of *Olive Trees* effectively distracts from these paint losses, but like the faded geranium lake, their loss impacts the appearance of the landscape. The losses expose underlying paint colors that were not meant to be visible. For example, paint loss in a large section of expanded blue sky on the upper left has exposed the underlying green paint of the trees, effectively undoing this modification by the artist (Fig. 31).

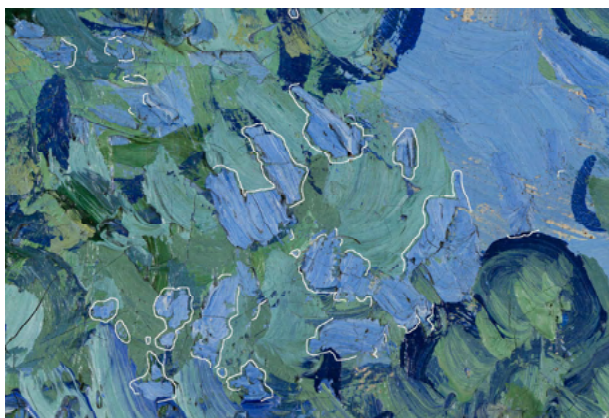


Fig. 31. Detail of second-phase paint losses in the upper left sky, *Olive Trees* (1889). Break edges are annotated with white lines to convey areas of missing blue paint. Courtesy of R. Bruce North.

Despite the important instances of paint loss and color fading, the painting is in stable condition today. Wax fills

and retouching cover its worn, outermost edges and corners. The thin ground layer is abraded in many areas where it was left exposed in the composition, revealing the upper peaks of the canvas weave. When the painting was last treated in 2005, a low concentration of Regalrez varnish was brush-applied to the paint surface, followed by removal of much of the varnish with a dry brush, in an effort to reach an appropriate saturation level while maintaining an unvarnished appearance.<sup>19</sup>

Mary Schafer and John Twilley  
March 2020

## Notes

1. Anthea Callen, *The Art of Impressionism: Painting Technique and the Making of Modernity* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 15.
2. The scientific study of *Olive Trees* was supported by an endowment from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for conservation science at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.
3. No underdrawing was detected using magnified inspection or infrared imaging conducted in the infrared spectrum between wavelengths of 700 – 2200 nanometers.
4. X-ray fluorescence spectrometry elemental mapping was undertaken as part of a collaboration with the Laboratory of Molecular and Structural Archaeology, directed by Philippe Walter (CNRS/Pierre and Marie Curie University, Paris) by which their instrument design and operational software was provided to the authors.
5. The authors are grateful to paleo-entomologist, Dr. Michael S. Engel, senior curator and university distinguished professor, University of Kansas, and associate, American Museum of Natural History, NY. Dr. Engel determined that the disarticulated body fragments (head and hind leg) lodged in the wet paint of *Olive Trees* point to an already dead nymph or a shed exuvium. This fact prohibited the use of the annual seasonal cycle of grasshoppers in the region during 1889 to gain more specificity as to the months in which Van Gogh completed the landscape.
6. See the accompanying catalogue essay by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan.

7. The findings presented include those from an earlier 2012 study with curatorial contributions by Nicole R. Myers, former associate curator, European paintings and sculpture, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.
8. The underlying cause of this granular appearance has not been definitively identified. This distinctive texture is most prevalent among the lighter paint mixtures, and although zinc-fatty acid soap formations are widespread within the paints of both phases, the formations do not protrude through or disrupt the paint surface in those locations where they have been found inside samples. Zinc-fatty acid soaps, formed by reactions between zinc white and free fatty acids present in the oil paint, have been widely cited as a cause of adhesion loss between successive applications of oil paints based on zinc white, as in the case of *Olive Trees*. Crystalline zinc soaps have been found at the interface between the delaminating paint layers in various paintings based on zinc white. See for example L. Raven, M. Bisschoff, M. Leeuwestein, M. Geldof, J.J. Hermans, M. Stols-Witlox, and K. Keune, "Delamination Due to Zinc Soap Formation in an Oil Painting by Piet Mondrian (1872–1944): Conservation Issues and Possible Implications for Treatment," in *Metal Soaps in Art: Conservation and Research*, ed. F. Casadio, K. Keune, P. Noble, A. Van Loon, E. Hendriks, S.A. Centeno, and G. Osmond (Springer Cultural Heritage Science Series, 2019), 343–58.
9. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, September 28, 1889, in Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, no. b656 V/1962; published in Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, eds., *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters* (Amsterdam and The Hague: Van Gogh Museum and Huygens, 2009), no. 806, <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let806/letter.html>. All English translations are from this publication. In footnote 8, the Nelson-Atkins painting is suggested to be the olive grove described in relation to this shipment.
10. A collaborative research project, led by the Dallas Art Museum and Van Gogh Museum, to study all fifteen paintings that comprise the olive tree series is underway and may clarify the chronology and shipment dates of the entire series. Nienke Bakker and Nicole R. Myers, eds., *Van Gogh and the Olive Groves* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, forthcoming).
11. "Lake" pigment is produced by the combination of a soluble dye color with a soluble, usually colorless inorganic compound to produce a colored precipitate that can be handled like a dry pigment and thereafter combined with oil. In some cases, the precipitation was carried out in the presence of a colored carrier so that the dye precipitate coats a particle of another pigment. In 1889 eosin lakes of several varieties were available, including some that were precipitated on red lead for their combined color. However, Van Gogh employed the "geranium" lake whose color was solely that of its eosin content. Eosin was synthesized in 1871. See M.J. Depierre, "Note on the Application of Eosin," *American Chemist* 6–7 (New York: C.F. & W. H. Chandler, 1875), 217.
12. Kathryn A. Dooley, Annalisa Chieli, Aldo Romani, Stijn Legrand, Costanza Miliani, Koen Janssens, and John K. Delaney, "Molecular Fluorescence Imaging Spectroscopy for Mapping Low Concentrations of Red Lake Pigments: Van Gogh's Painting *The Olive Orchard*," *Angewandte Chemie* 59, no. 15 (April 6, 2020): 6046–53.
13. Dooley et al., "Molecular Fluorescence Imaging Spectroscopy," 6050. Tin and calcium associated with these lakes were not associated with the red lake in the Nelson-Atkins *Olive Trees*.
14. Muriel Geldof, Matthijs de Keijzer, Maarten van Bommel, Kathrin Pilz, Johanna Salvant, Henk van Keulen, and Luc Megens, "Van Gogh's Geranium Lake," in *Van Gogh's Studio Practice*, ed. Marije Vellekoop, Muriel Geldof, Ella Hendriks, Leo Jansen, and Alberto de Tagle (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2013), 285–86.
15. All references to specific pigments are based on identification from samples that were examined in the scanning electron microscope, supported with elemental analysis by X-ray spectrometry. Polarized light microscopy was used to screen for compounds not responsive to other tests and to correlate colors to the proportions of mixtures. Confirmatory pigment identifications were carried

out with Raman spectroscopy and Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy.

16. Eosin is a water-soluble, synthetic dye invented in 1871 and soon after adapted to painting use in the form of a “lake” pigment of which there were several varieties. The variety found in *Olive Trees* contains eosin bound to aluminum ions derived from an alum solution. See A. Baeyer, “Ueber eine neue Klasse von Farbstoffen,” *Berichte der Deutschen Chemischen Gesellschaft* 4, no. 2 (1871): 555–58; M. J. Depierre, “Note on the Application of Eosin,” 217; A. H. Allen, *Commercial Organic Analysis*, 2nd ed., vol. 3, part 1 (Philadelphia: P. Blakiston, Son, 1889), 167–73. This “geranium” lake can be markedly faded by light exposure, a detrimental trait already known when employed by Van Gogh. By 1900 its short-lived commercial success was already being referred to in the past tense. See F. H. Jennison, *The Manufacture of Lake Pigments from Artificial Colours* (London: Scott, Greenwood & Son; New York: Van Nostrand, 1900).
17. See the accompanying catalogue essay by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan. For an overview of Van Gogh’s experimentation with color, see Maite van Dijk, “Van Gogh and the Laws of Colour: An Introduction,” in *Van Gogh’s Studio Practice*, 216–25.
18. Vincent van Gogh to Willemien van Gogh, June 16, 1889 in Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, no. b.712 V/1962; as cited in Jansen et al., *Letters*, <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let780/letter.html>.
19. Scott Heffley, December 8, 2005, treatment report, Nelson-Atkins conservation file, 32-2.

## Documentation

### Citation

#### Chicago:

Meghan Gray, “Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees*, June/September 1889,” documentation in Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, ed., *French Paintings, 1600–1945: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of*

*Art* (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.738.4033>

#### MLA:

Gray, Meghan. “Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees*, June/September 1889,” documentation. *French Paintings, 1600–1945: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, edited by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2021. doi: 10.37764/78973.5.738.4033

## Provenance

With the artist, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France, until September 20 or 28, 1889 [1];

To his brother, Theo van Gogh (1857–1891), Paris, 1889–January 25, 1891 [2];

Inherited by his widow, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger (1862–1925), Bussum and Amsterdam, The Netherlands, stock no. 147, as *Olivières /30/effet du matin*, 1891–May 25/June 1905 [3];

Purchased from Bonger by Kunstsalon Paul Cassirer, Berlin, stock no. 6588, as *Olivenbaume*, May 25/June 1905 [4];

Purchased from Cassirer by Carl Moll (1861–1945) for the Galerie H. O. Miethke, Vienna, May 25, 1905–at least January 1906 [5];

Purchased from the Galerie Miethke by Baron Adolf Kohner (1865/6–1937), Budapest, inventory no. K. 27, as *Olajerdő*, by April 24, 1910–October 7, 1930 [6];

[Possibly purchased from Kohner by] Paul Rosenberg and Co., Inc., Paris, London, and New York, no. 2854, as *Les olivières*, by October 7, 1930–January 23, 1932 [7];

Purchased half-share from Rosenberg by Durand-Ruel, Paris, for Durand-Ruel, New York, stock no. 5169, as *Les Olivières*, October 7, 1930–January 23, 1932 [8];

Purchased remainder of share from Rosenberg by Durand-Ruel, New York, January 23, 1932 [9];

Purchased from Durand-Ruel, through Harold Woodbury Parsons and Effie Seachrest, by The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 1932 [10].

#### NOTES:

[1] The artist may have sent the painting to his brother and dealer on or about September 20 or more likely on September 28, 1889. Letters from Vincent van Gogh,

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, to his brother, Theo van Gogh, on or about September 20, 1889, and September 28, 1889, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, inv. nos. b655 a-b V/1962 and b656 V/1962; pub. in Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, eds., *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters; The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*, vol. 5 (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), letter nos. 805 and 806, pp. 100–11.

[2] Van Gogh viewed the consignments of paintings he sent to his brother and dealer, Theo van Gogh, as remuneration for the latter's financial support. Letter from Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to his brother, Theo van Gogh, on or about March 20, 1884, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, inv. nos. b398 V/1962 (sheet 1) and b397 d V/1962 (sheet 2); pub. in Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, eds., *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters; The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*, vol. 3 (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), letter no. 440, pp. 138–40.

[3] Although, formally speaking, Vincent Willem van Gogh (1890–1978) was joint owner of the Van Gogh collection from 1891, his mother, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, managed the collection until her death in 1925. See the inventory of van Gogh's works then in van Gogh-Bonger's collection, Andries Bonger, "Catalogue des œuvres de Vincent van Gogh," 1891, Brieven en Documenten, b 3055 V/1962 (document), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, no. 147, as *Oliviers /30/effet du matin*. For the Cassirer exhibition, see Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, "List of 30 titles and prices of paintings by Vincent van Gogh, made for Cassirer, April 1905," Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Brieven en Documenten, 1905 b 2185 V/1982 (document, inkt, potlood, papier), no. 14-147, as *Olijfbomen*. Cassirer records the purchase of the canvas from Johanna on May 25, 1905 [see note 4], but Johanna records the sale of the canvas to Cassirer in her account book for the month of June 1905; see Theo van Gogh and Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, "Account book of Theo van Gogh and Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, May 21 1889–January 25, 1925," Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Brieven en Documenten, b 2205 V/1982 (boek, inkt op papier), p. 14 line no. 10, stock no. 4, as *Olijven*, and p. 89 line no. 21, as "ontvangen van Paul Cassirer te Berlijn voor 8 gr. En 1 kl. schilderij." Copies in NAMA curatorial files.

[4] See Kunstsalon Paul Cassirer Berlin, *Einkaufsbücher (3) 1903–1919* [book of purchases], May 25, 1905, Paul Cassirer-Walter Feilchenfeldt Archiv, Zurich, p. 44, stock no. 6588, as *Olivenbäume*. Kunstsalon Paul Cassirer Berlin, *Verkaufsbuch (1) October 2, 1903–April 28, 1910*

[stock book of sales], May 1905, Paul Cassirer-Walter Feilchenfeldt Archiv, Zurich, p. 102?, stock no. 6588?.

[5] Call Moll was the artistic director of Galerie H. O. Miethke from 1904–1912.

[6] According to the verso of Kohner's stock card (in a private collection, Hungary), the painting was "Véetett a bécsi Galerie Miethke-cégtől." We take this to mean that Kohner bought the painting from Galerie Miethke in Vienna. See correspondence from Péter Molnos, art historian, Budapest, to Meghan Gray, NAMA, October 4, 2017, NAMA curatorial file. See also inventory case K. 27, inventory loose card reproduced in Judit Geskó, ed., *Van Gogh in Budapest*, exh. cat. (Budapest: Museum of Fine Arts, 2006), 149. Kohner was a regular patron of Galerie Miethke and sold his Old Master collection in March 1908 in order to collect modern artists.

Kohner's birthdate is unclear: The year 1866 is given in Péter Molnos, *Lost Heritage: Hungarian Art Collectors in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest: Kieselbach Gallery and Auction House, 2018), 92; the year 1865 is given in Ilona Sármány-Parsons, "Notes on Patronage of Modernism in the Fine Arts in Vienna and Budapest at the Turn of the Century," *CEU History Department Yearbook* (1993): 151.

In his 1928 catalogue raisonné, J. B. de la Faille erroneously lists Galerie d'Art Barbazanges, Paris, as a constituent, an error that has persisted in other catalogues. See *L'Œuvre de Vincent Van Gogh: Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: Éditions G. Van Oest, 1928), no. 715, pp. 1:203. The Galerie operated from ca. 1910/1911 until ca. 1929, during the time that Adolf Kohner is documented to have owned the painting.

[7] According to Péter Molnos, the painting was exported from Budapest on October 8, 1930, and was likely sent to Paul Rosenberg in Paris. See Péter Molnos, *Aranykorok Romjain: Tanulmányok A Modern Magyar Festészet és Műgyűjtés Történetéből a Kieselbach Galéria Alapításának Huszadik Évfordulójá* (Budapest: Kieselbach Galéria Kereskedelmi Kft., 2015), 107. See also no. 362, Central Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, list of items exported from Budapest, no. 1930/ 3-23., 8 October 1930. Thanks to Péter Molnos for providing a scan of this document, which says, "Bejelentése alapján / K. főigazgató ni. 362. Dr. [Kohner]{underline} Adolf br. (Damjanich-n. / 20.) Iználatlan Van Gogh-féle Olajerdő / c. festményre (Franciaországba ?) x/8". See The Paul Rosenberg Archives, a Gift of Elaine and Alexandre Rosenberg, III.D, Rosenberg Galleries: Miniature Photo and Card Index, ca. 1910–1987, and IV.A.I.a, Liste de Photographies, Paris, [1917–1939] [1940–present], The



Museum of Modern Art, New York. According to Ilda François, secretary to Elaine Rosenberg, Paul Rosenberg must have purchased the painting between June 1929 and November 1930; the exact purchase date is unknown. See also email from Paul-Louis Durand-Ruel and Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie., Paris, to Nicole Myers, NAMA, January 11, 2016, NAMA curatorial file. Durand-Ruel says that Rosenberg purchased the painting for 104,000 Pengos, which was the official Hungarian currency; therefore it is possible that Rosenberg purchased the painting directly from Kohner.

[8] See email from Paul-Louis Durand-Ruel and Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie., Paris, to Nicole Myers, NAMA, January 11, 2016, NAMA curatorial file. Durand-Ruel erroneously records the purchase of the painting by the Kansas City Art Institute. Actually, the painting was sent on approval to NAMA from March 18, 1931 until its purchase in January 1932, where it was placed on view at the Kansas City Art Institute since the museum was not yet built. At this time, a petition spearheaded by local dealer Effie Seachrest (1869–1952) was signed by about 135 people encouraging the museum to purchase the work. See “Petition to purchase Van Gogh *Olive Orchards*,” ca. April 21, 1931, NAMA Archives, William Rockhill Nelson Trust Office Records (RG 80/05), Series II: Objects Offered, 1926–33, box 7, folder 12, Durand-Ruel, 1931–32; and letter from J. C. Nichols to Sybil Brelsford, July 21, 1931, NAMA Archives, William Rockhill Nelson Trust Office Records (RG 80/05), Series I: General Correspondence and Records, 1926–33, box 6, folder 21, University Trustees 1931, f. 2. See also “Pictures remaining in the Art Institute after May 20, 1932,” May 20, 1932, NAMA Archives, William Rockhill Nelson Trust Office Records 1926–33, RG 80/05, Series I, box 02, folder 17, Exhibition at the Kansas City Art Institute, 1932.

[9] See email from Paul-Louis Durand-Ruel and Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie., Paris, to Meghan Gray, NAMA, February 5, 2016, NAMA curatorial file.

[10] “The offer [to Durand-Ruel] was made in answer to petitions to the Trustees signed by at least two hundred admirers urging the purchase of this picture” [see footnote 8]. See “University Trustees Meeting Minutes,” January 12, 1932, NAMA Archives, William Rockhill Nelson Trust Office Records (RG 80/05), Series I: General Correspondence and Records, 1926–33, box 6, folder 20, University Trustees 1932.

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#### Related Works

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Grove*, June 1889, oil in canvas, 28 3/8 x 36 1/4 in. (72 x 92 cm), Kröller-Müller Museum,

Otterlo.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Grove*, June 1889, oil on canvas, 17 3/8 x 23 1/4 in. (44 x 59 in.), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Vincent van Gogh, *The Olive Trees*, June–July, 1889, oil on canvas, 28 5/8 x 36 in. (72.6 x 91.4 cm), Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Orchard*, September 1889, oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 25 5/8 in. (53.5 x 64.5 cm), private collection, Switzerland.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees*, November 1889, oil on canvas, 28 5/8 x 36 1/4 in. (72.7 x 92.1 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees*, November 1889, oil on canvas, 19 1/4 x 24 3/4 in. (51 x 65.2 cm), National Galleries Scotland, Edinburgh.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Grove, Saint-Rémy*, second half of November 1889, oil on canvas, 29 1/8 x 36 5/8 in. (74 x 93 cm), Göteborgs Konstmuseum, Göteborg, Sweden.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees*, second half of November 1889, oil on canvas, 29 x 36 1/2 in. (73.7 x 92.7 cm), The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Grove*, November–December 1889, oil on canvas, 28 5/8 x 36 5/8 in. (73 x 92.5 cm), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees on a Hillside*, November–December 1889, oil on canvas, 13 x 15 3/4 in. (33 x 40 cm), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Grove with Two Olive Pickers*, December 1889, oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 36 1/4 in. (73 x 92 cm), Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

Vincent van Gogh, *Women Picking Olives*, December 15–20, 1889, oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 35 in. (73 x 89 cm), Basil P. and Elise Goulandris, Lausanne.

Vincent van Gogh, *Women Picking Olives*, ca. December 20, 1889, oil on canvas, 28 5/8 x 36 in. (72.7 x 91.4 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Vincent van Gogh, *The Olive Orchard*, ca. December 20, 1889, oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 36 1/4 in. (73 x 92 cm), National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

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#### Preparatory Works

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Grove*, June 1889, reed pen and brown ink on paper, 19 5/8 x 25 5/8 in. (50 x 65 cm), Van

Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees in a Mountain Landscape*, second half of June 1889, pencil, pen, and reed pen on paper, 18 1/2 x 24 5/8 in. (47 x 62.5 cm), Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees with the Alpilles in the Background*, before June 18, 1889, reed pen, brush and black and brown inks over black graphite on bluish laid paper, 9 5/8 x 15 9/16 in. (24.5 x 39.5 cm), Private Collection, France.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees with the Alpilles in the Background*, June 17 or 18, 1889, black chalk, brush, brown ink on paper, 19 5/8 x 25 5/8 in. (50 x 65 cm), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Vincent van Gogh *Three Olive Trees with the Alpilles and Rising Sun I*, October–November 1889, reed pen and brown ink on bluish laid paper, 9 5/8 x 15 9/16 in. (24.5 x 39.5 cm), Private Collection, France.

Vincent van Gogh, *Three Olive Trees with the Alpilles and Rising Sun II*, October–November 1889, reed pen and brown ink on bluish laid paper, 9 11/16 x 15 9/16 in. (24.6 x 39.5 cm), Private Collection, France.

Vincent van Gogh, *Three Olive Trees with the Alpilles and Rising Sun III*, October–November 1889, reed pen and brown ink on bluish laid paper, 9 5/8 x 15 9/16 in. (24.5 x 39.5 cm), Private Collection, France.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Grove with Four Pickers*, December 1889, reed pen and brown ink on bluish laid paper, 9 11/16 x 15 9/16 in. (24.6 x 39.5 cm), Private collection, France.

Vincent van Gogh, *Women Picking Olives*, May–June 1890, pencil on paper, 5 1/4 x 3 3/8 in. (13.4 x 8.5 cm), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

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### Exhibitions

Possibly paintings by Vincent van Gogh, Theo van Gogh's apartment, 8, Cité Pigalle, Paris, end of 1890.

*Vincent Van Gogh*, Museum van Oudheden, Groningen, Netherlands, February 21–26, 1896, no. 40, as *Oliviers*.

van Gogh exhibition, Galerie Vollard, Paris, ca. December 1896–February 1897, no cat., no. 21, as *Jardin des Oliviers*.

*VII. Jahrgang Frühjahr 1905: VII. Ausstellung*, Galerie Paul Cassirer, Berlin, April 29–ca. May 25, 1905, no. 23, as *Olivenbäume*.

*Vincent van Gogh: Kollektiv-Ausstellung*, Galerie H. O. Miethke, Vienna, January 6–31, 1906, no. 44, as *Olivenhain*.

*Internationalen Kunstschau*, Vienna, May–October 1909, room 14, no. 2, as *Olivenhain*.

*Művészház nemzetközi impresszionista kiállításához*, Művészház, Budapest, April 24–June 19, 1910, room 7, no. 4, as *Oliva-erdő*.

*Die Neue Kunst*, Galerie Miethke, Vienna, January–February 9, 1913, no. 19, as *Olivenbäume*.

*A Köztulajdonba vett Műkincsek Első Kiállítása*, Múcsarnok, Budapest, May–July 1919, room 6, no. 7, as *Olajerdő*.

*One Hundred Years of French Painting 1820–1920*, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, March 31–April 28, 1935, no. 64, as *The Olive Grove*.

Possibly *Vincent Van Gogh*, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, June 12–July 10, 1936, hors cat., as *Olive Grove*.

*The Art and Life of Vincent van Gogh: A Loan Exhibition in Aid of American and Dutch War Relief*, Wildenstein, New York, October 6–November 7, 1943, no. 48, as *The Olive Trees*.

*Paintings by Vincent Van Gogh*, John Herron Museum of Art, Indianapolis, November 14–December 12, 1943, hors cat.

*Loan Exhibition of Great Paintings: Five Centuries of Dutch Art [Exposition de Tableaux Célèbres: Cinq Siècles d'Art Hollandais]*, Art Association of Montreal, Canada, March 9–April 9, 1944, no. 129, as *The Olive Trees, Les Oliviers*.

*Revolutionaries in Art: 1846–1946*, Denver Art Museum, November 8–30, 1946, no cat.

*A Loan Exhibition of Six Masters of Post-Impressionism: Benefit of Girl Scout Council of Greater New York*, Wildenstein, New York, April 8–May 8, 1948, no. 67, as *The Olive Grove*.

*Work by Vincent Van Gogh*, Cleveland Museum of Art, November 3–December 12, 1948, no. 22, as *The Olive Trees (Les Oliviers)*.

*Twentieth Anniversary Exhibition: The Beginnings of Modern Painting, France 1800–1910*, Joslyn Memorial Art Museum, Omaha, NE, October 4–November 4, 1951, unnumbered, as *The Olive Grove*.

*Twenty Years of Collecting*, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, December 11–31, 1953, no cat.

*Painters' Painters*, Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, April 16–May 30, 1954, no. 29, as *The Olive Grove*.

*Van Gogh: Loan Exhibition For the Benefit of The Public Education Association*, Wildenstein, New York, March 24–April 30, 1955, no. 51, as *The Olive Trees*.

Possibly *Cubists, Fauves, and Impressionists*, Denver Art Museum, October 1–November 18, 1956, no cat.

*Vincent Van Gogh: A Loan Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings*, Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, July 3–August 4, 1957, no. 14, as *The Olive Trees*.

*An Inaugural Exhibition: El Greco, Rembrandt, Goya, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Picasso*, Milwaukee Art Institute, September 12–October 20, 1957, no. 79, as *Olive Grove*.

*Twenty-fifth Anniversary Exhibition*, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, December 1958, hors cat.

*The Logic of Modern Art: An Exhibition Tracing the Evolution of Modern Painting from Cezanne to 1960*, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, January 19–February 26, 1961, no. 7, as *The Olive Grove*.

*Homage to Effie Seachrest*, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, August 25–October 9, 1966, no. 10, as *The Olive Grove*.

*Vincent van Gogh Exhibition*, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, October 12–December 8, 1985; Nagoya-City Museum, December 19, 1985–February 2, 1986, no. 82, as *Olive Orchard*.

*Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, November 25, 1986–March 22, 1987, no. 12, as *Olive Orchard*.

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Frankfurt, June 8–September 2, 2001, unnumbered, as *Olive Orchard*.

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