

ENGLISH

FLOWER STILL LIFES

VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853-1890)

After lengthy research the Kröller-Müller Museum has another Van Gogh painting to its name: *Still life with meadow flowers and roses*. Its authenticity had been in doubt ever since it was added to the collection in 1974, due to the unusual size of the canvas and the anomalous signature among other things. The work was dismissed in 2003 and has been listed as 'artist: anonymous' ever since. Now, nine years later, a team of researchers from the TU Delft, the University of Antwerp, Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron (DESY) Hamburg, the Van Gogh Museum and the Kröller-Müller Museum has succeeded in confirming its authenticity. The results are now presented in the article *Rehabilitation of a flower still life in the Kröller-Müller Museum and a lost Antwerp painting by Van Gogh*, a prepublication of *Van Gogh Studies 4*. From today, for the first time in its history, the flower piece will be given a prominent position among other works by Vincent van Gogh in the museum's collection.

A brief history of the painting's development and of the voyage of discovery that eventually led to this cutting-edge insight follows.

Paintings are attributed to a specific artist on the basis of a reliable signature or documented provenance. The middle painting of the three shown here – *Still life with meadow flowers and roses* – is an example of how new information can change an attribution. The flower still life is no longer Anonymous, thanks in part to the discovery of a painting that was believed to have been lost.

Vincent van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh left the Netherlands in late November 1885 and travelled via a short stay in Antwerp to Paris, where he arrived in late February 1886. He would stay in Paris for nearly two years, after which he travelled to the south of France (Provence). His brother Theo, who was an art dealer, already lived in Paris and Vincent moved in with him. Naturally the brothers did not send each other letters during this period. Thus, the most important source of information on Van Gogh's work in other periods is lacking for his Parisian period.

At that time, Paris is the undisputed centre of art and Vincent becomes acquainted with the latest French art and with many artists. He is influenced by the things he sees around him and starts experimenting with brighter colours, different styles, techniques and subjects. His Parisian work displays great diversity; he is still searching for his own style. As a consequence, his hand is not always easily identifiable in work from this period, and it is also difficult to date.

Flower still lifes

Van Gogh painted many flower still lifes in Paris. The Kröller-Müller Museum has a number of these floral pieces, three examples of which are shown here: *Roses and peonies* (KM 109.371), *Still life with meadow flowers and roses* (KM100.067), both from 1886, and *Flowers in a blue vase* (KM 107.055) from the following year.

In his Parisian period, flower still lifes are important to Van Gogh for practicing with colours and the application of the paint. According to his brother Theo, in a letter to their mother from July 1886, Vincent was painting flowers mainly in order to 'give fresher colours to his next paintings'. Acquaintances sent him bouquets of flowers to

serve as ‘model’. Gradually a transition can be seen from the darker earth tints to a richer use of colour.

Roses and peonies is dated to around June 1886 on the basis of the flowering seasons of the plants. Besides the colour, the thickly applied paint is also conspicuous. Here it is possible to recognize Van Gogh’s admiration for the Provençal painter Alphonse Monticelli, whose work was showing in various places in Paris.

In an oeuvre catalogue that includes all known works by Van Gogh, about forty flower still lifes are listed. But the editors doubted the authenticity of a number of works and this *Still life with meadow flowers and roses* was one of the pictures in question, particularly due to its size: it is an unusually large work for Van Gogh. When the work appeared in an auction in 1920, where the Kröllers purchased 26 (!) of the 48 Van Gogh paintings, this floral piece was not among their acquisitions. The painting ended up in various private collections and was not included in the Kröller-Müller collection until 1974. The work was purchased with support from the Rembrandt Association and the Prince Bernhard Fund, in order to ‘save it for the nation’.

Ellen Joosten, then senior curator of the museum described the work as both ‘exceptional’ and ‘remarkable’. She found the large size, the abundance of flowers in their lush display of colour and the smooth, ‘rather academic approach’ highly unusual. She probably found the attribution difficult, and she was not alone in that. Later authors also expressed their doubts in the 1990s.

In the 2003 file catalogue – *The paintings of Vincent van Gogh in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum* – new arguments were made, adding to the existing doubts: “but also by the signature, perhaps most importantly by the fact that the paint beneath it has clearly been polished, as if something had to be erased and/or the surface smoothed over before the picture could be signed.” The handwriting also showed some anomalies such as the large ‘e’ and the feet of both ‘n’s, this all seemed to indicate fraud. The work was dismissed and has been listed as ‘artist: anonymous’ ever since. This catalogue mentioned an X-ray image made in 1998 which revealed that the flower

piece was painted over another depiction: a scene with the torsos of two wrestlers grasping each other by the arms. This X-ray continued to fascinate researchers and now, thanks to new technology and close collaboration between various scientific institutions, new insights have come to light. These are presented in a joint article for *Van Gogh Studies 4: New Findings*, whereby the painting can once again be attributed to Van Gogh. Below a brief summary of the history of the origin of the painting.

Antwerp

Van Gogh arrived in Antwerp in late November 1885, but did not enter the art academy as a student until 18 January 1886. As a newcomer he was placed in the evening classes, where students drew plaster models of antique sculptures. Only when he showed some of his paintings to the director of the academy was he allowed to join the regular painting class, where they worked with live models. Part of the course was an exercise to paint a pair of wrestlers. If he passed this exercise he would be admitted to the following phase of the course. His teacher urged him to purchase a large canvas, new brushes and paint, as Vincent wrote in a letter on 22 January. He himself had no money, but Theo enabled him to buy the materials. A week later he wrote he had ‘painted a large thing with two nude torsos – two wrestlers’ and that he was delighted with the result. The scene with two wrestlers corresponds with the prevailing practice at the academy in Antwerp. The wrestlers are depicted in firm, direct brushstrokes that are also known from Van Gogh’s drawings from that period. Years later a fellow student recalled the scene with the wrestlers and Van Gogh painting feverishly and with haste and his thick brushstrokes. The large canvas was a standard format for figure paintings at the academy in Antwerp: that explains this painting’s unusual size for Van Gogh. A month later, Vincent packed his painting equipment and left for Paris.

Paris

In Paris Van Gogh re-used the canvas for another painting. This is typical for Van Gogh; canvases were expensive. This flower piece is painted directly over the wrestlers without an intermediate paint layer. He painted directly over previous works particularly in the period between April 1886 and early 1887. The thicker paint layers thus remain visible and can still be detected with the naked eye in raking light. Various colours of the underlying painting are visible under the microscope.

Van Gogh used large amounts of slow drying (zinc white) paint for the wrestlers, which caused cracks that are distributed over the surface of the later applied paint layers of the flower piece.



Four images showing the distribution of zinc white (ZnO), captured using MA-XRF from the verso at DESY (Hamburg) and the coarser scans at the Kröller-Müller Museum; overlaid with the X-ray image.

When the flower still life arrived in the museum, senior curator Ellen Joosten dated the painting to the early summer of 1886 and there is no reason to question this. These flowers, most of which Van Gogh mentioned in a letter, have an overlapping blooming season from the beginning of June to mid-July and this seems to confirm Joosten's dating of the painting. Van Gogh referred to poppies, cornflowers, forget-me-nots and pink roses. Expert taxonomists have further identified larkspurs, chamomile, calendula, chrysanthemums, asters, oxeye daisies and hydrangeas.

The flower still life was painted in three phases with drying time in between: the upper part was painted first and from life, the lower part was filled in later and a little more roughly and finally he added decorative accents and a few finishing touches including the signature. The upper right location of the signature is exceptional, but was most likely prompted by the composition. The unusually large format of the canvas also presented problems with the composition: the first group of flowers were painted too high, leaving too much space below, which Van Gogh filled with an opulent foreground. His ambition to harmonize the colours was also presumably difficult, and in order to compensate for this he added a few bright red accents, as new nondescript flowers. Van Gogh tried to heighten expression to the last. The final additions were probably added only at the beginning of 1887, when Van Gogh began to exhibit in the café Le Tambourin belonging to his sweetheart Augustina Segatori in Paris. She, however, fell into financial difficulties for which the café and its contents were sold, probably including this work. This would explain why this painting has a vague early provenance.

The new research technique MA-XRF (Macro Scanning X-ray Fluorescence Spectrometry), which can be used both in situ at the museum and far more accurately in an Electron Synchrotron, made it possible to analyse the heavier pigments in both paintings. Both reveal Van Gogh's old and trusted palette. The MA-XRF scan from the back of the painting for zinc also shows that the wrestlers wear loin-cloths and this corresponds to the prevailing practice at the academy in Antwerp, where nudity was not permitted for posing male models

until around 1890. This was in contrast to academies elsewhere. Thanks to the concerted efforts of various organizations and research from different disciplines, it can now be concluded that this flower still life is indeed a work by Vincent van Gogh.

Flowers in a blue vase, the last of the three flower still lifes, is a festive, though less exuberant work of a later date (1887): for want of fresh cut flowers, Van Gogh rested the theme during winter. He used the blue vase for at least three other flower still lifes. The vase and flowers stand out sharply against the light dotted background. This still life is again painted on a previously used canvas (X-ray images revealed a landscape), but this time most of the depiction was scraped off and covered with a ground layer. On top of that, an underdrawing of the vase and some of the flowers was applied in charcoal and pencil. Here too Van Gogh has painted some of the flowers from life and augmented the composition with nondescript flowers. The brushstrokes and lighter colouring of the bouquet indicate an increasing technical ability. The lessons from impressionism and neo-impressionism have now been learnt and incorporated into a personal style.

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- *Rehabilitation of a flower still life in the Kröller-Müller Museum and a lost Antwerp painting by Van Gogh.*
 - *The paintings of Vincent van Gogh in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum.*
- Both are available in the museum shop.

