

UNDERSTANDING EXHIBITIONS AS ART HISTORY

Exhibitions frame how we see, interpret, and appreciate art and its history—roles that public art museums have embraced since the late eighteenth century. Museums, exhibitions, and curators teach both broad and specialist publics about art by recounting rich (hi)stories with clear themes, compelling protagonists, and dynamic arcs and plot-points.

In order to explore the connections between artworks, exhibitions, and art history, students will, as a class, take a curator-led tour of the Cincinnati Museum of Art exhibition *Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth* on **10/27 (Thursday), 11 am-4:30 pm**. Students will depart Denison at **8:30 am** and will return at approximately **7 pm**. Because this trip will require the entire day, students should contact their other faculty to inform them of this absence well before **10/27**.

From this exercise, students will write a 12- to 14-page review of *Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth*. In addition to analyzing some of the works of art on exhibit (note that not all artworks can or should be described in a review), students should scrutinize the exhibition's overall organization and the narrative it presents, in order to interpret the intentions and aims of the curators. In undertaking this review, students should seek to answer such questions as:

- **Wall texts:** What information has been included in the introductory wall panel for the exhibit? Why has that information been included there? What do visitors learn at the outset? How does this text entice the visitor to continue onto the rest of the exhibition? What's the primary story behind or explanation for the exhibition? And what information has been included on the labels accompanying each work of art? What other texts are included throughout the exhibition (e.g., quotations, dates/timelines, artist biographies)? How do these texts explain, describe, and/or compare the works of art? How do the wall texts, as a whole, narrate the exhibition?
- **Artworks:** What artworks are included in the exhibition? Why were those artworks selected (what reasons are noted in the wall texts)? How does the combination of the works of art tell a story? Does that story coincide with, complicate, or even contradict what has been included in the wall texts? Describe key works of art.
- **Display:** Consider the optics of the exhibition. What sightlines are created between works of art? Are the paintings and other works of art displayed too high? Too low? Crowded? Have any walls been left blank? Have individual artworks been highlighted? If so, how? If not, should there have been more attention placed on certain works? Why? (Answering this last question may require additional research.)
- **Organization:** How are the paintings organized? Chronologically? Thematically? In order to facilitate comparisons? Have works by other artists been included? Are the paintings by van Gogh all located in one area? Spread throughout the exhibition? With what painting(s) does this exhibition start? With what painting(s) does it end? How is it obvious that van Gogh is the "protagonist" of this exhibition (other than the exhibition's title)?
- **Supplementary materials:** In addition to paintings, has the exhibition included other media (prints, drawings, posters, etc.)? How do those works of art develop or extend the aims of and arguments made by the exhibition? Is there a website providing additional materials to build upon what the exhibition presents? What about audio tours? What information is included there?

- **Story/Narrative:** How does this exhibition tell a story? How do the display, wall texts, supplementary materials and organization work together to tell that story? For whom is that story intended (a non-specialist public, art historians, students in college-level art history courses)? Is it a compelling story? Or is it banal? Does it offer a clear introduction and conclusion? Does it contain any climactic twists or turns? Or is this a story that has been told and retold? (This requires research.) What new insight or understanding of van Gogh (and other artists) does this exhibition facilitate? (This requires research.) What do different audiences learn by touring this exhibition? What is learned by the broader public? By a specialist art-history audience? By university students?

Weeks thirteen and fourteen will include peer-review workshops. Students should attend these workshops. **All drafts must be submitted along with the final review (to be submitted to Turnitin as a Word file) on Wednesday, 12/7.** Students should include color reproductions of artworks (with appropriate and complete captions) and installation shots of the exhibition (provided that the museum permits photography in the galleries).

For examples of excellent reviews, students are encouraged to consult *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*:

<http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/>