

Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth
Cincinnati Art Museum
15 October 2016–8 January 2017

Catalogue

Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth. Cornelia Homburg, Simon Kelly, and Laura Prins. London: D. Giles Ltd., 2016.

160 pp.; 86 color illustrations; artist biographies; bibliography.

\$45.00

ISBN: 1907804846

The three students' reviews presented here dissect the multiple ways the curators of *Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth* worked to tell a new narrative about the familiar life and art of this canonical artist via the works of art; the object labels and exhibition texts; and the beautifully illustrated and accessibly written catalogue. Each student-author reflects on the formulation and perpetuation of narratives in art history and considers the exhibition as a text, while developing her own perspective and voice in our field.

First Student Review

The mythology around the name “Vincent van Gogh” remains powerful enough to draw crowds to a museum—a reality relied on by the Cincinnati Art Museum in its curation of *Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth*. Cincinnati attempted to acknowledge the myths surrounding the art and life of van Gogh, working to debunk the persistent image of him as a tortured artist. Rather than repeat those myths, the Cincinnati curatorial team looked to his work and that of his predecessors and contemporaries in order to provide a new lens through which to see the evolution of nineteenth-century artistic movements and techniques.

In the foreword to the short but detailed exhibition catalogue, Cameron Kitchin, the museum's director, writes that the curators intended “to contextualize a less-examined body of van Gogh's work and thereby to deepen our understanding of the artist” (97). In the process of contextualizing van Gogh's oeuvre, the exhibit began to piece together a story of his artistic interests and connections to other artists and to his family. Yet the result of these connections was the production of a new legend of van Gogh as an artist dependent on his relationships (both personal and artistic).

Upon entering the exhibition, visitors were immersed in a dimly lit, purple-walled space that recalled an enchanted forest. This fairy tale-like mood dramatically shifted upon one's encountering the first painting: van Gogh's *Girl in the Woods*. Immediately, this painting challenged visitors to rethink van Gogh. Shades of muddy browns blend together in seemingly soft strokes to form the

bases of the trees and the figure of a girl standing on the forest floor (fig. 1). This painting starkly challenged visitors' preconceptions of van Gogh as a painter who produced only brilliantly lit canvases bespeckled with staccato dashes of color. Though this work does not conform to common ideas of van Gogh's style, it effectively led visitors to the work of Barbizon School artists and their many depictions of the forest of Fontainebleau.

The predominantly brown palette of van Gogh's *Girl in the Woods* mirrors those of the Barbizon works that launched the exhibit. In this exposition, visitors encountered several Barbizon paintings from Cincinnati's permanent collection, including one by Jules Dupré. His *Plateau de Belle-Croix* (fôret de Fontainebleau) acted as a centerpiece for the other Barbizon paintings. Dupré's painting seems characteristic of many stylistic qualities more broadly connected to the Barbizon School, from his subject—the forest of Fontainebleau—to the rough painterly quality of the simple, down-to-earth landscape. Dupré's painting features golden and orange tones throughout the leaves of the trees, fading into a darker brown where the leaves give way to trunks, and then shifting to green along the shoreline of the small body of water. Though the detail in the brushstrokes and the weight of the paint on the canvas differ greatly from those in van Gogh's *Girl in the Woods*, the paintings are clearly tied together through the subject matter of forest landscapes and the use of color in the paintings. The curatorial team intended that visitors would make this visual connection: visitors could glimpse van Gogh's painting on the wall just beyond Dupré's. The specter of van Gogh's *Girl in the Woods* hung over the other Barbizon paintings. Here, the wall texts usefully noted van Gogh's reactions to Barbizon; other texts speculate how these paintings (or paintings like these—van Gogh only encountered one of the paintings in the exhibit, a painting by Karl Bodmer) may have influenced him directly or indirectly. The catalogue goes into this discussion of van Gogh and the Barbizon School in even greater depth, explaining that van Gogh was aware of the "enormous success" of the school and believed that his best chance for success was in landscape painting (60). It is these connections between van Gogh and the Barbizon painters, demonstrated early in the exhibition, that led the museum to explore the artist's ties to Impressionist and Post-Impressionist colleagues and collaborators.

Opposite the Dupré was the first of van Gogh's paintings depicting the forest undergrowth (fig. 2). Though *Undergrowth* is still darker than many of van Gogh's better-known pieces, the vivid greens that depict the ivy and tree trunks felt more familiar. The curators' decision to place this painting alone, on a freestanding wall underscored the centrality of van Gogh's art to the entire exhibition. Though the painting still focuses on the forest floor, the ivy crawling up the sides of the trees seems to come to life due to the thick, palpable strokes of the dark green and black paint that envelop the flatter trees. Dashes of blue paint

are mixed in among the greens and browns on the trees and much of the forest floor, and become ever more apparent with careful reflection before the painting. This added color begins to shape the effect the painting has on the viewer, more in the way of the Impressionists than the Barbizon painters.

The wall text accompanying this painting begins to tell the story of van Gogh's personal life beyond his connection to the Barbizon painters, revealing *Undergrowth* to have been painted while he was interred in an asylum in Saint-Rémy. From the depths of this tangled forest, the exhibition plunged visitors into an exploration of van Gogh's personal motivations behind the painting. Beyond the mention of his mental illness and the breakdown that brought him to the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum, connections between this painting and correspondence between van Gogh and his sister Wilhelmina led to a psychobiographical interpretation of this painting. Throughout the exhibition and catalogue, the visitor-cum-reader encountered both the words van Gogh wrote and the images he painted. Letters from van Gogh to his siblings, quoted in the catalogue, connect this particular painting to illness and comfort: "I would try to console myself about it by thinking that illnesses like that are perhaps to man what ivy is to the oak." "With this," writes catalogue contributor Laura Prins, "he meant that the worst things could happen to the best people, but their inner selves would still remain untouched" (97). These connections to illness—both his own mental illness and the more general physical illness referred to in the letter—shaped this painting as not merely part of van Gogh's artistic journey, but part of his personal narrative as well.

Artistically, this painting moved visitors from the Barbizon works to those by the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists who inspired van Gogh. Hung to the left of *Undergrowth*, Camille Pissarro's *Road into the Woods* recalls the Barbizon palette: predominantly yellows and browns with touches of green. The trees, however, blend together in a way that seems more akin to the style of the Impressionists in the sense that it was painted quickly, merely an impression of a moment rather than a belabored and detailed painting. Pissarro was an important teacher to other artists exhibited in the gallery; van Gogh very much admired his work and ideas. In an 1888 letter to his brother Théo, van Gogh writes,

what Pissarro says is true—the effects colors produce through their harmonies or discords should be boldly exaggerated. . . . because the reflection of reality in the mirror, if it was possible to fix it with color and everything—would in no way be a painting, any more than a photograph.¹

Van Gogh's letters played an important role throughout the exhibit, and they helped to construct his biography by illuminating his relationships. Many of the quotes used in the object labels came from van Gogh's letters to his brother, and

¹ Vincent van Gogh to Théo van Gogh, 5 June 1888, in *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, accessed 1 December 2016 <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let620/letter.html>.

even more quotes from these letters were posted on the walls throughout the gallery. This quote situated van Gogh directly in the context of these other artists and presented him as an admirer of Pissarro, further peeling back the layers of influence on his artistic production.

Next to Pissarro's painting was *Interior of a Forest* by Paul Cézanne, which visually testified to the legendary teacher-student relationship between Pissarro and Cézanne. The way the light strikes the center of the painting draws the viewer's eye toward that point. Cézanne's painting also resembles Pissarro's work in how he blends the trees and undergrowth together. In other ways, however, the paintings part paths. The light touches of paint across the canvas surface, coupled with underlying tones of blue, reflect Cézanne's departure from his teacher. Still, the side-by-side placement emphasizes connections between the teacher and his pupil. In this way, these artists are understood not only in relation to van Gogh but to one another, giving the viewer deeper insight into the world of artists in which van Gogh was working. Cézanne, it will be recalled, went on to play the part of teacher to other avant-garde artists: Émile Bernard, Maurice Denis, and Georges Braque admired him. Van Gogh also demonstrated a marked interest in Cézanne. By establishing links between van Gogh and Cézanne, Cézanne and Pissarro, and Pissarro and van Gogh, the exhibit created a richly complex story.

As the exhibit built up this tale of van Gogh's life as narrated through his artistic connections and personal struggles, the styles of other painters became more important in making sense of his artistic decisions. The presentation of his painting *Trees* connected his personal life to his artistic interests and drives. The painting's palette is much brighter than the paintings showcased earlier in the exhibit, with bright greens and pinkish browns dominating most of the canvas. While the subject matter of the painting is similar to others, the whole canvas has been more heavily worked than the artist's *Undergrowth* or *Girl in the Woods*. Inspired by the pointillism of Georges Seurat and other Neo-Impressionists, van Gogh painted this scene over an earlier painting. A new painting, then, has supplanted the old. The artist's growth and maturity, as seen in these two layers, parallels the exhibition's theme of undergrowth. Visitors also learned that one reason van Gogh had for painting this scene over another was his straitened financial situation at the time, which left him without money for supplies. Such a detail reveals the intersections between his personal life and his artistic production.

Though a timeline of van Gogh's life—awkwardly located toward the exhibit's end—usefully recounted his education at the Académie Suisse and his encounters with such artists as Georges Seurat, this chronology tended to emphasize his periods of psychological crisis (fig. 3). The curators' decision to focus on this facet of his life seems questionable. The timeline provides many

details about his relocations and residence with family members, as well as dates of his admission to various hospitals and asylums after mental crises. Every detail included on this fairly minimal and limited timeline, even those that seem obvious to include, such as details about his artistic growth, work toward a certain narrative of van Gogh the man and the painter. When laid out in such a simple format as a timeline, the story may seem to be simply a factual list of important dates in his life, but in reality, this timeline serves as a sort of framework for the anecdotes and connections recounted throughout the exhibit, a way to put them all into the context of the new interpretation being presented in this show.

The exhibition culminates in van Gogh's *Undergrowth with Two Figures* (fig. 4). As part of the museum's permanent collection, it was no secret that the purpose of this exhibit was to contextualize this piece. The exhibit's organization seems rhetorical as much as practical: placing this painting at the end makes it seem as though all the previously shown art led up to the production of this painting so cherished by the Cincinnati Art Museum and the community. The text surrounding the painting focused on a detailed history of the painting and explanation of its preservation. The hints of pink seen on the tree trunks come from the pigment Geranium Lake, which loses its color with time. The wall text explains this and speculates on how this could shape modern day viewers' experience of the painting. Using the Raman spectroscopy technique, the museum was able to digitally reconstruct what it may have looked like when it was first painted (20). The painting, exhibited on its own wall with lengthy text detailing its deterioration and preservation over time, certainly stands out in the gallery. If the painting's placement at the exhibit's end was intended to fill the Cincinnati-area community with pride in their local museum, that pride seems warranted.

While the text accompanying *Undergrowth with Two Figures* includes excerpts of letters between Vincent and Théo van Gogh and some speculation by the curators about van Gogh's personal struggles during the time he painted it, the emphasis of the wall texts is primarily on the work's technical aspects and the history of its preservation. While this interest in the preservation is important in conveying the museum's role and centrality of this work in the collection, it seems to break from the narrative so carefully crafted throughout the rest of the exhibit.

Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth set out to create a new story around van Gogh's life and work and did so in ways that drew visitors into the exhibition. Through the text of his letters to his brother Théo and biographical details about the artist and his struggles, the exhibition successfully tied together paintings by van Gogh and his contemporaries. By assembling this group of works, the curators constructed a narrative around van Gogh's individual artistic growth and the changes in the art community that moves beyond the clichéd narrative of van

Gogh as a tortured artist. The Cincinnati Art Museum challenged visitors to expand their understanding of what they know of this artist.

Second Student Review

The Cincinnati Art Museum orchestrated a thoughtfully constructed exhibition centered around Vincent van Gogh's painting *Undergrowth with Two Figures* (fig. 4). Aptly entitled *Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth*, the exhibit contextualized the painting—which is part of the museum's permanent collection—by including van Gogh's correspondence and paintings, together with works by Barbizon, Impressionist, and Post-Impressionist artists who influenced him. In doing so, the curators created a multifaceted exhibition narrative around the influence of these art movements on van Gogh's works, closely tying that story to the emotional connection of each artist to the forest landscape, and, more specifically, to a part of that landscape often overlooked: the undergrowth.

The Cincinnati curators, as stated in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, meant for their exhibit to “honor this Cincinnati painting . . . by focusing in this exhibition on the importance of the subject of undergrowth to van Gogh's oeuvre, and to those of the artists preceding him” (20). Curator Julie Aronson sought to build a thematic and educational exhibit ending with their uniquely double-square size van Gogh painting, in order to chart the influences on his landscape paintings. While plotting this path, the exhibition at times diverted from its aim to tell a new tale of van Gogh and instead reverted to a more conventional art historical discourse.

The exhibition began with a central wall stenciled in bright yellow with the title *Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth*, walkways permitting entry into the galleries from two directions, dark purple walls, and dim lights that effectively cast shadows in a way that reminded the visitor of dappled sunlight in a forest (fig. 5). At the outset, visitors read documents intended to guide them through the paintings and artists displayed there, such as background information on the Barbizon School and the exhibition's extensive incorporation of van Gogh's correspondence with his brother, the art dealer Théo van Gogh.

Beginning with artists of the Barbizon School and their depictions of undergrowth in the forest of Fontainebleau, the exhibition featured works by Jean-François Millet, Théodore Rousseau, and Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Peña. The Barbizon artists produced direct studies of nature in and around Fontainebleau, wielding their paintbrushes to capture nature in minute detail.² The Barbizon forest scenes easily connected to van Gogh's paintings of nature and undergrowth, which, as Cornelia Homburg writes in a highly informative (albeit abbreviated)

² Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *Nineteenth-Century European Art* (London: Laurence King, 2012), 238.

catalogue essay, show how he sought “to establish himself as a painter of rural life, following in the footsteps of the painters of the Barbizon” (59).

In addition to illustrating van Gogh’s predilection for painting rural France, the exhibition also highlighted how van Gogh emotionally immersed himself in his scenes of nature. In 1882, in a charged letter to his brother expressing his almost spiritual reverence for nature, van Gogh wrote that “in all of nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul, as it were.”³ Van Gogh here summarizes how he viewed the artist as burdened with a duty to “to infuse his views of nature with a humanizing element and evoke an emotional response in the viewer” (60). Further excerpts of correspondence between Vincent and Théo throughout the exhibition illustrated the former’s almost pantheistic worship of nature. Of his rambles in the French countryside in and around Barbizon, for instance, van Gogh writes that there “at least one feels really alive. . . . And to feel—this has always been so and always will be.”⁴ Such documentation effectively tied the Barbizon School and their studies of nature to that of van Gogh.

While the walls text throughout the exhibition worked to establish the emotional bond of van Gogh to nature and to connect his words to his art, the format in which they were presented in the gallery made reading them a challenge: English translations overlay a fainter imprint of van Gogh’s script on clear plastic panels mounted on the walls (fig. 6). While a creative stylistic choice, this format, when combined with the lighting, created shadows on the wall behind the text, thus making these excerpts difficult to read. Still, these records were instrumental in deepening the connection of the works as visual representations of van Gogh’s experiences in nature. For example, two small paintings (*The Dreamer* by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, and *Trees on a Slope* by van Gogh) were placed on a wall juxtaposed with a panel of text that reads “You listen to that still voice of nature, and nature becomes a little less hostile; ultimately, you are her friend.”⁵ Depicting this friendship forged between man and nature, Corot’s *The Dreamer* is a black-and-white print of a tree shadowing a small human figure. While the figure is stationary, the lines of the print portray the tree almost in motion, as it leans toward the figure as if to absorb it into the forest. The print illustrates the desire to immerse oneself in nature in order to understand and then portray it best. Van Gogh’s own painting *Two Trees on a Slope* uses pastel colors bring a sense of lightness and joy at the experience of being in nature.

Following the entrance wall and introductory texts were the first paintings in the exhibition by the Barbizon artists. These paintings burrowed further into the “undergrowth” of the exhibition, starting with a painting by Barbizon painter

³ Vincent van Gogh to Théo van Gogh, 10 December 1882, letter 292.

⁴ Vincent van Gogh to Théo van Gogh, 22 September 1885, letter 509.

⁵ Vincent van Gogh to Théo van Gogh, 15 October 1883, letter 396.

Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Peña entitled *Forest of Fontainebleau*. The painting, which captures a peaceful moment in nature, is a beautifully rendered study of the sunny interior of the forest of Fontainebleau and illustrates the values important to Barbizon artists. The sun shines through the leafy treetops framing the upper part of the painting, and the light falls on the trunks of the trees, drawing the viewer's eye down toward the sunlit grass. The eye follows the light through the tops of the trees, down the tree trunks, and across the grass; shades of bright white are echoed by light grays of the birch bark on the trees. This dappled play of light and shadow across the tree trunks is paralleled by the blue tints of the shadows seen in the crystalline blue sky, all of which produces a unified composition.

Diaz de la Peña made extensive use of impasto, described by the museum as "thick oil paint applied to a canvas or panel that stands in relief from the surface and retains the marks of the brush or palette knife."⁶ The thickly applied impasto used in this painting is immediately noticeable, but, on closer inspection, one realizes that the impasto has been most heavily used to emphasize the play of light on the textures of the tree bark and leaves. This adds further realism to the depiction of nature, but also a sense of the immediacy of the experience.

The inclusion of Diaz de la Peña's work in the context of van Gogh's art is significant not only in illustrating the developments that the exhibition traces in the artistic, historical, and literal buildup within the exhibition to *Undergrowth with Two Figures*, but also because van Gogh discusses Diaz de la Peña's work in a letter to his brother. Van Gogh notes the elder artist's technique, comparing it to a tapestry "flecked in the same manner as a Diaz . . . red-brown, pink, creamy white, black, forget-me-not blue and bottle green."⁷ Showing van Gogh's appreciation of the technical execution of Diaz de la Peña adds further depth to the viewer's understanding of the stylistic choices the former made in his paintings, especially those in *Undergrowth with Two Figures* (fig. 4). Van Gogh extends and exaggerates the impasto technique used by Diaz de la Peña, thus making evident the path plotted by the exhibition as it works to trace the evolution of artistic styles.

From Diaz de la Peña's painting, the exhibition transitions to paintings of undergrowth by the Impressionists, whose own concerns around light and color were reflected in their highly individualistic works. One such painting is *Road in the Wood in the Summer* by Camille Pissarro (fig. 7). An iconic Impressionist painting in its study of the momentary effects of light, atmosphere, and color in the landscape, *Road in the Wood in the Summer* exemplifies how the Impressionist approach could produce an equally airy and almost blurry composition. This painting vividly shows how artists began to experiment with different styles of mark-making to express the momentary impression.

⁶ The Cincinnati Museum of Art, image a015.

⁷ Vincent van Gogh to Théo van Gogh, 23 May 1889, letter 776.

Using small, soft brushstrokes, Pissarro emphasizes the airiness of the woods and sunlight. Van Gogh appreciated the peacefulness of Pissarro's landscapes, writing in another letter to Théo that "under the stronger sun, I have found what Pissarro said to be true. . . . The simplicity, the bleaching-out, the solemnity of great effects of sunlight."⁸ Interestingly, and in accordance with the exhibit's themes, the subject of this painting is the undergrowth and the forest, yet Pissarro's style varies greatly from that of Diaz de la Peña and even van Gogh.

At this point in the exhibition, the curators included van Gogh's *Tree Trunks in the Grass* (fig. 8), as a way to juxtapose his technique with that of Impressionists such as Pissarro. This pairing effectively showed how van Gogh came to be influenced by both Barbizon studies of undergrowth and nature and Impressionist paintings that capture momentary experiences. *Tree Trunks in the Grass* depicts two tree trunks in the foreground, painted in distinctly contrasting slashes of brown and white. As the eye follows the movement of the trees, it intersects with what is either a blue road or a river flowing horizontally across the painting and through the woods. The blue of the horizontal line is echoed in the flowers in the grass and in the shadows of the trees. The small dots of the flowers and the short lines of the grass, both painted in soft colors, lead the eye through the darker vertical lines of trees. The overall impact of the painting is the depiction of a forest floor vibrating with life.

Van Gogh's retreat to, and careful recording of nature may be seen in his depiction of the details of the tree bark twisting up the trunk, and the flowers growing in the shadow of the trees, receding to the flowing river in the background. The colors and brushstrokes used for the different elements illustrate van Gogh's particular way of capturing his subjective, fleeting experiences of the natural environment. Once more, such detailed and highly individual treatment of the landscape illustrates the combined influence of the Barbizon School and Impressionism.

The thickly encrusted surfaces, literally covered in layers of paint and metaphorically coated with emotion, seen in *Tree Trunks in the Grass* are also prevalent in the final, culminating painting of the exhibition, *Undergrowth with Two Figures*. Both paintings feature multiple tree trunks that create a rhythm of vertical dark lines juxtaposed with the softer undergrowth of grass. In both, van Gogh utilizes vivid colors, especially blue to highlight shadows and texture on the trees.

In *Undergrowth with Two Figures*, however, the viewer feels simultaneously separate from yet suffocated by the density of the trees. The broad horizontal canvas allows van Gogh to paint many trees in rows receding into the distance in ragged lines. Perfectly framed between several trees (and positioned

⁸ Vincent van Gogh to Théo van Gogh, 17 October 1888, letter 707

rather unnaturally) stand a man and woman. The two are in line with the trees, and while not central to the composition, become the focus of the painting. It is through this couple that the viewer attempts to enter both the knotty forest and the equally thorny psyche of the artist. The composition is unsettlingly foreshortened, with dark sky between the crowded lines of trees in the background and cropped trees whose endless rows of trunks create an unsettling space that is somehow infinite yet enclosed. What is so unsettling here is that, though the painting depicts the outdoors, the viewer seems to enter a cramped nocturnal scene. The dark colors used to outline the trees further emphasize their harsh lines against the vivid and colorful slashes of the grass. The faceless, spectral couple standing in the midst of the forest create an emotional imbalance in the composition, as the viewer cannot identify with them. The dark colors, tightly enclosed space, and ominous, faceless couple create a feeling of being surrounded by a forest very much alive and even watching the viewer as much as the viewer watches it.

Undergrowth with Two Figures, then, is a grim depiction of nature and the undergrowth. In a letter to his brother Théo, van Gogh described his intention to paint “the undergrowth, violet trunks of poplars which cross the landscape perpendicularly like columns. The depths of the undergrowth are blue, and under the big trunks the flowery meadow, white, pink, yellow, green, long russet grasses and flowers.”⁹ Not only is his appreciation for nature illustrated by such correspondence, but so is his fabled love of color. The landscape was one of the twelve paintings van Gogh produced in the last six weeks before his suicide, when he “created the peculiar yet breathtaking masterpiece” now housed in Cincinnati (10).

The exhibition deliberately laid out a path to illustrate van Gogh’s intentions and influences. Using the common theme of undergrowth and paintings by artists who inspired van Gogh’s own oeuvre, the curators turned to the undergrowth—an area of the forest easily overlooked and an area of van Gogh’s output that could also be overlooked—so as to provide a focused context for the central work, *Undergrowth with Two Figures*. While the exhibit tried to combat the audience’s likely preconceptions of van Gogh as a “mad” or “genius” artist, by deliberately including more factual information about the artistic movements that influenced him, it at times fell short of replacing those myths with a distinct narrative—unless the story was that van Gogh was simply one of many artists who painted the French landscape. It confirms, through its inclusion of a few Impressionist paintings, that van Gogh painted at the same time as other artists working en plein air. The connections between van Gogh and his Impressionist counterparts were well illustrated by pairing a painting by an Impressionist artist—Pissarro, Renoir, or Cézanne—with a work or letter from van Gogh (fig.

⁹ Vincent van Gogh to Théo van Gogh, 2 July 1890, letter 896.

9). It was almost as though, because the exhibition began with the Barbizon School in the 1830s and ended with van Gogh's final works in 1890, the exhibit itself chronicled the teleology of European art. Following this temporal construct, it makes sense that the Barbizon School, with its tradition of venturing out into the wilderness to paint, launched the exhibition into its exploration of how van Gogh inserted himself into the landscape and the tradition of landscape painting.

Yet the discussion of Impressionism, Symbolism, and Neo-Impressionism that evolved from the Barbizon artists, and their respective theoretical (as opposed to stylistic) influences on van Gogh, could have been further developed. For instance, the Symbolists' collective interest in spiritual or metaphysical reality removed from the material, presumably led them to see nature in a different manner than those associated with the Barbizon School.¹⁰ Out of anarchist sympathies, the Neo-Impressionists under Georges Seurat (one of his works was included in the exhibit), employ their staccato brushstrokes and in more static compositions to capture the working classes in their rare moments of leisure in nature.¹¹ More could have been done to make explicit the similarities and differences between these movements' ideas of nature and those of van Gogh. While this exhibit surveyed the undergrowth painted by van Gogh and his predecessors, it could have more thoroughly documented the ideological or theoretical cross-currents between them. One hesitates to think that *Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth* will dispel the myths around van Gogh: still more light remains to be shed on his art.

In conclusion, by choosing to build the exhibition around *Undergrowth with Two Figures* and extending the theme of undergrowth through the selection of paintings, the curators at the Cincinnati Art Museum built a chronological and art historical context and provided a specific lens through which to understand and interpret van Gogh. Though the theme of "undergrowth" was intended to establish a new, or at least revised, legacy for van Gogh, the exhibition fell short of that aim. It did not make a new contribution to our knowledge of these art movements. Still, it effectively illustrated that the Barbizons, Impressionists, and Post-Impressionists were not in distinctly separate schools, but rather overlapped and influenced each other. More, however, could have been done to illustrate this. The exhibit construction contributes to the field of museum studies by illustrating how a smaller museum may build an exhibition around a unique piece by a well-known artist. The Cincinnati Art Museum effectively conveyed the value of its collection and van Gogh piece, and built an international dialogue between museums and between paintings.

¹⁰ Chu, *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 483.

¹¹ Chu, *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 411.

Coda: The exhibit did not end with *Undergrowth and Two Figures*, however. Somewhat unexpectedly, the curators elected to include one more room, entitled “Unlocking Van Gogh’s World,” that contained a collection of prints and other works on paper by van Gogh’s contemporaries (fig. 10). While it is an interesting mix, this room’s contents seemed incongruous with the rest of the exhibition. As implied by the room’s title, the works on paper shown here were intended to place van Gogh in the larger context of late nineteenth century visual culture. Other artists came into focus here. Yet the selection seemed not to reflect the particular world that van Gogh inhabited, but rather a somewhat random selection of works produced in the second half of the nineteenth century, and owned by the Cincinnati Art Museum. The curatorial team needed to make more discerning choices about which artists to include and, equally important, which artists to exclude. This room would have benefited from the addition of wall texts explaining each artist’s connection to van Gogh. An art history student may have been able to identify some of the artists, media, and works, but the broader public likely struggled to make the connections. However fascinating as a collection of works on paper, “Unlocking Van Gogh’s World” created confusion at the end of *Into the Undergrowth*, undermining the power of the ostensible conclusion produced by the titular *Undergrowth with Two Figures*.

Third Student Review

Vincent van Gogh has long been associated with the themes of madness, suicide, and suffering—ideas that often infiltrate interpretations of his paintings. Albert Aurier’s early criticism of van Gogh propelled these ideas. In his article “Les Isolés,” Aurier described the artist as “a terrible and high-strung genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque, almost always on the edge of the pathological.”¹² Mounting an exhibition around *Undergrowth with Two Figures*, the van Gogh painting in its permanent collection, the Cincinnati Art Museum curators presented an overlooked side of van Gogh’s oeuvre to the public. *Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth* thoroughly demonstrated how the artist’s landscape paintings were produced in dialogue with a wide spectrum of sources and inspirations: art dealers, artists past and present, published artist biographies, and artworks exhibited at the annual Paris Salon and Paris-based museums. By displaying a variety of depictions of nature by different artists in conjunction with those by van Gogh, the exhibition emphasized the artist’s interest in the relationship between humanity and nature, beyond the emotional relationship captured by other artists in his Symbolist circle.

¹² John Rewald, “Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy: Aurier’s Article on Van Gogh,” in *Post-Impressionism: From van Gogh to Gauguin* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962), 367–68. The article was published in January 1890 in the first issue of *Mercure de France*. Van Gogh wrote a letter to Aurier in response to the article on 9 or 10 February 1890, letter 853.

The exhibition opened with an anomalous van Gogh, *Girl in the Woods* (fig. 1). The painting depicts a small girl dwarfed by enormous tree trunks in a forest, whose roots snake along the ground to encircle her leg. She is isolated but not alone, as her figure blends in with the trunks as though she herself were a small tree planting its own roots into the ground. To resolve the visitor's inquiries regarding the subject of the painting, the introductory text on the gallery's wall explained the emergence of landscape paintings, especially direct studies popularized by artists of the Barbizon School in the forest of Fontainebleau (fig. 11). With the rough, almost scratchy brushstrokes of *Girl in the Woods*, van Gogh depicted a ray of light uniformly hitting a few tree trunks, highlighting the untouched beauty and greatness of nature. This was a common theme in the Barbizon artists' paintings of nature. Fittingly, it was with this painting that the public was introduced not only to van Gogh, but to the influence of Barbizon artists on him. This opening piece, then, plunged the visitor into the thick of the Cincinnati Art Museum's story of van Gogh as someone whose art reflects the influence of other artists from the mid-nineteenth century onward.

Curator Julie Aronson admirably set herself the task of educating a nonspecialist audience. For this reason, the exhibition commenced with a glossary of critical terms and a map of France showing locations important to the exhibition's story (fig. 12). The careful explanations of three art movements—Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism—and terms such as *en plein air* and *sous-bois* (undergrowth) proved to be useful aids for visitors as they navigated the galleries. At the same time, these terms formed a lexicon that the visitors could associate with van Gogh and use to analyze these paintings of nature.

The exhibition space was not divided into individual rooms that might disrupt the narrative about connections that van Gogh made with other artists, nor was it arranged in strictly chronological order. Soon after their introduction to van Gogh via *Girl in the Woods*, visitors encountered different depictions of the forest of Fontainebleau including that of Narcisse Diaz de la Peña. Standing before Diaz de la Peña's *Forest of Fontainebleau*, one could not help but feel drawn in by the mystery of the unwelcoming forest (fig. 13). Painting the landscape in deep shades of green and brown with sparse touches of white and light orange, the artist depicted the light of the setting sun piercing the thick foliage. The illuminated portions drew the visitor in for a closer examination of the surface that revealed tree leaves painted with decisive, quick brushstrokes. A prelude to Impressionism, these swift strokes reveal the artist's effort to capture a fleeting moment when the fading sunlight rested momentarily on the trees.

One of the founding members of the Barbizon School, Diaz de la Peña specialized in the *sous-bois* genre (34). To emphasize van Gogh's connection with Diaz de la Peña and the other artists exhibited throughout, the curatorial team

consistently cited van Gogh's voluminous correspondence with his brother, the art dealer Théo van Gogh. In one letter, van Gogh readily drew comparisons between his art and that of Diaz de la Peña. From this introduction to the Barbizon School and its depictions of the natural environment, the visitor entered the rest of the exhibition prepared to explore van Gogh's depictions of undergrowth.

To create the sensation of walking through the forest, four independent standing panels, like looming trees in a wood, were installed in the center of the room. In addition to creating more wall space to display paintings in a compact area, these panels complicated the visitor's paths. Benches with wrought iron armrests, like those found in municipal parks, were placed throughout the exhibition. The bench before Georges Seurat's painting, *The Forest at Pontaubert*, acted as an invitation to sit and reflect on this scene (fig. 14).¹³ To do so was to follow the movement of color that flows through Seurat's painting, and to compare his style with that of Diaz de la Peña, whose painting remained visible in the distance. Seurat's painting shares its subject matter with Diaz de la Peña's, but differences in their stylistic approaches are clear. Seurat's pointillist technique of placing white and yellow paint immediately beside flecks of green demonstrates his experimentation with color theories. As an artist who learned from the Impressionists and acted as the leader of Neo-Impressionism, Seurat helped the exhibition tie the Barbizon School to late nineteenth-century painterly schools.

Another realization that likely struck visitors seated on the bench before *The Forest at Pontaubert* was the ephemerality of the moment that Seurat attempted to capture. Even though the painting was done in the studio rather than en plein air, it is the idea and feel of *pleinairisme* that Seurat has encapsulated (136). The painting's frame cutting into a tree's base on the far left suggests spontaneity. Trunks in the middle ground are cast in shadow as opposed to those in the foreground, which radiate bright light suggestive of the rays of sunshine streaming through the leaves. The brighter color palette and the absence of leaves framing the painting, when compared with the aforementioned Diaz de la Peña, make Seurat's undergrowth seem more inviting, a sensation enhanced by the bench before the painting (what may be understood as the museum's invitation to spend more time before this work). Furthermore, as van Gogh deemed Seurat to be "the leader of the Petit Boulevard,"¹⁴ Pontaubert played a critical part in the exhibition by introducing the connection between van Gogh and Neo-

¹³ Seurat shared van Gogh's interest in the Barbizon painters and visited the forest of Fontainebleau in the late summer and early fall of 1881.

¹⁴ Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, on or about 5 June 1888, letter 620. The Museum of Modern Art, "Van Gogh and Seurat," *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 3, no. 3 (1935): 6. The Petit Boulevard was the name van Gogh used to refer to a group of up-and-coming artists including Émile Bernard, Charles Anquetin, Paul Gauguin, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and himself.

Impressionism and Symbolism, as well as ideas about how those movements inspired his own depictions of undergrowth. Seurat's painting further functioned as the transition from the Barbizon section to nature paintings by Neo-Impressionist and Symbolist artists.

In the area focused on Post-Impressionism, the visitor discovered more of van Gogh's paintings of undergrowth. Up to this point in the exhibition, nature was shown as untouched by man. From then on, the visitor was presented with depictions of nature that included traces of the presence of man. The first indication of a human presence in nature could be seen in Paul Gauguin's *Sunken Path, Wooded Rise* that includes a small figure of a peasant woman standing at the bottom of a stream (140) (fig. 9). The long tree trunks growing beyond the top edge of the frame interrupt the path of the water zigzagging into the background. Staring into this enhanced depth of the forest, the viewer was able to identify with the woman and experience the overwhelming force of nature at the same time. Pairing one of van Gogh's undergrowth paintings with the Gauguin mediated the shift from paintings focused solely on the sous-bois to those with human figures. In a letter in June 1881, van Gogh claimed that "nature is most certainly 'intangible' . . . yet one must seize it, and with a firm hand."¹⁵ Here, van Gogh expressed the importance of man's interaction with an ineffable, even spiritual nature and described how he would document this relationship.

The next instance of man in nature could be observed in van Gogh's *River Bank in Springtime* (fig. 15). In this painting, a bridge hides behind the swaying, thin leaves along the river bank. The movement of nature is mirrored by the diagonal and brusque marks of pink, purple, and blue. These colors were central to van Gogh's later depictions of undergrowth. In *Tree Trunks in the Grass*, he focuses on the sous-bois details (fig. 16), contrasting trees in the foreground with those in the background through the different textures of their trunks. Thick black lines bound various strokes of paint plastered onto the trunks' rich surface. It is as though van Gogh intended to build the bark of his trees out of pure color, without lines. Such dense accretions of paint were foreshadowed by the Barbizon School and Impressionism. The wall text suggested that van Gogh depicted this bug's-eye view through the mixture of various colors. The movement of paint up the trunk is paralleled with the swaying motion of flowers in the foreground. Several flowering branches in the center are colored purple, creating a trail that breaks up the field into clusters and leads the viewer's eye toward a purple path in the distance. This detail hints at the recent passing of a person through the field. Perhaps, it is the path that van Gogh took after finishing his study.

The sous-bois paintings by the Barbizon School functioned in the exhibition to introduce van Gogh's appreciation for nature. Paintings by Neo-

¹⁵ Vincent van Gogh to Théo van Gogh, between 12 and 15 June 1881, letter 175.

Impressionist artists explained the artist's stylistic choice for *Undergrowth with Two Figures*, while the paintings leading up to that final work elucidated its subject: the traces of human presence in nature. By presenting the work of these peers and predecessors of van Gogh, the curators attempted to explain the inspirations and thoughts behind the production of the van Gogh held by the Cincinnati Art Museum. In a way, the exhibition argued that each school of French art issued its own interpretation of man's relationship with nature. In earlier works, the viewer is left to experience untouched nature alone. As van Gogh introduced signs of human presence into his paintings, the viewer coexisted with these figures in the landscape and so felt themselves to be one with the natural world.

Since the exhibition was intended to showcase the museum's very own van Gogh, all the paintings on display culminated in *Undergrowth with Two Figures* (fig. 4). Occupying the last wall, the painting was accompanied by a large block of text that explored interesting discoveries about the physical state of the painting. The visitor learned that van Gogh sent a sketch and detailed description of this painting to his brother, employed a double-square format, and loaded his brush with a pink paint that has unfortunately faded over time. *Undergrowth with Two Figures* was truly the star of the show. The piece depicts a couple standing in the midst of a field of flowers in the woods. Though their facial features are unclear, the man seems to glance toward the museum visitor, while his female companion turns around as though searching for something or someone behind her. The sense of mystery and uneasiness continues when the viewer realizes that no visible trail led the couple to this location. The flowers fall in different directions in an effort to cover the couple's tracks into the undergrowth. This detail with the field depicted in *Tree Trunks in the Grass*. In *Two Figures*, flowers grow around the figures just as they do around the trunks, blending the figures into the scene as though they have now become parts of the forest.

The trunks in this undergrowth scene are outlined in black and colored in purple and pink. The paint was placed in a way that blends the two colors to underscore the thickness of the trunk. The highly visible brushstrokes imitate pieces of bark breaking off from the richly textured surface. Unlike the previous paintings in the exhibit, these trunks are arranged in parallel rows. They open onto another path, inviting the viewer to symbolically enter the forest and follow the enigmatic couple. The rows of trunks also make the viewer question his or her location in the painting: Where are we in relation to van Gogh's figures? Why have these figures ventured into this forest? Where does van Gogh put himself in this space? Is the forest welcoming or forbidding?

When closely examining different areas on the painted surface, one might find the medium covers the canvas with varying degrees of thickness that create a sense of depth and dimension. The paint depicting the field of flowers is thickly

layered in order to build volume over the tree trunks. In the top right corner, one can see heavy blue paint seemingly applied with a palette knife, not a brush. The short motion of these strokes is horizontal, juxtaposed against the vertical motion that the artist used for his tree trunks. The color palette of this painting resembles that of the earlier *Tree Trunks in the Grass* on the left wall. Despite this similarity, the forest in *Undergrowth with Two Figures* seems much more hostile to the presence of man than *Tree Trunks in the Grass*. This ominous appearance of nature and the somber mood could be explained by the fact that van Gogh executed the piece during the months before his suicide.

Throughout the exhibit, the visitor was presented with pertinent quotes from the extensive correspondence between van Gogh and his brother. It would seem, then, that the curators intended for the visitors to know the artist as much through his writing as through his painting. This was rightly done to challenge the myth of “the intuitive, inspired madman, [as] van Gogh’s letters reveal an unfaltering and articulate awareness of the daily problems involved in the making of paintings.”¹⁶ The quotes appeared not only in the wall texts and on glass panels that stood alone on several of the exhibition walls, but also in the interactive features housed within the exhibition space. Visitors were invited to create digital handwritten letters for their love ones. Ultimately, though, these activities became a redundant reminder of the exhibition’s consistent tendency to overemphasize the van Gogh’s letters that was too apparent in every part of the exhibition.

To venture into *Van Gogh: Into the Undergrowth* was truly an educational experience. By constructing a narrative to showcase the Cincinnati Art Museum’s van Gogh painting, Julie Aronson and her team introduced the public to a different side of the artist. Van Gogh was a student of those who came before him, whose paintings hung beside his in this exhibition. Unpacking van Gogh’s connections with artists of various movements through his handwritten letters, the exhibit highlighted the artist’s appreciation for nature and his distinctive interpretation of the nature-human relationship. With the continuous story created by the design of the space, and enhanced by carefully prepared wall texts and decisive arrangement of paintings, the exhibition deftly led its visitors along a narrative that challenged previous (mis)perceptions of van Gogh.

¹⁶ Linda Nochlin, “Van Gogh’s Letters,” in *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, 1874–1904* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 139.