

A “Fake” Van Gogh that Turned Out to be Authentic

Sharon Hecker

What happens if you own a work of art that is declared to be a forgery by that artist’s archive, estate or foundation? Should you destroy it, let it be marked as a fake, sue? Or should you continue to research it? In this sense, the incredible events surrounding Vincent van Gogh’s painting, *Sunset at Montmajour* (1888) are instructive.

The story begins in 1908, when a Norwegian industrialist, Christian Nicolai Mustad, bought a work of art he believed to be by Vincent van Gogh on the advice of art historian and conservator Jens Thiis, who that year became director of the National Museum in Oslo. The happy collector proceeded to proudly hang his new acquisition on a wall in his home. According to the family, one evening Mustad showed the painting to the French ambassador to Sweden, who was visiting his home, but the ambassador told the owner that the painting was probably not an authentic work by van Gogh. (Experts now believe that it was actually the Norwegian consul in Paris, Auguste Pellerin, who may have indicated that the work was a forgery.) The disappointed and angry Mustad removed the painting from his wall, convinced he had bought a fake, and banished it to his attic until his death in 1970. Mustad died believing that his painting was a forgery.

After Mustad’s death in 1970, the painting reappeared as part of his summer and was sold to a private collector. Wanting to have the work authenticated, the new owner took it to the Van Gogh Museum for authentication in 1991, but the museum responded that the painting was not by the artist’s hand because it was unsigned. This was the second time the work had been submitted for authentication, having been rejected the first time as well.

Fortunately, the owner did not throw away or destroy the painting, as some authentication committees now require once an opinion of falsity has been issued. And fortunately, the foundation did not indelibly mark the painting as a forgery, as some authentication committees routinely do. Instead, the owner persisted in his quest and intrepidly presented the painting to the museum again in 2011. This time, the museum made the wise decision to reconsider its opinion and agreed to examine the work again. Unfortunately, not many archives and foundations agree to reconsider their positions. Instead in this case, the van Gogh Museum decided to conduct a thorough investigation to re-examine the authenticity of the painting. The investigation took two years, and the details of the steps taken are as compelling as a Sherlock Holmes detective novel.

Closer study and the use of new techniques that had recently become available told an entirely different story. This time, the three types of due diligence (scientific analysis of materials, provenance research, and connoisseurship) were followed systematically. And here are the results:

Scientific analysis of the material aspects of the painting showed that it was made with the same pigments van Gogh was using at the time. One of the pigments, cobalt blue, was a color he did not begin to use until the summer of 1887, thus marking a period of time before which the work could not have been made if it were by van Gogh. This was indeed a promising discovery, but on its own it could not guarantee the authenticity of the painting, as forgeries of this artist already existed in those years and could easily have been executed using the same pigments, all of which were commercially available at the time.

A second type of examination conducted was that of the canvas weave, which was then compared to an ever-growing database of the warp and weft of other canvases known to be by the artist. The weave of the painting in question was found to be compatible with that used for at least one other van Gogh painting from the same period, *The Rocks* (1888) now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The background preparation of the canvas was also found to be of the same type in both paintings. Again, however, this examination demonstrated compatibility, but not a guarantee of authenticity.

A third art-historical examination led to a mysterious number '180' scrawled on the back of the canvas, which surprisingly had never been noticed by anyone before. This number corresponds to a number in Theo van Gogh's inventory list of his brother's works made in 1890, with the title of the work noted after the number. Since painting number 180 had been considered by scholars to be missing for many decades, it pointed even further in the direction of an attribution to Van Gogh. The number also allowed art historians to complete the painting's hitherto fragmentary chain of provenance and crucial aspect of an attribution: the painting was known to have been in the collection of his brother Theo until 1901, when his widow sold it to a Parisian art dealer, who then sold it to the Norwegian collector.

Finally, art-historical and visual research on the style of the work came full circle on the appearance of the painting, through the discovery of a letter from Vincent van Gogh to his brother, dated July 4, 1888, in which the artist poetically describes the exact scene and his act of painting it: "Yesterday, at sunset, I was on a stony moor, where very small and twisted oaks grow, in the background a ruin on the hill, and wheat fields in the valley. It was romantic, couldn't have been more so, à la [Adolphe] Monticelli, the sun was pouring its very yellow rays on the bushes and the ground, absolutely a shower of gold. And all the lines were beautiful; the whole scene had a charming nobility."

This beautiful letter has allowed scholars to finally confirm the subject, date and place of the painting: *Sunset at Montmajour* was painted on July 3, 1888, the day before the letter. The scene depicted was the moment of twilight in the wheat field landscape of Montmajour in Provence, with a Benedictine abbey seen in the distance. The details in this letter had previously been incorrectly attributed to *The Rocks*, although that work lacked some of the elements described in the letter.

With all the evidence well in hand, the Van Gogh Museum decided in 2013 to publicly reverse its attribution. It then displayed the painting in the museum, calling it a long-lost "masterpiece."

What 3 important things can a collector learn from this story? (1) Submitting a work of art for authentication may not preclude resubmission of the work for further viewing at a later date, if the archive or foundation agrees to this possibility. (2) Unless an authentication committee presents the collector with compelling evidence of a forgery, the collector may choose to take the artwork back and continue the search independently. (3) Art history, like all sciences, is a fluid field: attributions can change as new techniques become available and new information accumulates over time. As the Van Gogh Museum admitted, "the research is much more advanced now; therefore, we have been able to come to a very different conclusion." Isn't it sometimes worth taking a second look?

Originally published in Italian in *We Wealth*, December 2021.

English translation provided by the author

© Sharon Hecker

All rights reserved. This essay may not be reproduced, in part or in whole, without prior permission of the author.