

## Van Gogh and the Seasons is a sensitively curated crowd-pleaser despite a paucity of masterpieces

Written by Anita Pisch, Visiting Fellow, School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics, Australian National University

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A detail from Vincent Van Gogh's *A wheatfield, with cypresses*, early September 1889. National Gallery, London. Bought, Courtauld Fund, 1923 (NG3861) © The National Gallery, London

[Van Gogh and the Seasons](#), showing at the National Gallery of Victoria, is more than an opportunity for a geographically isolated Australian audience to view the works of one of the world's best-known and beloved artists in the flesh. Our last major Van Gogh exhibition occurred one generation ago in 1993 at the NGV, moving on to Queensland in early 1994. It adopted a broad perspective on Van Gogh's genius, placing him in the context of both his sources and his impact on the history of art.

With 35 paintings and 13 drawings from 20 lenders, this new exhibition is not huge in scope and does not feature Van Gogh's most iconic works. However, it is the largest collection of his work ever to travel to Australia and the first exhibition anywhere to focus so intensively on the seasonal theme. It is the fourteenth in the series of Melbourne Winter Masterpieces and brings a welcome surge of colour and movement to a damp and bleak Melbourne.

Van Gogh's total immersion in the natural world, both as the subject of his art and for its therapeutic effects, saw him observe, in minute detail, the everchanging moods and landscapes of the seasons, cyclical time through the rhythms of farming and human activity, and the qualities of light that changed with both the time of day and the time of year.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Avenue of poplars in autumn*, late October 1884 Nuenen, oil on canvas on wood panel 99.0 x 65.7 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam Purchased with support from the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and the Rembrandt Association (s0141M1977)

Van Gogh (1853-1890) was the son of a Protestant clergyman of the Groningen school and exhibited fervent religious devotion in his mid-twenties. He rejected this, to some extent, in the 1880s, as he commenced his art practice in earnest. However, a Christian outlook remained central to a worldview that also bordered on the pagan, with all of the natural world infused with

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a divine presence.

Van Gogh grew up imbued with notions of public service. In the family tradition, he studied to be a minister before undertaking preaching work in England, Holland and Belgium, often living almost as a [mendicant](#) .

When these efforts came to nought, he turned to making art with the financial support of his younger brother, Theo. This was less a break with his former ambitions than a continuation of “Christ-like service” in a different guise, and re-connected him, through Theo, to the family’s commercial art business.

Van Gogh’s hope, expressed repeatedly in his letters to Theo, was to share with others the profound healing to be found in nature and in colour. The seasonal cycle promises predictability within inevitable change, and the seeds of rebirth within each death.

### **A tour through the seasons**

Van Gogh and the Seasons is curated by the former Head of Collections at the Van Gogh Museum, Sjraar van Heugten, with the assistance of the NGV’s Senior Curator of International Art, Dr Ted Gott. It adopts a focused approach, highlighting the pivotal seasonal theme of Van Gogh’s oeuvre through which the artist expressed the joys, disappointments, melancholia and bleakness of his own mental landscapes.

The exhibition is carefully curated to play up its many strengths, while disguising some of its weaknesses. The rooms are laid out as a journey through the year, and through Van Gogh’s life as an artist.

A beautifully shot, atmospheric video, narrated by David Stratton with David Wenham as the voice of Vincent, sets the stage, explaining the centrality of the seasons to Van Gogh’s work. The next two rooms explore his sources of inspiration in his personal print collection and his fascination with Japanese woodblock prints. As the originals of the latter are too delicate to travel, the display is pulled together from the NGV’s own collection and introduces the seasonal layout.

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<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-10/van-gogh-and-the-seasons-exhibition-opens-in-sydney/11155870>