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Van Gogh Repetitions

VAN GOGH REPETITIONS



Synopsis

Popular perceptions of Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) frequently envision the painter working before nature in an intense frenzy, yet the artist's method was often controlled and deliberate. *Van Gogh Repetitions* is the first book to focus on the artist's "repetitions," a term he used to describe his process of producing more than one version of a composition. Van Gogh ultimately developed a conceptual framework that distinguished his repetitions from copies, *études*, tableaux, and *decorations*, balancing modernist aspirations toward originality with the creation of copies of his existing compositions. The artist's practice of producing repetitions was far more extensive and vital to his creative process than is commonly recognized. In this groundbreaking and beautifully illustrated book, a series of essays considers the many unresolved issues and controversies surrounding the repetitions, including their origins, development, and meaning in van Gogh's art. Technical and analytical examinations provide new insights into the artist's working methods and approach to the creative process.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"... resolve[s] questions . . . that have confounded scholars and fans of van Gogh until now." —Henry Adams, *New York Times* (Henry Adams New York Times) Won an Honorable Mention for the 2013 New England Book Festival given by the JM Northern Media Family of Festivals, in the Photography/Art Category. (Rathbone JM Northern Media

2013-12-27) "Beautiful . . . the kind of book that is both accessible to a general public and valuable to the researcher." •Cornelia Homburg, Art Newspaper (Cornelia Homburg Art Newspaper)

Eliza Rathbone is chief curator at The Phillips Collection. William Robinson is curator of modern European art at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Elizabeth Steele is head of conservation at The Phillips Collection. Marcia Steele is a senior conservator of paintings at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Excellent academic study of the way that van Gogh repeated a composition, tinkering with contours, colors, brushwork, adding details, shifting objects around, taking a much more thoughtful approach to a subject. The authors make it clear that van Gogh did paint fast outside...but they demonstrate how careful he was when he came back indoors, and created a second composition on the same theme, often with very similar structure. If you're an artist, you can glean some hints about his working methods here. If you are an academic, you'll appreciate the balanced approach, never claiming too much, even after years of hard technical work. If you just like van Gogh, though, you may not find this thoughtful book as exciting or revealing as some of the more popular biographies.

I just missed this exhibit by a day and I was crushed. but when I saw that I could purchase the catalogue and have it to enjoy I was delighted. this is a great catalogue (since I didn't see the show, so I cannot say how it compares) but as a stand-alone it is a strong book on the subject. the color reproductions as very good. the text is readable and the scientific examination is readable for an un-scientifically educated reader. I would recommend this book if you are interested in conservation/restoration or painting techniques in a general way even if you are not a fan of van gogh. the technical analysis is solid. if you are a fan the insight into the "repetitions," as Vincent called them himself, is fascinating and endearing.

. I went to this exhibition in DC and wanted a memento...this was perfect!!!

Provides amazing insights into the repetitions Van Gogh created in his brief 10-year career as an artist. Based on the research that led to joint Phillips Collection and Cleveland exhibits which gathered Van Gogh's own copies with variations from range of museums.

Very fine!!!

People who are particularly interested in examining Van Gogh's artistic techniques are having something of a heyday at the moment. There is, first, the large and comprehensive exhibition currently at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, "Van Gogh at Work" (see the reviews on this website), and, second, the book under review here is the catalogue accompanying the current exhibition at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. (from October 2013 until January 2014 and then at the Cleveland Museum of Art from March until May 2014). The impetus for this exhibition came from the idea of bringing together two canvases with the same subject that Van Gogh worked on in November and December 1889: Cleveland's "The Large Plane Trees" and The Phillips's "The Road Menders" (the jacket illustration shows details of these two paintings, l. and r.). These are what Van Gogh and other artists and art historians refer to as "repetitions," i.e., more or less faithful recreations of the same subject--as distinct from other kinds of copies. The creation of repetitions was quite common in the nineteenth century; they were considered to be as original and autonomous as the initial creations and were held in equally high esteem. Van Gogh painted at least a couple of dozen of such series, and this exhibition draws on the collections of over twenty-five lenders to bring some of them together. It is an excellent way to query and illuminate Van Gogh's techniques and to appreciate the amount of industry, planning and rational thought that went into Vincent's art. This is, in part, consciously conceived as a corrective to the common view that his procedures were akin to the "blinding simple-mindedness of a child," to use the words of Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith in their recent biography of the painter. In the first of his introductory essays, "The Artist Versus the Legend: Repetitions and Madness," Theodore H. Robinson, the Curator of Modern Art at the Cleveland Museum and co-editor of the catalogue, uses that Naifeh/Smith quotation as an epigraph, and then demonstrates that Vincent's procedures were anything but blind or simple-minded and have nothing whatever to do with madness. That and Dr. Robinson's second essay, on the origins and development of the repetitions, set the theoretical and historical framework for the analysis of the series that follows. The repetitions themselves are discussed in the catalogue "entries," arranged chronologically from the early "Weavers" (December 1883 to August 1884) and "Le Moulin de la Galette" (October 1886) to the better known series done during and after Vincent's residence in Arles, e.g., the postman Joseph Roulin and his family, including the "Berceuse" paintings of Mme. Roulin, the "L'Arlesienne" after the drawing of Gauguin, etc. There are eleven of these "entries," each discussed by one or more of the contributing curators, including Eliza Rathbone, who is Chief Curator at The Phillips, with technical data contributed by the

museums' conservators. It is quite fascinating to see these versions juxtaposed so closely and to observe the sometimes minute and sometimes quite considerable variations and to follow the curators' arguments as to the sequencing of the canvases--usually not very easy and sometimes not even possible to establish. The thirty-one catalogue plates and ninety-two accompanying illustrations (many of which are reproduced full-page, as are all the plates) are integrated with the discussions, so that text and illustration are never very far apart and it is very easy to compare the paintings. Our understanding of the variations among the repetitions is enhanced not only by the frequent detail illustrations but also by devices like digital overlay of the major outlines of one painting over another to indicate changes in size and shape. The technical information provided for each group is copious and probably more than enough for all but the most ardent fans of x-ray fluorescence, x-radiography and similar analyses, but it is that kind of technical examination that helps conservators to authenticate or de-authenticate questionable attributions, establish sequence, document technique, and do the many other things that contribute to our overall understanding of the paintings. They are not for everybody, but "the devil is in the details," and it is good that they are there; it is all brand-new information and will be especially welcome to art historians and scholars. The final essay of the catalogue is by Marcia Steele and Elizabeth Steele, the chief conservators at the Phillips and Cleveland, resp., and deals with the various methods of making repetitions, such as tracing, squaring, using the perspective frame, etc. The volume concludes with a checklist of the exhibition with full curatorial data, and an index. There is no general bibliography, but the meticulous annotations in the essays provide specific bibliographical references. In sum, this is a very welcome addition to the literature on Van Gogh, for it throws a much broader light on an aspect of his art that the "Van Gogh at Work" exhibition and catalogue was able to address only in passing and over only a couple of pages. It is the first exhibition and publication to focus specifically on Van Gogh's repetitions, and it has made clear that their creation was not accidental or haphazard, but an essential aspect of Van Gogh's aesthetic thought and an integral part of his artistic practice--an insight we owe to this very informative exhibition and its fine, very well produced and excellently illustrated catalogue.

Although haven't had time to read this book yet, (I'm busy reading other Van Gogh material right now), I'm looking forward to the read. Thanks.

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