

VAN GOGH

in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collections

As part of the **VanGogh2015** events held in several European museums to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the death of Vincent van Gogh, the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza is presenting a small exhibition of five of the Dutch artist's works in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collections: four oil paintings and a lithograph that represent the main periods in his career. All five works were acquired between 1965 and 1996 by Hans Heinrich Thyssen, who was born in Scheveningen, on whose beach Van Gogh often went to paint during his years in The Hague. They are displayed alongside three paintings (also from the Museum's collections) by Georges Michel, Charles-François Daubigny and Anton Mauve, three landscape artists who exerted decisive influence on Van Gogh during his formative period.

Watermill at Gennepe, from the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, is the largest work on canvas painted by Van Gogh and one of the masterpieces from his Dutch period. In the middle of November 1884, Vincent wrote to Theo: "These last few days, although it's freezing quite hard here, I've been working outdoors on a rather large study (more than 1 metre) of an old water mill in Gennepe, on the other side of Eindhoven. I want to finish the whole thing outdoors — but it will definitely be the last that I paint outdoors this year". The range of colours and textures evokes the intense cold and wet of those late autumn days in Brabant. With its double wheel and wooden structure reflected in the water, the mill resembles a strange boat moored on the river Dommel. There are two figures on a raft. A sliver of light breaks through the grey clouds and illuminates the sky with an unusually cold and white brightness, against which the dark mass of the mill stands out with a powerful effect of backlighting.

Backlighting is an expressive device to which Van Gogh would often return during the Nuenen period, such as in his *Evening Landscape* and his interior scenes featuring weavers or peasants, dark silhouettes surrounded by a glow of light from a window or lamp. These contrasts create an atmosphere of mystery and almost religious sublimity that is powerfully conveyed in the most important work from Van Gogh's Dutch period, *The Potato Eaters*, and in the lithograph the artist made of it, which is represented in our collections.

Van Gogh's art underwent a decisive change in 1886 after he came into contact with the Impressionists in Paris. However, there is also continuity between the painting from his Dutch period and the work he subsequently produced in France. In August 1888, Vincent described in a letter to Theo "a magnificent and very strange effect" he had seen in Arles one evening: a boat laden with coal on the Rhone, moored at the quay, with the workmen coming and going to carry the cargo ashore: "It was pure Hokusai", added Van Gogh, referring to the Japanese air the scene had. The artist was inspired by this impression to paint several pictures of boats unloading their cargoes, first from a high viewpoint in pale colours and later, in *The Stevedores in Arles*, from a low viewpoint and in dull shades. The marked contrast between the dark silhouettes of the figures and the boat standing out against the blazing dusk light creates an intensely dramatic effect.

The last painting in our collections shuns tonal contrasts of light and shadow and speaks a language based solely on pure colour and on the canvas's surface. Its title, "*Les Vessenois*", refers to an area on the outskirts of Auvers where Doctor Gachet, the first owner of this work, lived. The painter's gaze is focused on the fields, on the deserted space that extends from the foreground. The effect is similar to that of Degas's compositions in which the parquet floor expands and shifts the figures towards the background or edges of the painting. Here the empty fields seem to push the horizon upwards, compressing the houses, trees, hills, clouds and sky into a strip that runs along the upper edge of the canvas. The village moves away from us, becoming remote and inaccessible: we will never come to it. Above the fields, executed with a loaded paintbrush in frenzied movement, is a sort of relief writing with dots and commas, straight lines and tortured curves and, in the foreground, an enigmatic undulating blue form, perhaps a wisp of smoke.