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An ebook by Brad Teare

Van Gogh Thick Paint Genius

The Genius of Van Gogh Part I

Vue de l'asile, painted just one year before his death in 1890,



Did Van Gogh load his brush? (watch [how to load a brush](#)). Most assume he didn't load his brush but used the standard technique of picking up paint directly from the palette. I suspect he used ample amounts of paint to more easily get broken color on his brush and onto his canvas.

Fellow painter [Erik te Kamp](#) went to the [Kröller-Müller Museum](#) in the Netherlands and took several close-up photos of Van

Gogh's work. Erik noted that the paintings are over 125 years old and some passages look a little transparent. Also in brighter colors, he observed you could easily see an accumulation of dirt in the paint strokes.

LINKS

[How to Load a Brush](#)

[Painter Erik te Kamp](#)

[Kröller-Müller Museum](#)

An Analysis of Van Gogh's Technique

I start with a close-up (right) of a recent painting of mine for contrast (since I know which strokes are brush or palette knife marks with absolute certainty). You can clearly see both palette knife and brush marks in my painting. The principal example of a palette knife mark is the dark green stroke in the southwest quadrant. The most visible brush strokes are the purple-brown marks in the center lower half.



A closeup of my painting. Notice the dark green palette knife stroke and the purple-brown brush strokes.

The image right—courtesy of Eric te Kamp and the Kröller-Müller Museum—is a painting by Van Gogh entitled Green Field.

The image below is a close-up of the distant horizon. We see two flecks of red representing the tiled roofs of distant houses. There is evidence of brush marks and palette knife marks. Marks from the brush's bristles can clearly be seen in the green section. The light bluish-green vegetation in front of the houses appears to be made with a narrow, flat-ended palette knife—most notably in the stroke just right of center.



most notably in the stroke just right of center. This was completely unexpected, but further close-ups suggest he used both brushes and palette knives.

The image right—an extreme close-up of the strokes of grass—confirms the claim.

Note the hard edges on the upper sides of the central yellow strokes.



In the image right—where you see dabs of color representing flowers —some dabs have brush marks and some don't. This is an example of Van Gogh [painting with paint](#) rather than with the brush. Meaning that so much paint was on his brush that no bristle marks were impressed into the resulting strokes.



“I am always doing what I cannot do yet, in order to learn how to do it.” -Vincent Van Gogh

Which hand did he use?

There is controversy about whether Van Gogh was right or left handed. I guess from this painting that he was right handed. Van Gogh was a bold painter, and the grass strokes would have been less consistent if he were holding the brush in his left hand. This is also corroborated by several self-portraits of Van Gogh holding the palette in the right hand. Which would have been reversed since he would have been looking into a mirror to paint his portrait.

It is possible that he used his left hand for palette knife work but I see no evidence of that. Portraits of Vincent also show that he used generous amounts of paint on his palette. Which is good practice if you want to have lots of broken color in your paintings.



How did he do it?

You don't see many painters painting thickly in the style of Van Gogh because it is extremely difficult. The fact that he perfected his technique at such a young age is astonishing.

Here are a few reasons I feel Van Gogh was successful painting with thick strokes:

His Use of [Cloissonism](#)

Van Gogh's habit of surrounding his shapes with a bold outline—which he borrowed from Japanese woodcut—helped to simplify some of the frenetic nature of the thick strokes. The outlines gave a linear boundary that helps the viewer deal with form that otherwise might have succumbed to chromatic chaos.

Designing Large Masses

Imposing order on chaos is the challenge of thick paint. Van Gogh designed his compositions so that each component of the painting became a well connected series of shapes. He gave each mass a simplified yet highly designed silhouette.

How did he do it?

Strokes of Color that Guide Eye Movement

If paint gets too thick it can be difficult for the eye to navigate through the picture plane. Van Gogh solved this problem by using long dash-like strokes to give a very prominent direction to each area of the painting. Such strokes give the composition an additional unity that counteracts the potentially overwhelming activity of the thick strokes.

To read about field effects [go here](#). To watch a video on how to achieve this effect [go here](#). ■

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The Genius of Van Gogh Part 2

Pen and ink sketch by
Vincent Van Gogh.

I've noted elements that made Van Gogh's work different from other painters. Another difference was the way Van Gogh drew. The short distance from his drawing to his painting strengthened his work. Once you see how his painting was inspired by his idiosyncratic drawing style his methods become more transparent. His drawings had a rhythmic calligraphic syncopation. The energetic dots and dashes of his drawings allowed Van Gogh to instinctively translate his vision

onto canvas.

Van Gogh had an inimitable style and I would never suggest expropriating his techniques. Yet the unique nature of his drawing style and the kinship between his drawing and painting are so obviously interconnected we might ask ourselves if our drawing has achieved its own unique nature.



And if not, why?

I suspect too many students are in such a hurry to paint they neglect fostering a unique drawing method. Unique drawing indicates a unique way of thinking about the visual world. Those qualities can then be applied to achieving a unique effect in paint.

Below is the painting Yellow Fields from The Kroller-Muller Museum from a photo by Erik te Kamp. Note the use of cloisonnism to contain the close values of the distant hills and

mountains. Rather than using value Van Gogh uses line to delineate the distant houses as well as the sun.

We see evidence of dry brush— where he let the paint dry and added touches of paint at a later stage. Once again we see little evidence that he loaded his brush—as all the strokes are of one color—the mixing taking place on the canvas at the edges of the strokes.

Yellow Fields by
Vincent Van Gogh.



This extreme close-up of a virtuoso clot of paint in the lower right quadrant seems to have evidence of glazing—another sign that Van Gogh thoughtfully modified his paintings back in the studio after the initial [alla prima](#) session. I'm impressed with the abandon embodied in this passage—any other color combination would not look as impressive—the muddy yellows and purples make the opposite color come alive.



Close-up of the lower right quadrant.

In this last close-up we see another example of dry brush and possible glazing in the lower section. The green line work most likely was painted after the initial paint had dried. The slightly purple pastels strokes offset the high saturation of the yellows and greens. ■



Another close-up example of dry brush and glazing.

The Genius of Van Gogh Part 3

Vincent Van Gogh's work is so unique because no one will ever paint like Van Gogh. His work is inimitable. Nevertheless, I find it interesting and productive to study his work. Below is an analysis of several images fellow painter Erik te Kamp sent from the Kröller-Müller Museum:



The first thing I notice is what appears to be gessoed canvas showing through in areas. The most notable spot being in the middle of the canvas on the very left. Although Van Gogh generally applied the paint very thickly there is definitely a hierarchy of thick and thin strokes.

Many thanks to Erik te Kamp for the fascinating closeup images.



What makes Van Gogh's work so engaging? Paradox may play a part.

Also of interest is whether or not the green stroke on the trunk was painted *alla prima* or afterward when the first coat of paint had dried. I guess it was painted after. The dark, cloisonnistic strokes, of what appears to be black, also appear to have been painted after the first painting session. I'm impressed with Van Gogh's simultaneous abandon and control of the medium. That paradox might be what is so engaging about his work.

In the image right, we see some very random thick strokes. It is almost as if he used a different brush for each stroke—impossible of course—but it shows how he achieved a great deal of variety with his tools. I often paint foliage with a repetition that is painful. This passage is a good reminder that variety is possible even with a minimum of brushes. I don't think this portrait of a tree would work as well if he had not given a great deal of variety to each stroke. ■



Remember that stroke variety is possible with a minimum of brushes.

About the Author

Brad Teare built a successful career illustrating for publishers such as The New York Times and Random House where he did book covers for authors such as James Michener, Anne Tyler, and Alice Walker. In 1994 his aspiration of painting the Western landscape reasserted itself, and he moved to Providence, Utah, a small town in the Rocky Mountains.



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