



## PUBLICATION

## VAN GOGH'S SUNFLOWERS ILLUMINATED : ART MEETS SCIENCE (2019)

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Abstract	<p>Vase with Sunflowers is one of the best-loved paintings by Vincent van Gogh and seen by many as an icon of West-European art. Yet, as this book demonstrates, there are still new discoveries to be made about this famous painting. Recently, two of the Sunflower paintings- the first version painted in August 1888 (National Gallery, London) and the second version made after it in January 1889 (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam)- were subjected to a detailed comparison by a team of expert art historians, conservators and conservation scientists. The paintings were examined in unprecedented depth using a broad array of techniques, including state-of-the-art, non-invasive imaging analytical methods, to look closely at and under the paint surface. Relating these technical findings to information in the artist's letters enables a precise reconstruction of Van Gogh's working process; starting from his particular order of canvas and tube paints, to his way of sketching out and working up the composition, to a last minute change in format of the Amsterdam picture, for example. Despite the apparent similarity between the London and Amsterdam Sunflowers set against a yellow background, in fact numerous differences emerge in terms of their size, composition, technique and colouration. Clearly Van Gogh did not intend the Amsterdam Sunflowers to be a precise copy, but aimed for a subtly different effect. These findings enhance our understanding of the paintings seen in the context of Van Gogh's overall artistic development. Not only the making, but also the subsequent history of the paintings is reconstructed, including later campaigns of restoration. In the course of the twentieth to twenty-first century, attitudes and approaches towards conservation and restoration changed, as well as the methods of treatment employed. The restoration history of the Sunflowers is examined against this broader background, also considering the impact of past treatment choices for the way the paintings look now. Special attention is given to colour as an expressive medium used in the Sunflower paintings. Yet the question is to what extent the colours we see now are those intended by Van Gogh, as opposed to the result of discolouration of the pigments he used. A new combination of non-invasive elemental mapping techniques is used to register the light-sensitive chrome yellow and red lake pigments used in the paintings. On the one hand, this knowledge helps to inform decisions made regarding safe ways to exhibit and preserve the paintings for generations to come. On the other hand, the pigment mapping forms the basis of a painted partial reconstruction made to assess the original colours and the effects of colour change in the Amsterdam Sunflowers. The result brings us closer to appreciating the bright yet subtle color relationships of the original, and hence closer to understanding Van Gogh.</p>
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## CONTACT

Anna van Saksenlaan 51  
2593 HW Den Haag

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[narcis@dans.knaw.nl](mailto:narcis@dans.knaw.nl)

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