

Collecting SUNFLOWERS

Sharing my obsession with impressions of sunflowers

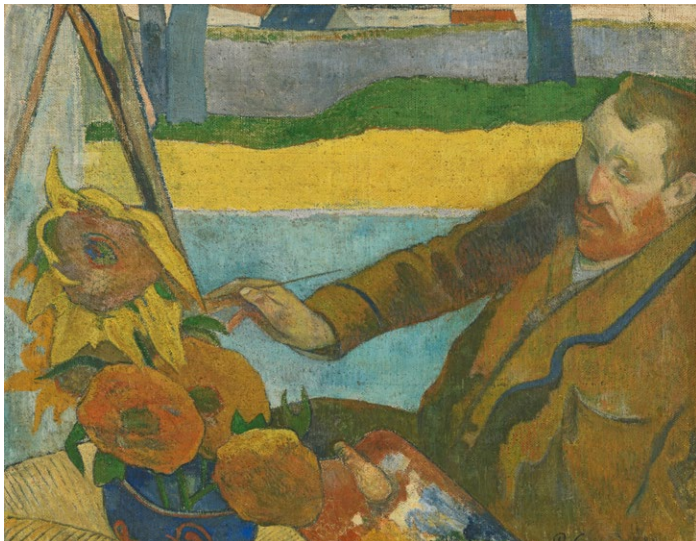
BY ERIN HANSON

SUNFLOWERS ARE ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC subjects in art history, particularly when it comes to impressionism and post-impressionism. But the true story of sunflowers in modern art began in 1887 in Paris, France, where Vincent van Gogh was living with his brother Theo.

Contrary to what he's famous for today, Vincent had until that time been painting in dark, somber colors. It was Theo who encouraged Vincent to work with lively, bright hues, and in Paris he finally began to do so.

Van Gogh painted two series of sunflower paintings—one while in Paris, and one while he lived in Arles. His sunflower paintings were admired by his friend Paul Gauguin, another artist, who acquired two of the works and hung them in his own Paris apartment.

In the winter of 1888, Gauguin was making plans to stay with van Gogh in Arles for a time. Unbeknownst to either, this would mark the last time they would see each other in person. While the friendship between the two men could be turbulent, both their letters leading up to the visit reveal them to be alight with happy anticipation.



The Painter of Sunflowers (1888) by Paul Gauguin



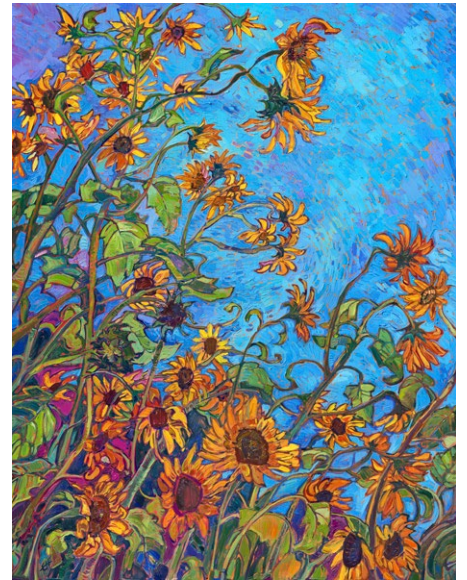
Erin at the opening of her gallery exhibition *The Sunflower Show*, 2022.

To celebrate the arrival of his dear friend, van Gogh created an entirely new series of sunflower paintings, two of which would hang in Gauguin's room. While his first series of sunflowers were of cut blooms lying on a table, this new series depicted them upright in vases.

Gauguin loved the new pieces, calling them “entirely Vincent.” During the two months they lived together, Gauguin created his own portrait of van Gogh painting sunflowers in his garden (*left*). Though you might not realize it at first, this painting reveals a vital difference in

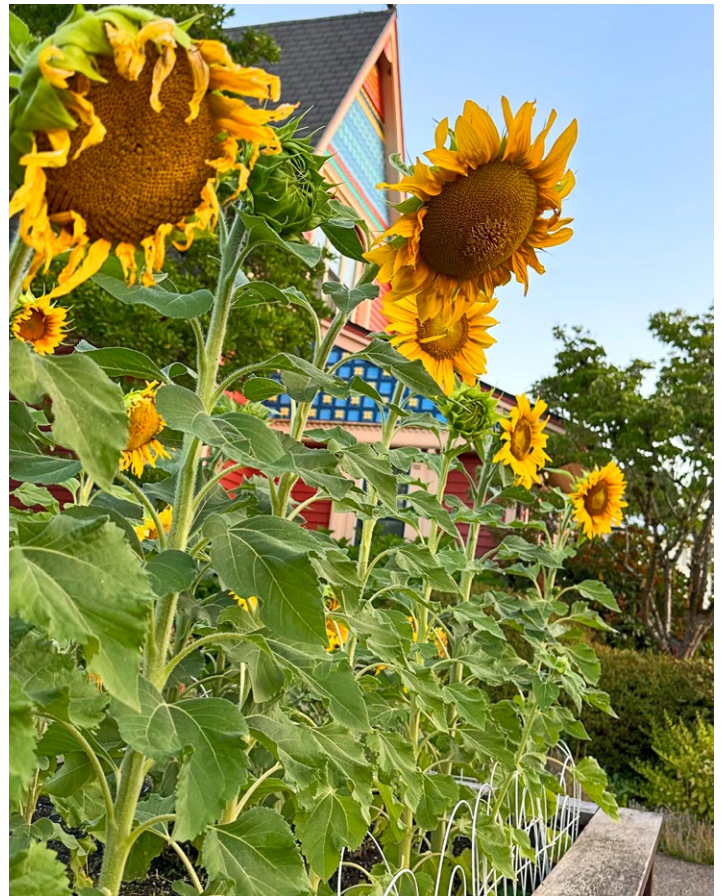


Sunflowers (1888) by Vincent van Gogh



(TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT) *Waves of Sunflowers* (2022), *Sunflowers II* (2019)
 (MIDDLE) *The Sunflower* (2026), *Sunflowers in Vase* (2016), *Azure Blooms* (2025)
 (BOTTOM) *Sunflower Blues* (2023), *Sunflowers in Provence* (2024)
 Paintings by Erin Hanson

“TO THIS DAY, SUNFLOWERS CONTINUE TO BE POPULAR AMONG ART LOVERS”



the two artists' styles. It depicts van Gogh painting a still life with a vase in front of him, but Gauguin never observed this while they stayed together. It was the dead of winter, and sunflowers had been out of bloom for months.

Gauguin often painted from his imagination, while van Gogh preferred to paint the natural world he could see before him. Indeed, the fact that Gauguin could not have observed the scene he painted led to a heated argument with van Gogh—the first in a series of disagreements that would lead Gauguin to leave Arles after only two months.

They soon rekindled and strengthened their friendship through letters. After van Gogh passed, Gauguin requested sunflower seeds be sent to his home in Tahiti. There he planted and grew them, and in the end painted a final sunflower painting in tribute to his friend.

A hundred years later, in 1987, a Japanese art collector by the name of Yasuo Goto purchased Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* for almost \$40 million, setting a world auction record at the time.

The purchase solidified this painting as one of the most globally recognizable works of art and fueled a worldwide demand for sunflower imagery in homes, galleries, and reproductions.

To this day, sunflowers continue to be popular among art lovers. My own collectors tell me that sunflower paintings make a room “feel alive,” and their sunny, yellow complexion brightens the spirit. Over the years, I've heard many stories from my collectors of childhood memories involving sunflowers, including growing them, and discovering sunflower fields while traveling abroad. Their paintings of sunflowers remind them of these happy memories.

I've told the story before of how van Gogh's painting *Irises* made me want to become a painter at only eight years of age. It gave me my first big epiphany as a painter: *An artist can use paint and brush to create something more beautiful than real life.* Ever since, I've tried to capture the beauty I see in life and magnify it on my canvas.

As I learned more about van Gogh, I became as captivated by his sunflower paintings as I had been with his *Irises*. I loved how he transformed an ordinary flower into an evocative expression of color and movement.

A few years ago, I decided to try growing my own sunflowers (*above*). I searched the internet to find heirloom varieties of sunflower seeds that would produce oversized heads and drooping petals like van Gogh's blooms.

In the spring, I planted 20 varieties of sunflower seeds. I eagerly waited for the plants to grow out of the ground like Jack's beanstalks. Soon they were towering above my head, their blooms as large and glorious as I had hoped.

My experiment with planting sunflowers has since inspired dozens of paintings. I have painted them in the garden, cut in vases, with wilted petals, and standing alone as a single flower.

I still can't get enough of painting sunflowers. I've even explored sunflower fields in Oregon and France, endlessly searching for more compositions with these blooms.

For you as a collector of my work, I hope you continue to find beauty and inspiration in my sunflower works, and may they fill your home with joy.

