I’ll tell you that we’re having some superb autumn days and that I’m taking advantage of them . . . I have a study [étude] of two yellowed poplars on a background of mountains . . . I’ve seen more very beautiful subjects for [painting] tomorrow—in the mountains.

—VINCENT VAN GOGH

This reference to a painting of two poplars in the mountains appears in a letter Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo on October 5, 1889. At the time, Van Gogh had already spent six months living at the Saint-Paul asylum near Saint-Rémy and was now enjoying the beautiful autumunal weather by taking extended hiking trips through the Alpilles, a small mountain range in Provence with distinctive limestone peaks (fig. 1). Van Gogh was also recovering from his third mental attack. After suffering hallucinatory seizures while painting outdoors on the sixteenth or seventeenth of July, he was forbidden to paint, even in his workroom at the asylum. When Dr. Peyron, head physician at the asylum, rescinded the order in September, Van Gogh resumed painting with a new burst of enthusiasm.¹ On October 4, Dr. Peyron informed Theo that his brother was not mad but suffering from intermittent epileptic seizures.² Despite the reassuring words, Van Gogh remained troubled, as he feared the possibility of a recurrence.
Van Gogh’s principal aim in *Two Poplars in the Alpilles* was to capture the unique character of this rugged, mountainous region surrounding the asylum (fig. 2). His infatuation with the Alpilles grew daily as he viewed the rocky cliffs from the window of his bedroom. “Everything’s hard to do here,” he wrote to Émile Bernard on October 8, 1889, “to disentangle its intimate character, and so that it’s not something vaguely true, but the true soil of Provence . . . [a]nd so it naturally becomes a little abstract. Because it will be a question of giving strength and brilliance to the sun and the blue sky, and to the scorched and often so melancholy fields, their delicate scent of thyme.”

Although modest in size, *Two Poplars in the Alpilles* is a painting of tremendous power and emotional intensity. It depicts a pair of isolated trees growing on a rocky hillside, their leaves yellowing in the cool autumnal weather. A dirt path or road descends from the right past a series of stone blocks, a common sight in a region known for its quarries. Providing a dramatic foil for the golden trees, the sky pulses with powerful brushstrokes of blue and white that race across the canvas with electric energy. A house with two windows peeks through the golden trees like a face between parted curtains. Secluded in this rugged landscape, the flamelike trees infuse the scene with fervent emotion while the quarried stones imply associations with funerary monuments and the region’s historic ties to antiquity. Examination of the tacking edge, where the paint has been protected from daylight (fig. 3), reveals that the blue sky was originally violet, a color that once formed a strong complementary contrast to the yellow trees, perhaps suggesting associations with the fragrant lilac and lavender fields of Provence. The violet has probably faded due to the presence of unstable red lake pigments mixed with the blues.

J.-B. de la Faille included a second version of this subject, a painting now at the Ohara Museum of Art, in his catalogue raisonné of 1928 (fig. 4). Since the Cleveland and Ohara paintings are closely related in size and composition, it was once assumed that one version must be a repetition of the other, but the more common view today is that the Ohara painting is by another hand. The Ohara painting’s history offers revealing insights into the complex, shifting nature of Van Gogh attributions. Shortly after the publication of Faille’s catalogue, a scandal erupted when the German art dealer Otto Wacker was accused of selling Van Gogh forgeries, including thirty-three works published by Faille. Faille quickly sought to protect himself and in November 1928 distributed an errata sheet or supplément that denounced all the Wacker paintings in his catalogue as fakes. In 1930 he expanded upon the supplément by publishing a new book, *Les faux Van Gogh*, which identified 174 Van Gogh paintings, including the Ohara canvas, as forgeries. This hardly settled the
matter, as experts continued to disagree over the attribution of a surprisingly large number of the artist’s paintings. In May 1929 police confiscated nine suspect works from the studio of Wacker’s father, painter Hans Wacker, and shortly thereafter seized another twelve canvases from the studio of Wacker’s brother, Leonhard Wacker, another painter and amateur restorer who insisted he was only repairing the works. The confiscated paintings were sent for analysis to the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. There, researchers discovered the presence of resin, a paint additive used to speed up drying time, in all the works they tested—including Ohara’s *Road in Alpilles*—but not in any undisputed Van Gogh paintings. The experts who testified at Wacker’s trial failed to reach a consensus even on the fifteen paintings on display in the courtroom (fig. 5). When Faille took the witness stand, he shocked everyone by changing his opinion, declaring five of the questioned works genuine, including the Ohara canvas—an opinion seconded by H. P. Bremmer, Julies Meier-Graefe, and Hans Rosenhagen. Faille’s dramatic about-face may have been influenced by the testimony of Cornelis Garnier of the Utrecht police department, who reported discovering a thumbprint on the Ohara painting that matched those on uncontested Van Gogh paintings in the Kröller-Müller collection. Evidently convinced, Faille changed his mind and included the Ohara painting among the genuine works in the second edition of his catalogue raisonné of 1939, only to have an
editorial committee remove it from the catalogue’s final edition, posthumously published in 1970.\textsuperscript{11}

Jan Hulsker did not include the Ohara painting in the final edition of his catalogue raisonné.\textsuperscript{12} Walter Feilchenfeldt believes the painting is a forgery copied from the Cleveland version when the latter was owned by the German art dealer Alfred Flechtheim in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{13} It has also been proposed that the Ohara painting may have been based on the large photographs taken of the Van Gogh paintings exhibited at the Cologne Sunderbund of 1912, where the Cleveland canvas was on display.\textsuperscript{14} In 2003 Karin van Lieverloo recommended that this issue should be revisited based on the fingerprint evidence discovered in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{15}

Louise d’Argencourt and Roger Diereren also rejected the Ohara version in their study of Cleveland’s \textit{Two Poplars} and went on to speculate, based on their reading of the artist’s letters, that there must be a lost version of the composition. “Until the other version reappears,” they conclude, “it will be impossible to determine if Cleveland’s \textit{Poplars} is the prime version or the second.”\textsuperscript{16} Unfortunately, the passage they cite as evidence for a lost version actually refers to another painting, \textit{The Ravine} (F662), of which there is a known repetition (F661).

It should also be noted that the Cleveland and Ohara paintings are not nearly as similar as some suppose. When scaled, digital images of the paintings are superimposed, significant variances between the two become more apparent. In fact, it almost appears
as if the painter of the Ohara version tried to correct the Cleveland composition by placing the trees on opposite sides of the road and raising the upper contour of the distant hills; however, this decision only produced a more confused space and decreased the size and dramatic impact of the sky. Analysis of the fabric support also indicates that the Cleveland and Ohara paintings were not executed on the same type of canvas, and the Ohara support does not match any Van Gogh or Wacker paintings studied thus far in Don H. Johnson’s weave mapping project.17

Perhaps the most striking difference between the two paintings is that the brushwork in the Ohara version seems less varied in comparison with the subtle, fluid, purposeful brushstrokes of the Cleveland canvas. These differences are especially evident in x-radiographs of the two works (figs. 6a–b). The Ohara version also has a more conventional palette that omits the fiery yellow-orange tones in the trees. The emerald greens in the landscape are also missing from the Ohara version, perhaps indicating that the painter was working from a black-and-white photograph. Whatever the source of the Ohara painting, it seems clear that Cleveland’s Two Poplars in the Alpilles is not a second version because it was quickly painted in a single session, entirely wet in wet, an attribute commonly associated with a first version painted from nature and consistent with Van Gogh’s description of the painting as une étude d’après nature. Recent examination of the Ohara Museum of Art’s Road in Alpilles by conservators at Kibi International University in Japan also reveals the presence of titanium white, a pigment not manufactured for use by artists until about 1916.18

Figs. 6a–b. X-radiographs of Two Poplars in the Alpilles (left) and Road in Alpilles (right). Fig. 6b courtesy the Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan.
The Ohara painting’s history raises several difficult issues, such as whether all the works associated with Wacker should be dismissed outright and whether they are by the same artist. Once considered genuine—perhaps a repetition of a closely related oil painting (fig. 7) and drawing (F1525) of June 1889—Cypresses (fig. 8) was among the other paintings placed on display at Wacker’s trial. Although Faille rejected Cypresses F614 in his 1928 supplément, the renowned Van Gogh expert H. P. Bremmer staunchly defended it at the Wacker trial, even describing it as one of Van Gogh’s most beautiful works. In its final decision, the court declared that eleven of the paintings on display in the courtroom were forgeries, two genuine, and two possibly genuine. The court did not rule on the authenticity of each individual work, but recorded comments indicate that Cypresses F614 and Ohara’s Road in Alpilles were among the works some experts considered genuine. After the trial, Faille changed his mind about Cypresses F614 and included it among the authentic works in the 1939 edition of his catalogue raisonné.

Experts have occasionally raised doubts about the authenticity of Van Gogh’s paintings due to the presence of a large amount of lead white mixed with the other paints, but that is no reason to discount them. “I’ve worked their foregrounds with thick impastos of white lead,” Van Gogh wrote to Theo in June 1889, “which gives
firmness to the ground. I believe that Monticellis were very often prepared in this way.” In 2001 *Cypresses* F614 was examined at the Van Gogh Museum and at the Canadian Conservation Institute at the owner’s request. Conservators at both institutions independently decided against an attribution to Van Gogh. Although many factors went into their decision, two stood out: the presence of a large quantity of resin in the paint binder, and the symmetrical weave of the canvas (possessing an equal number of warp and weft threads), which is unlike the asymmetrical weave of the canvases Van Gogh typically used during this period. There is one question, though, that the examiners were not in a position to answer: are all the forgeries that passed through Wacker’s stock by the same hand? If so, how can we explain the obvious differences in palette and brushwork between *Road in Alpilles* and *Cypresses* F614? Perhaps we will never know the exact source of these paintings or the full story behind the Wacker affair.

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**TECHNICAL NOTES**

**Two Poplars in the Alpilles** (F638, The Cleveland Museum of Art)

The original support is a medium-fine-weight linen (est.) fabric with a thread count of twelve vertical threads and sixteen horizontal threads per centimeter. The thread weave pattern is part of a clique of sixty-two paintings identified thus far in the weave match project. Others in this clique include two Berceuse paintings (F504, F506), *The Artist’s Bedroom* (F483), and two Sunflower paintings (F455, F458). The ground is a thinly applied warm off-white. Moderate weave texture is visible throughout the composition and along the exposed edges. X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analysis identifies lead white as the major component of the ground layer, with a small amount of zinc white and traces of calcium, iron, and copper. It has been sanded or rubbed, leaving the nubs of the raised threads exposed. The paint is applied with thick, vigorous brushstrokes and high impasto, executed in one sitting. X-radiographs reveal that there are no changes and all is done wet in wet, with edges of brushstrokes built up and appearing more opaque. The sky was first painted with a flat brush of about 1 centimeter wide. The edges of the trees were brushed into the sky and the foreground when still wet: starting with yellow, followed by green, with a brush about 3 millimeters wide in the sky, and starting with the yellow, followed by green and blue outlining in the foreground. The orange strokes in the center hill and nearby trees were applied wet in wet and are among the last touches added to the painting. XRF analysis has identified cobalt blue in the sky and water; zinc and possibly lead white in the clouds;
chrome yellow and emerald green in the sienna of the left tree; and emerald green in the hill in the left background and the right tree. An imprinted weave texture pattern in high impasto areas suggests contact with another canvas. Compressed impasto is commonly found in Van Gogh’s paintings, as they were often pressed together before the surfaces had completely dried.

Road in Alpilles (Ohara Museum of Art)

This work is executed on a plain weave fabric with an off-white ground. The ground remains visible in many areas. The paint was largely applied wet in wet, with some areas of wet over dry, such as the dark strokes in the outer tree edges. Areas of the image were first outlined with dark green. The painting sequence exhibits less spontaneity than the Cleveland version. Both examination and the x-radiographs indicate that the central trees were painted before the sky, which was worked in around the tree tops. Overall, the composition is more thinly painted and in a more limited palette than the Cleveland version.

NOTES


1 Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh (Saint-Rémy, letter 797), August 22, 1889. This attack occurred in mid-July, and Van Gogh remained incapacitated until the end of August.

2 Theo van Gogh to Vincent van Gogh (Paris, letter 807), October 4, 1889.

3 Vincent van Gogh to Emile Bernard (Saint-Rémy, letter 809), October 8, 1889. Van Gogh often underlined words in his letters for emphasis; the italics here reflect the emphasis in the original text.


7 Ibid., p. 102.


10 Tromp, A Real Van Gogh, p. 122.


12 The painting was included in the 1977 edition but accompanied by a note explaining that only one of the editorial board members (not Hulsker) accepted its inclusion. See Jan Hulsker, The Complete Van Gogh: paintings, drawings, sketches (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), p. 255.


16 The painting’s title has been altered slightly since the publication of d’Argencourt's catalogue because the canvas does not depict poplars in the town of Saint-Rémy but, rather, in the Alpilles mountains around the Saint-Paul asylum. D’Argencourt and Diederen cite letter 865 (CL630) as evidence for the existence of a second version; however, the reference is actually to a second version of The Ravine (F661). See Louise d’Argencourt with Roger Diederen, European Paintings of the 19th Century (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1999), p. 302.

17 The authors thank Don H. Johnson of Rice University for his analysis of the two canvases.

18 Examinations with non-destructive infrared fluorescent x-rays were conducted on September 9, 2013. We would like to thank Sara Durt, Assistant Curator at the Ohara Museum of Art in Kurashiki, Japan, for sharing this information.


20 The court had apparently lost the trial records by 1939, but the proceedings have been reconstructed from newspaper and personal accounts. See Tromp, A Real Van Gogh, p. 159; Tromp, Feilchenfeldt, Koldehoff, and Eksteins, Solar Dance, p. 205.

21 Vincent Van Gogh to Theo van Gogh (Saint-Rémy, letter 783), June 25, 1889.

22 The examinations were filmed for Me, My Brother, and My Father’s Van Gogh, videotape, directed by Elise Swerhone (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Riverain Productions, 2000). Also see Elizabeth Moffatt, Geneviève Sansoucy, Marie-Claude Corbeil, and Jeremy J. Powell, “Is It or Isn’t It? Scientific Examination of F 614 Reveals the Truth,” CCI Newsletter no. 27 (June 2001), http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/ccci-icc/about-apropos/nb/nb27/f614-eng.aspx. Weave maps have not yet been done on Cypresses F614.

23 Among the other known Wacker paintings are Boats at Saintes-Maries (F418, Kröller-Müller Museum) and Self-Portrait with Pipe (527bis, Harvard Art Museums). Ludwig Justi of the Nationalgalerie believed all the forgeries are by the same artist who simply got better as he produced more works. Eksteins identified Leonhard Wacker as the most likely forger; see Tromp, Feilchenfeldt, Koldehoff, and Eksteins, Solar Dance, pp. 200, 224.
HOW TO CITE THIS WORK

Fig. 2. *Two Poplars in the Alpilles*, October 1889. Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). Oil on canvas; 61.6 x 45.7 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of Leonard C. Hanna Jr. 1958.32, F638.

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Fig. 4. Road in Alpilles. Formerly attributed to Vincent van Gogh. Oil on canvas; 55 x 45 cm. Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan.

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Fig. 8. Cypresses. Formerly attributed to Vincent van Gogh. Oil on canvas; 90 x 69.5 cm. Ken MacDonald, Winnipeg.

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