ROAD IN ALPILLES

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Technical analysis provided by the art conservation teams at Kibi International University

The Ohara Museum of Art was founded in 1930 to exhibit a broad range of modern European art gathered by the European-style painter Torajiro Kojima with the financial backing of industrialist Magosaburo Ohara. From its conception around 1920, the collection’s principal mission has been to benefit and educate the general public. Although people in Japan had heard about Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne, there were few works for them to see, so acquiring examples was not a trivial matter.

The magazine Shirakaba, first published in 1910 by a group of prominent young artists, writers, and critics, played an important role in introducing modern European art to Japan. Among the painters featured in the magazine, Cézanne and Van Gogh in
particular gained great popularity. The Shirakaba group acquired Landscape by Cézanne and Sunflowers by Van Gogh, among other works, in the hopes of building its own museum, but the magazine was discontinued following the Tokyo earthquake of 1923 and the museum never built.

In light of Van Gogh’s importance, Ohara decided to ask Ryuzaburo Shikiba to search for a work by the artist. A psychiatrist close to the Shirakaba group, Shikiba contacted J.-B. de la Faille, author of Van Gogh’s first catalogue raisonné, to inquire about the possibility of purchasing works by the artist. In May 1935 Shikiba learned that two Van Goghs were available, and the decision to purchase one was made within a week. That painting, introduced by Faille, was Road in Alpilles (fig. 1).

Road in Alpilles was published in Faille’s 1928 catalogue raisonné of Van Gogh’s work, but when the Paul Cassirer Gallery organized a Van Gogh exhibition in January 1928, Grete Ring, the gallery’s general manager, and Walter Feilchenfeldt, managing director of the firm holding the exhibition, questioned the authenticity of some of the works. All the suspicious paintings came from the gallery of Otto Wacker. In response to the controversy, Faille issued an errata statement in November 1928 declaring thirty-three of the works in his catalogue raisonné forgeries, including Road in Alpilles. Wacker was subsequently charged with fraud and brought to trial in Berlin in 1932. In sworn testimony, Faille changed his mind, claiming that five of the thirty-three works were genuine, Road in Alpilles among them.

Road in Alpilles was purchased for 44,242 yen from Willem Scherjon’s gallery in Utrecht and subsequently brought to the Ohara Museum of Art in December 1935. Only following the painting’s arrival at the museum did the director Takeuchi Kiyomi learn that it had been deemed authentic after previously being rejected as a fake by Faille himself (fig. 2). The canvas was almost immediately placed on public display, marking January 1, 1936,
as the moment when a “Van Gogh” painting was first exhibited in a Japanese museum. It remained the only “Van Gogh” anyone could see in Japan until the Bridgestone Museum and the National Museum of Western Art were founded in Tokyo in the 1950s.

On November 28, 1970, Road in Alpilles was stolen from the museum, along with Gustave Moreau’s Song of Songs (Cantique des Cantiques), Armand Guillaumin’s Self-Portrait, Édouard Vuillard’s Madame Vuillard Peeling Potatoes, and Georges Rouault’s Clown (Profile). In 1972 the thief was caught, and the works returned to the museum on February 8 of that year. Two days later, Road in Alpilles was again on the wall, exhibited to the public.

Around this time, a committee of Van Gogh scholars working on the 1970 edition of Faille’s catalogue raisonné cast doubt on the authenticity of Road in Alpilles. Opinions were divided, but the committee ultimately decided to list the painting as genuine but arguable. On March 25, 1984, the canvas was studied by Professor Ronald Pickvance of Glasgow University and Johannes van der Wolk from the Kröller-Müller Museum at the atelier of the restorer Mitsuhiko Kuroe. The scholars concluded that the Van Gogh attribution as very doubtful, and from then on, the work was kept in museum storage. On May 15, 1995, Dr. Tsukasa Ködera, assistant professor at Osaka University at the time, was invited to deliver a lecture on forgeries. After a fifteen-year absence, Road in Alpilles was returned to the galleries, and at Ködera’s request, the installation included a panel explaining the various shifts in the work’s authenticity.

In October and November 2002, an exhibition titled Yurinso Fukuda Miran, Ohara Museum of Art was held in Yurinso, the second residence of the Ohara family and a building occasionally used by the museum as an exhibition space. Road in Alpilles was featured in this exhibition and displayed together with a painting by Miran Fukuda that aimed to make the disputed work more “authentic.” Fukuda’s painting To Make “Van Gogh” More Like “Van Gogh” was accompanied by the following statement by the artist:

Today, it is a very precious occasion for us to experience a work by a renowned artist whose authenticity is not confirmed. The experience is intriguing because the authenticity of the artwork has been one of the central topics in the history of paintings, and has further implications for the critical issue of what art is. When I first saw this painting, I was more interested in the issue of why it appears to me not so much like “a Van Gogh” than the issue of whether it is really authentic or not. I wanted to consider what is needed to make it look really like “a Van Gogh.”
And if it’s a real Van Gogh, I wanted to consider the issue of what it would mean to make “Van Gogh” more like “Van Gogh” through the act of painting. It is unlikely even for Van Gogh that he is perfectly satisfied with all the works he created in his whole life. Yet, we have a certain image of his style by repeatedly being exposed to his representative works of his golden age.

Since 2002, *Road in Alpilles* has been exhibited together with Fukuda’s *To Make “Van Gogh” More Like “Van Gogh”* in the context of the contemporary art collection at the Ohara Museum.

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**TECHNICAL NOTES**

*Road in Alpilles* (Ohara Museum of Art)

On June 9, 1950, the frame was replaced, presumably with the one currently in use. When Mitsuhiko Kuroe restored the painting in the 1980s, the back of the canvas was lined using mainly beeswax—a type of lining for which Kuroe is known (fig. 3). No records were made of this treatment. The painting’s size did not
change, but the location of the nail holes did. The painting may have been previously restored. The source of the current varnish is unknown, although it probably dates to an earlier conservation treatment.

Stereo-microscope studies were undertaken by Hideyuki Ohara on September 9, 2013, at the Research Center for Cultural Properties, Kibi International University, at a microscopic magnification of 6.5. The entire surface was recorded on video at intervals of 1 centimeter, top to bottom. Ohara, who as an exhibition conservator had the occasion to analyze a large number of works by Van Gogh, remarked, “This work appears less damaged than many other [of] Van Gogh’s works. Works of Van Gogh being restored in the 1950s and ’60s have often many cleavages and losses all over the surface.” There is some squashed impasto, but it is hard to determine if this is the result of the wax lining process or from the impasto being pressed when the paint was still fresh.

There are no features in the Ohara painting that correspond to the microscopic images of Two Poplars in the Alpilles (F638) at the Cleveland Museum of Art, making a direct comparison between the two works is impossible. But even with the naked eye, one can see that the colors in the Ohara painting are impure and lack freshness, which gives a general impression of dullness. The blue paint of the sky—which shows no evidence of fading—was created with brushstrokes applied around the contours of the trees. X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analysis indicated that, unlike the Cleveland painting, there is no cobalt blue in the Ohara version and no trace of yellow or orange in the trees.

X-radiography conducted by Susumu Shimoyama, Hideaki Takagi, and Koji Oshita on September 9, 2013, at the Research Center for Cultural Properties of Kibi International University indicated that the paint surface is largely unchanged, showing no signs of composition adjustment (fig. 4). Additional examination with infrared imaging showed no evidence of charcoal or graphite underdrawing (fig. 5).

Shimoyama and Oshita also performed non-destructive XRF analysis. Using a portable x-ray fluorescence spectrometer system, they selected sixteen points for measurement, providing evidence for the presence of silver white (lead white), along with zinc and titanium white, in the ground layer. In the layers above the ground, it is likely that zinc white was mixed with Prussian blue, a green made of Prussian blue mixed with chrome yellow, or vermilion red. Unlike the Cleveland painting, cobalt blue and emerald green were not found in the Ohara version.
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Fig. 4. X-radiograph of Road in Alpilles. Courtesy the Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan.

Fig. 5. Infrared image of Road in Alpilles. Courtesy of Research Center for Cultural Properties, Kibi International University.
PROVENANCE


EXHIBITION HISTORY


Galerie Otto Wacker, Berlin.


1951  Osaka Matsuzakaya Department Store, *Van Gogh (Gohho ten)*, December 8–17.


1960  Nagoya Matsuzakaya Department Store, *European Masterpieces from the Ohara Collection (Ohara Korekushon Taisei Meiga ten)*, February 2–21, no. 15.

Nagasaki Hamaya Department Store, *Netherland Paintings (Olanda Kaiga ten)*, February 23–March 3.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


3 H. P. Bremmer and Willem Scherjon also believed some of Wacker’s paintings were genuine; see Scherjon, Catalogue des Tableaux par Vincent van Gogh décrits dans les letters periode St. Remy et Auvers sur Oise (Utrecht: A. Oosthoek, 1932), no. 56. Eight Wacker paintings were judged authentic in Scherjon and W. Jos de Gruyter, Van Gogh’s Great Period (Amsterdam: De Speighel, 1937). Faille accepted six of the Wacker paintings as genuine in Vincent van Gogh (New York: French and European Publications, 1939), H817 / F639.

4 J.-B. de la Faille, The Works of Vincent van Gogh: his paintings and drawings (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International, 1970), pp. 255, 588–96. The editors’ comment reads: “None of the editors but W. J. de Gruyter agree with Faille, who accepted F639 [Road in Alpilles] in the 1939 edition and in his manuscript for the present edition. The other editors do not consider the painting an authentic work by [V]an Gogh. The only editors who have seen the painting are W. J. De Gruyter and A. M. Hammacher, who saw it in 1930.”

5 This system is described in Jo Kirby, Dyes in History and Archaeology (London: Archetype, 2002), 18: pp. 74–75.

HOW TO CITE THIS WORK

Fig. 1. *Road in Alpilles.* Formerly attributed to Vincent van Gogh. Oil on canvas; 55 x 45.2 cm. Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan.

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