

Write About a Painting you feel Strongly About

Elizabeth Shove

July 1889

My dear Theo

I have not been allowed into the place they let me use as a studio since I was discovered drinking turpentine. I am eating better now, and strength is coming back to me day by day. I don't know how long this will last, but working is always the best therapy. Today, and for the first time in weeks, I was able to go out into the grounds of the hospital. On the northern boundary there is a huge wheatfield, bordered by dark cypress trees. I have been there before with my sketchbook but this morning I started work on a medium sized canvas – big enough to have effect but small enough to carry around.

I had my portable easel and my brushes and paints – thank you very much for the last consignment. I focused intently on the wind, the twisting movement of the terrain and the relentless power of nature. I began to build a picture of great bands of colour, slicing across the field. In my mind's eye, the tall cypress trees at one side would offer a powerful contrast to the horizontals of the terrain. I could see before me the oppositions of warm and cool, the proportioning of the parts, and the relative heights of sky and earth on the two sides. In between the trees I could pick out the silhouette of the distant mountain, broken by vegetation, but it was the cypresses writhing in the sun-drenched landscape that captured my attention.

I mixed my paints in a frenzy, but constantly missed the effect I wanted. Whilst I was in the middle of painting in this blasted field a new crisis came upon me. My emotions came to the boil and in a moment of self-loathing and hatred, I gathered a fist full of small stones and hurled them at the canvas. 'Take that!' I yelled. The moment passed, and afterwards I felt strangely calm.

My dear brother, I can't put into words what this painting means to me, and I won't even try, but you of all people will know what this is about. There is no mistaking the symbolism of the cypress – its association with death and immortality and the eternal cycles of life. Theo, I am constantly engulfed by paralysing fears and by forces that I cannot control. I don't mean to complain but I no longer see any possibility for courage or good hope. The swirling, foreboding cypress trees capture this enduring darkness in my own way and in a way that you will understand at once. They will tell you what I cannot say to your face.

I am sorry not to be writing with better news. Thank you for all your kindnesses, good handshake to you and to Jo, and naturally to Cor if he's still there.

Ever yours

Vincent

Vincent Van Gogh shot himself and died aged 37 just 12 months later.



Wheat Field With Cypresses which was purchased for \$57 million by Walter Annenberg as a gift for the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in 1993, came from the collection of Emil Bührle, a German arms manufacturer who made his fortune selling weapons to the Nazis.

Experts have found pebbles embedded in the paint. Perhaps the canvas just blew over in the wind. Perhaps van Gogh was so disgusted with the painting that he threw a handful of dirt at it. No one knows.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/11/arts/design/van-gogh-cypresses-met-museum.html>

<https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let789/letter.html>