



THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY

POETRY RESOURCE

A WHEATFIELD
WITH CYPRESSES

In 1888 Van Gogh settled in Arles in Provence, where he painted his now famous series of 'Sunflowers'. The golden wheat field, tall evergreen cypresses, olive bush and a backdrop of the blue Alpilles mountains give a typical view of the region. Van Gogh wrote about painting outdoors during the summer mistral, the strong, cold wind of southern France. You can almost feel the wind rippling through the wheat and trees but also the clouds too. Even the distant mountains look like they might be blown away. His swirling brushstrokes and powerful rhythmic lines give a sense of energy and vitality to the landscape.

Van Gogh became mentally unwell a year later and was a patient at the sanatorium in St Remy. He painted the first version of 'A Wheatfield, with Cypresses' in late June 1889 when he was allowed on an accompanied trip out of the hospital grounds. Van Gogh thought of this painting as a first impression or study for the final painting. In September, while temporarily confined to his room due to a relapse, he painted the National Gallery's picture. He judged it to be one of his best summer landscapes.

Looking and noticing

Put yourself somewhere in the painting. You don't have to be a person; you could transform yourself into a bird or an animal that lives in the landscape.

- Now look around you; what's the closest thing you can see and what's furthest away?
- Stay very still; what sounds can you hear? Some might be very quiet so listen carefully.
- Reach out; what can you touch? How does it feel?
- Take a deep breath; what can you smell?

From your starting point, imagine travelling through the painting, noticing as much as you can on the way. Notice, colours, shapes, textures and describe your journey to a partner. Can they guess where you started from?

Are there any clues about what the weather is like? Or the time of year?



Observing movement

Van Gogh captured the way the strong wind moved through the landscape. Step outside if you can and observe the world around you. You might look at how the clouds move across the sky or the light filters through the trees. Can you catch any shifting shadows?

You might want to capture these movements by creating a series of quick drawings. Experiment with focusing on what you are drawing rather than looking down at your paper, or using the hand you don't use for writing.



Talking points

- Does nature need to be wild to be real?
- Can we experience nature without being inside?
- Do we control nature or does nature control us?
- Should artists always paint what they see?
- Should art always be beautiful?

Creating a poem using Van Gogh's *A Wheatfield with Cypresses*

The poem could be an individual or group exercise. Artists and writers have much in common. Artists think about colour, shape, line and texture when they compose their work; for a writer, words are their building blocks. Each arranges their work, thinking about the finished result, reworks it for a better effect and keeps the audience in mind. Van Gogh made several versions of this painting, each one a little different.

Looking and recording

Start by developing a word bank; words to describe:

- colour
- texture
- how all the senses are reached
- mood, how the painting makes us feel

Is there something that needs a new word to properly describe it. Writing each word on separate pieces of paper will make it easier to move them around later.



Arranging

Van Gogh thought carefully about how the different elements of the painting worked together. Start to arrange words from the word bank thinking about:

- words that go well together because of their sound. They might share a sound (alliteration/assonance) or they might sound like the thing they're describing (onomatopoeia).
- putting contrasting words together.
- arranging words into the shape of the thing they're describing.

Composing

Combining words into phrases will give the beginning of the poem. Start to:

- Combine individual words to make phrases
- Write phrases on individual strips of paper
- Move them around to create the best effect

This could be an individual or group exercise with everyone adding a line to the whole. Sometimes less is more! Is there anything you would like to leave out? Are there lines you would like to shorten?

Sharing

Poems, like paintings need an audience. Read the poem aloud, thinking about where you need to pause or run lines together. What punctuation do you need to add?

Giving something a name will also help bring it to life. Give the poem a title.

Van Gogh's painting helps to imagine experiencing the landscape; can varying the way the poem is read add to the meaning?

Links

nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/vincent-van-gogh-a-wheatfield-with-cypresses

metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436535

