

Flower still life by Vincent van Gogh rediscovered thanks to new research technique

March 21 2012

After lengthy research the Kröller-Müller Museum has another Van Gogh painting to its name: Still life with meadow flowers and roses. Its authenticity had been in doubt ever since it was added to the collection in 1974, due to the unusual size of the canvas and the anomalous signature among other things. The work was dismissed in 2003 and has been listed as “artist: anonymous” ever since.

Now, nine years later, a team of researchers from the TU Delft, the University of Antwerp, Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron DESY in Hamburg, the Van Gogh Museum and the Kröller-Müller Museum has succeeded in confirming its authenticity. The results are now presented in the article “Rehabilitation of a flower still life in the Kröller-Müller Museum and a lost Antwerp painting by Van Gogh”, a prepublication of Van Gogh Studies 4. From today, for the first time in its history, the flower piece will be given a prominent position among other works by [Vincent van Gogh](#) in the museum’s collection.

A brief history of the painting’s development and of the voyage of discovery that eventually led to this cutting-edge insight follows below.

The story begins in Antwerp, where Van Gogh arrived in late November 1885 and enrolled at the art academy in January 1886. Part of the course was an exercise to paint a pair of wrestlers. Van Gogh’s teacher urged him to purchase a large [canvas](#), new brushes and paint, as Vincent wrote

in a letter on 22 January. He himself had no money, but Theo enabled him to buy the materials. A week later he wrote ‘This week I painted a large thing with two nude torsos – two wrestlers’ and that he was delighted with the result. The large canvas was a standard format for figure paintings at the academy in Antwerp.

Van Gogh took the canvas with him when he went to live with his brother in Paris in late February 1886. There, he painted over the wrestlers several months later in a manner that was typical for him during this period, namely without first scraping off the first depiction or painting an intermediate layer over it: he painted immediately on top of it. The doubts about the authenticity of the flower piece were prompted in part by the unusual format for the subject: 100 x 80 cm. Van Gogh’s Parisian flower still lifes are generally smaller, but here the size proved to be determined by the underlying academic piece. Another argument for its dismissal was the flower piece’s uncharacteristic exuberance for Van Gogh, particularly the opulently filled foreground. But that too can be linked to the format and the fact that the artist had to paint over an entire wrestler on that spot.

When the work appeared in an auction in 1920, where the Kröllers purchased 26 (!) of the 48 Van Gogh paintings, this floral piece was not among their acquisitions. The painting ended up in various private collections and was not included in the Kröller-Müller collection until 1974. The work was purchased with support from the Rembrandt Association and the Prince Bernhard Fund, in order to ‘save it for the nation’. Ellen Joosten, then senior curator of the museum described the work as both ‘exceptional’ and ‘remarkable’. She found the large size, the abundance of flowers in their lush display of colour and the smooth, ‘rather academic approach’ highly unusual. In the 2003 file catalogue – The paintings of Vincent van Gogh in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum – new arguments were raised, adding to the existing doubts. The work was dismissed but remained in the collection.

An X-ray image made in 1998 already revealed that the flower piece was painted over the other depiction: the scene with the torsos of two wrestlers grasping each other by the arms. This X-ray continued to fascinate researchers. The new research technique MA-XRF (Macro Scanning X-ray Fluorescence Spectrometry) made it possible to analyze both paintings in greater detail. The experiments which were mainly conducted at DESY's synchrotron radiation source DORIS in Hamburg revealed not only a defining characteristic of the academy in Antwerp, namely that the male models posed half naked in contrast to academies elsewhere, but that the pigments used correspond entirely with Van Gogh's palette at that time. Furthermore, it was also possible to recognize Van Gogh's typical brushstrokes in the now far more visible depiction.

These and other arguments explained in detail in the article leave no doubt that the wrestlers and the flower still life were painted by Van Gogh. The publication *Rehabilitation of a flower still life in the Kröller-Müller Museum and a lost Antwerp painting by Van Gogh* (authors: Luuk Struick van der Loeff, Matthias Alfeld, Teio Meedendorp, Joris Dik, Ella Hendriks, Geert van der Snickt, Koen Janssens and Meta Chavannes) is available as a prepublication in the museum shop (English language). *Van Gogh: New Findings* (Van Gogh Studies deel 4) will be available from June 2012 and is published by WBooks under the auspices of the Van Gogh Museum. Still life with meadow flowers and roses is on display from 20 March in the Kröller-Müller [Museum](#), together with Van Gogh's *Roses and peonies* and *Flowers in a blue vase*.

Provided by DESY

Citation: Flower still life by Vincent van Gogh rediscovered thanks to new research technique (2012, March 21) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-03-life-vincent-van-gogh-rediscovered.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.