

Applied Humanities

Vernon Lamb 

What Is Art?

What Is It a Picture Of?

By James Romaine

5 Theme: Impact of the Humanities (week 5) / Page 5.1.5 What Is It a Picture Of?

On this page: 0 of 3 attempted (0%)

Objective: Understand how minor differences can have major effects on the meaning of an image.

Van Gogh's Copies and Compositions

In the fall of 1889, Vincent van Gogh began to make painted copies of works by artists he admired, including Rembrandt van Rijn, Eugène Delacroix, and Jean-François Millet. Van Gogh's motivations for this practice, which had been a rarity in his art until 1889, could have been manifold: First, in an age before color photography, color reproductions had to be made by hand. Second, throughout art history, artists have made copies of each other's works, or simply copied parts of an image, as a way of paying homage to and/or trying to identify oneself as belonging to the tradition established by the old master. And third, in many cases, artists have made copies of "masterpieces" in museums as a way of learning. While Van Gogh, who was largely a self-taught painter, had carefully studied the work of Delacroix and Millet for the purpose of learning from them, by the fall of 1889 Van Gogh was a mature painter who had developed his own unique artistic voice.



Swirls of blue and yellow make up the night sky in this oil painting. A yellow crescent moon is in the upper right corner. Venus, the morning star, is to the left of center surrounded by rings of yellow and white. Other stars are scattered among the swirls of blue, each surrounded by various sized rings of white and yellow. Under the sky is a village with its church and steeple centered and prominent. Mountains undulate in the background. The mountains are darker shades of blue. In the village, windows in various locations have lights in their windows. There is a green cypress tree in the left foreground reaching almost to the top of the painting.

The Starry Night by Vincent van Gogh. Oil on canvas, 1889. 2' 5" × 3' 0.25".

[Click to enlarge](#)

Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

In works such as *The Starry Night*, we see a visual language of unmixed colors, often applied to establish visual contrast (a yellow next to a blue, colors that are opposite on the color wheel). His brush marks are vigorous and expressive. In fact, the previous 18 months (between February of 1888, when Van Gogh left Paris for the south of France, and the fall of 1889) had been the most artistically successful period of his career. Therefore, one possible motivation for Van Gogh's project of making creative copies may have been to test or measure his now-mature artistic method against that of some of the artists from whom he had borrowed along the way. What would it look like to repaint a work by Millet in the visual language of Vincent van Gogh? Could he make these images his own by giving new interpretations to inherited subjects?

In addition to the visual delight and historical intrigue that these copies provide, they also allow us to compare two works that depict the exact same subject but employ distinctly different visual methods. In every work of art, there is a relationship between the subject depicted and the visual language that the artist employs. This visual language is composed of elements such as color and composition, the contrast of light and shadow, balance and rhythm. In interpreting the work of art, we should not only consider the subject depicted but also pay attention to *how* the subject is depicted. The advantage of Van Gogh's copies of works by Millet and Delacroix is that the subjects remain the same but the visual language, and therefore the content visualized, is changed. Looking at these works, we can ask, "How is our reading of the work shaped by the way in which the subject is depicted?"

Looking at *First Steps*, *The Good Samaritan*, and *The Pietà*, and comparing Van Gogh's paintings with those by Millet and Delacroix, we can see that Van Gogh made different types of modifications to his models. The copy of Millet's work is basically unchanged compositionally, only repainted in the colors and technique of Van Gogh's method. In the two copies after Delacroix, Van Gogh has reversed the composition, creating a mirror image of the original. Our concern here will be not so much in speculating on why Van Gogh might have followed different strategies but rather looking carefully at what the effect on the reading of the subject might be.

First Steps



In this painting, a farmer crouches with his arms outstretched toward his baby daughter, who is attempting to walk. The daughter is being supported by the farmer's wife, who is a few steps away and holding the baby's arms. All three figures are out in a garden. There is a wheelbarrow behind the farmer and a shovel lying on the ground in front of him. Behind the garden there is a fence, two trees, and a cottage

First Steps by Jean-François Millet. Black chalk and pastel, c. 1858-1866. 11.5" × 1' 6".
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Thomas H. Jones, Sr. 1962.407

[Click to enlarge](#)

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Thomas H. Jones, Sr.

Like much of his art, Jean-François Millet's *First Steps* celebrates, or even heroicizes, the daily life of agrarian labor. In mid-19th-century France, when art was expected to depict subjects of historical or religious importance, Millet treated everyday events as if they, in fact, had that type of significance.

Millet's subject is immediately recognizable. A farmer has laid aside a shovel, with which he seems to have been filling (or emptying) the wheelbarrow beside him. His wife and child have come out of the house with the exciting news that the toddler has begun to walk. The simplicity of this subject seems almost banal, and in the hands of a lesser artist than Millet it may well have become such. The charm of Millet's work may disguise the carefully constructed composition that guides the viewer's reading of the motif.

Recognizing that, in western art, we read an image from left to right, Millet situates the farmer at the left. He is a surrogate figure, a figure with whom the viewer might identify. We naturally read the image moving toward the mother and child. From this point, like the child, the viewer is on his or her own. It is up to the viewer to imagine, moving from right to left, the child's walk toward the father's open arms. Will the child make this journey without falling? Will she stumble and recover? The subtle anticipation built into this image is palpable. Through the means by which he depicted his subject, Millet has succeeded in creating a monumental event out of a moment that would ordinarily only be of interest to its participants.



There are two paintings juxtaposed in this image. In the first painting, a farmer crouches with his arms outstretched toward his baby daughter, who is attempting to walk. The daughter is being supported by the farmer's wife, who is a few steps away and holding the baby's arms. All three figures are out in a garden. There is a wheelbarrow behind the farmer and a shovel lying on the ground in front of him. Behind the garden there is a fence, two trees, and a cottage. The second painting is nearly identical to the first, but it has been painted with different, brighter colors, and there is laundry hanging over the fence in the background between the farmer and his wife.

First Steps by Jean-François Millet (left) juxtaposed with *First Steps, after Millet* by Vincent van Gogh (right).

Cleveland Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY

In making Millet's work his own, Van Gogh made several changes. Most notably, he has altered the colors. The father and mother are both dressed in blue. This was one of Van Gogh's favorite colors, and it visually causes the figures to more strongly stand out against the background of bushes and the house. Furthermore, because the father and mother are the same color, they become visually conjoined. Even their poses (the father leans to the right and the mother leans to the left) link them. They act like compositional parenthesis for the space that the child must walk. The father and mother are also visually connected by the laundry that hangs behind them. The rhythm created by the repeated visual units of each piece of laundry on the line, with its billowing sheets, acts like a visual surrogate for the child's steps.



In this painting, a farmer crouches with his arms outstretched toward his baby daughter, who is attempting to walk. The daughter is being supported by the farmer's wife, who is a few steps away and holding the baby's arms. All three figures are out in a garden. There is a wheelbarrow behind the farmer and a shovel lying on the ground in front of him. Behind the garden there is a fence, two trees, and a cottage. Laundry hangs over the fence between the farmer and his wife.

First Steps, after Millet by Vincent van Gogh. Oil on canvas, 1890. 2' 4.5" × 3'.

[Click to enlarge](#)

Art Resource, NY

Van Gogh's composition is nearly identical to Millet's, and we read the two works the same way: first across the image from left to right, and then, in our imagination, from right to left. And yet the two works convey opposite impressions of the same moment. In Millet's work, the space between the father and mother seems expansive. This gives a sense of heroic drama to the initial stumblings of a child.

Van Gogh's treatment of the same subjects makes every attempt to visually close the space between the adults. His emphasis is on the intimacy, the bond of a family. In his letters to his brother Theo, Vincent van Gogh often lamented not having a wife and child. In reinterpreting Millet's image, he achieved in art what had eluded him in life.

The Pietà



Both of these paintings depict the dead body of Jesus Christ leaning against the sloping ground. A white cloth is draped over His body from the waist down. Behind Him, the Virgin Mary stands over Him with her arms outstretched around and slightly over Him. Her palms are open and she stares downward, but not directly at Him. Her expression is sad and calm. Christ's head leans in toward Mary. In the first image, Christ's body is lightly colored and Mary is dressed in blue. Christ's body leans to the right and Mary stands slightly to the left. In the second painting, Christ's upper body is shrouded in shadow, while Mary's is more in the light. She is also wearing red cloth around her neck. In this version, Christ's body leans to the left and Mary stands slightly to the right.

Pietà (after Delacroix) by Vincent van Gogh (left) juxtaposed with *Pietà* by Eugène Delacroix (right).

Art Resource, NY/Wikimedia

In reinventing Eugène Delacroix's *The Pietà*, Van Gogh was even more ambitious in the alterations that he made. Not only did he change the colors, but he also reversed the composition.¹ In Delacroix's work, the dead body of Christ is framed by the outstretched arms of His mother, the Virgin Mary. The purpose of the work is to evoke within the viewer a sense of sacred pity for her suffering. To achieve this end, Delacroix employs both color and composition. Like Millet's work, this painting is meant to be read from left to right. However, because Christ is in shadow and Mary is in light, we visually leap over Him to look at her. It is Mary's outstretched arms that redirect the viewer to Christ. In fact, her outstretched arms might remind the viewer of Christ's crucifixion. However, Christ is dead and His pain over. In Delacroix's painting, the suffering of the Son has become the agony of the mother.



In this painting the dead body of Jesus Christ leans to the left against the sloping ground. A white cloth is draped over His body from the waist down. Behind Him, the Virgin Mary stands over Him with her arms outstretched around and slightly over Him. Her palms are open and she stares downward, but not directly at Him. Her expression is sad and calm. Christ's head leans to the right toward Mary. His upper body is shrouded in shadow, while Mary's is more in the light.

Pietà by Eugène Delacroix. Oil on canvas, 1850. 1' 1.75" × 10.75".

[Click to enlarge](#)

Wikimedia

Delacroix's use of red is also strategic. Red is a visually aggressive color (this is, in part, why it is so often found on flags and athletic uniforms). The red behind Mary visually pushes her toward the viewer. Everything about Delacroix's visual treatment of the subject aims to connect the viewer and the virgin. It is through her that the viewer is then reminded of Christ.



In this painting the dead body of Jesus Christ leans to the right against the sloping ground. A white cloth is draped over His body from the waist down. Behind Him, the Virgin Mary stands over Him with her arms outstretched around and slightly over Him. Her palms are open and she stares downward, but not directly at Him. Her expression is sad and calm. Christ's head leans to the left toward Mary.

Pietà (after Delacroix) by Vincent van Gogh. Oil on canvas, 1889. 2' 4.75" × 2'.

[Click to enlarge](#)

Art Resource, NY

Put most simply, in mirroring the composition, Van Gogh also reversed the roles of Mary and Christ. Mary is now in blue, a color that Van Gogh associated with spirituality. But she is now darker, and Christ is in light. As we read Van Gogh's painting, starting from the lower left corner, we are almost immediately visually drawn to Christ's body. Mary is a background figure. She is important and treated with respect, but she is not central to Van Gogh's composition.

One of Van Gogh's favorite books was *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. That 15th-century devotional guide encouraged the reader to identify with the suffering of Christ. This is what Van Gogh's *The Pietà* achieves. Finally, if the composition didn't already sufficiently establish a direct connection to Christ, Van Gogh painted his own face as the face of Christ.

As a Roman Catholic, Delacroix had a great reverence for the role of the Virgin Mary as spiritual intercessor. As a Protestant, Van Gogh believed that he could have direct access to Christ. While they depict the same motif and are similar in almost every way, except being mirror images of each other, these two paintings visualize very different theological approaches to their subject.

The Good Samaritan



In this painting, the good Samaritan character from a parable told by Christ is helping a hurt man down from a horse. The hurt man leans heavily on the Samaritan and has his arm wrapped around the Samaritan's neck. The horse stands patiently to the right of the two men, looking slightly toward them. The Samaritan is leaning back under the weight of the hurt man. Behind the men and to the left of them there is a road winding through a field and out of sight over a low hill. Two other vague human figures walk along the road away from the men, one near the men and the other in the distance. There is also an open and empty chest on the ground to the left of the men. The lighting in this painting is very light.

The Good Samaritan (after Delacroix) by Vincent van Gogh. Oil on canvas, 1890. 2' 4.75" × 1' 11.5".

[Click to enlarge](#)

Album/Art Resource, NY

In his version of *The Good Samaritan*, Van Gogh again creates a mirror composition. The effect is that the direction of the action (and thereby the identity of the principal

actor) is reversed. In his painting, Delacroix employs composition to visualize weight. Being invisible, weight can be difficult to measure by observation alone. How often do we look at something and misjudge its weight? The focus of Delacroix's depiction of a parable told by Christ is on the transference of one man's weight from a horse to another man. As we read the image, from left to right, we follow the movement of the man (a man who has been attacked by robbers and left for dead) from a horse to the arms of another man (the good Samaritan who has come to his rescue). Note how the Samaritan's legs are positioned to receive the weight.

Throughout his oeuvre, Delacroix evidenced an artistic interest for depicting figures in poses in which their bodies are under physical strain. As such, *The Good Samaritan* joins many examples of his work depicting figures wrestling or fighting. Indeed, if we didn't have a title or know the story, we might wonder if the two men were engaged in some sort of struggle.



In this painting, the good Samaritan character from a parable told by Christ is helping a hurt man down from a horse. The hurt man leans heavily on the Samaritan and has his arm wrapped around the Samaritan's neck. The horse stands patiently to the left of the two men, looking slightly toward them. The Samaritan is leaning back under the weight of the hurt man. Behind the men and to the right of them there is a road winding through a field and out of sight over a low hill. Two other vague human figures walk along the road away from the men, one near the men and the other in the distance. There is also an open and empty chest on the ground to the right of the men. The lighting in this version of the scene is dark and shadowy.

The Good Samaritan by Eugène Delacroix. Oil on canvas, 1849. 1' 2.5" × 11.75".

[Click to enlarge](#)

Wikimedia

Van Gogh transformed this motif from an image of understated struggle to a visualization of compassion. In his composition, the Samaritan is a surrogate figure.

To complete this identification, Van Gogh has given the man his own face. As the Samaritan pulls the wounded man from the horse, rather than being the recipient of the man's weight, he is the active rescuer.

Van Gogh also added two figures to his background. These men walking away in the distance are not present in Delacroix's painting. From the parable, we can identify these as men, religious leaders, who walked by the wounded man without helping him. The contrast is made clear. Compassion must be active in order to be real. To make this

point, Delacroix's figure of the Samaritan as a receiver may not have been sufficiently proactive.

Vincent van Gogh's reinterpretation of works by Eugène Delacroix and Jean-François Millet serve as useful test cases in how the use of compositional structure and color create certain readings of a motif. In art, recognizing *what* the art depicts (the subject) is only half of what is required to understand the work. We must also look at *how* the subject is depicted (the visual language) to read the work of art's content, the meaning that the work visualizes.

Short-Answer Question

Give one example of how Van Gogh's use of color changed the way we read the painting.

No response saved yet.

Short-Answer Question

Give one example of how Van Gogh's reversal of the image changed how we read the painting.

No response saved yet.

- Response Board

List some characteristics of Van Gogh's style or visual language.

No response saved yet.

1 It is likely that Van Gogh made his painting from a print of Delacroix's painting. Before the widespread use of photography, prints were one way in which an image could be reproduced. The printmaking process would result in a reversal of the composition. However, knowing this, Van Gogh could have used a mirror to correct this reversal. Instead, he embraced this new orientation as his own.