Vincent van Gogh and Expressionism

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"Van Gogh was Father to us All!" When he made this remark about Van Gogh, the German Expressionist painter Max Pechstein spoke for a whole generation of artists.[1] Not only in Germany and Austria but in many countries across Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, Van Gogh's impassioned paintings captured the imagination of modern artists who were intent on reinventing the art of their times. After Van Gogh's death in 1890 it took some ten years before his paintings emerged from obscurity. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the artists and writers of the Expressionist generation immediately responded to the vibrant colors and animated brushwork they found in his work. The highly charged emotional intensity of Van Gogh's painting and his readiness to depart from slavish representations of nature in order to penetrate deeper underlying truths showed them how to break free from the shackles of nineteenth-century realism. "What was in the air?" the Expressionist poet Ernst Blass inquired. "Above all Van Gogh, Nietzsche, Freud too and Wedekind. … Van Gogh stood for expression and experience as opposed to Impressionism and Naturalism. Flaming concentration, youthful sincerity, immediacy, depth, exhibition and hallucination. The term Expressionism was coined by others; but in our circle we had been sailing in Expressionistic waters for a long time. Van Gogh: that meant the courage of one's own means of expression."[2]

The passion for Van Gogh's paintings struck a particular chord in the psyche of German and Austrian artists. In these countries Expressionism took its most powerful form, although the term was originally used around 1910 by German art critics to describe both French and German art that broke with Impressionism. There is a certain irony that Van Gogh was regarded as a trailblazer by artists who turned their back on recording their sensations of nature in favor of pouring out their innermost feelings and emotions. Van Gogh's deliberate exaggerations of line and color were meant to convey his passionate response to the world; but he always remained true to nature and considered himself a realist. The Expressionists interpreted Van Gogh's work in a way that he certainly never intended—for example, as a license to distance themselves from nature and explore the expressive potential of pure colors and forms. In France, the Fauve artists Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Maurice de Vlaminck responded to the revolutionary aspects of Van Gogh's style. But in Germany and Austria, where Expressionism became a movement that spread like wildfire through art, literature and theatre (and eventually through architecture and cinema as well), there was a more profound dissatisfaction with art that merely imitated the outward appearances of the world. The subjective, romantic mood of