

Art & Object

The Parallel Life and Art of Matthew Wong and Vincent Van Gogh

BY DIAN PARKER | **MAY 28, 2024**



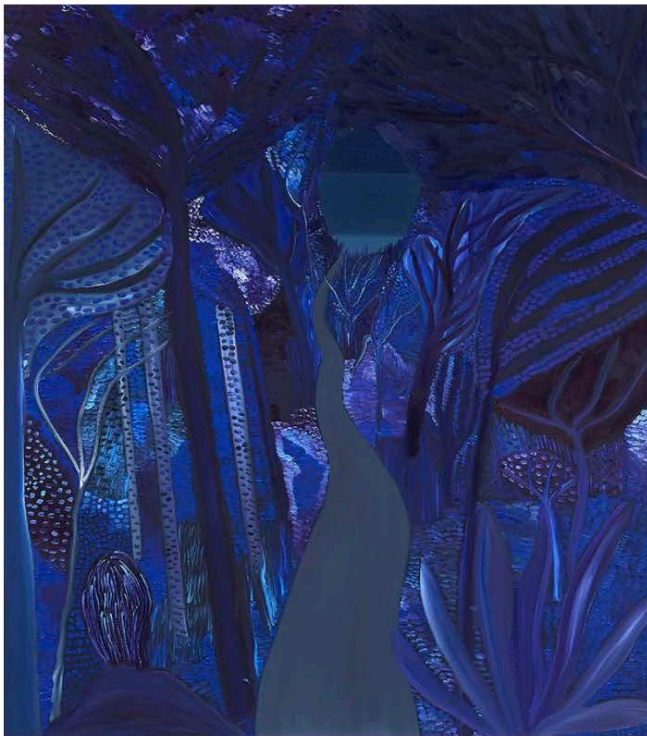
COURTESY MATTHEW WONG FOUNDATION AND VAN GOGH
MUSEUM AMSTERDAM

**Matthew Wong, *The Space Between Trees*,
2019.**

The lines of inspiration between **artists** throughout time are endless. The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam offers a powerful example of this with *Matthew Wong/Vincent Van Gogh: Painting as a Last Resort*. Even though the artists lived 130 years apart, Van Gogh's influence on Wong is unmistakable.

The work of both **painters** is singular, energetic, primal, thick with color and paint, vibrant, explosive, and beloved. You don't simply view their work, rather you enter these worlds emotionally. Their paintings swirl with vivacious impasto saturated with color, allowing you to feel the energy surging in each brushstroke. The physicality and emotional pressure explode out from each artist's **canvas**.

The first retrospective in Europe features 41 paintings and 21 works on paper by Wong, and five paintings and one drawing by **Van Gogh**. Each section, or chapter, is introduced by one piece from Van Gogh, as an entrypoint to Wong's work: Learning by Doing; Expressions Through Color; Bold Brushwork; Black and White; Imagination and Reality; Inner Landscape; Wong's Death; and the last chapter, featuring one Wong painting, *Path to the Sea*.



MATTHEW WONG FOUNDATION

Matthew Wong, *Path to the Sea*, 2019.

The concept, mostly chronological, offers the viewer the intensity of Wong's perspective and deep emotions, through his ferocity of brushstroke and bold **color**, tiny lone figures, swirling slashes and points of paint, and the mystical landscapes of pounding rain, moon reflections, searing suns, dense forests, or a single tree or park bench where Wong would spend many afternoons alone.

The curator, Joost van der Hoeven, spoke about his decision to exhibit Wong's work at the museum. "Van Gogh is an inspiration to **contemporary artists**. For Wong, he looked to him for inspiration and as a role model. I saw all these uncanny similarities between their lives. Both started painting at 27 and were self-taught. They each created a large body of work in their short lifetime. Both loved reading and **writing**, and kept up extensive correspondence. Both suffered from mental health problems

that resulted in their untimely deaths; Wong at 35, Van Gogh at 37."

In the eight years of his painting life, Van Gogh produced 2000 **artworks**, with Wong producing 1300 in his seven years. However, the world lost an opportunity to witness the development of these two passionate and devoted artists who continually pushed themselves. Van Gogh suffered from melancholia and was likely bi-polar. Wong dealt with depression, Tourette's syndrome, and was later diagnosed with autism. Both committed suicide, though Van Gogh's cause of death is debatable.

Six years into his work, Wong painted *Shangri-La*, and the year after he died, this painting sold at **auction** for 4.7 million dollars. Van Gogh sold very few paintings in his lifetime.

Born in Toronto in 1984, Wong moved with his parents to Hong Kong when he was seven, then returned to Canada after eight years. He received his MFA in **Photography** from the City University of Hong Kong's School of Creative Media, then began focusing on **drawing** and painting. Two years later, he had his first solo show of 30 works at Cuiheng Art Museum, China and was later given his first solo show in the United States at the Occasional Gallery in Burlington, Washington.

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Wong was attracted to ABEX painters, like de Kooning and **Joan Mitchell**, and also **Chinese historical art**. For the first three years of his career, he experimented with ink on rice paper. Two years after he started painting, he was already exhibiting in Beijing and Hong Kong with **abstract work**. Turning to **figurative work**, influenced by Soutine and Auerbach, Wong exhibited in the States at Karma Gallery, Amagansett NY, Dallas, Frieze NY, and Cheim & Read.

Both Van Gogh and Wong kept active, frequent correspondences—Van Gogh through **letters** and Wong on Facebook and Instagram. You could feel the intensity of their drive, almost as if they knew their time was fleeting. Wong had declared, "Basically life is hell all around except the moments before the canvas." He sometimes completed three to six paintings a day, working through the early morning, late into the night. Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo, "Melancholy, if it can be overcome, must be overcome by toil." The enormous effort of both painters to reach beyond their isolation and affliction is our gift today.



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Joost van der Hoeven stated, “Wong worked quickly, intuitively, with no preparatory drawings. He didn’t overthink, but practiced by doing. He would start with a base layer, usually warm tones, and then squeeze from the paint tube onto a paper towel. He held it in his cupped hand, like a palette, and applied the paint in quick succession, building up layers. He sometimes completed a gouache as a morning ritual.”

Wong’s *The Kingdom* 2017, *Coming of Age* 2018, and *The Realm of Appearances* 2018 have a **tapestry**-like feel to them, building layers through a kind of pointillism. You can see the same effect in Van Gogh’s *Wheatfield* 1888 and *Undergrowth with Two Figures* 1890. Wong’s transcendental **landscapes** painted in the last year of his life, *Unknown Pleasure* 2019 and *Path to the Sea* 2019, are prescient, soulful, and terribly vulnerable. These are not unlike Van Gogh’s final **paintings** of the solitary lark and a swarm of crows.

“After I finished installing the work,” van der Hoeven said, “I was struck how Wong has created this body of work that can hold an entire exhibition wing of the Van Gogh Museum. It is an achievement of gigantic proportions; so colorful, so powerful, so personal, yet so diverse. It remains compelling from beginning to the end.” The tragedy of a world dominated by monetary value is that one can miss what is truly valuable—life. Like Van Gogh, Matthew Wong will continue to touch souls through his art for a very long time.