

5-1-1989

Demain: A Study in Yellow

Miriam K. Harris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces>

Recommended Citation

Harris, Miriam K. (1989) "Demain: A Study in Yellow," *Forces*: Vol. 1989 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol1989/iss1/18>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Collin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Forces by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Collin. For more information, please contact mtomlin@collin.edu.

Demain: A Study in Yellow

by Miriam K. Harris

*So now we will try something else to see
if the look works.*

---van Gogh 1883 Arles

If we take a train to get to Tarascon
or Rouen, we take death to reach a
star. — van Gogh, 1888, Arles.

Vincent van Gogh's masterpiece *Irises* sold for
\$53.9 million on Wednesday—a record price for a
painting. —New York, 1987

If I only continue working hard, it will not be long
before I earn something with my work, but until
then it hinders me so much when I have to think
about too many other things against my will; . . . I
have some hope that as soon as I am quite well
again things will go better than they do now.

The identity of the buyer, who bid by telephone,
was not disclosed. The price includes a 10%
commission fee paid to Sotheby's, which auctioned
the painting.

I am making progress, and I shall learn to make
water-colours, and then it will not be so very long
before my work becomes salable. Mr. Tersteeg
himself said something about it, and when some of
those smaller ones turn out well he will probably
buy. I have completed still further the drawing of
the little old woman of which I sent you a sketch,
and someday it will surely sell.

Believe me, I grind all day long, and I do so
with pleasure, but I should get very much
discouraged if I could not go on working as hard or
even harder. As to the size of the drawings or the
subjects, I shall readily listen to the suggestions of
Mr. Tersteeg and Mauve.

Gasps echoed through a packed auction room at
Sotheby's as bidding quickly rose from the \$15
million starting price. Some of the estimated
1,000 people applauded and cheered when the price
topped \$40 million.

You talk of the emptiness you feel everywhere; it is that very thing that I feel myself. Taking, if you like, the time in which we live as a great and true renaissance of art, the worm-eaten official tradition still alive but really impotent and inactivate [sic], the new painters alone, poor, treated like madmen and, because of this treatment, actually becoming so, at least as far as their social life is concerned: then you must know that you are doing exactly the same work as these primitive painters, since you provide them with money which makes them able to produce. If a painter ruins his own personality by working hard at painting a thing which leaves him useless for many other things, if therefore he paints not only with colours, but with denial and renunciation, and with a broken heart—as far as you are concerned, your own work is not only no better paid than his, but costs you exactly what the painter's costs him; this effacement of individuality, half-voluntary, half accidental.

“The whole world is looking very closely at the sale of this painting.” John Marion, chairman of Sotheby's North America, where the *Iris* auction was held, had said earlier. “Some see it as an indicator of what the art market is doing.”

The more hopelessly you become a dealer, the more you become an artist. And the same is true of me. The more I am spent, ill, the cracked pot, by so much more am I the artist—the creative artist. These are surely so, but this eternally living art and this renaissance [sic], this green shoot sprinting from the roots of the old cut-down trunk, these are such abstract things that a kind of melancholy remains with us when we think that one could have made life for oneself at less cost than making art.

. . . And these painter's fingers of mine grow supple, even though the carcass is going to pieces. . . All it has cost me is a carcass pretty well ruined and pretty well crazed for any life that I might and should have lived. . .

My dear brother, if I were not bankrupt and crazy with this blasted painting, what a dealer I should make just for the impressionists!

A Monet, *Antibes, Vue du Plateau Notre Dame*, sold for \$2.3 million, 1 million more than its expected price.

I think the autumn is going to be absolutely amazing. It promises to give so many magnificent subjects that I simply do not know whether I am going to start five canvases or ten. It will be just as it was in the spring with the orchards in bloom.

I am hard at it, painting with the enthusiasm of a Marseillais eating *bouillabaisse*--which won't surprise you when you know that what I'm at is the painting of some great sunflowers.

The previous record for a painting was set by another van Gogh, *Sunflowers*, which sold for \$39.9 million this year to a Japanese insurance company.

Have you read Loti's "Madame Chrysantheme"? It gave the impression that the real Japanese have nothing on their walls, the drawings and curiosities all being hidden in drawers; and that is how you must look at Japanese art: in a very bright room, quite bare and open to the country. All my work is in a way founded on Japanese art, and we do not know enough about Japanese prints.

Before the auction, *Irises* was seen by thousands—first on a month long, 17,500 mile tour of Tokyo, London, Geneva, and Zurich, then in six days of pre-sale exhibition in New York. It was exhibited through late March at the entrance to the "Van Gogh in St.-Remy and Auvers" exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

As for me, I shall go on working, and here and there amid my work there will be things which will last. I hope that other artists will rise up in this lovely country and do for it what the Japanese have done for theirs. I have no fear but that I shall always love this countryside. . . . I am convinced that nature down here is exactly what one needs to give one colour.

The fierce bidding for the masterpiece was witnessed in person and on closed-circuit television by an international gathering of about 2,000 collectors, dealers and museum curators. Taking bids by telephone at the front of the room were two Sotheby's representatives, David Nash, head of fine-art sales, and Geraldine Nagler, of the bids department.

If the storm within gets too loud, I take a glass too much to distract me. Cracked, of course, when you look at what one *ought* to be. But in the olden days I used to feel myself *less a painter*. My concentration becomes more intense, my hand more sure. That is why I dare almost swear to you that my painting will improve: because I have nothing left but that. I hope the desire to succeed is gone, and I work because I must, so as not to suffer too much mentally.

Irises, a 28 x 32 inch oil on canvas, depicts a patch of purple irises and one white bloom in a sea of green stems. It is a study of a flower garden

at the Saint- Remy asylum, which van Gogh entered voluntarily in 1889 for treatment of his mental illness. He lived there until his suicide in 1890 at the age of 37. He sold few if any paintings during his lifetime.

I have now done two new studies; a farm by the highroad among cornfields, and a meadow full of very yellow buttercups, a ditch with irises, green leaves and purple flowers, the town in the background, some grey willows and a strip of blue sky. If the meadow is not cut I should like to do this study again, for the subject was a very beautiful one . . .

I have also another bridge, and the side of a highroad. Bit by bit as my blood quickens the thought of success quickens too.

Irises had been owned by John Whitney Payson, an art consultant from Maine, whose mother, philanthropist Joan Whitney Payson, the owner of the New York Mets until her death in 1975, acquired it for \$80,000 in 1947 and hung it over the fireplace in her living room.

Just now I have a sort of exhibition at home: I have nailed all the studies to the wall to finish drying. You will see that when there are a lot of them and one can choose among them, it comes to the same thing as if I had studied them more and worked on them longer; because to paint and repaint a subject on the same or several canvases comes in the end to the same thing. Nothing would help us more to place our canvases than if they could get general acceptance as decoration for middle-class houses . . .

Payson, who is an art dealer, said he decided in late summer to sell the painting "because of the recent and unprecedented spiral in art prices and changes in federal tax law."

If you are well you must be able to live on a bit of bread while you are working all day, and have enough strength to smoke and drink you whack at night—that's all in the bargain—and at the same time feel the stars and the infinite high and clear above you. Then life is, after all, most enchanted. Oh! those who do not believe in this sun here are the real infidels.

The decision came after van Gogh's *Sunflowers* was auctioned in March for \$39.9 million and his *Bridge of Trinquetaille* was sold in June for \$20.2 million — both by Christie's in London.

It certainly is a strange phenomenon that all the artists, poets, musicians, painters are unfortunate

in material things — the happy ones as well. Guy de Maupassant is a fresh proof of it. That brings up the eternal question: Is the whole of life visible to us, or isn't it rather that this side of death we see one hemisphere only?

Painters—to take them only—dead and buried, speak to the next generation or to several succeeding generations in their work. Is that all, or is there more besides: In a painter's life death is not perhaps the hardest thing there is?

Claude Monet, the French landscape painter who is credited with founding impressionism, said of

*Iris*s: "How did a man who loved flowers and light to such an extent and who rendered them so well . . . still manage to be so unhappy?"

My dear boy, sometimes I know so well what I want. I can do without God both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, ill as I am, do without something which is greater than I, which is my life—the power to create.

. . . In a picture I want to say something comforting, as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize and which we seek to give by the actual radiance and vibration of our colourings. Ideas from my work come to me in swarms, so that although solitary I have no time to think or to feel; I go on like a steam-engine at painting.

The Sotheby's auction room was filled to capacity and bids came fast and furious for the 95 pieces of modern and impressionist art—including works by Monet, Renoir and Picasso—on the sale block Wednesday.

If I painted prettily as Bourruerau paints, people would not be ashamed to let themselves be painted; I think I have lost models because they thought that they will be compromised, and that people will laugh at their portraits.

The head of the postman was done at a single sitting. But that's what I'm good at. I should always do it—drink with the first comer and paint him, and that not in water-colours but in oils, on the spot. If I did a hundred like that there would be some good ones among them. And I should be more of a Frenchman, more myself, and more a drinker. It does so tempt me—not drinking, but painting loafers. What I gained by it as an artist, should I lose as a man?

If I had the faith to do it, I should be a notable madman; now I am an insignificant one . . .

Van Gogh died at the asylum in 1890, two days after shooting himself. He was 37 years old and in his lifetime, he is believed to have sold only one painting.

For my own part, I declare I know nothing whatever about it; but to look at the stars always makes me dream as simply as I dream over the black dots on a map representing towns and villages. Why, I ask myself, should the shining dots of the sky not be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France. If we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star. One thing undoubtedly true in this reasoning is this: that while we are alive we cannot get to a star any more than when we are dead we can take the train.

TOP 10 SALES PRICES FOR PAINTINGS

Here are the top 10 prices ever paid for paintings sold at the world's two major auction houses, Christie's and Sotheby's.

- Irises*, Vincent van Gogh; \$53,900,000; Nov. 11, 1987
- Sunflowers*, van Gogh; \$39,921,750; March 31, 1987
- The Trinquetalle Bridge*, van Gogh; \$20,240,000; June 29, 1987
- Mosnier Street with Paviers*, Eduard Manet; \$11,088,000; Dec. 1, 1986
- Adoration of the Magi*, Andrea Mantegna; \$10,499,000; April 18, 1985
- Portrait of a Girl Wearing a Gold-Trimmed Cloak*, Rembrandt van Rijn; \$10,381,800; Dec. 1, 1986
- Seascape, Folkstone*, J.M.W. Turner; \$10,023,200; July 5, 1984
- Landscape with Rising Sun*, van Gogh; \$9,900,000; April 24, 1985
- Woman Reading*, Georges Braque; \$9,504,000; Dec. 2, 1986
- Juliet and Her Nurse*, Turner; \$7,400,000; May 29, 1980

The Dallas Morning News
November 12, 1987

Overheard in an art gallery in Dallas, Texas, November 13, 1987:
"One thing you can say about van Gogh: his work's hotter than a July sidewalk. Hell, you can fry a damn egg on the cash register receipts."

I feel more and more that we must not judge God on the basis of this world; it's a study that didn't come off.

van Gogh—————

Excerpts from
Dear Theo by Irving Stone (Signet Books, 1937)
The Dallas Morning News
The Associated Press