

Wilting Flowers: Art Under a Different Light

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Lydia Childs examines the impact of Van Gogh's fading colours on the conservation and the display of artwork



Image: Flickr

Age is inevitable, as has been proved by the recent decision made by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam to review its display of Vincent Van Gogh's 1889 oil painting *'Sunflowers'* (part of his second series of depictions of sunflowers, featuring five canvases painted in Arles between 1888-1889). *'Sunflowers'* is a fascinating piece because Van Gogh used only yellow pigments, creating paintings with variations of a singular colour, with the light sensitive pigment used to create the green hues of the painting. The results of a pioneering new macroscopic X-ray technique (known as 'chemical mapping') revealed that, due to Van Gogh's use of light sensitive yellow pigments, the vivid yellow hues of *'Sunflowers'* have already begun to fade to an olive-brown shade. Despite the fact that such damage is not yet visible to the human eye, it is particularly significant as one of the most distinctive elements of Van Gogh's work are his use of vivid colours.

The consideration of light damage to works of art is not a new one. Five years ago the Van Gogh Museum lowered the lighting in its rooms in order to better conserve the works of art on display. The National Gallery in London displays Leonardo da Vinci's *'Burlington House Cartoon'* in a separate alcove with very low lighting so as to best preserve the already fragile drawing.

However, as one of the most recognisable works of art, *'Sunflowers'* has already been the focus of conservators' research, as have other works by Van Gogh. In 2011, chemists found that exposure to UV light from both sunlight and halogen lamps (used in museum lighting) was causing oxidation and therefore colour change in certain paint pigments used in *'View of Arles with Irises'* and *'Bank of the Seine'*. In 2016, Italian chemists further explored the lead chromatic dyes used by Van Gogh. They found that exposure to UV light causes the particular combination of yellow lead chromate and white lead sulphate favoured by Van Gogh was particularly unstable as the pigments began to clump together, subsequently dulling the once vivid yellow.

The value of this new technique lies in the fact that it is in a way pre-emptive: it was able to show light damage to *'Sunflowers'* not yet visible to the human eye. This is an invaluable tool for conservators as it could enable them to discover damage early, allowing museums and galleries to better prepare for any restoration work that may be required. As in the case of the Van Gogh Museum, this discovery has led to the reconsideration of how they display their collection.

Museums have a responsibility to conserve the artworks in their collection: Advancements in technology and restoration techniques have provided the art world with the opportunity to re-assess their displays, reconsidering lighting and positions in rooms where the natural light will impact the artworks. For instance, the Government Art Collection, which allows parts of their collection to be displayed in British Government Buildings overseas, must consider conservation when deciding which pieces they allow to be sent to which buildings. They must take into account the lighting of the room in question, such as whether the room is south-facing, which could lead to light damage.

These technological advancements also have the potential to afford conservators and art institutions the opportunity to consider how to better preserve our artistic heritage for future generations. Outdated conservation techniques have caused irreparable damage to some of the finest artworks, such as the British Museum's controversial cleaning of the Parthenon Marbles in 1937. Examples of poor conservation impact the institutes themselves as damaged collections hurt their international reputations.

When reconsidering how museums and galleries display their collections should they take this as an opportunity to rotate their permanent displays? Most art institutes own more artworks than they have the space to display them. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York owns around two million objects but only displays tens of thousands. There are so many works of art within museum collections that the public never get to see. This raises the debate of who has the right to decide which artworks deserve to be on public display? As a result, are lesser known artists relegated to the private collections and thus remain relatively unknown?

Perhaps it is time for art institutions to not only reconsider their conservation techniques but also to give their private collections their moment in the spotlight.



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