

MATTHEW WONG

VINCENT VAN GOGH

PAINTING AS A LAST RESORT

Exhibition Facts

Duration	14 February – 19 June 2025
Opening	13 February 2025 6.30 p.m.
Venue	Bastion Hall The ALBERTINA Museum
Curator	Angela Stief
Assistant Curators	Lydia Eder & Lorenz Ecker
Works	65
Catalogue	Available for EUR 32,90 (English German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via https://shop.albertina.at/en/

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Opening Hours
The ALBERTINA Museum | Albertinaplatz 1, 1010 Wien
Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Except Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.

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Matthew Wong – Vincent van Gogh

Painting as a Last Resort

14 February until 19 June 2025

The work of the Chinese-Canadian artist Matthew Wong (1984-2019) is created in a dialogue that transcends time: it connects the past with the present and represents the relevance of outstanding artists such as Vincent van Gogh for the individual development of a unique oeuvre.

Wong explores expressionism and modernist positions such as Henri Matisse and Gustav Klimt as well as contemporary varieties of expressive art. Not only Western, but also Eastern art history, in particular the work of important Chinese artists such as Shitao, are an important influence for Wong. The exhibition, conceived as a dialogue with works by Van Gogh, makes it clear that Wong's artistic ping-pong game with selected artists is a form of referentiality far removed from imitation, appropriation or blind homage.

Wong absorbed the entire spectrum of historical and contemporary art like a sponge, mediated by digital media and image archives. His preference for imaginary landscapes, interiors and the interweaving of interior and exterior spaces reflects the need to express psychological dispositions. His paintings move through emotional immediacy, a dynamic, pastose application of paint and different hatchings, which the artist interweaves ornamentally.

As a self-taught artist, Wong only discovered his passion for painting late in life, but the short time he had – eight years in which he worked almost obsessively – was all the more intense. He shares with Vincent van Gogh not only the depiction of a direct and uninhibited expression of emotion, but also the topos of “painting as a last resort”. For both of them, art is a place of retreat and a safe refuge for free expression. In his examination of Van Gogh's work, Wong created works that are characterized by a deeply felt melancholy and address the isolation of the modern individual in the midst of natural and urban landscapes. Wong only became better known shortly before his tragic suicide in 2019.

The exhibition at the ALBERTINA Museum is being organized in collaboration with the Matthew Wong Foundation, the Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam and the Kunsthaus Zürich. It presents a dialogue of 44 paintings and 12 works on paper by Wong and selected works by Van Gogh.

Exhibition Texts

Introduction

PAINTING AS A LAST RESORT

Painting as a last resort—the title illustrates passion as the driving force of artistic processes as well as the existential urgency, the inner necessity of creation in the lives of Matthew Wong (1984–2019) and Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). Both artists see the act of painting as an escape offering free self-expression. Wong identifies not only with Van Gogh's oeuvre, but also with his life: "I see myself in him. The impossibility of belonging in this world."

The show illustrates an affinity that transcends temporal and geographical boundaries. The works of Wong and Van Gogh are both characterized by hypersensitive *weltschmerz* and an utter sincere attitude toward expression. The similarities between them range from shared themes and motifs to a mutual fascination with landscape and the connection between inner and outer worlds. They also both use thick, textured paint and brushstrokes that create an ornamental effect on the canvas through crisscrossing movements, dabs, and short dashes, giving their work a unique material quality.

The present-day concurrence of styles and trends justifies juxtapositions across epochs and provides the basis for the special connection that Matthew Wong felt with Vincent van Gogh. Contemporary painting is informed by an intensive examination of the collective visual memory as well as historical and current references. In today's information society, where the world feels smaller yet people grow more distant, retreating behind their screens, Wong is an exemplary artist of his time.

Wong and Van Gogh have more in common than just artistic oeuvres with great affinities in content and style. In his art, the younger artist rejected a linear view of history, instead embracing cycles and visual connections. Also, there are some striking biographical similarities: social marginalization, a late and brief painting career, and a premature tragic death.

The exhibition at the ALBERTINA was organized in collaboration with the Matthew Wong Foundation, the Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam and the Kunsthaus Zürich.

PAINTING AS A LAST RESORT

“Basically life is hell all around except the moments before a canvas,” Wong writes. Art gives him a last refuge to escape his illnesses—he suffers from depression, autism and Tourette’s syndrome—for brief periods of time. Van Gogh also struggled with episodes of severe mental illness throughout his lifetime and in the darkest phases of his life, painting offered a welcome refuge. Wong’s identification with Van Gogh’s life and work, the realization that another painter’s feelings were so similar to his own, gives him comfort: “I see myself in him. The impossibility of belonging in this world.” In both artist’s work, melancholy takes shape in atmospheric landscapes—sometimes mirrored in dark, moody colours, and other times counterbalanced by vivid hues. Their depictions of nature, cities and landscapes are marked by bright tones, striking contrasts and dynamic colour schemes. Wong long hoped that social recognition would have a positive influence on his health. However, with growing professional success in the final years of his life, he realized that this hope was illusory and took his own life at the age of 35—Van Gogh died at 37.

LANDSCAPES OF LONGING

After spending time in hectic business metropolises like Hong Kong, Los Angeles, and New York, Matthew Wong found a retreat in Edmonton, Canada, in 2016 where he was able to work in peace. Distancing himself from these major hubs allowed him to focus on his work without the distraction and obligations of navigating the hyper-social art world.

The conflict between a desire to belong and the inability to do so inform many of Wong’s paintings such as *Old Town*. Unlike Van Gogh’s, Wong’s landscapes are imaginary, painted in the seclusion of his studio. Wong uses the Portuguese word *saudade* to designate a melancholic, wistful longing for a place, a person or a thing that no longer, or not yet, exists. Like paradise, the idyllic natural landscape is a distant place of longing or a utopia that has no place in real life. For both Wong and Van Gogh, art can serve as an escapist refuge from which, on the one hand, they draw strength; on the other, the realization of the inaccessibility of any such place leads to feelings of loss and melancholy: “Something of profound feeling yet at once at an impossible irreconcilable remove—the paradox that I feel is at the heart of my vision.”

STRONG CONTRASTS:

“I may really be a black and white ink painter at the core of my project”, Matthew Wong wrote. His black-and-white works on rice paper speak to the direct influence that Chinese culture had on his oeuvre. His art brings together Eastern and Western influences. He was familiar with both cultures and languages. “China is such a hermetically sealed culture. [...] there are parts of me that can’t quite escape those roots by default,” he wrote. When he lived in Hong Kong he did an ink painting at the beginning and at the end of each day—a ritual that gave his life some structure throughout his short art career.

After his artistic beginnings with experimental photography, which he studied in Hong Kong, he began, from 2015, to focus intensely on the tradition of Chinese literati painting, which values subjectivity and the representation of inner realities over objectivity and the depiction of outward appearances. He makes reference to historic artists such as Shitao (1642–1707) and Bada Shanren (1626–1705), who stand for an expressive-intuitive approach in traditional ink painting. The use of specific marks to distinguish several pictorial areas is not only found in Wong’s drawings, but also in Van Gogh’s. In contrast to Wong, Van Gogh works not with a brush but with a reed pen. And while Wong’s drawing style emphasizes the imaginary character of his worlds, Van Gogh’s works are based on direct observation.

THE CYCLE OF TIMES

Oppositions play a central role in the work of both Mathew Wong and Vincent van Gogh: light and dark, day and night, sun and moon, life and death are what defines the paintings. In motifs such as the snow-covered winter field with a plow and harrow left lying outside, Van Gogh combines the subject of the changing seasons with the theme of becoming and passing away, making it into a metaphor for the course of life. Wong also takes up this theme, showing colourful summer fields in rich, radiant yellow tones or, as in the painting *The Nightwatcher*, a lonely figure in a snowy winter landscape.

Apart from the course of the year, the cycle of the times of day also was of interest to both artists: Van Gogh’s famous depictions of starry nights are echoed in Wong’s quiet, soulful night paintings. While, on the one hand, they evoke forebodings of death, the recurring motif of the stars in the sky also awakens a sense of confidence and hope for some metaphysical afterlife that transcends the human world. For centuries, philosophers and artists have been interested in the sublime.

In the context of thematic oppositions, the use of complementary colours to create tension and contradiction plays an important role for both Wong and Van Gogh. Contrasts in form and content that are mutually contingent upon each other like yin and yang also reflect polarities, which crucially inform the work of both artists.

INNER AND OUTER WORLDS

The artistic exploration of their own emotions connects Matthew Wong and Vincent van Gogh across the distance of time. Introspection and self-reflection are also mirrored in the subject of the interior scene, as it keeps recurring in the works of both artists, especially for Wong. On a symbolic level, the outward-directed gaze through the interior brings to the canvas the ambivalent relationship of the introverted (artist's) soul with the outside world: "I'm not comfortable with the attention really. [...] I just kinda wanna be invisible", Wong writes.

In the 19th century, the interior became a popular and now also paintworthy motif that was taken up by artists such as Henri Matisse, Edouard Manet and Berthe Morisot. Van Gogh painted two restaurants in Paris, his bedroom and the famous *Night Café*. Wong recurrently depicts abandoned spaces, addressing the theme of the individual thrown back on himself. Instead of the safety of a home, Wong's interiors speak of abandonment, melancholy, and gloom. His paintings such as *Time After Time* or *Night Moods*, the view to the outside through the window heightens this emotion even further.

ELECTIVE AFFINITIES

Aside from biographical and thematic parallels, there are, above all, stylistic similarities that throw a bridge between Matthew Wong and Vincent van Gogh. Like Van Gogh, Wong, who studied photography and cultural anthropology, was a self-taught painter and draughtsman. He acquired the ability to work in both media through intensive study of works by eminent artistic role models on the one hand, and through his own experimentation on the other. He studied Van Gogh's works primarily with the help of reproductions. He was not interested to imitate, but rather to develop an individual style through engagement with a collective visual memory. While Wong initially worked in a style that borrowed from Abstract Expressionism, he went on, from 2016, to develop his own independent artistic style, which has many analogies with Van Gogh's: broad brushstrokes, dynamic impasto and dense fabric of marks and hatchings which sometimes merge into interlacing ornamental patterns. Wong's intuitive, imaginary landscapes oscillate between abstraction and figuration, with colour

being a vehicle for the expression of emotions. Wong worked obsessively, producing up to five paintings a day at breakneck speed in his beginnings: “Working on a daily basis is basically a way for me to keep track of my life, like a diary.” Although his creative period was brief, he left behind a large oeuvre of around 1300 works.

WELTSCHMERZ

Atmospheres of melancholy link the oeuvres of Matthew Wong and Vincent van Gogh in a unique way. Both artists use painting to express their emotions. Both use colour to convey certain feelings or moods. In Wong’s work, solitary figures appear as leitmotifs, placing them like miniature staffage into the surrounding space, especially in landscapes, fields and forests. They embody forlornness, solitude, and social alienation, aspects that reflect his own life. For him, though, melancholy is not an individual, but a collective-social diagnosis, the attribute of a zeitgeist: “I do believe that there is an inherent loneliness or melancholy to much of contemporary life, and on a broader level I feel my work speaks to this quality in addition to being a reflection of my thoughts, fascinations and impulses.”

In the last year before his death, Wong made almost exclusively blue paintings such as *Path to the Sea* and *Night Crossing*. In this blue series, he once again takes up that “greater dialogue between artists throughout time”, this time with artists who had a special affinity for this colour, like Pablo Picasso, Yves Klein, and Ad Reinhardt.

Matthew Wong (1984–2019)

Matthew Wong only discovered his passion for painting in his late twenties. And despite an art career of only seven years, in which he kept working obsessively, he achieved considerable success and much media attention from 2017.

The Chinese-Canadian artist's paintings and drawings are distinguished by a remarkable sense of colour and style. In his imaginary landscapes, he touches viewers with emotional directness. Wong wanted to secure himself a place in "the greater dialogue between artists throughout times." In doing so, he named Van Gogh as one of his most important sources of inspiration. Wong, however, was interested in a wider spectrum of art, historical and contemporary. The exploration of the work of those like Paul Klee, Gustav Klimt, Henri Matisse, Edvard Munch, and Egon Schiele had as much of a bearing on his development as did contemporary painting. The closeness to artists such as Peter Doig, Scott Kahn, Alex Katz, Yayoi Kusama, Joan Mitchell, and Jonas Wood is obvious. It was, however, not only European-American but also Chinese art history that was important to Wong, who grew up between Canada and Hong Kong, in particular the work of eminent Chinese artists such as Shitao and traditional Asian techniques such as ink on rice paper. Beyond that, he was also interested in music, fashion, literature, poetry and film. Wong led a reclusive life but engaged with various people from the art and culture scene in a close exchange on social media, which he saw as a form of digital pen-palling.

After lifelong struggles with depression, autism and Tourette's syndrome, Wong took his own life at the age of 35.

- 1984** Born 8 March in Toronto, Canada.
- 1991** Moves to Hong Kong at the age of seven with his parents Raymond and Monita Wong.
- 1999** Wong family returns to Toronto.
- 2003** Receives his high school diploma at York School in Toronto and begins a bachelor's degree in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- 2007** Receives his bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan and moves to Hong Kong.
- 2008** Wong begins to recite his poems at poetry clubs in Hong Kong.
- 2010** Enrols on a master's course in photography at the City University of Hong Kong's School of Creative Media.

- 2011** Wong interns in November at the Hong Kong pavilion of the 54th Venice Biennale. He sees the work by Julian Schnabel and Christopher Wool in Venice and is inspired to make his first drawings. Wong's photographs are published for the first time in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*.
- 2012** Receives his master's degree in photography and publishes his photographic work a few more times while increasingly concentrating on drawing and painting.
- 2013** Secures his first studio space in a complex for creative professionals at Cuiheng in Zhongshan, mainland China. Comes into contact via Facebook with Peter Shear, John Cheim and many others in the art world.
- 2014** Continues to work on his abstract ink drawings and paintings and tries out different techniques. Organizes his first solo exhibition, titled *Matthew Wong: Chapter One*, at Cuiheng Art Museum.
- 2015** First experiments with figurative compositions. Sends a roll of drawings to John Cheim. Posts one of his own works on Facebook alongside a Van Gogh.
- 2016** Wong and his mother set off on a long journey through the United States and Canada. They start out in New York where they meet John Cheim and others before moving on to Michigan and then Los Angeles, where they stay for two months. The trip ends in Edmonton, where Wong and his mother move into an apartment.
- The curator Matthew Higgs selects Wong for the group exhibition *Outside*, held at a temporary branch of the Karma gallery in New York. Wong meets Karma owner Brendan Dugan.
- Wong's work is shown at FIAC in Paris.
- 2017** Wong begins to paint in what would become his signature style. Settles permanently in Edmonton. He is formally represented by Karma and not long thereafter by Frank Elbaz, who is based in Paris and Dallas.
- Wong's work is shown at Frieze New York, where it draws the attention of the critics Jerry Saltz (New York magazine) and Roberta Smith (The New York Times).
- Moves into his studio in Edmonton, where he will continue to work until his death.
- Wong's work is shown at Art Basel Miami.
- 2018** Wong continues to work in his familiar style, while simultaneously trying to instil more calm in his work.
- Wong's debut exhibition at Karma.
- Albert Oehlen selects Wong's work for the exhibition *Trance* at the Aïshti Foundation in Beirut.
- Wong declares in a WhatsApp message to Dugan that he recognizes himself in Van Gogh: 'I see myself in him. The impossibility of belonging in this world.'

2019 Wong works primarily in blue tones and paints three works in which he refers directly to Van Gogh: *Starry Night*, *Untitled* (blue interior with chair) and *The Space Between Trees*.

2 October: Wong dies in Edmonton at the age of 35.

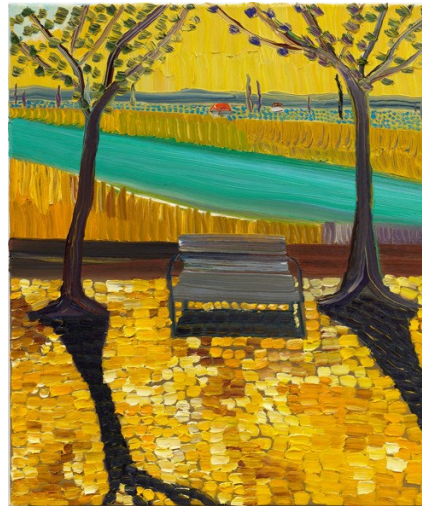
The exhibition *Blue*, with the series of blue works that Wong made in 2019, is held posthumously at Karma in New York.

Press Images

The following images are available free of charge in the *Press* section of www.albertina.at.
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Matthew Wong
End of the Day, 2019
Oil on canvas
203,2 × 177,8 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of
Monita and Raymond Wong in memory of their son,
Matthew Wong, 2023
© 2025 Matthew Wong Foundation / Bildrecht,
Vienna 2025, Cheim & Read, New York, Photo: Alex
Yudzon



Matthew Wong
The Space Between Trees, 2019
Oil on canvas
61 × 50,8 cm
Collection of Judith and Danny Tobey
© 2025 Matthew Wong Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna
2025, Photo: Matthew Wong Foundation



Vincent van Gogh
View of Arles with Irises, 1888
Oil on canvas
54 × 65 cm
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh
Foundation)
© Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van
Gogh Foundation)



Matthew Wong
Coming of Age Landscape, 2018
Oil on canvas
152,4 × 177,8 cm
Private Collection. The loan of this work has been made
possible due to the generous support of Rosaline Wong
and HomeArt
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2025, Photo: HomeArt



Vincent van Gogh
Roses and Sunflowers, 1886
Oil on canvas
50 × 61 cm
Kunsthalle Mannheim
© Photo: Kunsthalle Mannheim / Cem Yüçetas



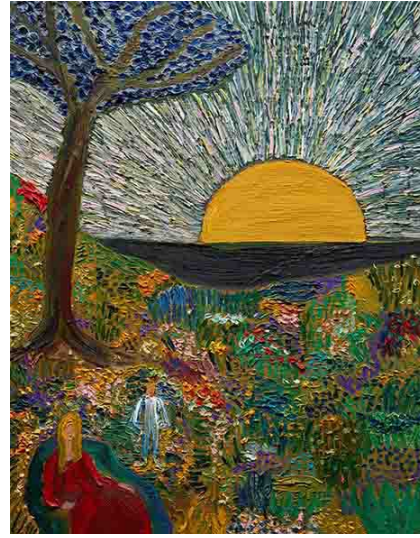
Matthew Wong
The Realm of Appearances, 2017
Oil on canvas
101,6 × 76,2 cm
Matthew Wong Foundation
© 2025 Matthew Wong Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna
2025, Photo: Matthew Wong Foundation



Vincent van Gogh
Daubigny's Garden, 1890
Oil on canvas
56 × 101,5 cm
Rudolf Staechlin Collection
© Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Sammlung Beyeler, Photo: Robert Bayer



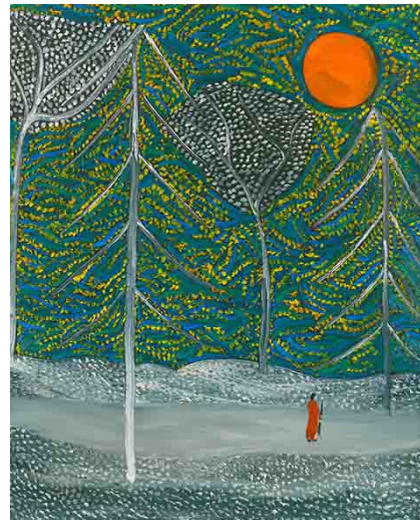
Matthew Wong
Blue Rain, 2018
Oil on canvas
182,9 × 121,9 cm
Collection of KAWS, promised gift to the Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York, inspired by Julia Chang
© 2025 Matthew Wong Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna
2025, Photo: Matthew Wong Foundation



Matthew Wong
Landscape with Mother and Child, 2017
Oil on canvas
71,1 × 55,9 cm
Brooker-Pardee Family Collection
© 2025 Matthew Wong Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna
2025, Photo: Dallas Museum of Art



Matthew Wong
The Kingdom, 2017
Oil on canvas
121,9 × 182,9 cm
Liz Lange and David Shapiro
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2025, Photo: Matthew Wong Foundation



Matthew Wong
The Night Watcher, 2018
Oil on canvas
152,4 × 122 cm
Private Collection
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2025, Photo: Matthew Wong Foundation



Matthew Wong
Unknown Pleasures, 2019
Oil on canvas
165,1 × 165,1 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Monita
and Raymond Wong in memory of their son Matthew
Wong, 2020
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2025, Photo: The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Matthew Wong
Starry Night, 2019
Oil on canvas
152,4 × 177,8 cm
Matthew Wong Foundation
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2025, Photo: Matthew Wong Foundation