

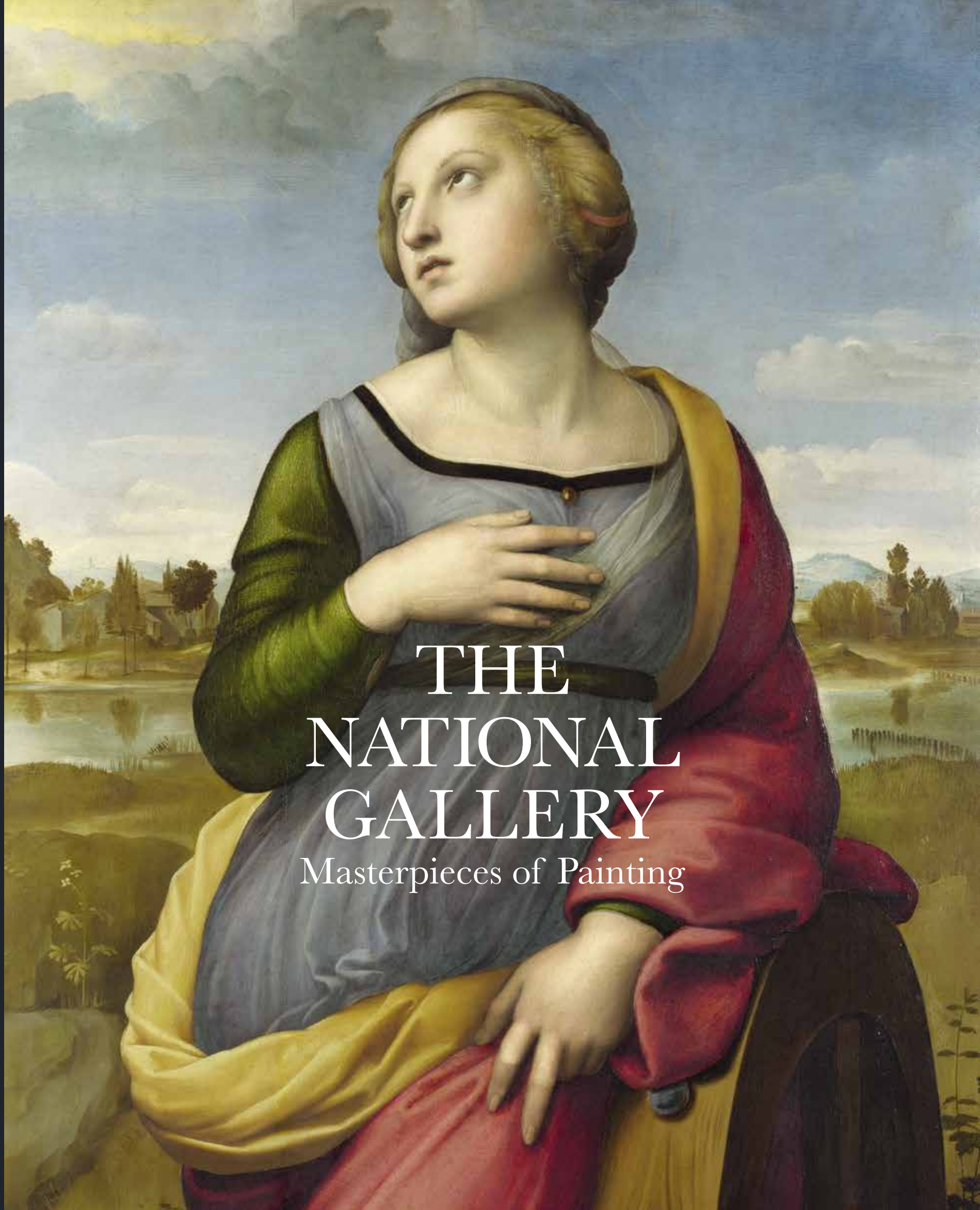


THE  
NATIONAL  
GALLERY

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Gabriele  
Finaldi

THE NATIONAL GALLERY



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Masterpieces of Painting

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Masterpieces of Painting

A celebration of European painting from  
the thirteenth to the early twentieth century

The National Gallery, London, houses one of the finest collections of western European paintings in the world. Its extraordinary range includes masterpieces from the early medieval and Renaissance periods to Post-Impressionism, by artists such as Leonardo, Raphael, Holbein, Titian, Velázquez, Rembrandt, Turner, Monet and Van Gogh. This beautiful book presents more than 275 of the Gallery's most treasured pictures including some outstanding recent acquisitions. Each work is richly illustrated, many with full page details, and accompanied by a concise, illuminating text. Like the collection itself, the paintings are arranged broadly by date, offering an unrivalled overview of European painting through seven centuries and allowing the reader to make fascinating connections across this uniquely representative collection.

An introduction by Gabriele Finaldi provides a history of the Gallery from its beginnings in a London townhouse to its present landmark position in Trafalgar Square.

**Gabriele Finaldi** is Director of the National Gallery, London.



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# On the National Gallery, by way of introduction

Gabriele Finaldi

This book celebrates the nation's collection of great paintings on show in Trafalgar Square. From Duccio to Degas, the National Gallery tells a compelling story of picture-making in Western Europe: from the time when paintings wrought in wood, gold and lapis lazuli graced the altars of medieval Italian churches or hung in the bedrooms of Netherlandish merchants, to the turn of the twentieth century, when artists strove for powerful forms of expression in works that broke with the traditions of the past. The story begins over seven centuries ago, with the first stirrings in central Italy of a new naturalism in art and renewed interest in classical antiquity, and culminates with the revolutionary canvases of Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso. From Cimabue to Velázquez, from Michelangelo to Hogarth, from Poussin to Van Gogh, the National Gallery's collection of pictures gives it a privileged place among the galleries and museums of the world, on account of its breadth, beauty and historical significance.

By comparison with other major European museums, however, the origin of the National Gallery can best be described as modest. Unlike the Uffizi, the Louvre or the Prado, its genesis lies not in a princely or imperial gallery of pictures housed in a royal palace that is opened up for visitors, but in the purchase by Parliament in 1824 of 38 paintings from a single private collection, 'for the use of the public'. The collection was that of the Russian-born

financier, John Julius Angerstein (1735–1823), recently deceased, and it was his house at 100 Pall Mall that became the first National Gallery (fig. 2). Free access to all was specified, artists and nursing mothers and everyone in between. The intention was that this embryonic national collection, which included Sebastiano del Piombo's *Raising of Lazarus* and paintings by Peter Paul Rubens, Claude and William Hogarth, should be 'conveniently accessible, to all ranks and degrees of men, to the indolent as well as the busy, to the idle as well as the industrious'. Visitors were expected only to dress decently. Several distinguished collectors of the time, notably Sir George Beaumont (1753–1827), a friend and supporter of John Constable, and the Reverend William Holwell Carr (1758–1830), donated their collections of Italian, French and Dutch paintings to build up the fledgling institution for the benefit of the public. This combination of purchases and gifts in approximately equal measure still characterises the national collection, made up today of some 2,400 paintings.

The National Gallery's facade, with its plucky classicism, slim Corinthian columns, repurposed stone sculptures from the Marble Arch and small domes, occupies the entire north side of Trafalgar Square and constitutes a distinctive London landmark. Designed by William Wilkins (1778–1839) and inaugurated in 1838, the building originally also housed on the right side of the portico the Royal

Fig. 1 Jan van Eyck (active 1422; died 1441)  
*Portrait of Giovanni(?) Arnolfini and his Wife*, 1434,  
detail (see p. 47)



# 1250–1500

Most of the earliest paintings in the National Gallery come from Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany. These are remarkable survivors, considering their age and fragility, and represent a selection of artistic production spanning three centuries. Many were made for churches, as the backdrop or focus of religious services, and some originally formed part of large, multi-panelled altarpieces, which were later dismantled. Smaller, portable pictures were also made for private prayer, while others featured mythological scenes and were intended for secular purposes, perhaps to decorate a room or a costly piece of furniture.

Painters were guided by religious convention in how they depicted the saints and the holy family, but also by local craft traditions. Nevertheless, both artists and clients travelled widely, as did ideas and influences, across the frontiers of city states and principalities which then made up Europe. Sometimes artists were employed to paint a picture of a particular subject or for a location that held personal significance for the client, such as a chapel dedicated to a patron saint, and the donor and his family might also appear in the painting. The artist's name is not always known to us. Some are identified stylistically by a particular work or feature, such as the German 'Master of the Mornauer Portrait' or by the place where they were born, for example Antonello da Messina, who was originally from Sicily.

Most paintings made before 1500, apart from murals, were on wood, and larger altarpieces with different panels required complex joinery and careful planning. Gold leaf, beaten from gold coins to tissue-paper thinness, with punched or incised decoration to catch and reflect candlelight, was used in Northern and Southern Europe for the backgrounds of religious paintings such as *The Wilton Diptych*. Italian artists painted with finely ground pigments dispersed in egg yolk or whole egg, which dried to a tough, durable film with a light, bright tonality. In Northern Europe drying oils were the preferred paint medium, especially linseed, which offered more flexibility and deeper tones enriched by transparent glazes. By the fifteenth century the sophistication of the oil medium, combined with an increasing attention to representing the natural world, gave artists throughout Europe the means to produce subtle portraits such as Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of Giovanni(?) Arnolfini and his Wife*.



12 **Jan van Eyck (active 1422; died 1441)**

*Portrait of a Man (Self Portrait?)*, 1433

Oil on oak, 26 × 19 cm

The man's sharp, serious gaze suggests self-scrutiny: this is probably a self portrait. The cryptic motto 'Als Ich Can' in Greek lettering on the upper frame, an echo of the artist's last name, is an abbreviation of the Flemish saying: 'all I can but not as I would'. The implied modesty is false. The minute details such as the almost imperceptible stubble on his chin and the fine tracery of wrinkles around his left eye assert van Eyck's complete mastery of his craft. The artist's signature appears at the bottom.

13, 14 **Robert Campin (1378/9–1444)**

*A Man and A Woman*, about 1435

Oil with egg tempera on oak, 40.7 × 28.1 cm  
and 40.6 × 28.1 cm

These portraits – perhaps once joined with hinges to form a folding diptych – almost certainly show a married couple. Prosperous enough to be painted by Campin, they may be from his hometown of Tournai. The artist has not flattered them but rather records in acute detail their individual features and flaws. The whites and irises of the woman's eyes are dotted with tiny flecks of white paint so they appear to gleam with reflected light, giving her a sense of optimism and vibrancy. Their upper corners mirror the upwards curve of her elaborate, crisply folded headdress, secured with pins. Her husband's heavy wrinkled brow and thin lips suggest a soberness which contrasts, perhaps deliberately, with the flamboyance of his chaperon (headdress), which has a personality of its own. Campin made the most of oil paint's slow drying time to achieve tactile effects – for instance, dragging his brush through wet paint to imitate the soft texture of fur.



71 **Raphael (1483–1520)**  
*Portrait of Pope Julius II*, 1511  
Oil on poplar, 108.7 × 81 cm

This astonishingly intimate portrait of a careworn Pope Julius II shows him with the beard he grew in 1510 and vowed not to shave off until French troops had been expelled from Italy, which happened in 1512. Julius was a great patron of the arts, commissioning Raphael to decorate the papal apartments in the Vatican and ordering the rebuilding of St Peter's in Rome. The two golden acorns on the pope's chair allude to his family name, della Rovere (*rovere* is Italian for oak).



72 **Giovanni Bellini (about 1435–1516)**  
*Doge Leonardo Loredan*, about 1501–2  
Oil on poplar, 61.4 × 44.5 cm

Intelligent and imperious, Doge Loredan – the elected ruler of Venice – appears to be on the verge of breaking into a wry smile. This extraordinarily fluid expression, conveying both authority and benevolence, contrasts with the rigidity of his torso, which resembles a sculpted portrait bust, a deliberate association with the emperors of ancient Rome. In a striking act of false modesty, Bellini has signed the work on a fictive scrap of paper loosely attached to the marble ledge.



74 **Jan Gossaert (Jean Gossart) (active 1508; died 1532)**

*The Adoration of the Kings*, 1510–15  
Oil on oak, 179.8 × 163.2 cm

This altarpiece was made for an abbey near Brussels. The scene, showing the Virgin and Child surrounded by the Three Kings, is set in a crumbling classical palace rather than the traditional stable. The ruins may be inspired by Gossaert's travels to Italy, while the kings' gifts are elaborate examples of Netherlandish metalwork. The picture is divided into two horizontal sections, the heavenly and the earthly, with some echoes between the two. The poses of the kings, for instance, mirror those of the angels, lending harmony to an otherwise busy composition.



95 **Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8–1543)**

*Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve ('The Ambassadors')*, 1533  
Oil on oak, 207 × 209.5 cm

This portrait is full of curious objects, some of which hint at the sitters' social status. On the left, Jean de Dinteville, French ambassador to England, stands before a globe. To the right, his friend Georges de Selve, a scholar and bishop, rests his elbow on a book. At top left, the magnificent green drapery is pulled back to reveal a Crucifix. The distorted skull stretching across the mosaic floor, only visible correctly when seen from a particular viewpoint, is a *memento mori*, a reminder of the transience of human life.



114 **Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio**  
(1571–1610)  
*The Supper at Emmaus*, 1601  
Oil and tempera on canvas, 141 × 196.2 cm

Caravaggio shows the moment when two of Christ's disciples realise that the stranger sharing their meal is their master, resurrected after his crucifixion. The dynamic poses and strong contrasts of light and shade emphasise the shock of recognition. The precariously balanced fruit basket and the space in front of it help to draw us into the scene, while the apparent realism is manipulated for dramatic and artistic effect. Painted at the height of Caravaggio's fame in Rome, the work was commissioned by the nobleman Ciriaco Mattei.





234 **Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851)**  
*The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up, 1838, 1839*  
Oil on canvas, 90.7 × 121.6 cm

Turner's painting shows the final journey of the *Temeraire*, as she is towed by a steam tugboat along the River Thames to Rotherhithe to be scrapped. The veteran warship had played a distinguished role in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, but by 1838 she was over 40 years old and had been sold off. Set against a blazing sunset, the *Temeraire's* last voyage takes on a greater symbolic meaning, as the age of sail gives way to the age of steam.

254 **Georges Seurat (1859–1891)**  
*Bathers at Asnières*, 1884  
Oil on canvas, 201 × 300 cm

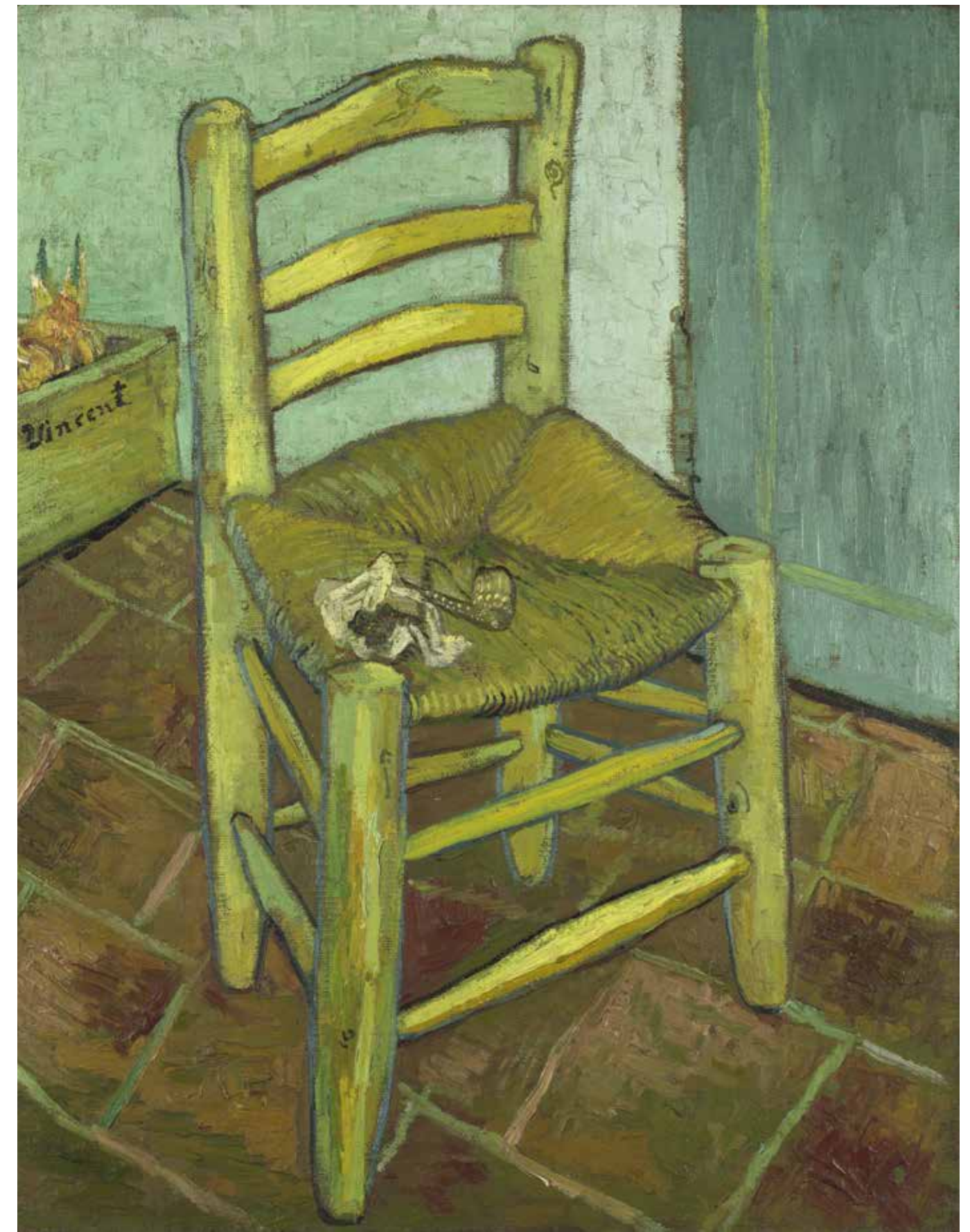
Working-class men and boys relax by the River Seine in the Parisian industrial suburb of Asnières. The factories of Clichy can be seen in the distance. Seurat invests his workers with quiet monumentality, portraying them on the enormous scale previously reserved for more heroic subjects. He began his painting using a variety of thick, impressionistic and criss-cross brushstrokes, but later reworked part of it in a pointillist technique, using tiny dots of contrasting colour for a vibrant effect.





258 **Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890)**  
*Sunflowers*, 1888  
 Oil on canvas, 92.1 × 73 cm

In anticipation of Paul Gauguin's arrival in Arles, Van Gogh began to paint a series of pictures of sunflowers to decorate his friend's bedroom. He considered only two of them good enough to hang there, of which this is one. There are several layers of meaning here: for Van Gogh yellow was the colour of happiness, and in Dutch literature the sunflower was a symbol of loyalty and devotion. The flowers illustrate different stages in the life cycle, from maturity to death.



259 **Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890)**  
*Van Gogh's Chair*, 1888  
 Oil on canvas, 91.8 × 73 cm

While Gauguin was living with him in Arles in 1888, Van Gogh painted companion pictures of two chairs representing their contrasting personalities. Gauguin is symbolised by a nocturnal scene of an elegant carved armchair supporting two novels and a candle. Van Gogh's rush-bottomed chair is more simple and rustic, and there is a box of sprouting onions in the background. The tobacco pouch and pipe on the seat perhaps echo Dutch old master paintings in which smoking symbolises the transience of life.

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All measurements give height before width

FRONT COVER Raphael, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*  
(detail)

BACK COVER Juan de Zurbarán, *Still Life with Lemons*  
*in a Wicker Basket* (detail)

PAGE 9 Michelangelo, *The Virgin and Child with Saint John*  
*and Angels* ('*The Manchester Madonna*') (detail)

PAGE 28 Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars* (detail)

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