

STOLEN VAN GOGH PAINTINGS BACK ON DISPLAY IN AMSTERDAM 14 YEARS AFTER THEFT FROM THE VAN GOGH MUSEUM



Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 2017; Vincent Van Gogh, *View of the Sea at Scheveningen*, 1882; Vincent Van Gogh, *Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen*, 1884-1885

- **Works on public display until 15 May 2017 before conservation work begins**
- **Expert assessment outlines extent of damage to the works**
- **Full details of theft and recovery revealed**

Amsterdam, 21 March 2017 – After 14 years, two masterpieces by Van Gogh stolen and feared lost forever are back on public display at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. *View of the Sea at Scheveningen* (1882) and *Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen* (1884–85) were taken from the Museum during a break-in in 2002 and discovered during a recent house search in the vicinity of Naples following a long investigation. From today they have resumed their place in the museum's collection and are on display in the state in which they were found, slightly damaged and without their frames, until 15 May 2017, after which they will be sent for restoration and framing.

Having been found behind a double wall in the house occupied by the parents of Camorra chief Raffaele Imperiale and identified by experts from the Van Gogh Museum, initial examination has shown that the paintings are in reasonably good condition, apart from a small area of visible damage to the canvas *View of the Sea at Scheveningen*, caused immediately after the robbery, when the thieves removed the frames.

Feared lost but recovered

In September 2016, members of a specialist team of the Italian Guardia di Finanza found the two stolen works while searching one of the many houses belonging to Imperiale as part of a large-scale investigation into the financial dealings of the drug syndicate led by the Neapolitan fugitive. This put an end to many years of uncertainty as to the condition and whereabouts of the paintings. In January 2017, an Italian judge sentenced three Neapolitans to 16, 18 and 20 years in prison for money-laundering and drug trafficking, and immediately released the two impounded paintings, which could then begin their journey back to the Netherlands.

There were fears that they had suffered considerable damage but the recovered works appear to be in reasonably good condition, although their frames have disappeared. The relatively minor damage is all the more remarkable because both paintings were taken out of their frames after the theft. The canvas *Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen* seems at first glance to be unharmed, apart from slight damage to the edges in a few places and some scratches in the layer of varnish. *View of the Sea at Scheveningen* suffered more damage. A piece of the paper support – and therefore a substantial part of the depiction – is missing in the lower left-hand corner. This piece of paper was torn off when the work was forcibly removed from its frame. Small pieces of paint have chipped off in several places along the edge.

Filling in the gaps in the story

The two paintings from Van Gogh's early period hold a lot of value for the museum's collection and their return fills glaring gaps in the presentation.

View of the Sea at Scheveningen (1882) is the only painting in the Van Gogh Museum collection dating from Van Gogh's period in The Hague and one of only two seascapes that he painted during his years in the Netherlands. Originally painted on paper, it is one of the first works Van Gogh made without the supervision of his teacher, Anton Mauve. In the preceding years he had devoted himself almost exclusively to drawing and had done little painting. Given his still-scant experience, the canvas is strikingly forceful. Even though the brushwork is fairly coarse and the simple, drawn figures distributed rather haphazardly over the beach, the space and the approaching storm are aptly characterized.

Van Gogh painted the *Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen* in 1884, when he was living with his parents in Nuenen in the province of Brabant. The canvas was intended for his mother, who had broken her leg early that year. The choice of subject, the church of the Reverend van Gogh, suggests that Vincent hoped his father would take pleasure in the work as well. X-radiographs show that Van Gogh touched up the foreground and other passages too, probably a year later, in 1885. He painted figures in front of the church door and applied autumnal colours to the bare winter trees and hedges. Only the church, the sky and some of the trees remained unchanged. In the foreground Van Gogh painted women wearing long mourning shawls, perhaps a reference to his own grieving process and thus to the death of his father on 26 March 1885. In addition to its art-historical importance, therefore, this work is clearly of biographical value as well.

Axel Rüger, Director of the Van Gogh Museum, said: *"The homecoming of the recovered paintings means that our collection is once again complete, and we can close the door on this particularly painful period in our history. I've been looking forward tremendously to the day when we could again show these two gems to our public. That day has finally come. We haven't been able to tell their story for more than 14 years, but starting today, they again have a face and a voice! They're home at last! Unbelievable!"*

Van Gogh bus connects Nuenen and Amsterdam

To mark the return of the two Van Gogh works, the organisation Van Gogh Brabant and the Van Gogh Museum are introducing a bus service between Amsterdam and Nuenen from 30 March 2017. Visitors to the Van Gogh Museum can see, on the same day, the paintings and the edifice depicted, the Reformed Church in Nuenen.

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Notes to Editors

The return of the paintings to the Netherlands, the festive reception from the Minister of Culture Jet Bussemaker, and museum director Axel Rüger, the research and restoration are all made possible by the generous support of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the BankGiro Lottery, Van Lanschot Bankiers, Heineken, Kikkoman Foods Europe B.V. and Bulgari. Hizkia Van Kralingen and Hilton Hotel Amsterdam facilitated the transport and presentation of the recovered works.