

K-1

Vincent van Gogh, *Sunflowers*

Discussion Questions

Style:

1. How did van Gogh paint these expressive sunflowers?

Expressionism

van Gogh painted these Expressionist sunflowers with large brushstrokes and thick impasto paint. He filled the vase and the canvas with bright, warm colors that contrast with the turquoise background. At the time van Gogh painted this, people preferred realistic paintings, and they didn't like this painting. But now most people love the happy, expressive flowers that seem to have personalities.

2. What did van Gogh do first when he painted this still life?

Sketch

van Gogh first drew a **sketch** of an oval for the vase, then he drew the flowers in the arrangement. Next, he mixed the colors, using oil paint, and then he painted the canvas. He painted the flowers, one at a time, in a lively arrangement.

3. What makes this still life seem alive?

Still life

A **still life** painting shows objects that are still and cannot move on their own. van Gogh liked to paint still-life compositions because he could arrange the objects in pleasing ways. The flowers show the warmth of fall. In winter, after the sunflowers are gone, the lively flowers in this painting will still be blooming.

Museum

We are looking at a **reproduction**, or copy, of the original painting that is in a **museum** in Germany. This reproduction is a photograph of the real painting. On the original painting, you can see the thick oil paint layered on its surface. Where did van Gogh sign his painting?

Color:

4. Why is yellow called a warm color?

Warm

Yellow is a happy, **warm** color. Yellow is considered a happy, warm color because it is the color of the sun, of summer flowers, and of wheat fields in autumn. For van Gogh, the color yellow symbolized everything good, including love, hope, and friendship. Look at the color wheel and find the warm colors. Red, yellow and orange are warm colors.

Cool

The warm colors are bright against the **cool** blue background.

5. How did van Gogh make the color orange?

Mixed

Orange is made by mixing red and yellow. van Gogh **mixed** his paints to make many different shades of yellow and orange.

Line:

6. What makes this still life seem alive?

Personalities

The flowers in this painting seem to have **personalities**. van Gogh arranged these flowers to make them appear lively. He painted the flowers one at a time, adding each one to fit into the arrangement. Some flower heads seem to look at us. Some flowers droop sadly. Some flowers stand tall like brave soldiers. Some flowers hide their faces, like shy people. Which flower is cheerful? Is there an angry or frightened flower? How many flowers are in the vase?

7. How do the straight and curving lines give the flowers personalities?

Straight

Some flowers have **straight** stems. They seem to stand straight and tall.

Curving

Some flowers have **curving** stems and petals. They appear to be shy or sad, like a person bending over.

8. Did van Gogh paint the table line or the vase first?

Horizontal

He drew the vase and flowers first and then added the table line. We know this because the table is a different height on each side. He had already painted the vase before he painted the line.

Shape:

9. What shapes are repeated?

Round

Flowers seen from the front have **round** shapes.

Oval

Flowers turned sideways have **oval** shapes. The vase has an oval shape with a flat top and bottom.

Space:

10. How does van Gogh show that some flowers are in front of others?

Overlap

Overlap shows that one thing is in front of another. The flowers are arranged in a vase. Some flowers overlap others and hide their shapes. Which flowers are in front of all the others? Which flower is almost hidden by the others? The vase is sitting on top of a table. The oval shape of the vase overlaps the table and background. Some flowers overlap the vase.

Balance:

11. How does van Gogh balance the flowers in this arrangement?

Four flowers form a zig zag line above the center of the vase. Four flowers on the right twist and turn. Four flowers on the left hide their faces. These groups of four are **balanced** in the painting.

Texture:

12. If you could touch the paint, what texture would you feel?

Rough

This reproduction is flat and smooth, but the real painting has **actual texture**. The flowers and vase have rough texture. You would feel it if you touched them.

Impasto

van Gogh used thick, **impasto** paint, like toothpaste, to paint the flowers and vase. We can see the marks made by the paintbrush.