

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Sjraar van Heugten

Vincent van Gogh's *The Blute-fin Mill*

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010)

Citation: Sjraar van Heugten, "Vincent van Gogh's *The Blute-fin Mill*," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn10/vincent-van-goghs-the-blute-fin-mill>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

New Discoveries

Vincent van Gogh's *The Blute-fin Mill* by Sjraar van Heugten

A recently discovered painting by Vincent van Gogh was actually rediscovered, or, maybe more accurately, liberated from the doubts about its authorship that came with the dubious reputation of its first discoverer, Dirk Hannema. The work, painted in Paris in 1886, shows the Moulin Blute-fin on Montmartre, with a remarkable number of figures crowding the scene (fig. 1).



Fig. 1, Vincent van Gogh, *The Blute-fin Mill*, 1886. Oil on canvas. Museum de Fundatie, Heino and Zwolle, Netherlands. [\[larger image\]](#)

When Dirk Hannema, at the time director of the Hannema-De Stuers Foundation in Heino, Netherlands, acquired the painting in 1975, he attributed it to Van Gogh. Hannema's reputation as a connoisseur, however, had been much damaged when, as director of the Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam, he was one of the key players who in 1938 had accepted Han van Meegeren's *Christ at Emmaus* as an original work by Johannes Vermeer. After the *demasqué* of the work, Hannema's reputation never recovered. In Heino, he actively acquired works of art but, given his penchant for attributing many of them almost obsessively—and quite incorrectly—to great masters, nobody accepted his attribution of the Montmartre scene, although it now proves to have been completely solid.

The painting was examined in the Van Gogh Museum stylistically and technically and the results were published in the June issue of *The Burlington Magazine*.^[1] As did Hannema, the authors compared the work to Van Gogh's *Guinguette* (1886; fig. 2) now in the Musée d'Orsay, and rightly so, as the brushwork is in many ways very similar and, like the Montmartre view, the scene is populated by many figures. Another Van Gogh work from Paris, *Bois de Boulogne with People Walking* (1886), which also has similar brushwork and many figures, gives further weight to the attribution.^[2] But even compared to these images of city life, the number of

men and women in *The Blute-fin Mill* is surprising, as is their size and the detailed way some of them are painted. Clearly, Van Gogh was experimenting with a rather ambitious combination of cityscape and figure piece. Whether he was satisfied with the result is not known but, as the painting was not signed, it might not have been entirely to his liking.



Fig. 2, Vincent van Gogh, *Guinguette*, 1886. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

Based on the resemblances with the works mentioned and other paintings, *The Blute-fin Mill* is convincingly dated autumn 1886.^[3] The art historical argument for that dating and for its place in Van Gogh's *oeuvre* seemed open to question when the painting was compared to a drawing, a sketch,^[4] and a lost painting, each by van Gogh, of what is believed to be the same spot in *The Burlington Magazine*. Those works, however, clearly show a different staircase leading up the hill (fig. 3) from the one shown in *The Blute-fin Mill*. The staircase in the sketch, the drawing, and the lost painting is broader, has a handrail in the middle, and has other distinct differences that, contrary to the assumption in *The Burlington Magazine* article, were not omitted or manipulated by Van Gogh, but simply belonged to a different flight of steps. The confusion probably arose because in all four works the mill is in the same position: sails facing right. But a mill of this type could in its entirety be turned around in a full circle in order to point the sails toward the wind, and, as a result, it could be seen in the same position—sails facing right—from virtually every spot around the hill. The dating of the lost painting to spring 1886 is also slightly awkward, as it seems mainly based on the impression of the leaves on the trees. Since the painting has not been examined since 1967, when it was lost in a fire, and an old photograph is the only thing left for comparison, there is every reason to be careful here, too.



Fig. 3, Vincent van Gogh, *The Blute-fin-Mill*, 1886–87. Pen and ink, graphite on laid paper. Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. [\[larger image\]](#)

An in-depth technical examination takes away all doubt that one might still have. The pigments, examined and identified using X-ray fluorescence spectrometry (XRF) and Scanning Electron Microscopy with Energy Dispersive Electroscopy (SEM-EDS), were all used by Van Gogh in autumn 1886. The canvas with a stamp of the Paris art supplies dealer Rey et Perrod is similar to at least one painting by Van Gogh,[\[5\]](#) and to several by contemporaries. A useful new tool, computerized thread count, was applied to identify the canvas. Not only is this method, developed by Rick Johnson and Don Johnson, much more reliable than the awkward counting by hand and eye, it also reveals patterns in the canvas that the human eye cannot possibly identify.[\[6\]](#)

Infra red reflectography revealed that the artist drew the lines of a perspective frame on the canvas—absolutely typical for Van Gogh's Paris work—before he started out to make the composition. The wooden perspective frame had a horizontal, a vertical, and two diagonal wires, which Van Gogh used to get a grip on the motif in front of him; he would put the frame between himself and his subject and draw lines on his canvas corresponding to the wires, thus being able to measure perspective and proportions.

The Blute-fin Mill is not a highlight in Van Gogh's Paris work, but it reveals quite a bit about his artistic ambitions. From the beginning of his career, Van Gogh wanted to be a painter of the human figure, and this work is the best painted testimony from the Paris period of the vigor of that aspiration during that time.

Sjraar van Heugten
masjra[at]xs4all.nl

Notes

[1] For a detailed account of their findings see Louis van Tilborgh and Ella Hendriks, "Dirk Hannema and the Rediscovery of a Painting by Vincent van Gogh," *The Burlington Magazine* 152 (June 2010): 393–405.

[2] *Bois de Boulogne with people walking*, Noro Foundation, F 225.

[3] Van Tilborgh and Hendriks, "Dirk Hannema and the Rediscovery," note 68, lists other comparable paintings.

[4] Van Gogh's sketch *The Blute-fin Mill*, F 1395, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

[5] *Portrait of a Woman*, F 215d, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

[6] The Thread Count Automation Project is led by Rick Johnson, School of Electrical Engineering at Cornell University and Don Johnson, School of Computer Engineering at Rice University.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Vincent van Gogh, *The Blute-fin Mill*, 1886. Oil on canvas. Museum de Fundatie, Heino and Zwolle, Netherlands. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Vincent van Gogh, *Guinguette*, 1886. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Vincent van Gogh, *The Blute-fin-Mill*, 1886–87. Pen and ink, graphite on laid paper. Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)