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Vincent van Gogh’s Wheatfields and Piet Oudolf’s Meadows: Color, Contrast and Change in the Landscape

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ABSTRACT
This capstone investigates the unique relationship between Vincent Van Gogh and planting designer Piet Oudolf's vibrant use of color and contrast in their work as it relates to their perception of the landscape. The project is mainly a comparison of the two artists, exploring Van Gogh's use of complementary colors and brushstroke techniques to create vivid contrast in his renderings of agrarian landscapes, and Oudolf's parallel approach to creating painterly meadows and prairie gardens. The project focuses on Van Gogh's study of wheat field landscapes, which are essentially the same in structure and composition but can be used to compare to one another in change over time. They then can be compared to Oudolf's plant palette that change overtime, showing how he designed for evolving seasonal landscapes. This is a designer’s response to the observation of change in nature like Van Gogh’s.

THE QUESTION

What relationship is there between Vincent Van Gogh and Piet Oudolf in using layering of data, in the form of color, contrast, and texture, when exploring seasonality the landscape, and what lessons might these discoveries have on the profession and practice of planting design and landscape architecture?

INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of place, and its unique situation in time is inextricably tied to the changing seasons. After spending a few years in Fayetteville as a design student, I have become interested in the experience of the landscape through the seasons. As the landscape shifts through its natural cycles, our bodies and physical senses are bombarded with information: a slight change in scent that greets the nose in spring as the flowers and trees begin to bloom; a new twinge of delicate green appearing on the tree branches; a slightly warmer and gentle casting of light in the late afternoon of early fall as the sun shifts across the sky. We perceive these changes constantly - changes so subtle that often we don’t notice them until they smack us in the face with their beauty. More often these changes are most apparent in their shift in color: all of a sudden, it seems, the trees are green again, signally the arrival of spring; or, the flash of vivid color as the trees shift into dormancy and lose their leaves.

Through my academic work, I have explored my interest in the relationship between landscape and time. Color, light, and texture play into this, and help formulate a person’s experience. Planting design and plant communities are an area of interest to me for this reason. Shifts in color and textures of the landscapes are fluid and subtle, changing over the course of the day with the changing of the light, and over the course of a year throughout the seasons.
So then, what role does color play in our experience in the landscape? How do we relate this rich, deeply personal experience to others? How might we curate opportunities for sensorial interaction with seasonal change in the landscape? What information can be derived from this layering that wouldn’t be discovered otherwise? Independently, these layers of data communicate information about a place or thing from which we can derive observations but lack the substance and holistic vision that layering together these elements provides. Together, they can reveal a more robust understanding of character and location. This can help to guide design intervention in a more meaningful, intentional way.

Two designers using different media: Vincent Van Gogh, an Impressionist painter and Piet Oudolf, a Dutch planting designer, have explored this layering of sensorial information and its relationship to the landscape. Though active in two vastly different time periods and manipulating different mediums, the two artists share many similarities in their work. The most important is that both use layering of data - emotionally and perceptually derived - through gestures and patterns to understand their experience of the landscape. The data is the layers of plant types or brushstrokes, the strategy behind the organization, the color and timing of color/how color is layered and mixed, the brushstrokes and pencil marks. Both take cues and information from what the eye observes, or what is biologically appropriate, i.e., plants a technician may select based on successful native plant communities, and reorganize them to create a visual and physical experience that is rich and engaging. These gestures take the form of physical or metaphorical brushstrokes on a canvas; Van Gogh used bold, repetitive brushstrokes of varying gestures to create texture and pattern with thick, vibrant oil paints, while Oudolf uses clusterings of native plants of varying heights, forms and bloom times to create curated yet naturalistic planting designs that are rich in texture and color year-round. Both also strategically use contrasting colors and textures to their advantage.

Presence of oppositions are found in the use of complementary colors in Van Gogh’s thinking about representation of seasonal change. These oppositions draw attention to one another and heighten the contrast of the two oppositions. This brings an energy to Van Gogh’s paintings that give them a unique color while also still being recognizable, even distinct and unique, to a season. Oudolf used similar color theory techniques to create contrast and energy in his planting compositions that evolve as plants come into bloom and as other recede. Oudolf layers native plant communities, textures, and seasonality using data: color and contrast based on an understanding of seasonality and plant growth cycles are used strategically to act in harmony to communicate a designed experience that is intended to evolve over time from what otherwise is not a distinguishable system.
PROJECT BACKGROUND

THE INVESTIGATION

This capstone is a unique investigation into the world of color theory as it relates to landscape architecture, planting design, painting and visual communication. This is obviously a topic rich with subtopics for investigation, in different combinations of comparisons. The relationship between Van Gogh and Piet Oudolf is one of many parallel relationships that exist between art and design. Even as such, this relationship is extensive, and this project is a toe-dip into the broad waters of exploration.

THE METHOD

This investigation is a written exploration surveying the relationship between between Vincent Van Gogh and planting designer Piet Oudolf's vibrant use of color and contrast in their work as it relates to their experience of the landscape. The project is mainly a comparison of the two, exploring Van Gogh's use of complementary colors and brushstroke techniques to create vivid contrast in his renderings of agrarian landscapes, and Oudolf's parallel approach to creating painterly meadows and prairie gardens. Though mostly in written essay format, the investigation will also include exploratory color studies.

DEFINING COLOR THEORY TERMS

**Hierarchy** – the approximate amount of each color present in the piece of art. It influences the order in which the human eye perceives what it sees. This order is created by the visual contrast between forms in a field of perception.

**Color Harmony** – refers to the property that certain aesthetically pleasing color combinations have, when the colors go well together instead of clashing.

**Complementary colors** - exist opposite each other on the color wheel. They create the most contrast and therefore greatest visual tension by virtue of how dissimilar they are.

**Color Balance** – when a hierarchy is created with the selected colors, while also complementing the readability of the composition.

**Simultaneous Contrast** - when two colors are placed side by side, the human eye perceives the colors differently, depending on what colors are combined. Simultaneous contrast is most intense when two complementary colors are juxtaposed directly next to each other.
VINCENT VAN GOGH

Vincent van Gogh was a Dutch post-impressionist painter who lived in the 19th century, between 1853 and 1890. He is among the most famous and influential figures in the history of Western art: in just over a decade he created about 2,100 artworks, including around 860 oil paintings, most of them in the last two years of his life. ¹ These works include landscapes, still lifes, portraits and self-portraits, and are characterised by bold colors and dramatic, impulsive and expressive brushwork. ²

Vincent van Gogh saw nature and art as inseparably linked. Nowhere did he find as much inspiration, peace and solace as in nature. Van Gogh explored the landscape through painting, and his paintings rely on color, movement, texture, and form to convey the mood and character of the landscape. ³ Van Gogh’s paintings have a vibrant, dream-like feel to them, abstract but emotionally charged enough to convey mood and character. The brush strokes themselves are broad and sweeping, layered using thick, richly colored oil paints, and the landscapes he painted come alive off the canvas with character and energy. Van Gogh’s techniques are expressive and energetic, and the heavily textural surface of his paintings add movement and dimensionality. ⁴

VAN GOGH, THE LANDSCAPE + THE SEASONS

Van Gogh was born in the region of North Brabant on the southern coast of the Netherlands, where the region’s sandy soils were too poor to sustain a wide variety of crops, but whose landscape was covered in woods, marshes, and heath. His parents, Reverend Theodorus van Gogh and Anna van Gogh took great interest in nature because of the teachings of the Groningen School - a theological movement within the Dutch Reformed Church to which the van Gogh’s belonged. As a child, Vincent was exposed regularly exposed to nature on walks his family took regularly together, and his mother kept a kitchen garden located alongside the house. This relationship inspired Van Gogh’s lifelong love of tracts of nature shaped by human hands. ⁵

Van Gogh was particularly captivated by nature’s changing seasons and their ever-recurring cycle. His work overall contains depictions of the seasons not only in the form of landscapes representing spring, summer, autumn or winter, but also portrayals of people engaged in seasonal work, such as reaping wheat (summer), sowing a crop and harvesting the grapes (autumn) and gathering wood in the snow (winter). In the early summer of 1884, Van Gogh was struck by an effect on the landscape connected with the growth cycle of wheat.  

In early July of 1884, he wrote a letter to his brother Theo:

“But for want of a good model I haven’t yet started on what has most struck me in nature these last few days. At present the half-ripe wheatfields have a dark, golden blonde tone, ruddy or golden bronze. This is brought out to maximum effect by opposition with the broken cobalt tone of the sky.

... It would be something that expresses Summer well - in my view summer isn’t easy to express. Usually, or often at least, a summery effect is either impossible or ugly, that’s my feeling, at least - it’s offset by the twilights, though.
But I mean it isn’t easy to find the effect of a summer sun that’s as lush and as simple and as pleasant to look at as the characteristic effects of the other seasons. The spring is tender green (young wheat) and pink (apple blossom).  

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The autumn is the contrast of the yellow leaves against violet tones. The winter is the snow with the little black silhouettes.

But if the summer is the opposition of blues against an element of orange in the golden bronze of the wheat, this way one could paint a painting in each of the contrasts of the complementary colors (red and green, blue and orange, yellow and violet, white and black) that really expressed the mood of the seasons.”

In this letter we see that Van Gogh is recognizing seasonal change in the landscape through hue and contrasting color relationships, and how they are indicative of and unique to each season. These relationships draw attention to one another and heighten the contrast of the two oppositions. This brings an energy to Van Gogh’s paintings that give them a unique color harmony while also still being recognizable by season.

FIGURE 2: WHEAT STACKS WITH REAPER, VINCENT VAN GOGH, JUNE 1888

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Vincent believed that an artist had to truly know and understand nature. The best way to achieve that was by living and working in the middle of it, in the unspoiled countryside. Vincent moved to Paris in February 1886, but after two years of hard work, he grew tired of the city. He went to live in the small town of Arles in the south of France, in search of light and peace. \(^8\) Arles was a small town, from which a short walk took Van Gogh into vast landscapes:

\[\text{“I have a new subject on the go, green and yellow fields as far as the eye can see, which I’ve already drawn twice and am starting again as a painting.”} \,(\text{to Theo from Arles, 12 June 1888})\] \(^9\)

The fact that Van Gogh actually forged a plan to document the seasons after his arrival in Arles in the South of France on February 20, 1888 is apparent from his letters. In September of that year, after settling into a house which he had been using as a studio since early May, he wrote to Theo:

\[\text{“As far as the house is concerned, the fact that it will be habitable continues to soothe me very much. Will my work be worse because by staying in the same place I’ll see the seasons come and go on the same subjects? Seeing the same orchards again in spring, the same wheatfields in summer, I’ll inevitably see my work regularly before me in advance, and can plan better. And by keeping certain studies here to make an ensemble that will hold together, after a certain time that will make a calmer body of work for you. I feel that as far as that goes, we’re pretty well on the right road.”} \,^{10}\]

Following his notorious breakdown in Arles, Vincent had himself committed on May 8, 1889 to the Saint-Paul de Mausole psychiatric hospital, near the village of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, northeast of Arles. Van Gogh described the view from his room on the upper storey of the asylum in a letter to Theo written on or around May 23, 1889:

\[\text{“Through the iron-barred window I can make out a square of what in an enclosure, a perspective in the manner of Van Goyen, above which in the morning I see the sun rise in its glory.”} \,^{11}\]

Working and painting in the same landscape for several months gave Van Gogh the opportunity to study the change in seasons as it was happening, and to anticipate the changes in the

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landscape around him beforehand. **This consistency acts as a datum for comparison:** in his own study of the changing seasons, and in our study of the paintings that resulted from these months. When arranged together, they create a record of this change in which the evolution is made apparent by comparison. This is an example of quantitative data used in Van Gogh’s study of his surroundings: not only was he collecting visual information about the seasons through color, but his window from Saint-Paul’s hospital became a frame for tracking gradual change in the landscape across seasons. We are able to see how Van Gogh’s evolving understanding and perception of the land around him shifted through the changes in the paintings of repeated scenes and motifs. **The limited scope and enclosed space served as a test area, a frame that can be measured against repeatedly and itself does not change; instead the experience of what lies beyond the frame changes.**

**FIGURE 3: SKETCH OF THE WALLED WHEATFIELD, VINCENT VAN GOGH, APRIL-MAY 1890**
Vincent painted what he observed, rather than from his imagination. 12 His observations - conveyed through the lens of color, texture, repeated thick brush strokes - describe change in a qualitative way. This change is subtle and gradual but is captured in singular momentary experiences. The frequency of these paintings was fairly irregular, but change throughout the seasons can be recognized across this selection of his work. 13 This change is not only indicative of ephemeral, experiential pattern changes in the landscape - such as the quality of light, cloud cover, wheatfield texture - but also of the productive, cultural changes that occur in the landscape. The appearance of figures in the landscape describes these patterns - wheat reapers tending to the fields - while also providing scale. These figures’ appearance relates the

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landscape to a greater, environmental purpose - the wheat field does not just grow or change completely on its own, it is a productive landscape and serves a purpose in its cultural context: jobs, source of income, provisions for other industries like breadmaking, etc. The landscape is manipulated over time to achieve this overall purpose. Thus, a repeated motif became apparent in Van Gogh’s work: figures and couples walking within, working or manipulating, or interacting with the landscape. These figures were painted while in the midst of experiencing the landscape, embedded in it, tied directly to it.

As the seasons changes, and the actions of the people who interacted with the productive landscape changed, we can see in Van Gogh’s work an attempt to characterize the seasons using color. Until the end of his life he continued to paint landscape featuring fields of wheat or other crops in which cultivated nature is given center stage and nonessentials are generally emitted. Most of the canvases lack farms and houses as well as figures, as if Van Gogh were setting aside the transient features of culture in favor of the elemental; these features are what he
captured through his use of varying brushstrokes and color. However, the loss of particularity does not lead to mere pattern but to an unprecedented emphasis on the brute facts of landscape and the viewer’s visceral relationship to it. Consistent with this state of mind was a new emphasis on breadth of sensation and experience, expressed in large canvases and characterized by sweeping, unpopulated landscapes and a limited palette of bold, contrasting colors. Topography and narrative are thus effectively absent, and we are often left with horizontal bands of richly textured paint.

**VAN GOGH + COLOR THEORY**

When he first devoted himself to painting full time in 1880, Van Gogh used dark and gloomy earth colors such as raw umber, raw sienna, and olive green, applying his paint with heavy, expressive brushstrokes. These colors were suited to his painted subjects, the miners, weavers, and peasant farm laborers who worked the landscape.

But due to the development of new, more lightfast pigments and his move to Paris in early 1886, he was exposed to the work of the Impressionists, who exemplified a brighter and looser painting style. These artists were striving to capture the effects of light in their work and introduced bright hues into Van Gogh’s palette: reds, yellows, oranges, greens, and blues. Inspired by a ceiling mural painted by Eugène Delacroix in the Louvre, renowned for its bold color contrasts, Van Gogh began to study books on color theory, especially those of Charles Blanc in 1884. Blanc was one of the most important sources of inspiration for Van Gogh’s use of color. Blanc gave a clear overview of color theory and how complementary colors interact, intensifying one another. This opened up a vast array of possibilities for Van Gogh.

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Van Gogh then moved to Arles to further develop his modern style; the bright light of Provence led him to even more daring color relationships, and complementary contrasts enabled him to make his works even more expressive. Van Gogh deliberately set about using colors to capture mood and emotion, rather than using colors realistically. At the time, this technique was completely unheard of. At the same time, he experimented with the lively, energetic brushstrokes.

Emotion became tied to place, color and seasonality - the landscape had an impact on Van Gogh’s senses through senses through the seasons. For Van Gogh, color became indicative of character and identity, a way to capture a brief moment in time. But Van Gogh didn’t just paint the landscape at its peak color - he painted the landscape, especially wheatfields and productive

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landscapes, at all times of the year, during different points along the life cycle. He found beauty in change in textures and patterns of the dying grasses as the growing season ended, and celebrated the dead of winter, too.

FIGURE 7: WHEATFIELD WITH A REAPER, VINCENT VAN GOGH, SEPTEMBER 1889

REPRESENTING THE LANDSCAPE

Van Gogh spent much of his practice studying the landscape through sketches. These sketches became his personal records of place, and how he perceived and experienced movement and texture, arranged in a composition that told this story. Rather than making abstract studies, he used them to help himself understand what he wanted to communicate, and wrote:

"I am getting well acquainted with nature. I exaggerate, sometime I make change in motif; but for all that, I do not invent the whole picture; on the contrary, I find it already in nature, only it must be disentangled." 21

Many of his paintings were preceded by sketches (see Figure 8, a study for a later painting, Figure 9). These studies became a fascinating dialog arose between the arts of painting and drawing in his quest for style. He took the lines and the rhythm that had failed to satisfy him on canvas and repeated the process in a drawing. Here is where he often succeeded in realizing his intentions, thus adding a new step to the creative process. Drawing can thus be understood as a step in Van Gogh’s data collection process, used to understand an essential idea, on top of which other discoveries are layered.

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PIET OUDOLF

Piet Oudolf is one of the world’s most famous and innovative garden designers, known for his rich, seasonally resilient native plantings. Born in 1944, the Dutchman has lived and worked in a village called Hummelo in the Netherlands since 1982, where he started a nursery with his wife Anja, to grow perennials. The landscape here is essentially flat, with verdant pastures, and often coated in mist and perpetual rain.

What makes Oudolf’s landscapes special? He’s often seen as the figurehead of “The New Perennial Movement,” which utilizes herbaceous plantings and meadows made up of woody plants, long-lived perennials and ornamental grasses with a natural look. His work challenges conventional approaches to gardening that rely on short-lived bursts of color and shows delights of versatile, expressive perennials to create landscapes that are not only ecologically robust, but beautiful, too. He uses a well-thought out palette of plants that are chosen for the rhythm of

FIGURE 9: WHEAT FIELD WITH CYPRESSES, VINCENT VAN GOGH, SEPTEMBER 1889
colors and textures they create over the seasons. They are valued for their structure and combined in masses to float and blend seamlessly together, making for an ever-vibrant landscape that shifts in character through the year.  

Oudolf co-founded Future Plants, a company which specializes in selecting, growing, breeding and protecting plants for landscaping and public areas. Oudolf’s recent projects include The High Line, New York NY; Lurie Garden, Millennium Park, Chicago IL; Serpentine Gallery, London, England, and the Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy. Oudolf is also a successful author, having co-written numerous books such as: “Planting: A New Perspective” (2013); “Landscapes in Landscapes” (2011); “Gardening with Grasses” (1998); “Designing with Plants and Planting Design” (1999); “Dream Plants for the Natural Garden” (2000); “Planting the Natural Garden” (2003), and “Planting Design: Gardens in Time and Space” (2005). In his 35-year career, Oudolf has achieved international acclaim, and has recently been awarded an Honorary Fellowship from RIBA for Planting Design (2012) and the Prince Bernhard Cultural Foundation Award (2013).

PIET OUDOLF + PLANTING DESIGN

In 2018, a film was released about Oudolf’s design process, called Five Seasons: The Gardens of Piet Oudolf. During the most spontaneous sequence in Five Seasons, Oudolf is driving through Texas Hill Country to see the wildflowers, and completely taken aback by their beauty. “Just like paintings,” he muses. The same could be said of his work, although his preference is for

perennials that aren't conventionally pretty. He uses palettes that consider grays and browns as colors too — an approach to gardens that embraces the entire life cycle of the plants, not just in flower but also in decay. Oudolf’s contemporary designs are inspired by nature and even more dramatic in fall and winter: plants are left to fade, wither and die as the seasons wind down into winter.

FIGURE 11: A PRIVATE GARDEN IN ROTTERDAM, NETHERLANDS

Oudolf is known for his aversion to deadheading, preferring to let the shapes of seed pods and stalks add architectural interest to his designs. This inevitably has an effect on the colors present – the dried earthy browns and reds of plants as they fizzle out continuing to add interest and variety to the gardens in winter. They are left to be cut back in stages so there is always seasonal interest. Plants transform from light pastels, deep blues and rich purples into browns and blacks, architectural and sculptural, down to their bare forms and silhouettes. Seedpods and stems are left to create textural contrast and visual interest as well as providing food for birds and insects and shelter for wildlife.

PLANTS AS BRUSHSTROKES

Oudolf’s gardens have been described as Impressionist paintings in motion, with drifts of color set against masses of more neutral-colored grasses. Inspired by nature, rather than seeking to control it, Oudolf’s placement of plant masses seem to enhance each of his designs, from the smallest private gardens to large-scale meadows. Oudolf is skilled at communicating and creating ephemeral experiences within the landscape through his use of native plants and wildflowers in the landscape as his medium, rather than oil paints on a canvas. His drawings express the colors, patterns, and textures of the landscapes that he is creating. Yet the sketches are missing layers of communication and data that are quantitative and may not communicate clearly to a layperson who is not familiar with these types of sketches (see Figure 12).

FIGURE 12: PROCESS SKETCH OF GARDEN PLANTING PLAN.

FIGURE 13: PLANTING PLAN OF POTTERS FIELD PARK, LONDON, PIET OUDOLF.
From above or in plan, the gardens look formal, structured, perhaps even stiff (see Figure 3). But from the perspective within the garden, the geometry disappears, blending together to create a complex composition of textures and colors (see Figures 5 + 6). The structure remains, however, providing a secret backbone and underlying rhythm and logic.

FIGURE 14: VIEW OF POTTERSFIELD PARK, LONDON, MIDSUMMER. PIET OUDOLF.

FIGURE 15: VIEW OF POTTERSFIELD PARK, LONDON, LATE SUMMER. PIET OUDOLF.
According to Oudolf, perennials fall into two categories: filler and structure plants. Where structure plants can help provide a clear visual interest until about autumn, filler plants are typically only used for their flowers, foliage and color. These eventually become untidy and, sometimes, formless after their bloom time has come and gone. Oudolf teaches that at least 70 percent of a garden should be filled with structure plants, and the remaining 30 can be filler plants. 26 These structure plants are repeat bloomers, grasses and long-season perennials. The combination of these two types of plants are what Oudolf calls “matrix planting,” and is designed to emulate the look and function of a natural ecosystem found in the wild. 27 Good matrix plantings will depend on visually quiet and colorfully soft background plants, and grasses are one of the top selection choices; grasses are able to occupy a large amount of space for long periods of time, and many last year-round without having to be replaced.28

PAINTERLY LANDSCAPES

What elements does Oudolf consistently use in his projects? What makes the landscapes he creates so painterly, and what relationship do they have to the works of Van Gogh?

![layered planting composition](image)

**FIGURE 16: LAYERED PLANTING COMPOSITION. TRENTHAM ESTATE, ENGLAND. PIET OUDOLF.**

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Layering of plant communities together into a composition is one way color and contrast are used in harmony to communicate experience and seasonality of what otherwise is not a distinguishable system.

More of Oudolf’s tried and true methods deal with repeating patterns and themes throughout the landscape, as well as adding in layers. “Repeating plants at regular intervals adds rhythm and variation,” Oudolf states. “It creates a feeling that ‘this is one place, with one design and one vision. Good repeating plants need to have a distinct personality and a long season of interest, or at least disappear tidily or die back discreetly.” 29 This is a direct parallel to the qualities discussed in Van Gogh’s work: his use of color contrasts throughout each painting is repeated in groupings of brushstrokes, and certain colors are often paired together, such as a bright, warm tone adjacent to a cooler, darker one.

Oudolf’s gardens are special due to his unique understanding of layering in wild of semi-natural plant communities, and has transferred it to designed plantings. Layering is about segregating plants so that the visual effect is clear and coherent. This also clarifies the design process and simplifies setting out plants for planting. 30 For planning purposes two or three layers are all that is

FIGURE 17: MATRIX PLANTING AS A BACKDROP FOR POPS OF COLOR. PRIVATE GARDEN, NANTUCKET ISLAND. PIET OUDOLF.

needed, although these can potentially include several plant categories. Piet’s gardens display a seemingly spontaneous but planned wildness, a sensitive awareness of the site and the climate he is working in. Oudolf intentionally selects plants that have inherent, sturdy form, rather than relying solely on the blooms. He talks about the importance of structural, re-blooming plants providing vivid interest throughout the seasons and filler plants that are “only used for foliage color, becoming formless or even untidy after midsummer”. Structurally, he selects a wide range of plants to create a “matrix planting”, which acts as a neutral backdrop. Within this matrix he designs waves of densely planted, repeating and blended perennials in layers, creating a rich tapestry of color and texture.  

In Van Gogh’s work, we can also break down his landscape paintings into layers of plant types or brushstrokes, and observe the strategy behind the organization of the brushstrokes and pencil marks. One way that Van Gogh captured the essence of the landscape was by studying the texture of the variety in plant growth. Using both pen and brush and a wide range of rapid strokes and streaks, he successfully made the vegetation of his rendered landscapes almost look three-dimensional. The brushstrokes themselves are repeated patterns of texture, clustered together in bursts or swaths to create unexpected juxtapositions.

![Green Wheat Field, Auvers, Vincent Van Gogh, May 1890.](image)

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FIGURE 19: SKETCH OF THE ENCLOSED WHEATFIELD AFTER A STORM, VINCENT VAN GOGH, JUNE-JULY 1889

CONTRAST

For the purposes of this investigation, design and composition is largely an exercise in creating or suggesting contrasts, which are used to define hierarchy, manipulate certain widely understood relationships, and exploit context to enhance or redefine those relationships.

One of Oudolf’s most notable design characteristics is his ability to emphasize nature’s form, texture and the natural way plants work in harmony with each other. In Oudolf’s work, contrast is used to enhance the character of different plant species. Blooms and flowers will die and fade away, leaving stalks, stems and seed pods behind. Knowing full well that these blooms and flowers will not last, Oudolf is sure to choose a selection that can still add interesting shapes and textures to the landscape, even when their bloom time is up. Oudolf organizes perennials into a planting palette of geometric forms, shapes and colours that can be combined in myriad

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ways. He divides the elemental forms of flowers, and even seed heads, into spires, plumes, buttons and globes, umbels, daisies, screens and curtains. He envisions the color spectrum as “hot, cool, sweet, sombre and earthy”. Foliage provides the counterpoint to form and color by adding layers of shape and texture.

Piet's gardens are composed of various groups of shapes that he repeats in different combinations to create rhythm and to punctuate the flow of his composition. He typically uses a roughly 70:30 ratio of taller structural plants to lower-growing filler plants — all closely spaced to achieve a lush meadow effect. While large blocks of perennials can be dramatic when seen from a distance, they can compromise detail when viewed up close. Oudolf remedies this by using a New Perennial planting technique called intermingling, which is inspired by how wildflowers grow randomly together in nature. When two or three different perennials are paired within the same block they blend into the overall planting when observed from afar, but up close they offer an unexpected level of detail.

Van Gogh’s work also strongly utilized contrast to give his compositions with a unique energy and tension that creates movement within, throughout and across each of his paintings. One technique he used to create this effect was his use of bold brushstrokes in thickly layered paint. Clusters of short, linear strokes are placed in juxtaposition with elegant, fluidly gestural swirls and gestures. These strokes are layered on top of one another, and create a sense of depth that is indicative of the character of the vegetation Van Gogh observed. The other technique Van Gogh used was the elements of color theory, the hierarchy and balance of complementary colors. Van Gogh mentioned the liveliness and interplay of "a wedding of two complementary colors, their mingling and opposition, the mysterious vibrations of two kindred souls."

COLOR

Typical colors in Van Gogh's palette included yellow ocher, chrome yellow, cadmium yellow, chrome orange, vermilion, Prussian blue, ultramarine, lead white, zinc white, emerald green, red lake, red ochre, raw sienna, and black. Vincent produced one color study after another. Which color combinations create the most powerful effect? Color had now become an obsession for him: according to the Van Gogh Museum's collections, Van Gogh's letters contain some 324 references to colors. Van Gogh kept balls of wool with threads in different hues - red and orange, blue and yellow, orange and gray - to test different combinations before trying them out.

with his expensive paints. His palette gradually lightened from the dark hues of his earlier work, and he became more sensitive to color in the landscape. 

“Instead of trying to paint exactly what I see before me, I make more arbitrary use of color to express myself more forcefully.... Color expresses something in itself. One can’t do without it; one must make use of it.... there are colours that make each other shine, that make a couple, complete each other like man and wife.” (Vincent to his sister Willemien, Arles, c. 20 June 1888)

As such, Van Gogh’s color experiments ultimately relied on color hierarchies and complementary color combinations, such as orange and blue, and green and red. The colors he used were kept in balance with one another, as to not overwhelm the relationship one way or the other. This use of simultaneous contrast is one of the most striking elements of Van Gogh’s work.


Oudolf’s root inspiration is nature itself. He starts with plant selection, preferring robust and long-flowering plants with a wild character, turning his plantsman’s eye to the proportions between flower, seed head, leaf and stem and to the balance between form and texture. He places less emphasis on color, favoring small, less profuse flowers that are akin to their wild cousins. This frees Oudolf from the dictums of color theory so that he can mix many different colors without much danger of them clashing. The effect is further enhanced by the buffering effect of ornamental grasses, which allow for bold, playful complementary color relationships to emerge.  

But just what makes this complementary effect so special? Underlying this phenomenon is a physiological explanation. The optic nerve that translates incoming information into shapes and colors has a very distinctive property that helps it to process color. This filter in a complementary colour acts to somewhat neutralise the original color. If you take a white surface with a single red dot in the center, hold it in sunlight and focus directly on it for 30 seconds, you will see an after-image of the dot when you close your eyes; instead of red, however, it will be green, the complementary color of red. The reverse is also true – a bright green dot will produce a red after-image. If you take one of the other two primary colors – blue or yellow – the after-image formed will be in their respective complementary colours, orange and violet. This physiological phenomenon means that complementary colors have a strong effect on each other: a splash of orange on a blue plane reinforces both colors. A patch of green against a red background produces a brighter contrast than it would against a brown background.

CONCLUSION

How can these similarities impact planting design as a profession and practice?

What do we gain by layering the study of art with practice? Planting design as a profession and practice has an intimate relationship with time and change in the natural world. A rich and robust understanding of the landscape and its ephemeral qualities is paramount for successful, meaningful and appropriate design proposals that are properly suited for the specific site they are intended for. However, their rich knowledge about the context and change of place over time is often lost in translation when communicating with clients or non-designers. Planting designers as practitioners can benefit from a holistic visual design language that combines layers of information into one drawing. This method of drawing helps designers and clients communicate more effectively, and helps to educate the public about the importance of site-specific planting design in general.

“Signature plantings are about making something that is site-specific and gives the garden or landscape as distinct personality which helps to make it memorable.”

As practitioners use plant combinations more and more to perform environmental services, it will become increasingly important that they look intentional and attractive. The input of gardeners and designers into such active systems is to provide the aesthetic dimension. Plant selection has fundamentally to serve certain functions, based in a knowledge of plant physiology, best understood by appropriate specialists. However, leaving plant selection entirely with technicians rarely achieves the most aesthetically pleasing results, and gardeners and designers have a role to play in working with plant lists provided by the specialists.

The ongoing discussion determining whether there is merit in prioritizing site-specific, beautiful landscapes is a pertinent one: why is it important to make landscapes memorable?

“The point has been made by others that in order for natural environments to be valued by humans, they have to be liked - simply functional plantings which satisfy technical criteria for sustainability or biodiversity but do not satisfy human users are in the long run doomed, because nobody will care for them when they are threatened by other potential users on this overcrowded planet or simply through a lack of care.”

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Planting design is not only functional. Indeed, successful planting palettes serve a physical, scientific purpose in supporting biodiversity, wildlife habitat, and hydrological needs and goals on a site. I would argue that perhaps most important service that planting designs such as Oudolf’s provide is an emotional one. His meadows draw us in physically and emotionally with their beauty: our eyes are drawn in by the playful combinations of color and textures, so that our eyes bounce across the landscape. On a surface level, these compositions are meant for our enjoyment, but they ultimately provide much more by garnering interest and attention. There is much to learn from these meadows about ecology, hydrology, seasonality and life cycles, biodiversity, and so on. They become valuable educational tools that ultimately create empathy in the hearts of those who experience it. Creating beautiful, sensorial landscapes that are also enriched with meaning stirs something in us, an urge to protect, to cherish, to recreate elsewhere. This emotional response becomes part of the memory of a place, a memory that remains with a visitor long after they’ve left. By educating other designers and the public of the merits of meaningful planting design, these landscapes generate an opportunity for collaboration and conversation about design among designers and practitioners. Most importantly, they create a legacy for themselves that has the potential to generate change in how our landscapes and gardens are cared for.
FIGURE 23: WATERCOLOR SKETCH FOR SERPENTINE PAVILION, ENGLAND. PIET OUDOLF.

FIGURE 24: PLANTING DESIGN PLAN FOR SERPENTINE PAVILION, ENGLAND. PIET OUDOLF.
Ultimately, as seen in the works of both Van Gogh and Oudolf, a great, productive place to start in this process is exploring the works of other artists. By studying the relationship of prominent designers from different fields of design and art, there is much we can learn about even the most basic of design principles such as contrast and color. Van Gogh and Oudolf have differing backgrounds and areas of expertise, yes, but there is value to cross-disciplinary inspiration and collaboration that brings a fresh perspective to the work. These two designers are special because of their passion for the landscape, and the manifestation of their unique artistic expression of this passion. Van Gogh served as a precursor for Oudolf’s work, directly or not, in his bold exploration into the relationships between colors, and use of contract and texture to enrich the compositions they created so skillfully.
CITED SOURCES


FIGURE 10: A Private Garden in Bonn, Germany. Piet Oudolf. Photo courtesy of Piet Oudolf.


FIGURE 18: Vincent van Gogh, Green Wheat Field, Auvers. Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, May 1890, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

FIGURE 19: Vincent van Gogh, The Enclosed Wheatfield After a Storm. Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, June-July 1889, reed pen and pen and ink, on paper, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

FIGURE 20: Vincent van Gogh, Harvest in Provence, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, 1888, oil on canvas, Israel Museum.


IMAGES USED IN COLOR STUDIES - VAN GOGH PAINTINGS:

Auvers in the Rain
Vincent van Gogh, Auvers-sur-Oise, July 1890, oil on canvas, National Museum, Cardiff.

Green Wheat Field with Cypress
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, June 1889, oil on canvas, National Museum, Prague.
Green Wheat Field, Auvers
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, May 1890, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

The Harvest
Vincent van Gogh, Arles, June 1888, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Harvest in Provence
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, 1888, oil on canvas, Israel Museum.

Landscape with Wheat Sheaves and Rising Moon
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, July 1889, oil on canvas, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

Landscape from Saint-Rémy
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, 1889, oil on canvas, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.

Landscape at Saint-Rémy (Enclosed Field with Peasant)
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, October 1889, oil on canvas, Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Plain Near Auvers
Vincent van Gogh, Auvers-sur-Oise, July 1890, oil on canvas, Neue Pinakothek, Munich.

Sheaves of Wheat
Vincent van Gogh, Auvers-sur-Oise, July 1890, oil on canvas, Dallas Museum of Art.

The Sower at Sunset
Vincent van Gogh, Arles, June 1888, oil on canvas, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

Wheatfield
Vincent van Gogh, Arles, June 1888, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Wheatfield with Crows
Vincent van Gogh, Auvers-sur-Oise, July 1890, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Wheat Field with Cypresses
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, September 1889, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London.
Wheatfield with a Reaper  
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, September 1889, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Wheatfield with Partridge  
Vincent van Gogh, Paris, June-July 1887, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Wheatfield Under Thunderclouds  
Vincent van Gogh, Auvers-sur-Oise, July 1890, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Wheat Stacks with Reaper  
Vincent van Gogh, Arles, June 1888, oil on canvas, Toledo Museum of Art.

IMAGES USED IN COLOR STUDIES - OUDOLF PHOTOGRAPHS:  
Locations:  
- Pottersfield Park, London, England  
- Private Garden, Bonn, Germany  
- Trentham Estate, England  
- Private Garden, Nantucket Island  
- Pensthorpe Natural Park, England  
- Ichtushof, Netherlands  
- Serpentine Gallery, England  
- Venice Biennale, Italy  
- Private Garden, Bury Court, England  
- Hauser + Wirth, England  
- Lurie Garden, Chicago, Illinois  
- Maximilianpark, Denmark  
- Private Estate, West Cork, Ireland  
- Wisley, England

SKETCHES:

The Enclosed Wheatfield After a Storm  
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, June-July 1889, reed pen and pen and ink, on paper, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Landscape with Peasant Women Harvesting  
Vincent van Gogh, Auvers-sur-Oise, July 1890, crayon on paper, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

The Walled Wheatfield  
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, April-May 1890, pencil on paper, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)
Enclosed Wheatfield with Sun and Cloud
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, May-June 1889, black chalk, reed pen and ink, white opaque watercolour on paper, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Wheatfield with Cypresses
Vincent van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, June 1889, reed pen on paper, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).