1. Detail of ill. 3

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Van Gogh's *Tree roots* up close

Bert Maes and Louis van Tilborgh

Tree roots is undoubtedly the most intriguing painting from Vincent van Gogh's Auvers period (ills. 1, 3). This close-up view of the bases of trees shows a jungle of twisted roots, trunks, branches and leaves. Enlarging and bringing forward details that had traditionally been relegated to the background had become a stock part of Van Gogh's visual vocabulary since his discovery of the world of Japanese prints (ill. 2), but unlike a work such as *Long grass with butterflies* (ill. 4), which is also a close-up, the viewer of *Tree roots* 'is hard put to identify the subject as a whole', as Jan Hulsker wrote in 1980.[1] The scene is regarded virtually without exception as 'almost abstract' due to 'the extreme stylisation'.[2] 'Ambiguous, stylized, vitalistic, life-affirming, antinaturalistic yet palpably organic: a kind of prototype for an Art Nouveau frieze',[3] was Ronald Pickvance's reaction to it. In this he was following Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, who had asserted six years previously that 'intimations of the elegant stylizations of the international Art Nouveau movement' were 'obviously present' in the work.[4] It displayed 'one of the most extraordinary degrees of a decoratively conceived quasi-abstraction which can be discovered in his total *oeuvre*', and it should therefore be 'celebrated for the prediction of twentieth-century style which it represents'.

Whether we should judge art by its value for 'the Road to Flatness', as many regard the origins of the history of modern art,[5] is very much the question, but leaving that aside, does the significance of *Tree roots* lie solely in its formal characteristics, and are they really that extreme? The scene may look fairly abstract and difficult to decipher compared with other works from the same period, but the stylistic devices (the omission of a horizon line due to the extreme close-up, the

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2. Ando Hiroshige, *The new station of Naito, Yotsuya*, no. 86 from *One hundred famous views of Edo*, 1857, woodblock print, 36 × 23.5 cm. Brooklyn Museum. Gift of Anna Ferris

3. Vincent van Gogh, *Tree roots*, 1890, oil on canvas, 50 × 100 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; F 816 JH 2113

draughtsman-like way the artist has handled his impasted brushstrokes, the use of anti-naturalistic colours and heavy contours) are no different from those found in *Long grass with butterflies*. But if Van Gogh's 'trickery' [822] is of the usual kind, why is the scene considered to be so much more abstract and decorative? What causes this?

Motif

Paul Gachet Jr, the son of the doctor who befriended Van Gogh in Auvers, considered *Tree roots* to be an utter failure. 'This so-called underwood is truly impossible to disentangle: it is above all a pretext to paint a hotchpotch, as regards both colour and line, of unrecognizable roots, stumps, trunks and grass', he wrote dismissively in the 1950s.[6] Almost all that he could say about it was that it could not possibly have been seen in real life. 'This canvas is not a landscape: it is a study without any local character at all. It is impossible to place it in any of the woods in the countryside around Auvers.'[7]

If the suggestion is that Van Gogh painted the work from his imagination, it would certainly have been totally at odds with his practice at the time, and examination of the picture, which is done entirely wet-on-wet, does not reveal the slightest hint that it was painted in the studio. Too many details look true to life.

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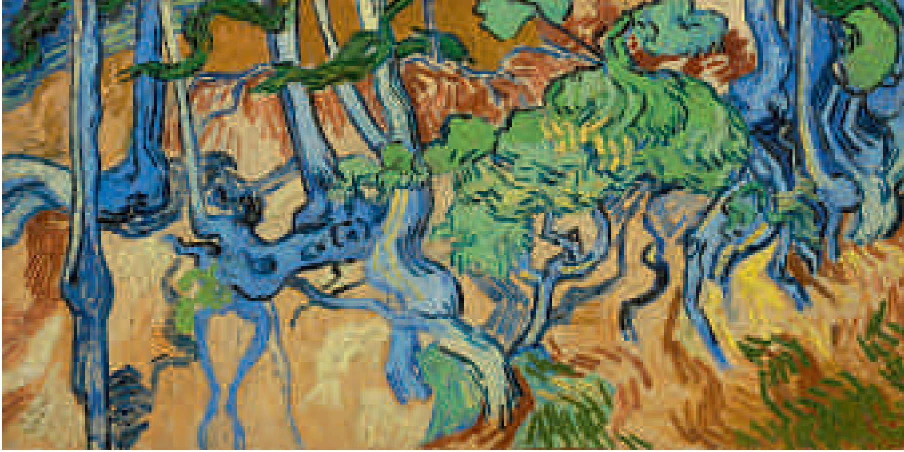

4. Vincent van Gogh, *Long grass with butterflies*, 1890, oil on canvas, 64.5 × 80.7 cm. The National Gallery, London; F 672 JH 1975

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There are shadows, so we know the trees stood in full sunlight, which falls from behind the artist and to the left, and that is not something one dreams up in a studio. Sunlight reflects, and the phenomenon of patches of light is suggested beautifully and naturally with yellow and yellowish white passages on trunks, bases and earth. Admittedly, they barely register in the light brown to yellowish earth, but we know that the painting has discoloured in these areas.

In 1928 De la Faille described the earth as 'pinkish yellow' and the tree trunks as 'violet-blue and blue-grey', not blue as they are now.[8] The suspicion is that Van Gogh used the unstable pigment geranium lake, which tends to vanish like snow in sunlight.[9] As a result the earth gradually became yellower with the passage of time, and the patches of light are now less noticeable.[10] Of course we do not know how strong the pink and the violet were originally, but the yellow and yellowish white would certainly have stood out more than they do today.

5. An old pit near Rue Gachet, Auvers-sur-Oise. The top of a chalk face with the roots and gnarled stools of abandoned elm coppices and all kinds of plants in the undergrowth; April 2005

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According to De la Faille, the trunks and bases of the trees grew in 'a sandy soil', an idea that was also adopted by later writers.[11] It was suggested that the trees were in a 'mound', 'the steep rise of the hillside', or 'at the side of a holloway [sunken lane]', with their roots exposed by rainfall or erosion.[12] A new suggestion was put forward at the beginning of this century that the trees are actually vines, and this was repeated in the recent exhibition catalogue *Van Gogh up close*.[13]

The curved shapes of the tree stems on the right are vaguely reminiscent of vines,[14] but apart from that there is nothing to suggest that this could be a scene in a vineyard, either tended or neglected. What Van Gogh depicted is coppiced wood, that is to say trees that are repeatedly cut to the base, allowing new shoots to grow from the stool (ills. 5, 6, 7). They are sawn or cut off close to the ground in winter or early spring and the whole cycle is repeated.[15] The coppicing process leads to the creation of thickets of slender tree stems of the kind most clearly recognizable on the right in the painting. The history of the depicted trees can be read from the scars and scar tissue, which takes the form of circular ridging where the shoots have been removed. Some of the stems will have been between ten and twenty years old, or perhaps even older, but the stools might have been coppiced for centuries, being cut back right down to the ground before embarking on another struggle for survival.

The painting itself provides no clues, but the trees are probably wych elms (*Ulmus glabra*), which were traditionally used for firewood and still grow in abundance in Auvers-sur-Oise.[16] The leaves at top right seem to be attached to the low branches of the coppiced wood, and they may also be depicted in the passage below that, but then mixed with shrubs and ivy, which is clearly recognizable in the liana-like shapes to the right of centre. The four dark tendrils at top left – three up against the slope and the fourth in the blue passage – are traveller's joy, otherwise known as old man's beard (*Clematis vitalba*), which grows horizontally in order to attach itself to other trees.[17] Depicted in green at lower centre are cursory indications of herbs or grasses that Van Gogh did not even attempt to render in any detail.

It is unlikely that the trees are in a 'sandy soil' as De la Faille stated.[18] The area around Auvers is know for its chalky soil,[19] and since that would have been closer in colour than sand to the original 'pinkish yellow' that he described, that seems to be what Van Gogh is suggesting. The blue passage in the top left corner is important for understanding the spatial arrangement of the background, for this can only be blue sky.[20] It is admittedly mixed with a little green, but this is Van Gogh's way of suggesting that we are seeing sunlight falling through and filtered by foliage. That patch of sky tells us that rather than being viewed from above, the trunks and their bases are at eye level, which makes the scene comprehensible. We are looking at an oblique angle along the side of a mound or a steep slope with coppiced trees.[21]

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6. Elms near Rue Gachet, Auvers-sur-Oise. Detail of roots and the stools of coppiced elms with the scars and scar tissue of felled trunks; August 2011

Limestone mining was a traditional activity in the area, so excavating a hillside on which there was a copse or a brushwood hedge would have created the chalky face. Once the quarry had been abandoned the slope would have taken on an irregular shape through the action of water, wind and the working of the tree roots on its edge, and that helps explain the shadows cast by the trunks in the centre, which are difficult to read.[22] What is striking is that the group to the right of the two on the left is on a slight slant. Trees grow vertically, so the fact that the roots of one stump are completely exposed suggests that this is a group of small trees that has slipped down and is only attached to the face of the slope by a few roots. Because the passage to the right of it seems to be an extension of this sagging group, we can cautiously assume that we are seeing a section of the unstable, subsiding margin of a wood.

This makes other details more comprehensible. The ochre area at the top would be the uppermost layer of earth, which is coloured by humus and was created by the erosion of the limestone beneath. Below it is the chalk face, which contains a lot of reddish brown at the top. This suggests fallen leaves, and this

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7. Elms and chalk face near Rue Gachet, Auvers-sur-Oise. Face of the old pit with abandoned elm coppices on the edge overgrown with ivy; April 2005

area was probably quite flat. However, it is doubtful whether the reddish brown area at bottom right was also a level surface. It looks rather perfunctory and was probably not observed from life but filled in to match the rest of the scene.

Anyone in present-day Auvers who goes looking for similar vertical faces or slopes overgrown with coppiced wood will find several, but it is impossible to say whether any one of them is the spot depicted by Van Gogh. The original face was fully illuminated from the left by the sun, and was probably by a road rather than somewhere out in the wilds where there would be difficulties setting up an easel. One possible location for this picture is near a turning off Rue Gachet, not far from the house of the doctor of the same name whose son asserted that the painting did not have 'any local character at all'. The turning leads to an old chalk pit edged with a jungle of coppiced trees with twisted trunks and bases that is similar to the one in the painting (ills. 5, 6, 7). The side of the pit is roughly facing to the north and is in the sun around midday, so this could be the spot that Van Gogh immortalized in his painting, but given a lack of knowledge about limestone extraction at the time it is impossible to be sure.[23]

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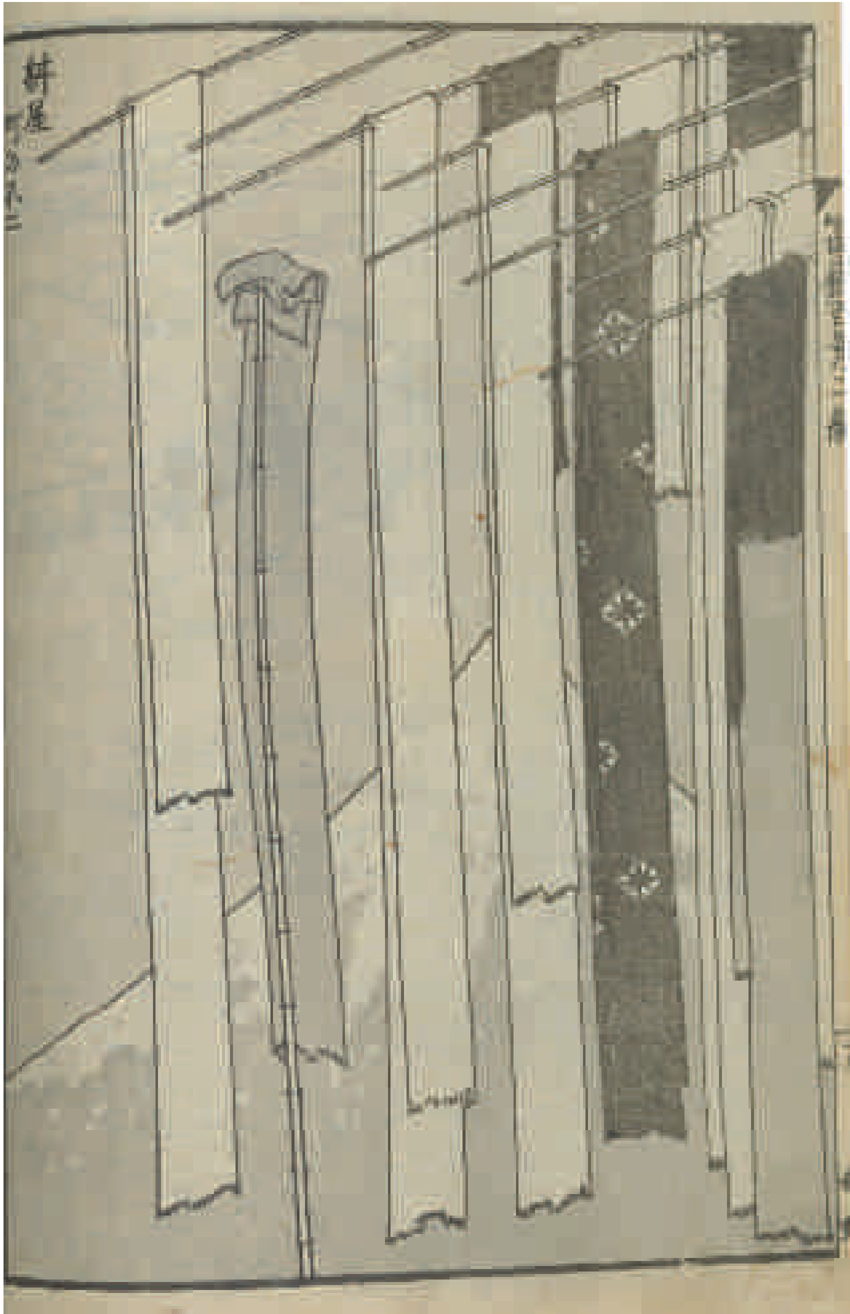
Interpretation and significance

The identification of the subject makes it easier to answer the question posed at the start of this article: why is *Tree roots* considered to be so much more abstract and more anti-naturalistic than other subjects that Van Gogh depicted in similar close-ups? It is because he zoomed in on an earthen wall with coppiced wood. This made it difficult to decipher the scene, just as Katsushika Hokusai's print of long strips of fabric drying on racks cannot immediately be localized if one does not know that Mount Fuji was easily visible from a local dye-works (ill. 8). Without some knowledge about the place depicted, the gnarled tree trunks and their meandering shadows merely reinforce the idea that the painting is difficult 'to identify [...] as a whole', and the scene seems 'almost abstract' because of the arabesque forms.[24]

In addition, that effect is heightened by the discolouration. The disappearance of the violet and the pink means that, like the ground, the tree trunks do not stand out as much, which reduces the sense of depth and makes the picture flatter than Van Gogh intended. Something that may well have contributed to the idea that the painting is rather abstract is the fact that it is not entirely finished.[25] In the bottom half, in particular, we still see a great deal of Van Gogh's initial rudimentary draft, which he usually painted out entirely in his large, mature works. For example, the paint at the bottom of the trunk on the left was applied very drily and rapidly, almost superficially, so that it only lies on the nubs of the canvas.[26] The three roots to the right of it are equally undeveloped, and the bottom right half is out of balance with the rest of the scene, as if Van Gogh was still wondering how to bring this part of the picture to life. In other words, after his initial broad outline he followed the usual practice of landscape painters by working up the top half but evidently got stuck in the lower part.

These qualifications to the idea that *Tree roots* is a near-abstract painting do not detract from the fact that Van Gogh's choice of a close-up view of this earthen wall with trees was indeed prompted by his aim to produce works of art that looked more decorative, whether or not they were inspired by Japanese prints. Since 1887 he had been convinced that the mimetic tradition had had its day, and as a result he attached more importance to the formal values of his art than he had in his Dutch period. However, when faced with the choice between 'renewing medieval tapestries' and 'the true, the possible' [822], to quote his words of 1889, then as a dyed-in-the-wool realist he opted for the latter. In practice this meant that he always wanted to combine a certain amount of flatness with the suggestion of space and perspective, which is why there is a path heading diagonally out of the top of *Long grass with butterflies* and a piece of sky in *Tree roots*.

However, the fact that Van Gogh chose his field of view so as to place the emphasis on the gnarled tree trunks cannot be explained by his fascination with



8. Katsushika Hokusai, *Mount Fuji from the dyers' quarter*, from *One hundred views of Mount Fuji*, 3 vols., 1834-47, vol. 2. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

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10. Karl Bodmer, *Assembly of eagle owls*, 'Série de vingt eau-fortes, no. 14'.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes, Paris

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9. Vincent van Gogh, *Tree roots in sandy ground ('Les racines')*, 1882, pencil, black chalk, brush in ink, brown and grey wash and opaque watercolour on watercolour paper, 51.5 × 70.7 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo; F 933r JH 142

11. Vincent van Gogh, *Sorrow*, 1882, black chalk, 44.5 × 27 cm. The New Art Gallery Walsall, The Garman Ryan Collection; F 929a JH 130

decorative forms alone. It is more than likely that by capturing the scarred old bases and trunks of the trees he intended to highlight the great power and tragedy inherent in life and survival in nature. He saw it as a reflection of *La condition humaine*, for the sentiment enshrined in *Tree roots* is no different from that in his studies of people scarred by hard times, dilapidated workers' cottages, weathered willows, broken-down dray horses, worn-out shoes, neglected orchards and sunflowers going to seed. Although this had been toned down a bit as he began attaching far more importance to the form as an autonomous element in the second half of his career, his calling as an artist had nevertheless sprung from the need to bear witness to his humanistically tinged religion, and he never lost sight of that mission.[27]

Tree roots can thus be seen as a repetition of his 1882 drawing of massive white willows with equally majestic roots (ill. 9).[28] As regards form, that sheet was his attempt as a draughtsman of trees to emulate the remarkable achievements of the Barbizon School artist Karl Bodmer (ill. 10), but characteristically he made no

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12. Vincent van Gogh, *Farms near Auvers*, 1890, oil on canvas, 50.2 × 100.3 cm. The National Gallery, London, on loan from Tate; F 793 JH 2114

mention of that in the letter to Theo in which he described his drawing.[29] He merely compared it to his ambitious study of the woman he was living with, the pregnant former prostitute Sien Hoornik (ill. 11). He had portrayed her as a woman scarred by life, and saw similarities to the age-old trees ravaged by nature in his drawing. 'Frantically and fervently rooting itself, as it were, in the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm. I wanted to express something of life's struggle, both in that white, slender female figure and in those gnarled black roots with their knots. Or rather, because I tried without any philosophizing to be true to nature, which I had before me, something of that great struggle has come into both of them almost inadvertently' [222].

Something else that would have contributed to Van Gogh's choice of this underwood subject is that prior to his departure for Auvers he had resolved to follow the example of the Barbizon artists far more closely. His avant-garde colleagues regarded that as hopelessly out of date, but in Saint-Rémy, far more than in Arles, despite their old-fashioned palette he felt indebted to their achievements, which in his view were based on their unerring feeling for nature. That is why he praised not only Henri Rousseau, but also Bodmer: 'I admire and I like the man who knew all the forest of Fontainebleau, from the insect to the wild boar and from the stag to the lark. From the tall oak and the lump of rock to the fern and the blade of grass. Now a thing like that, not anyone who wants to can feel it or find it' [798]. Such an eye for the outdoor life made him envious, and *Tree roots* was certainly based on the realization that however modern and contemporary his stylistic devices were, his foundations as an artist lay in the art from the first half of the nineteenth century.

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13. Vincent van Gogh, *Trees*, 1890, oil on canvas, 73 × 92 cm.
Private collection; F 817 JH 1319

Dating and its significance

The above may appear to be an adequate reading of *Tree roots*, but one question remains, arising from the new, more precise dating of the picture. The work was previously roughly allocated to July 1890 but it turns out that it was one of Van Gogh's last paintings, if not the very last one. Scholars have been trying in vain to identify that canvas since the early twentieth century,[30] but the answer was staring us in the face. Like every artist, Van Gogh worked on several studies at once, but since he differed from artists like Paul Cézanne or Edouard Manet in being a true craftsman who had the discipline to finish what he had started,[31] we know that the unfinished paintings from Auvers must have been his last ones, of which there are only two known: *Tree roots* and *Farms near Auvers* (ills. 3, 12).[32]

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That these two pictures were indeed his very last works is confirmed by what Andries Bonger, the brother of Theo's wife, wrote about the artist's last achievements in the years after his death. Bonger had attended the funeral,[33] and in 1891, possibly repeating something that he then heard from Theo or someone else, he titled a work of Vincent's that he submitted to the Salon des Indépendants 'Village (dernière esquisse)' (Village, last sketch).[34] Since this description perfectly matches the unfinished *Farms near Auvers*, it must have been the same work he sent in for the show.[35] Two years later, though, he identified in a newspaper article another painting as the very last canvas. 'The morning before his death', by which he meant the morning before he shot himself,[36] he wrote, 'he had painted an underwood, full of sun and life'.[37] There are only two paintings that could match this description, *Trees* and *Tree roots* (ills. 13, 3), but since the former is finished and the latter is not, and since the latter is more 'full of sun and life', it can be assumed that he was speaking of *Tree roots*. Of course we cannot be certain whether this, rather than *Farms near Auvers*, really was his very last work since we do not know the source of Bonger's information,[38] but we can get no closer to the reality of those final days.

Even if *Tree roots* is not the last work but the penultimate one, we are still left with the inevitable question of whether, in the light of subsequent events, Van Gogh's detailed portrayal of the struggle for survival of coppiced trees, of unstable, subsiding elms, was not intended as a premeditated, almost programmatic adieu. It is understandable that such a connection should be made, but in our view it is unlikely. Starting in 1888 Van Gogh had occasionally attached a personal, specific significance to still lifes and landscapes, but he always did so as an afterthought. In 1889, for example, he suggested that he had painted Paul Gauguin's empty chair out of a presentiment of his friend's departure from Arles, maintained after making his triptych with sunflowers and *La berceuse* that his flower still lifes symbolized the idea of gratitude, and claimed in connection with Emile Bernard's *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (1889, present whereabouts unknown) that his own painting of the garden of the asylum in Saint-Rémy (ill. 4) hinted at something of 'the feeling of anxiety from which some of my companions in misfortune often suffer' [853, 856, 855]. But even if all these interpretations were prompted by elements in the paintings themselves, they were later reflections nevertheless. That makes it unlikely that Van Gogh intended *Tree roots* to be an allusion to his own state of mind at the time, although he felt more than ever before that 'the solid ground [was] shifting beneath his feet'.[39] During the two days that he lay dying he could very well have regarded this image of unstable trees, 'soiled in the struggle for life' [856] as such, but that is food for biographers and another story.

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NOTES

We are grateful to Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, Teio Meedendorp and Evert van Uitert for their critical comments and suggestions. The translation from the Dutch is by Michael Hoyle.

1. For information on the way Western artists absorbed and used this visual device in imitation of Japanese prints see Kirk Varnedoe, *A fine disregard: What makes modern art modern*, New York 1994, pp. 25-99. The quotation is from Jan Hulsker, *The complete Van Gogh: Paintings, drawings, sketches*, New York 1980, p. 476. The idea that the subject was hard to identify led to the work being given fairly general titles initially. Jo Bonger, Theo's widow, called it *Young dense wood* in 1905 (*Catalogus der tentoonstelling van schilderijen en teekeningen door Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam [Stedelijk Museum] 1905, p. 29, no. 216: *Jong dicht hout*) and in his catalogue raisonné of 1928 De la Faille introduced the term *Underwood* (J.-B. de la Faille, *L'oeuvre de Vincent van Gogh: Catalogue raisonné*, 4 vols., Paris & Brussels 1928, vol. 1, p. 230: *Sous-bois*), and that was then generally accepted. It was not until 1970 that the editors of the revised edition of De la Faille's book felt the need for greater detail and proposed *Trees, roots and branches* (J.-B. de la Faille, *The works of Vincent van Gogh: His paintings and drawings*, Amsterdam 1970, p. 307). That is not incorrect, strictly speaking, but it does not make the picture any easier to understand, so in 1980 Jan Hulsker came up with *Roots and trunks of trees* (Hulsker, *The complete Van Gogh*, p. 476). This was adopted by the Van Gogh Museum (Evert van Uitert and Michael Hoyle (eds.), *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1987, p. 350), but in 1990 a new generation of curators felt that it could be even pithier and called it *Tree roots,* following the example of Van Gogh's drawing of 1882 (ill. 9), which he himself called *Les racines* [222]. For the title of the painting see Evert van Uitert, Sjraar van Heugten and Louis van Tilborgh, exhib. cat. *Vincent van Gogh: Schilderijen*, Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 1990. It was given the variant title of *Tree-trunks* in the English edition of that catalogue.
2. Juleke van Lindert in Van Uitert and Hoyle, *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, p. 286.
3. Ronald Pickvance, exhib. cat. *Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers*, New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1986-87, p. 282.
4. Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, exhib. cat. *Vincent van Gogh and the birth of Cloisonism*, Ontario (Art Gallery of Ontario) & Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 1980, p. 162.
5. On this question see, among others, Varnedoe, *A fine disregard*, pp. 25-99, with the quotation on p. 25.
6. Paul Gachet, *Les 70 jours de van Gogh à Auvers*, ed. Alain Mothe, Paris 1994 (1st ed. Auvers-sur-Oise 1959), p. 223: 'Ce pseudo sous-bois est véritablement inextricable: il prétexte surtout un fouillis, tant en couleur qu'en dessin, de racines, de souches, de troncs et d'herbes méconnaissables.'
7. Ibid., p. 224: 'Cette toile n'est pas un paysage: c'est une étude sans aucun caractère regional. Il est impossible de la situer dans l'un ou l'autre des bois du pays d'Auvers.' Gachet almost certainly based his opinion on a black-and-white photograph in De la Faille (1928), vol. 1, p. 230. The painting had already discoloured by the 1950s, on which see below, but Gachet described the colours in the same terms as De la Faille had in 1928, so we know that he adopted his description.
8. De la Faille (1928), p. 230.
9. Ella Hendriks, *Technical examination report*, 21 December 2011, recording that eosine (geranium) lake was found in paint samples from the picture that were analysed by Muriel Geldof at the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (RCE). On Van Gogh's use of this organic pigment see also Maarten van Bommel, Muriel Geldof and Ella Hendriks, 'An investigation of organic red pigments in paintings by Van Gogh (November 1885 to February 1888)', *Art Matters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art* 3 (2005), pp. 111-37.
10. Van Gogh had been using this colour for trees since the beginning of 1888, as noted in letters 597, 609 and 717.
11. De la Faille (1928), vol. 1, p. 230: 'un sol sablonneux.'
12. Juleke van Lindert in Van Uitert and Hoyle, *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, p. 286; Pickvance, *Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers*, pp. 282-83; Van Uitert, Van Heugten and Van Tilborgh, *Vincent van Gogh: Schilderijen*, p. 286.

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See also Alain Mothe, *Vincent van Gogh à Auvers-sur-Oise*, Paris 1987, p. 182.
13. Marie-Thérèse van de Kamp, *Vincent van Gogh: 'Boomwortels'*, paper, University of Amsterdam 2003, pp. 20-22, and Cornelia Homburg, 'Nature so close', in Cornelia Homburg *et al.*, exhib. cat. *Van Gogh up close*, Ottawa (National Gallery of Ottawa) & Philadelphia (Philadelphia Museum of Art) 2012, p. 32.
14. This interpretation is based primarily on the right-hand part of the scene, where the trunks are more curved and thus bear some resemblance to vines. However, they are too straight to really justify the identification, which is also contradicted by the fact that there is no suggestion of the distinctive, slightly fibrous bark of vine trunks. Nor do the other trunks look like vines.
15. On coppiced wood see Bert Maes *et al.*, *Inheemse bomen en struiken in Nederland en Vlaanderen*, Amsterdam 2007, pp. 61-70, with further literature.
16. The alternatives are types of lime, hornbeam and small-leaved elm, but these seem less likely in view of the present vegetation in Auvers. On the use of elm see H. M. Heybroek, L. Goudzwaard and H. Kaljee, *Iep of olm: Karakterboom van de Lage Landen*, Zeist 2009, pp. 10-23. The wych elm (*Ulmus glabra*) is also called Scotch elm. See also Maes *et al.*, pp. 320-30.
17. An alternative is white bryony (*Bryonia cretica*), which still grows in Auvers today, but since its tendrils have a corkscrew shape that is less likely.
18. De la Faille (1928), vol. 1, p. 230.
19. To quote a historical source, H. Mataigne, *Notes historiques et géographiques sur Auvers-sur-Oise*, Pontoise 1885, p. 12: 'Le sol de la commune et en grande partie composé de terres végétales, argileuses, quelquefois sablonneuses, reposant sur des masses calcaires.'
20. This had not been spotted before. Richard Bionda and Carel Blotkamp (eds.), exhib. cat. *De schilders van Tachtig: Nederlandse schilderkunst 1880-1895*, Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 1991, p. 172, stated 'there is no sky to be seen' ('er is geen lucht te zien'), as did Gachet: 'sans ciel.'
21. Judging by the size of the shrubs and leaves it can be estimated that this particular spot is about 3 metres wide. That, in turn, makes it possible to gauge the approximate thickness of the tree trunks. It is slightly intuitive, but they appear to be about the thickness of a wrist, which means that the ones visible in the painting would have been approximately 80-100 centimetres tall, with the tree as a whole standing between 5 and 8 metres high.
22. The lime was both strip and deep mined. Many of the buildings in and around Auvers were built of limestone, but bricks were introduced into the village around 1890, which put an end to its extraction.
23. The trees have not been coppiced for decades although they have many traces of previous harvesting, but of course they do not reproduce the situation as it was in Van Gogh's day.
24. Hulsker, *The complete Van Gogh*, p. 474, and Juleke van Lindert in Van Uitert and Hoyle, *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, p. 286.
25. That was first suggested, although without supporting arguments, in exhib. cat. *Vincent van Gogh*, Bern (Kunstmuseum Bern) 1973, p. 51, no. 45: 'peinture inachevée.'
26. To the naked eye the paint looks abraded, but microscopic examination confirms that this appearance is due to the original manner of paint application; see the report cited in n. 9.
27. For that mission and its consequences for Van Gogh's artistic career see Louis van Tilborgh and Evert van Uitert, 'Van Gogh in search of his own voice', to be published in Timothy Standring and Louis van Tilborgh (eds.), exhib. cat. *Becoming Van Gogh 1853-1890*, Denver (Denver Art Museum) 2012.
28. Van Gogh also depicted roots and the bases of trees in F 928 JH 199 and F 1095 JH 406.
29. Bodmer's drawing is mentioned in letter 321.
30. *Wheatfield with crows* (F 779 JH 2117) had been regarded as the very last painting since the early twentieth century, but for a long time now it has rightly been dated to the beginning of July 1890; see De la Faille (1970), p. 299, and Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh – The letters: The complete illustrated and annotated edition*, Amsterdam 2009, letter 898, n. 4. The reputation of that work as Van Gogh's last painting is discussed in Tsukasa Kōdera, 'Fan Gohho no Karasu no Muretobu Mugibatake, Monogatari no Musubi to shiteno Zeppitsu ['Van Gogh's *Crows over the wheatfield*: the "last" painting as narrative closure'], in Tsukasa Kōdera and Eiko Wakayama (eds.), *Bijutsushi no spectrum* [*The*

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spectrum of art history], Kyoto 1996, pp. 196-207. For more on this question see also n. 35 below.
31. There are only a few known exceptions to this rule, such as F 159 JH – and F 299 JH 1254. See Van Tilborgh and Van Uitert, 'Van Gogh in search of his own voice', for Van Gogh's views on art as a craft.
32. In De la Faille (1970), p. 303, it is said that this picture 'appears to be unfinished', but that did not lead to the conclusion that it was one of his last pictures. On the contrary, it was supposedly 'one of the first paintings of mossy thatched roofs executed at Auvers', but that is incorrect, since there are sunflowers in the foreground. In comparison with *Tree roots* the initial, rudimentary draft is even more visible, and as in that last painting, here and there the paint was applied very drily and rapidly. Although less finished, it is comparable to *Tree roots* in that sense.
33. On this see Han van Crimpen in *Brief happiness: The correspondence of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bonger*, ed. Leo Jansen and Jan Robert, Zwolle & Amsterdam 1999, p. 281.
34. Exhib. cat. *7ième exposition*, Paris (Pavillon de la Ville de Paris) 1891, no. 1204, in which Bonger is named as the exhibitor. He was acting for Jo van Gogh-Bonger at the time by administering the works by Vincent that had been left behind in Paris, which included *Farms near Auvers*. A list of 1894 shows that it had been stored with the colourman Père Tanguy (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, b 1449 v/1973). Andries had listed it as no. 287 in his inventory of Theo's collection, giving it the title 'Village (40 en longeur)'. For this identification see Walter Feilchenfeldt, *Vincent van Gogh: Die Gemalde 1886-1890*, Wädenswill 2009, p. 291.
35. Albert Chatelet, 'Le dernier tableau de Van Gogh', *Archives de l'Art Français* 25 (1978), pp. 439-42, thought that it was *Village street in Auvers* (F 802 JH 2001), and this was repeated by others, including Pickvance, *Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers*, p. 71, but it was then contested by Marja Supinen, 'Julien Leclerq, Vincent van Gogh varhaien polustaja', *Taidehistorialhisia Tukimuksia: Kunsthistoriska Studeis* 11 (1988), p. 109. The identification of that work as the last painting was based on the very lazy interpretation of the sky as being unfinished, and that is indeed incorrect, as demonstrated by a study of the technical structure of picture: Tuulikki Kilpinen, 'Beneath the surface: study and conservation of Vincent van Gogh's painting Street in Auvers-sur-Oise', *Ateneum: The Finnish National Gallery Bulletin*, 1995, pp. 43-69, esp. pp. 57-59.
36. We are not convinced by the recent suggestion that Van Gogh did not commit suicide but was accidentally shot and mortally wounded by two young boys; see Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Vincent van Gogh: The life*, New York 2011, pp. 851-856, 869-879.
37. 'Vincent', *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, 5 September 1893. We know that it was written by Andries from a scrapbook kept by his sister, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, which is now in the Van Gogh Museum. It contains a copy of the article with the pencilled annotation 'A. Bonger' in the margin. It is true that Andries suggested that *Sous-bois* was finished, but that was to indicate that Van Gogh 'never returned to his work ('nooit op zijn werk terug [kwam]'), in a hostile response to A. M. Boele van Hensbroek, 'De Van Gogh's', *De Nederlandsche Spectator*, 26 August 1893.
38. Many people recalled what happened on the day of his attempted suicide, some of them at the time, some later. All that can be made out from their stories is that Van Gogh went out painting in the morning, returned to the inn for lunch and went out again in the afternoon. Some thought that he took his painting implements with him then, but others said that he did not, and these accounts are a tangled mixture of myth and reality. The Van Gogh Museum hopes to devote a separate study to unravelling them at a later date.
39. Quotation from Juleke van Lindert in Van Uitert and Hoyle, *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, p. 286.

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