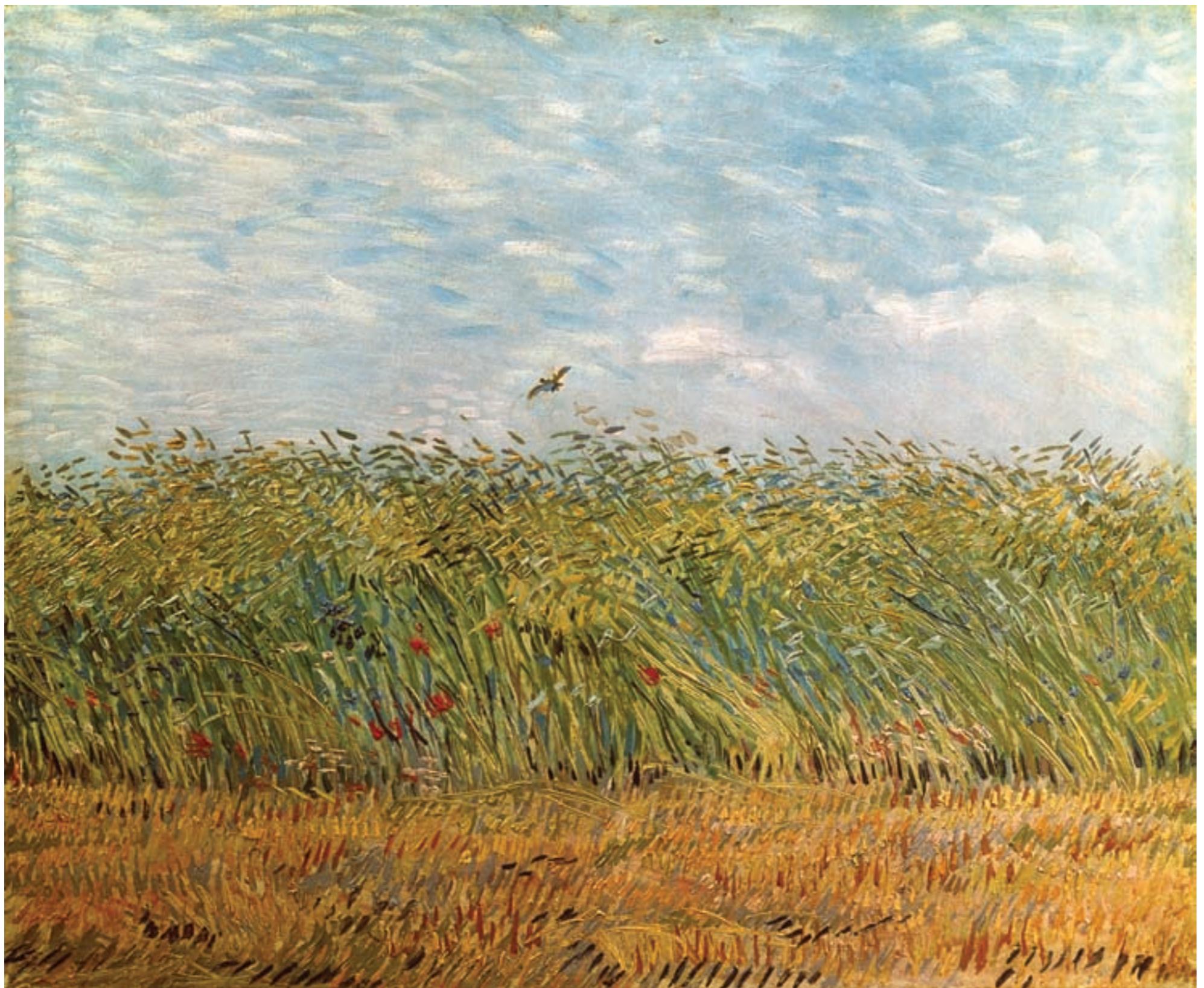


Van Gogh's Wheat Field with a Lark (1887)



In the summer of 1887, Vincent Van Gogh painted *Wheat Field with a Lark* while residing in Paris. The two years he spent in the city is often regarded as a pivotal point in his career as an artist. It was here that he began exploring the radically different style of painting ushered in by the Impressionists. *Wheat Field with a Lark* bears traces of such influences.

At first glance, the painting appears serene. Golden stubble deck the foreground, full-grown golden wheat make up the middle-ground, and blue skies with a lark flying slightly off-centre completes the picture in the background. But it's neither as simple nor as idyllic as it seems. Just beneath the surface is a wealth of emotion, conveyed by an inspired use of colour and texture.

Colour often plays a major role in Van Gogh's works, and it is no different with this painting. "There are colours which cause each other to shine brilliantly, which form a couple, which complete each other like man and woman," Van Gogh wrote in a letter to his sister, Wilhelmina Van Gogh on 22 June 1888. In *Wheat Field with a Lark* he manages to do just that with two colours – the marriage of yellow in the foreground and blue in the background, giving birth to green in the middle-ground.

However, unlike earlier pieces, such as *The Potato Eaters* (completed in 1885), which were dark, the emphasis in *Wheat Field with a Lark* is on light. This is a nod to Van Gogh's fascination with the Impressionist movement, which broke the rules of traditional paintings by focusing on bold colours and visible brushstrokes. These techniques become more apparent in Van Gogh's later works.

Also, much is revealed by the solitary lark. The lark, as its conspicuous position implies, is significant in Van Gogh's life. A harbinger of spring, the lark is a songbird often associated with hope and a carefree spirit. It may seem odd then, that Van Gogh, who is known for his struggles in life, should focus on the lark. A closer look at the painting may reveal the answer. The swaying wheat could represent Van Gogh's sense of inner turmoil and the soaring, free-spirited lark its counterpoint. A letter to his brother Theo written on 14 February 1886 sheds light on the duality of Van Gogh's nature and tendency to oscillate between hope and despair. He wrote: "I see the lark soaring in the spring air as well as the greatest optimist; but I also see the young girl of about twenty, who might have been in good health, a victim of consumption, and who will perhaps drown herself before she dies of any illness."

— Valerie Chew

Vincent Van Gogh,
Wheat Field with a Lark, 1887