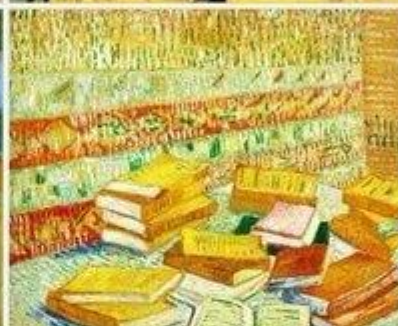
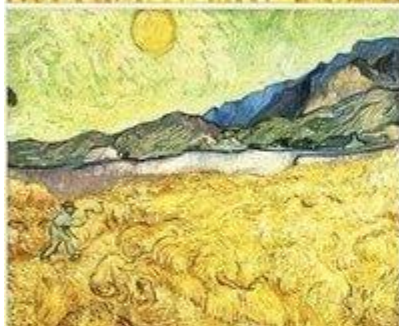
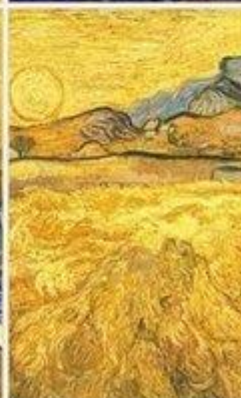
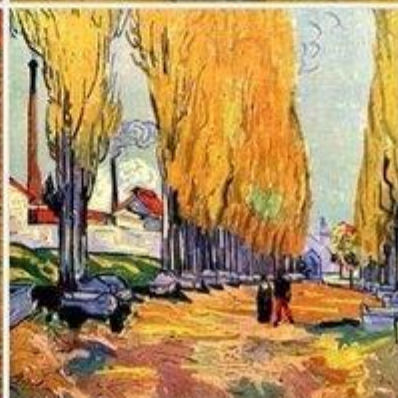
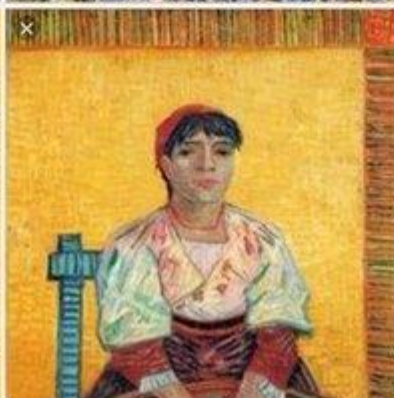
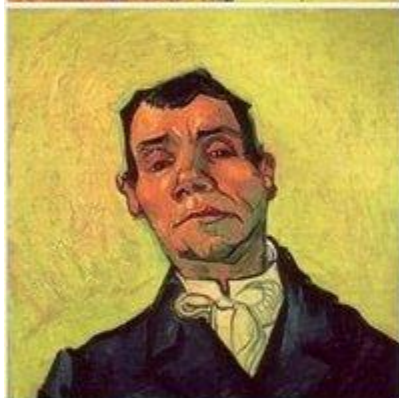
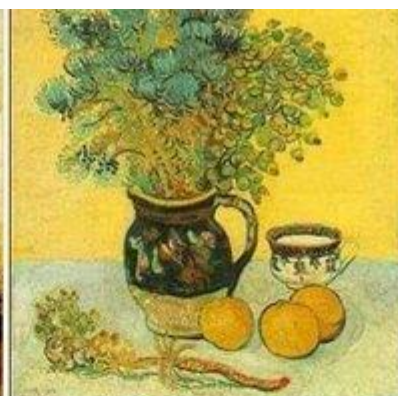
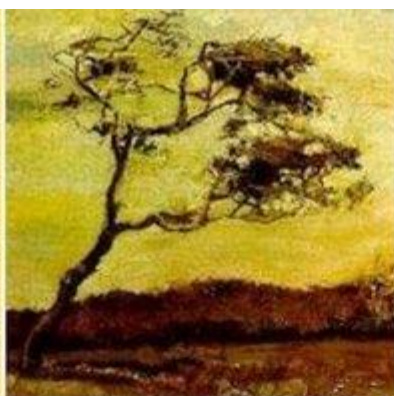
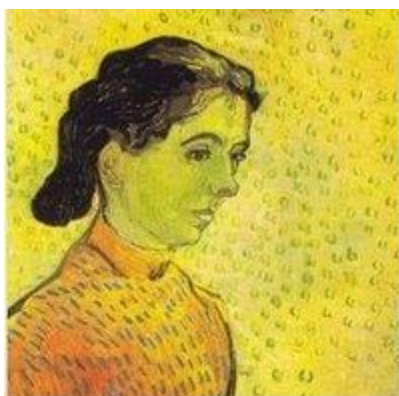


Everybody knows that Vincent van Gogh loved the colour yellow. But why?



The Cultural Tutor @culturaltutor

Well, the story begins 19,000 years ago...



Yellow is one of the oldest colours in art. For most of history it came from yellow ochre, a naturally occurring and readily available clay-like substance.

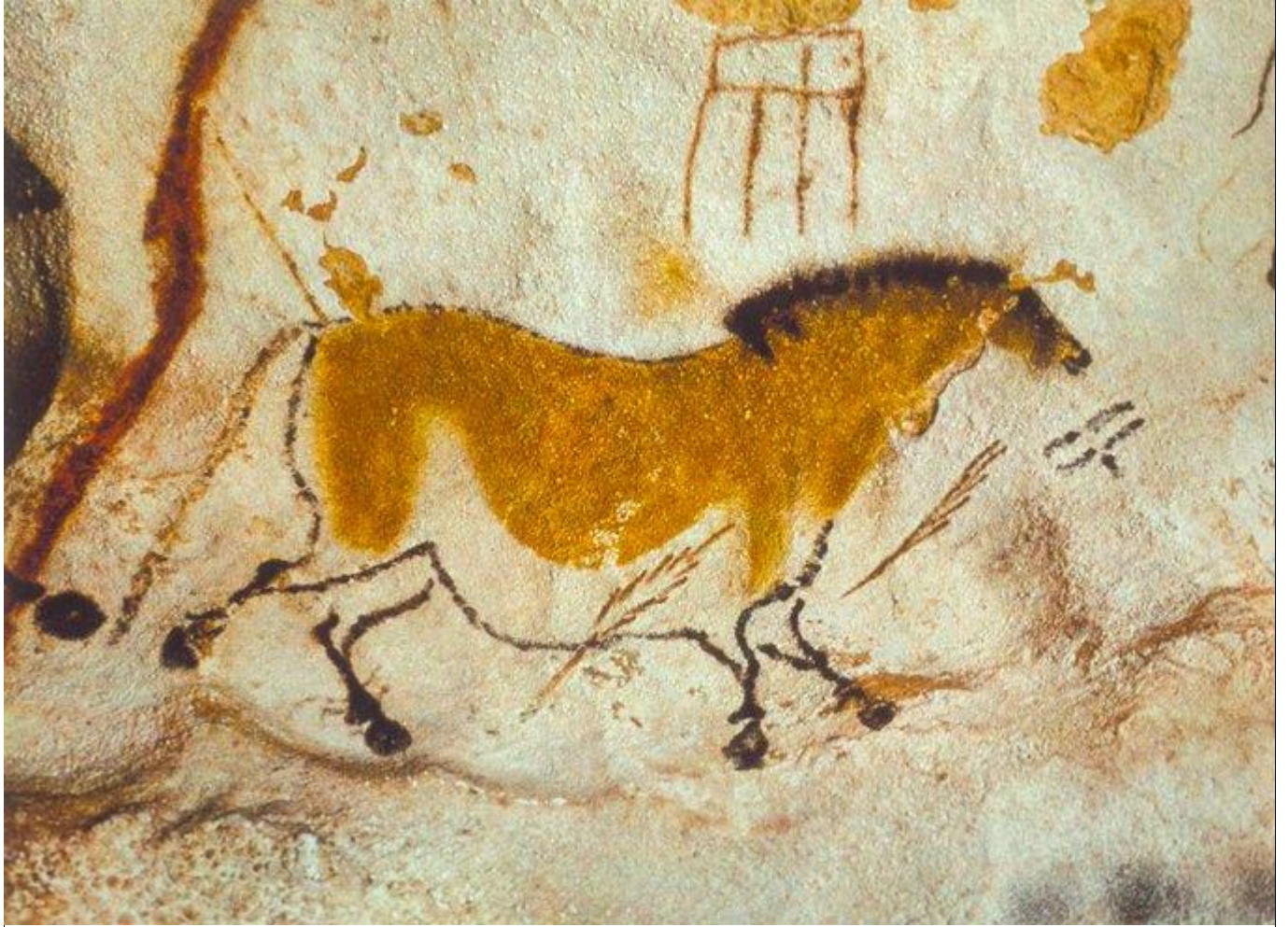


Ochre (/ˈoʊkər/ OH-kər; from Ancient Greek ὄχρα (ókhra), from ὀχρός (ōkhros) 'pale'), or ocher in American English, is **a natural clay earth pigment, a mixture of ferric oxide and varying amounts of clay and sand**. It ranges in colour from yellow to deep orange or brown.

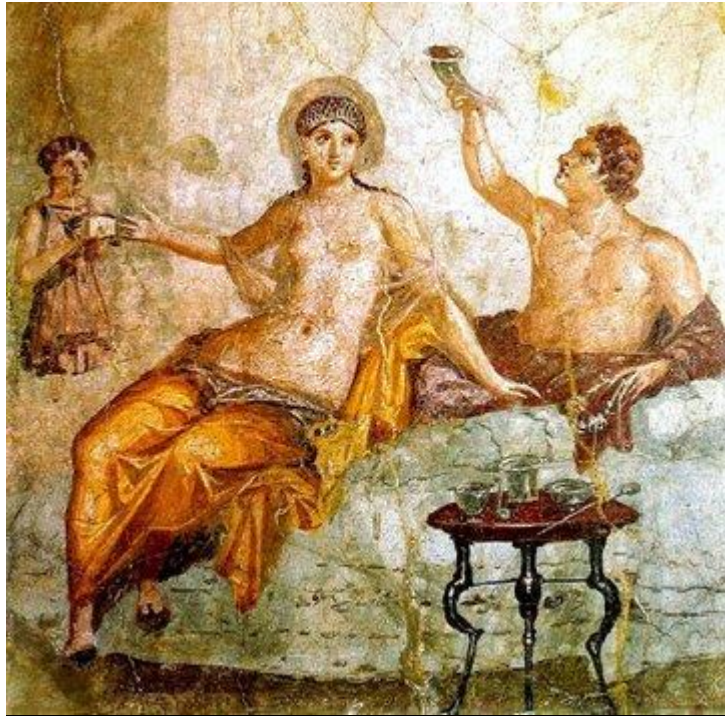
[Ochre - Wikipedia](#)

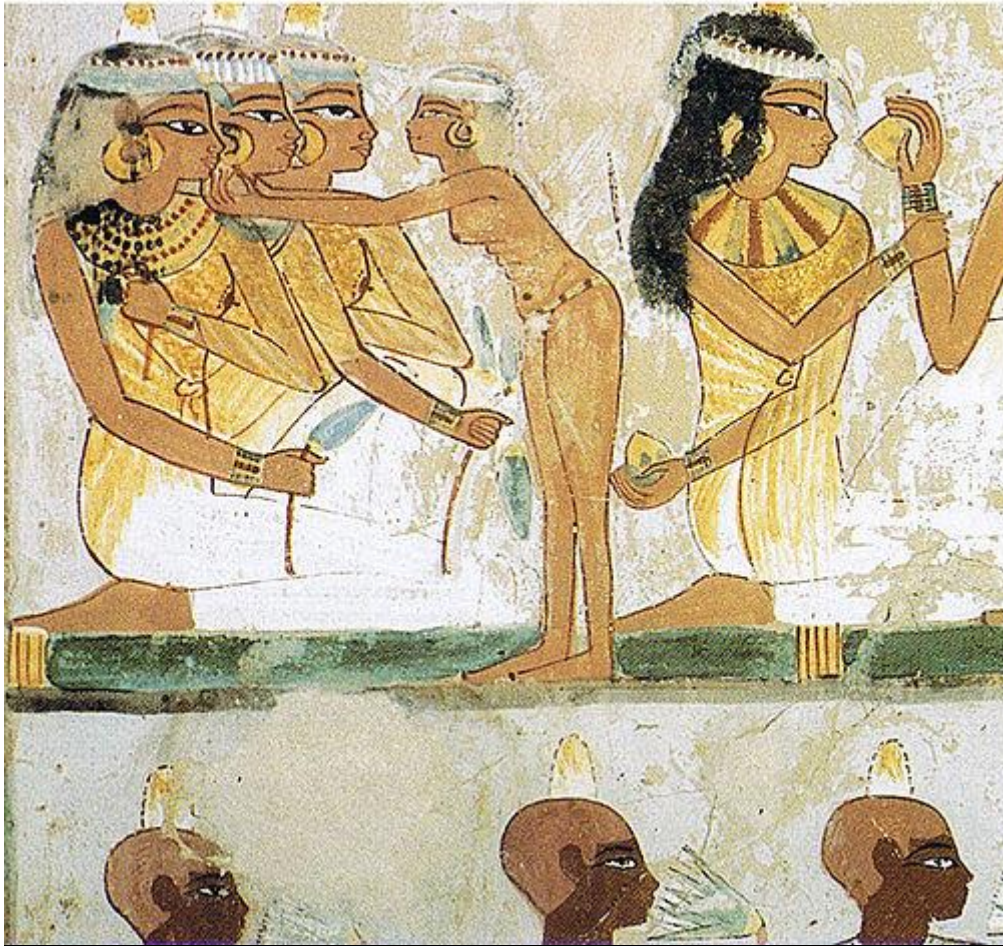
These cave paintings from 17,000 B.C. in Lascaux, France, include a yellow horse:





After that we see yellow cropping up in ancient art across the world, again from ochre. The Ancient Egyptians loved it, probably because it was similar to and thus symbolised gold, and so did the Romans.





During the Middle Ages yellow came to be associated with Judas, even though the Bible never mentions this, and so he was often painted in yellow robes. As in this work by Giotto (1267-1337):



But during the Renaissance there was a tension between the painters of Florence and Rome, who favoured shape and composition, and the painters of Venice, who favoured colour. So we can see the great Venetian painter Titian (1490-1576) using yellow much more intensely:





Moving into the 17th and 18th centuries, colour itself began to take centre stage. Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), a descendent of Titian's Venetian School of colour, took up the mantle of intense and expressive colours, including yellow.





While the great Caravaggio used yellow in a way that it hadn't quite before: as real sunlight itself. Through intense chiaroscuro (contrast between light and shadow) Caravaggio allowed himself to use yellow more powerfully than ever. Consider *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1600).



One thing you'll notice about the use of colour from the Renaissance through to the 18th century is its realism. Artists depicted the world as it really appeared, whether in an idealised way or as in daily life. Like Vermeer's Milkmaid (1658) with her yellow clothes:



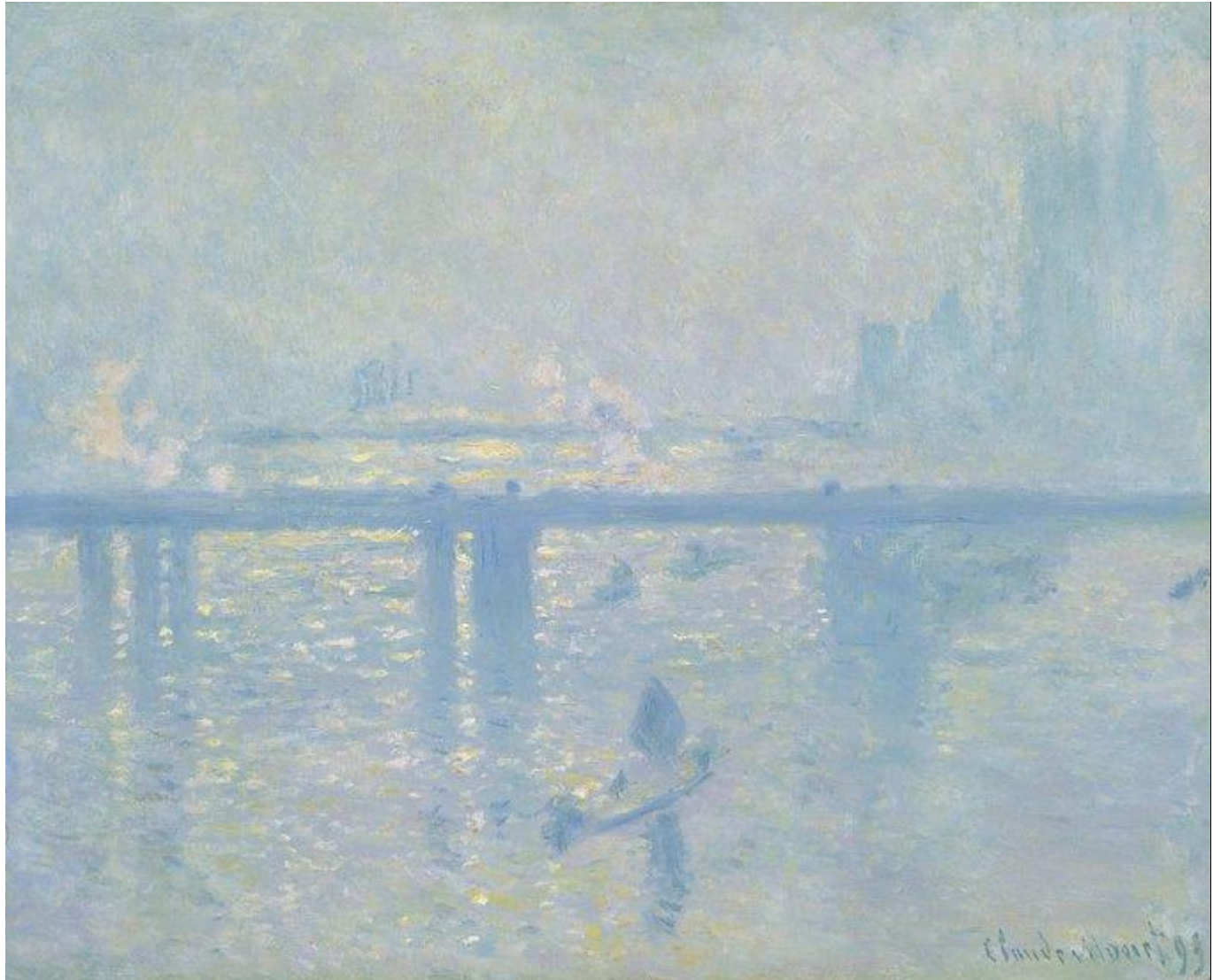
The Academic painters imitated the High Renaissance in everything they did, including a preference for "dignified" themes from Classical and Biblical history. And, crucially, they were studio painters who had models pose in carefully orchestrated lighting.



In reaction to the Academy came the Impressionists, led by Edouard Manet and Claude Monet, who realised that the world doesn't look like a painter's studio. We see things differently outside, beneath the sky, in changing light, and with all that movement...



This entailed a preference for colour over line, which the Impressionists saw as a better representative of reality. A return of the Venetian-Florentine divergence in painting from centuries before. And, like the Romantics, they saw colour's expressive power. Take Monet's blue:



The Impressionists also embraced unconventional angles and scenes from ordinary life, inspired by the influx of Japanese prints into Europe. Such as a train pulling into a station, a far cry from the Biblical and Classical scenes of the Academy;



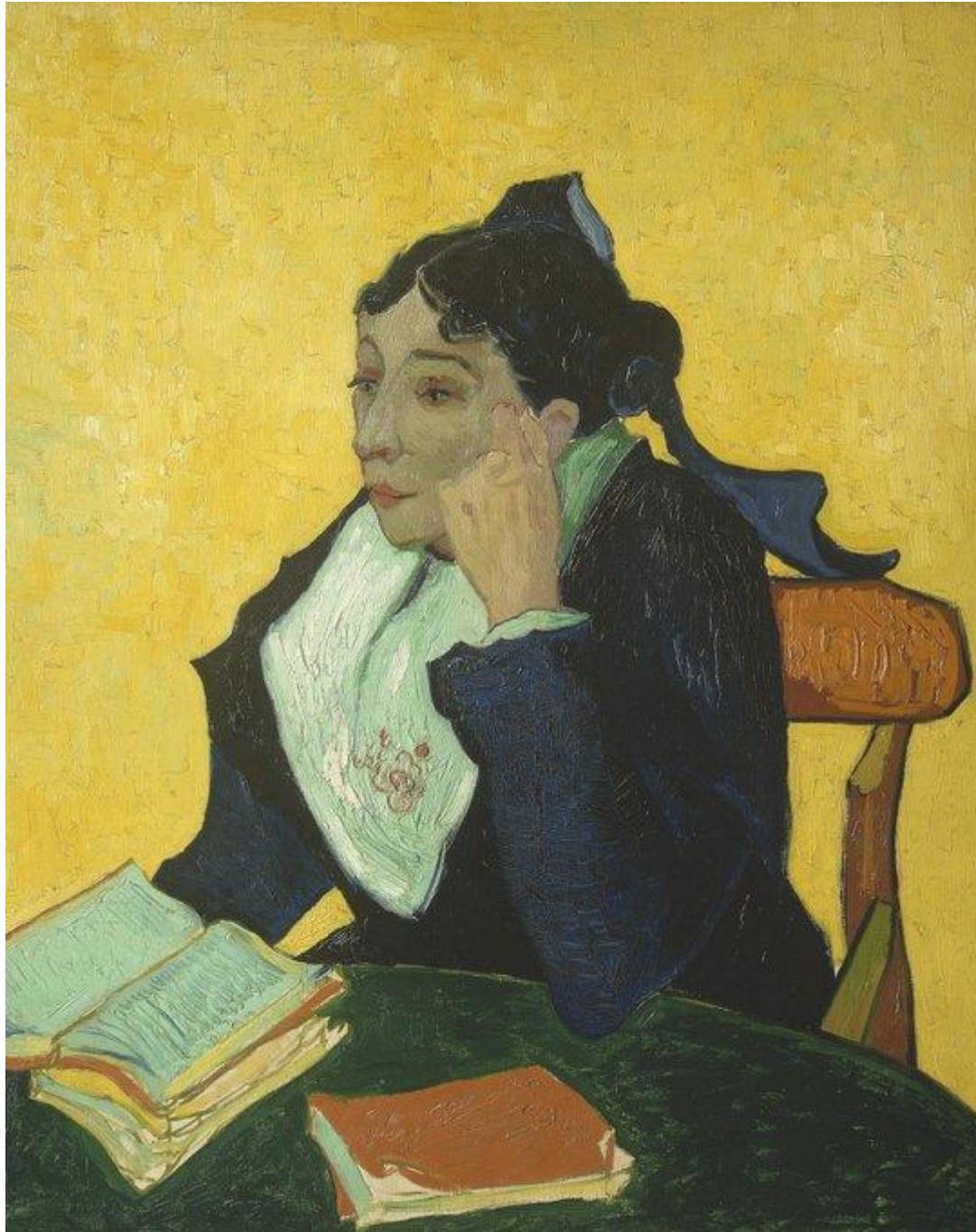
It also tells us why van Gogh painted not only with vivid yellow but also why his version of reality isn't "realistic" in the sense of objects or places looking as they might do in a photograph.

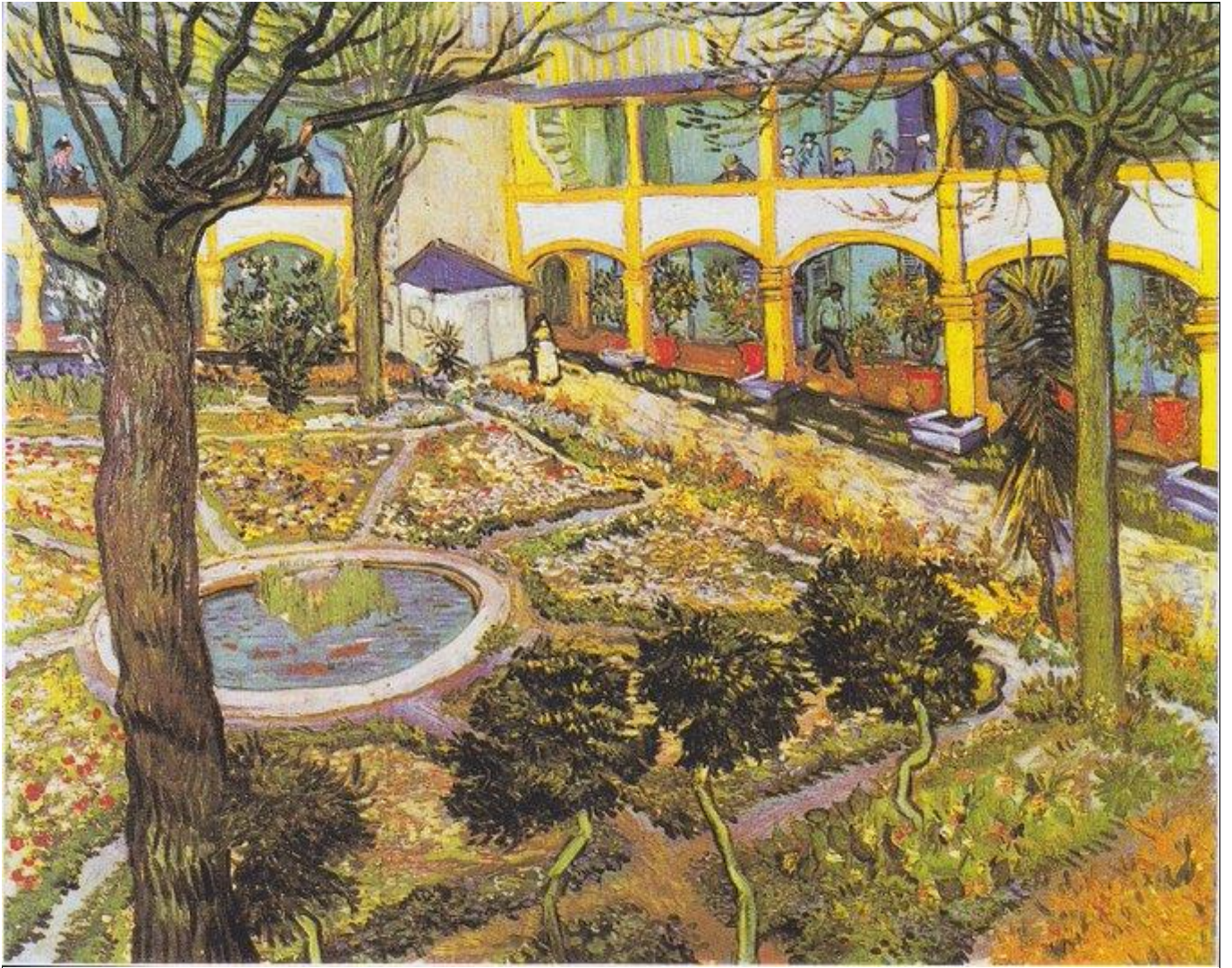


But what's more important than any of this art history was Vincent van Gogh's own mind and heart. As he wrote to his sister in 1888: "The sun, a light that for lack of a better word I can only call yellow, bright sulfur yellow, pale lemon gold. How beautiful yellow is!"



It was his inspired, anxious, troubled, bright genius that unleashed yellow like never before or since. Whether dominating the view from his room at the hospital in Arles or as a solid background for a portrait:





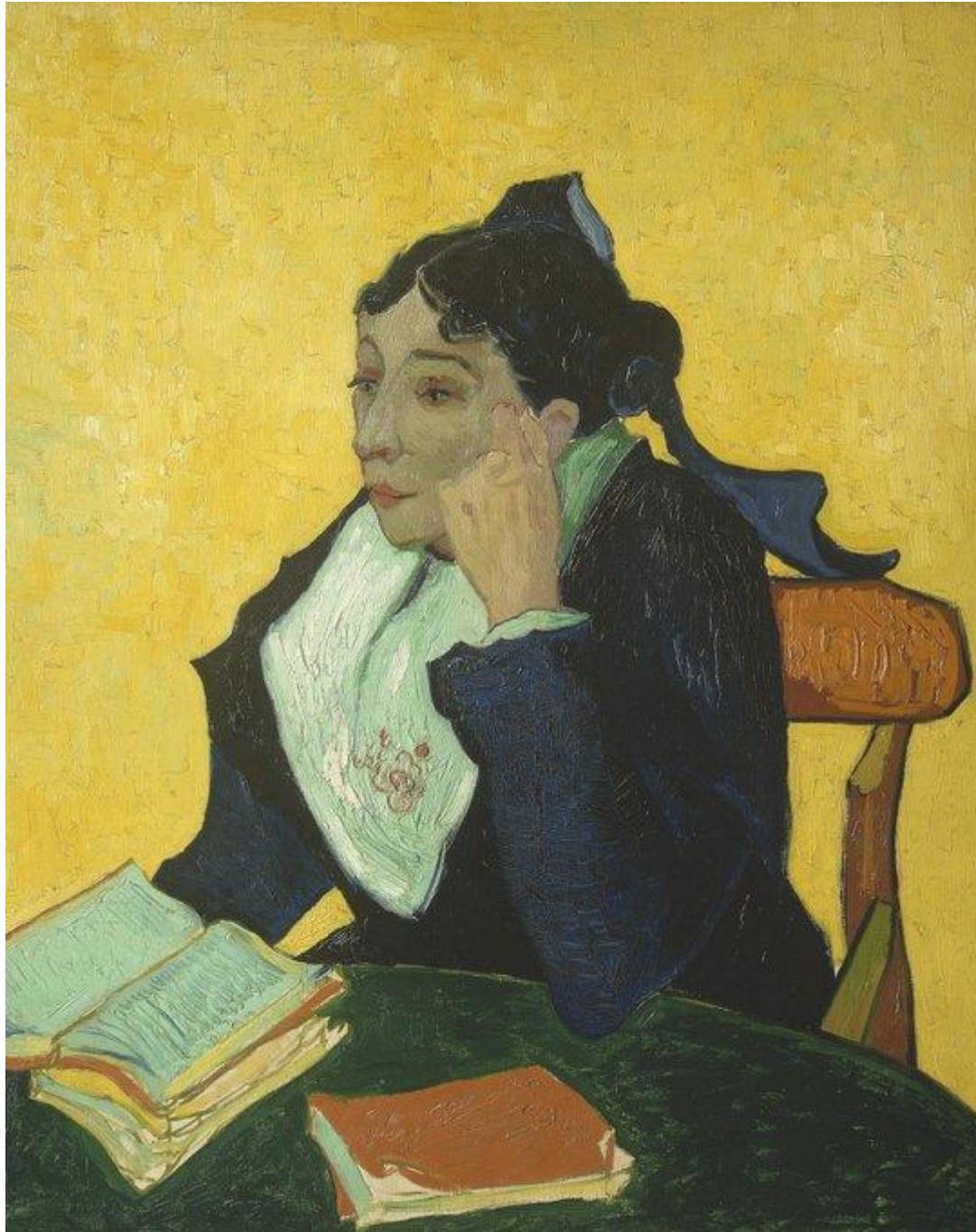
Or, in harmony with his also-beloved purple, creating a vivid night sky which isn't "realistic" at all, and yet which is more deeply real and expressive than any photograph could ever be. And that, in so many words, is why van Gogh loved yellow.

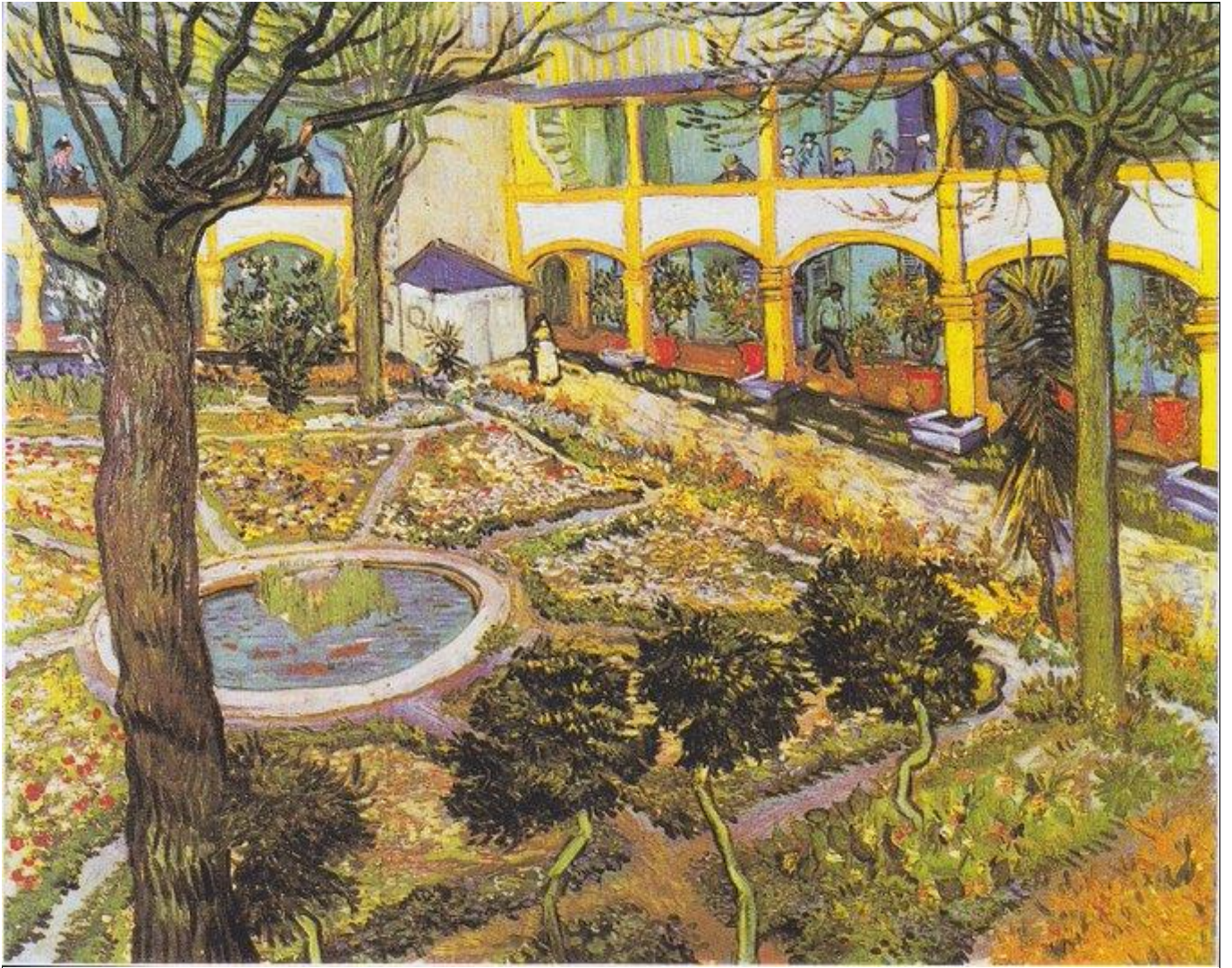


But what's more important than any of this art history was Vincent van Gogh's own mind and heart. As he wrote to his sister in 1888: "The sun, a light that for lack of a better word I can only call yellow, bright sulfur yellow, pale lemon gold. How beautiful yellow is!"



It was his inspired, anxious, troubled, bright genius that unleashed yellow like never before or since. Whether dominating the view from his room at the hospital in Arles or as a solid background for a portrait:





Or, in harmony with his also-beloved purple, creating a vivid night sky which isn't "realistic" at all, and yet which is more deeply real and expressive than any photograph could ever be. And that, in so many words, is why van Gogh loved yellow.