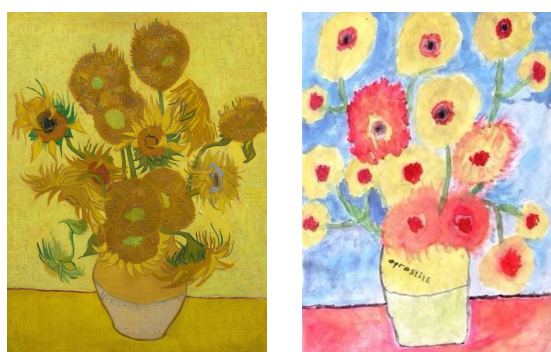


WEEKLY ENGLISH PRACTICE

The Day I Saved Van Gogh's Sunflowers

'Sunflowers' by Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh, is one of the world's most recognisable works of art. Coach John relates the role the painting has played in his life and how he saved it from being destroyed.



Which painting is by Vincent and which is by John?

I lived in **'the Smoke'** for about 10 years, so I had access to Sunflowers whenever I wanted for free. I used to go to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, London, at weekends and on **days off** to learn about art. I appreciated the other Dutch Masters, Picasso, and Da Vinci's 'Cartoon', but was always **drawn towards** Van Gogh's masterpiece.

Van Gogh's paintings of Sunflowers are among his most famous. He did them in Arles, in the south of France, in 1888 and 1889. Vincent painted a total of five large canvases with sunflowers in a vase, with three shades of yellow "and nothing else". In this way, he demonstrated that it was possible to create an image with numerous variations of a single colour, without any loss of eloquence.

The sunflower paintings had a special significance for Van Gogh: they communicated "gratitude", he wrote. He hung the first two in the room of his friend, the painter Paul Gauguin, who came to live with him for a while in the Yellow House. Gauguin was impressed by the

sunflowers, which he thought were "completely Vincent". Van Gogh had already painted a new version during his friend's stay and Gauguin later asked for one as a gift, which Vincent was **reluctant** to give him.

I used to lose myself in thought standing in front of the canvas. Sunflowers became a motif for me, representing, happiness, optimism (sunflowers always look on the bright side towards the sun!) and of course love. Today I have a 'Eguzkilorea' above my front door.

One of life's joys is to take my bike and ride around Alava, looking for fields of Sunflowers. Despite the winter and dark months, Sunflowers always turn up in the summer, showing us there is always hope. As the Swedish socialist Joe Hill said: "Who knows what may lie around the next corner? There may be a window somewhere ahead. It may look out on a field of sunflowers".

About 10 years ago, I was in London and had arranged to meet my youngest sister in front of Sunflowers in the National Gallery. As I approached, I could see one of her sons getting excited. I saw him running towards the canvas, with a pencil in his hand. He seemed determined to make 'improvements' to the work of art. I **stretched out** my arm, **grabbed** his collar and lifted him off the ground **in one fell swoop**. His legs were **dangling** in the air as a security guard came up to us and said simply; "I think it's better if you left!"

Vincent knew that his sunflower paintings were special, as did other people. After he died, friends brought sunflowers with them to his funeral. Sunflowers became synonymous with Vincent, just as he had hoped.



by ECP coach

John Hird

Word list

the (Big) Smoke: a name for London, used especially by northerners

days off: days when you are not working

drawn towards: attracted to something or someone

reluctant: marked by hesitation or slowness because of unwillingness

stretched out: extended to a greater or the full length

to grab: to seize suddenly, eagerly, or roughly

in one fell swoop: with a single, quick action or effort

to dangle: to hang or swing loosely

Let's chat about that!

1. Give a summary of the text to your coach and/or classmates.
2. What is a nickname for London? Do you know other cities which have nicknames?
3. Where did Vincent paint his Sunflowers and how many did he do?
4. What did Sunflowers signify to Vincent? And to John now?
5. How did John 'save' Sunflowers? Retell his anecdote.
6. Read 'Sunflower Facts' on p2. Which facts are interesting to you?
7. Read the poem on p2 and follow the link for an explanation of it.

Sunflower facts & a sunflower poem

1. Sunflowers are heliotropic – they move in the direction of the sun

2. The scientific name for the sunflower is Helianthus. It comes from the Greek words "helios", meaning sun, and "anthus", meaning flower

3. The first Spanish explorers to arrive in Peru in the sixteenth century mistook a field of sunflowers for gold after seeing the amazing golden sunflower jewellery worn by Incan high priests. It earned the sunflower the symbolism of 'false riches'.

4. The tallest sunflower ever recorded was 9.17m (30 ft, 1 inch)! It was grown in Karst, Germany, back in 2014 and still holds the title today.

5. Sunflowers are part of the Asteraceae family, which is the same family as Daisies.

6. The sunflower is the national flower of Russia and Ukraine.

7. Sunflower seeds are full of calcium, making them an excellent healthy food source.

8. The sunflower's seeds follow the Fibonacci sequence. Created by the mathematician Fibonacci, each number in the sequence is the sum of the two

previous numbers. All things in nature tend to follow this pattern; you see it especially in spiral shapes!

<https://www.interflora.co.uk/page/flower-types/sunflowers>

Ah! Sun-flower by William Blake

Ah Sun-flower! weary of time,

Who countest the steps of the Sun:

Seeking after that sweet golden clime

Where the travellers journey is done.

Where the Youth pined away with desire,

And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow:

Arise from their graves and aspire,

Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

<https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-blake/ah-sun-flower>