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How to paint van Gogh's 'Sunflowers,' in 20 steps

A Chinese master copyist shares his technique



WINNIE WON YIN WONG

Copies of "Sunflowers" by Zhao Xiaoyong, left, and by another painter in Dafen.

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IN THE FALL OF 2008, MIT doctoral researcher Winnie Wong got an unusual lesson from a man named Zhao Xiaoyong, in Dafen village outside of the Chinese city of Shenzhen. Dafen has become known for a curious global trade in hand-copying famous works of Western painting. Zhao specializes in the late masterpieces of Vincent van Gogh; among other works, he, his wife, or his fellow painters can make unlimited oil-on-canvas copies of any paintings in the artist's "Sunflowers" series, completed in Arles from 1888 to 1899, at any size requested. ("Café Terrace," "Starry Night," and "Self-Portrait with Easel" are the other most popular van Gogh orders.)

Wong, now an assistant professor in the University of California Berkeley's rhetoric department, apprenticed with Zhao over the course of several months, and learned how to paint "Sunflowers." She documented his instructions in a new book, "Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade," which looks at the recent interest of the contemporary art world in Dafen's strange trade. A standard-size 20-x-24-inch painting can be completed by the master and an apprentice in two to three hours, plus an additional week to dry.

Most of the painters of Dafen, as Wong notes, have no formal training in oil painting, nor does their work require the originality we associate with a painter like van Gogh. But they have developed extraordinary skill at making paintings that look like a product of both.

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