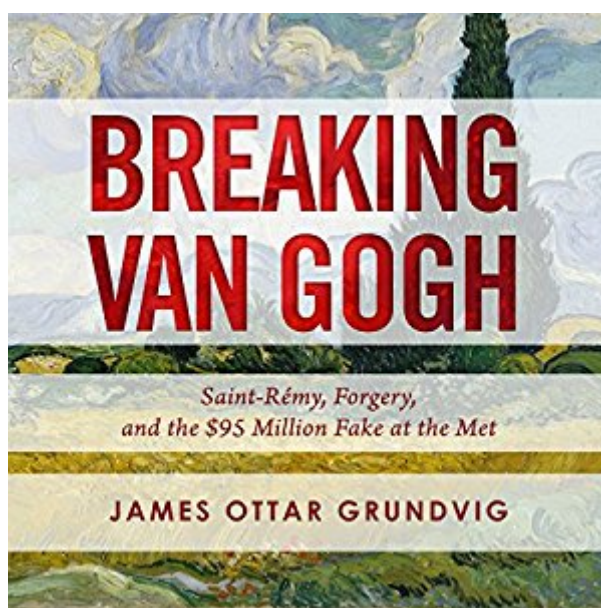


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# Breaking Van Gogh: Saint-Rémy, Forgery, And The \$95 Million Fake At The Met



## Synopsis

In *Breaking van Gogh*, James Grundvig investigates the history and authenticity of van Gogh's iconic *Wheat Field with Cypresses*, currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Relying on a vast array of techniques from the study of the painter's biography and personal correspondence to the examination of the painting's style and technical characteristics, Grundvig proves that the "most expensive purchase" housed in the Met is a fake. The *Wheat Field with Cypresses* is traditionally considered to date to the time of van Gogh's stay in the Saint-Rémy mental asylum, where the artist produced many of his masterpieces. After his suicide, these paintings languished for a decade, until his sister-in-law took them to a family friend for restoration. The restorer had other ideas. In the course of his investigation, Grundvig traces the incredible story of this piece from the artist's brushstrokes in sunlit southern France to a forger's den in Paris, the art collections of a prominent Jewish banking family and a Nazi-sympathizing Swiss arms dealer, and finally the walls of the Met. The riveting narrative weaves its way through the turbulent history of twentieth-century Europe, as the painting's fate is intimately bound with some of its major players.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 7 hours and 53 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Brilliance Audio

Audible.com Release Date: June 16, 2017

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B071GVLMGQ

Best Sellers Rank: #129 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Arts & Entertainment > Art  
#660 in Books > Arts & Photography > Individual Artists > Monographs

## Customer Reviews

The author is probably correct in identifying the Van Gogh *Wheat Fields and Cypress* in the MET as a forgery, however the book is so disorganized and badly edited that it's hard to follow his story. This is a book that needed great storytelling and a clear path to its conclusions but parts of the book appear to have been written on index cards and then shuffled. Many unimportant facts are repeated so many times that the repetition frustrated this reader. The sad truth is that had Grundvig been up

to the task the impact of his thesis would have forced a review of the painting. I bought the book to add to my collection of books on forgery and art connoisseurship and I already have most of the reference books and articles noted in the book (note to editor: a bibliography at the beginning of the notes would have been helpful). Additionally the tone of the writing is at times needlessly hostile and somewhat immature: the book floats between wanting to be a serious investigation and a popular tale of art high-jinks. Many topics are covered along with the revelations about the painting in question: Van Gogh's biography in the South of France to his death; the history of the Böhrl family involvement in looted art; other forgeries; blockchain; etc. With a little effort the book would have benefitted by cutting about a quarter of the text out. Also some illustrations would have been helpful but no doubt prohibited. There are a few factual errors in the text which should have been caught: the Knoedler Gallery was owned by the Hammer foundation with Michael Armand Hammer as its Chairman not The Getty is one example. This is an important topic and I think James Grundvig is correct in questioning the provenance of Wheat Fields at the MET but tighter writing and clear organization would have made this book a must read.

I wasn't surprised but was, with the obvious questions as to paintings in the Met gallery. Makes me wonder how many fake paintings are in the world, claiming to be by the Masters. Enjoyed the read and still go back, reviewing and wondering.

Breaking Van Gogh provides an illuminating look at, what I learned to be, the often nefarious world of fine art dealings. Although primarily a piece of investigative reporting, author James Grundvig has also given us a quite a bit of interesting history. Stylistically, the first few chapters set the stage through Grundvig's journalistic approach, relating his conversations with key players and providing some background relevant to the alleged forgery of a Van Gogh's painting "Wheat Field with Cypresses." This masterpiece has been hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art since 1994, when it was bequeathed by the Walter Annenberg Estate. The meat of the book is really a great piece of history writing, meticulously researched and well referenced. Cover up aside, I found it really interesting from a historic perspective alone. The saga of this painting spans more than 100 years and has real connections to many important 20th century European events. This includes both WW1 and WW2, key Nazi figures (Goring), not to mention involving us in the personal lives of Van Gogh's circle of friends, other famous artists, his family and his psychological deterioration. This interesting narrative is really the vehicle for exploring the (apparent lack of) veracity of the above noted painting. Finally, returning to a journalistic style,

the last few chapters are somewhat of a polemic against the high echelon curators of major museum art collections, who often stonewalled the authors attempts to get answers, and also to remove any remaining doubt by the reader that this painting is indeed a forgery. While interesting, we have already been convinced of this probability by the multiple lines of evidence carefully detailed throughout the book. Be it a real conspiracy or just interested parties protecting their careers by putting on blinders, many tough questions are raised about the integrity of the art world. If you are a fan of Van Gogh, art history, 20th century European history, forensics, or just a good conspiracy theory, you will find this a great read.

Really enjoyed. Interesting and well thought out. Makes you think.

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