



ARTS | **NIGERIA**

Van Gogh from Lagos: John Madu

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Nigerian artist John Madu drew on his home country's experience to revisit the paintings of Vincent van Gogh. Madu's work is now on show at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.



Nigerian artist John Madu is currently on show in Amsterdam

Image: John Madu

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"I was born and raised in the heart of Lagos, and the way people live here shapes my view of the world," said John Madu.

"The city is a vibrant mix of cultures, and it boasts a highly cultured, cosmopolitan middle class. This hustle and bustle, this human energy, and the many subcultures all influenced me, even as a teenager."

Van Gogh meets John Madu

The [Nigerian](#) artist is showcased in an exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, titled "[Van Gogh x John Madu: Paint Your Path](#) [↗](#)."

Inspired by the museum's invitation to participate, Madu created 10 large-format paintings in his studio in just three months.

His works draw from the museum's collection, adding a modern West African touch to motifs painted by [Vincent Van Gogh](#) in the late 19th century. For example, one painting shows a Black person carrying a monobloc plastic chair into the restaurant in the Parisian suburb of Asnières, which Van Gogh painted in 1887. Madu has also created a self-portrait that features van Gogh's "Flowering Plum Orchard (after Hiroshige)" in the background.

"I wanted to pay my respects to the master I truly admire," Madu told DW.



Madu's 'No Food for Lazy Man II' refers to van Gogh's 'Exterior of a Restaurant in Asnières' (1887)

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Early influences

"Long before I even knew who Van Gogh was, I was already familiar with his works," he said. There was a calendar on the wall in his parents' apartment featuring paintings of the great Dutch artist. As a boy, Madu was captivated by Van Gogh's use of color — the cornflower blue, the wheat yellow and the deep green — as well as the expressive brushstrokes. He was drawn to the trees and stars that look like little whirlwinds.

Van Gogh played a crucial role in guiding Madu toward painting as a means of expressing his inner world. "Van Gogh's world unfolds for people, allowing them to connect with him," he said.

Madu's father also contributed to his artistic journey. Although not an artist himself, he still nurtured his son's talent. "My father was an aesthete; he had a keen sense of style and beauty," Madu recalled fondly. "He loved flowers and Versace."

Madu and Van Gogh are both self-taught artists who developed their own unique painting style.

Additionally, both were influenced by East Asian art. Van Gogh's fascination lay with Japanese woodcuts, while Madu identifies as part of "Generation Manga." Even his French bulldog is named Sasuke, a "Naruto" reference that [manga](#) fans will recognize.



Madu and Van Gogh are both fans of Japanese art: Here in the background is a reference to the work 'Flowering Plum Orchard (after Hiroshige)'

Image

Van Gogh would undoubtedly have enjoyed visiting Lagos, particularly to experience the Yoruba art or the Nok sculptures, the oldest known art in West Africa. These works captivated European artists as early as the 19th century.

"Anyone who claims that Africans were savages should consider the avant-gardism and playfulness of this art," said Madu.

A 'global citizen'

Madu has one request for his audience: not to be called an "African artist." Instead, he likes to be referred to as "an artist from Africa."

The Lagos-born artist identifies as a global citizen. He enjoys house music and anime series, and he admits to spending "a lot of money" on Nike sneakers and trendy sunglasses.

When asked if his art carries a social message, Madu reflects on a particular phenomenon happening in Nigeria known as "Japa." This term refers to the trend of young, educated Nigerians leaving the country.

"It's a real syndrome," he explained. "I won't leave Lagos. What if everyone leaves?" That means that whenever Hollywood stars and Japanese stock market millionaires purchase his paintings, they know exactly where to find him.

This article was originally written in German.
