

Vincent

VAN GOGH

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Victoria Charles

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Self-portrait as an Artist, Paris, 1888.

Oil on canvas, 65 x 50.5 cm.

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Forward

He sat on that chair. His pipe lies on a reed seat next to an open tobacco pouch. He slept in that bed, lived in that house. It was there that he cut off a piece of his ear. We see him with a bandaged head, the pipe in the corner of his mouth, looking at us.

Vincent van Gogh's life and work are so intertwined that it is hardly possible to see his pictures without reading in them the story of his life: a life which has been described so many times that it is by now the stuff of legend. Van Gogh is the incarnation of the suffering, a misunderstood martyr of modern art and the emblem of the artist as an outsider.

In 1996, Jan Hulsker, the famous van Gogh scholar, published a corrected catalogue of the complete works in which he questioned the authenticity of forty-five paintings and drawings. What concerned Hulsker were not only the forgeries, but also canvases which were falsely attributed to van Gogh. In a similar vein, the British art historian Martin Bailey claimed to have recognized more than one hundred false 'van Goghs,' among them the *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, which exists in two versions. One of these was purchased in 1990 by a Japanese industrialist for 82.5 million dollars: the highest price ever paid for a painting. The new owner then shocked the public by announcing that after his death he wanted to be burned with the picture. Out of respect for the feelings of European art lovers, he later changed his mind and decided to build a museum to house his collection. If someone should prove that the *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* is a fake, however, public interest in this painting would disappear.

It became apparent early on that the events of van Gogh's life would play a major role in the reception of his works. The first article about the painter was published in January 1890 in the *Mercure de France*. The author of the article, Albert Aurier, was in contact with a friend of van Gogh named Emile Bernard, from whom he learned the details of van Gogh's illness. At the time, van Gogh was living in a mental hospital in Saint-Rémy, near Arles. The year before, he had cut off a piece of his right ear. Without explicitly revealing these facts from the artist's life, Aurier nevertheless introduced his knowledge of the apparent insanity of the painter into his discussion of the paintings themselves. Thus, for example, he used terms like "obsessive passion"[\[1\]](#) and "persistent preoccupation."[\[2\]](#) Van Gogh seemed to him a "terrible and demented genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque, always at the brink of the pathological."[\[3\]](#) Aurier regarded the painter as a "Messiah [...] who would regenerate the decrepitude of our art and perhaps of our imbecile and industrialist society."[\[4\]](#)

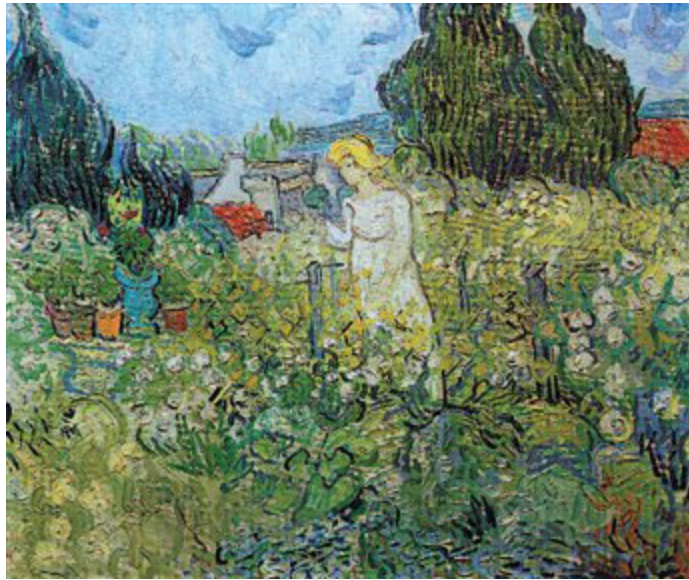
With this characterization of the artist as a mad genius, the critic laid the foundation for the van Gogh myth, which began to emerge shortly after the death of the painter. After all, Aurier did not believe that van Gogh would ever be understood by the general public: "But whatever happens, even if it became fashionable to buy his canvases – which is unlikely – at the prices of M. Meissonier's little infamies, I don't think that much sincerity could ever enter into that belated admiration of the general public."[\[5\]](#)



Wheat Field with Crows,
Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890.

Oil on canvas, 50.5 x 103 cm.

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Mlle Gachet in the Garden at Auvers-sur-Oise,
June 1890.

Oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm.

Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

A few days after van Gogh's funeral in Auvers-sur-Oise, Dr. Gachet, who looked after the painter at the end of his life, wrote to van Gogh's brother Theo:

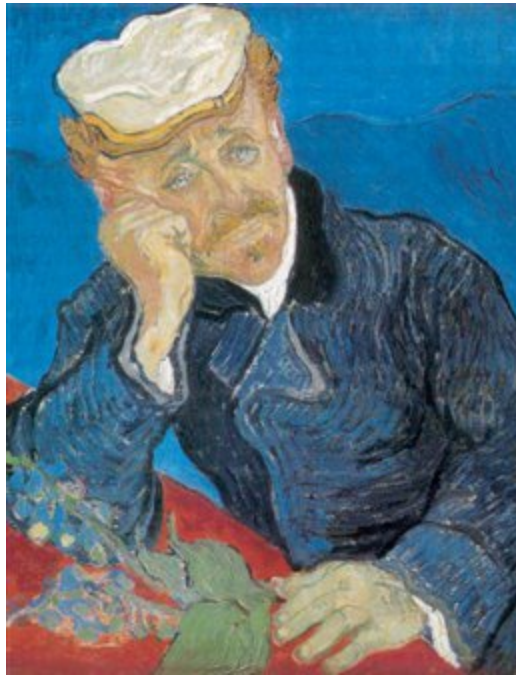
This sovereign contempt for life, doubtless a result of his impetuous love of art, is extraordinary [...] If Vincent were still alive, it would take years and years until the human art triumphed. His death however, is, so to speak, the glorious result of the fight between two opposed principles: light and darkness, life and death.

[\[6\]](#)

Van Gogh neither despised life nor was he its master. In his letters, nearly seven hundred of which have been published, he often wrote about his desire for love and safety: "I should like to be with a woman for a change, I cannot live without

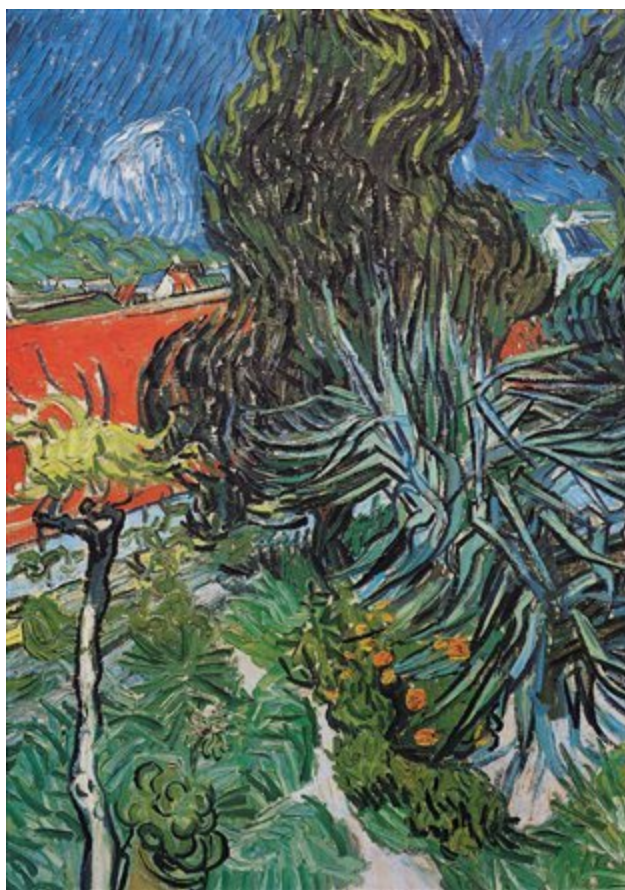
love, without a woman. I would not value life at all, if there were not something infinite, something deep, something real.”[\[7\]](#) On several occasions he stressed that it would be “more worthwhile to make children than pictures.”[\[8\]](#)

Van Gogh’s rather bourgeois dreams of hearth and home never materialized. His first love, Ursula Loyer, married someone else. His cousin Kee, already a mother and widow, refused him partly for material reasons: van Gogh was unable to care for her and her child. He tried to build up a family life with the prostitute, Sien. He finally left her because his brother Theo, on whom he depended financially, wanted him to end the relationship. Van Gogh’s relationship with the twenty-one-year-old Marguerite Gachet is only known by rumour: a friend of Marguerite maintained that they had fallen in love, but the usually freethinking Dr. Gachet barred van Gogh from then on.



Portrait of Doctor Paul Gachet,
Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890.
Oil on canvas, 68.2 x 57 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Van Gogh not only sought the love of women but also that of his family and friends, although he never achieved it in the measure he would have wished. Several days before his suicide, he summed up his lifelong failure to find a satisfying intimacy in the following enigmatic remark: “As through a looking glass, by a dark reason – so it has remained.”^[9] The parson’s son had taken his analogy from *The Excellencies of Love* in the *First Epistle to The Corinthians*: “For now we see through a glass, darkly: but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” This longing for a place in the community and the struggle for renown are two themes that can be traced throughout van Gogh’s life.



Dr. Paul Gachet's Garden at Auvers-sur-Oise,
May 1890.

Oil on canvas, 73 x 52 cm.

Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

**Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh
Auvers-sur-Oise, 28 June 1890**

My dear Theo,

You should send the enclosed order for paints at the beginning of the month, anyway at the most convenient time, there is no hurry, a few days sooner or later don't matter.

Yesterday and the day before I painted Mlle. Gachet's portrait, which I hope you will see soon; the dress is pink, the wall in the background green with orange spots, the carpet red with green spots, the piano dark violet; it is 1 metre high by 50 cm wide.

It is a figure that I painted with pleasure - but it is difficult.

He has promised to make her pose for me another time at the small organ. I will do one for you - I have noticed that this canvas goes very well with another horizontal one of wheat, as one canvas is vertical and in pink tones, the other pale green and greenish yellow, the complementary of pink; but we are still far from the time when people will understand the curious relation between one fragment of nature and another, which all the same explain each other and enhance each other. But some certainly feel it, and that's something.

And then there is this improvement, that in clothes you see combinations of very pretty light colours; if you could make the people you are walking past pose and do their portraits, it would be as pretty as any period whatever in the past, and I even think that often in nature there is actually all the grace of a picture by Puvis, between art and nature. For instance, yesterday I saw two figures: the mother in a gown of deep carmine, the daughter in pale pink with a yellow hat without any ornament, very healthy country faces, browned by fresh air, burned by the sun; the mother especially had a very, very red face and black hair and two

diamonds in her ears. And I thought again of that canvas by Delacroix, "L'Éducation Maternelle." For in the expression of the faces there was really everything that there was in the head of George Sand. Do you know that there is a portrait - "Bust of George Sand" - by Delacroix, there is a wood engraving of it in L'Illustration, with short hair.

A good handshake in thought for you and Jo and good luck with the little one.

Ever yours, Vincent

[The original letter is missing; the text here is from a copy of the letter in Johanna's handwriting. The sketch Vincent drew of Mlle. Gachet at the piano, F 2049, is recorded, but its location (presumably with the rest of the original letter) is unknown. Jo's copy has just a blank rectangle in its place.]



Peasant Woman with a White Bonnet,
Nuenen, February-March 1885.

Oil on canvas, 37 x 45 cm.

Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal.

Holland, England and Belgium

1853-1886

On March 30th, 1852, a stillborn son was born at the vicarage of Zundert, but a year later, on the same date, Anna van Gogh gave birth to a healthy boy.[\[10\]](#) Pastor Theodorus van Gogh gave his second-born son the same name as the first: Vincent. When the second Vincent walked to his father's church to attend services, he passed by the grave where 'his' name was written on a tombstone. In the last months of his life, van Gogh reminisced about the places of his childhood and often wistfully mentioned the graveyard of Zundert.

Very little is known about van Gogh as a child. A neighbour's daughter described him as "kind-hearted, friendly, good, pitiful,"[\[11\]](#) while a former servant girl of the family reported that "Vincent had 'oarige' (funny, meaning unpleasantly eccentric) manners, and that he was often punished accordingly."[\[12\]](#) Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, who met her brother-in-law only a few times near the end of his life, also described him as a difficult, naughty, and obstinate child who had been spoiled by overindulgent parents.[\[13\]](#)

Similar inconsistencies appear in descriptions of van Gogh as an adult. Most of the descriptions were collected at the beginning of the twentieth century by van Gogh-Bonger, who took charge of van Gogh's assets after Theo's death in 1891. These accounts are somewhat dubious not only because of the distance of time, but also because the dead painter was by then already a figure of legend.

In general, van Gogh was kind and compassionate toward the poor or sick, and also to children. Another important trait that emerged early on, according to the artist's sister Elisabeth Huberta, was his close relation to nature:

He knew the places where the rarest flowers bloomed [...] as regards birds, he knew exactly where each nested or lived, and if he saw a pair of larks descend in the rye field, he knew how to approach their nest without snapping the surrounding blades or harming the birds in the least.[\[14\]](#)



Potato Planting,
Nuenen, September 1884.
Oil on canvas, 70.5 x 170 cm.
Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal.

In his last years, van Gogh returned to the landscapes of his childhood through painting. “The whole south, everything became Holland for him,”[\[15\]](#) said Paul Gauguin of the paintings van Gogh made in Arles. In a letter to Emile Bernard, van Gogh compared the heath and flat landscape of the Camargue with Holland. While in the mental hospital of Saint-Rémy he wrote to Theo:

During my illness I saw again every room in the house at Zundert, every path, every plant in the garden, the views of the fields outside, the neighbours, the graveyard, the church, our kitchen garden at the back - down to a magpie's nest in a tall acacia in the graveyard.[\[16\]](#)

The references to nests made by both Elisabeth Huberta and by van Gogh himself suggests the extent of the importance of this image for the painter. The nest is a symbol of safety, which may explain why he called houses “human nests.”[\[17\]](#)

Van Gogh had to leave his first nest - his parents' home - at the age of eleven. It is not clear why the elder van Gogh decided to send his son to a boarding school in Zevenbergen, some thirty kilometres from Zundert. Perhaps there was no Protestant school nearby; the neighbourhood of Zundert was almost entirely Catholic. Or perhaps the parents' nest had simply become too small with the arrival of four more children.

It was an autumn day when I stood on the steps before Mr. Provily's school, watching the carriage in which Pa and Ma were driving home. One could see the little yellow carriage far down the road - wet with rain and

with spare trees on either side – running through the meadows.[\[18\]](#)

A few weeks before his death, van Gogh painted his memory of this farewell: a two-wheel carriage rolling through fields on a narrow path.

At the age of thirteen, Vincent went to high school in Tilburg, where the landscape painter Constantijn C. Huysmans taught him drawing. Only one of van Gogh's works from school has been preserved: *Two Sketches of a Man Leaning on His Spade*. In all, about a dozen of van Gogh's childhood drawings and paintings have survived. On one occasion, according to van Gogh-Bonger, the eight-year-old "had modeled a little clay elephant that drew his parents' attention, but he destroyed it at once when, according to his notion, such a fuss was made about it."[\[19\]](#)

During his stay in Tilburg the first of two known photographs of young van Gogh was taken. It shows a soft, boyish face with very light eyes. The second portrait shows van Gogh as an earnest 19-year-old. By then, he had already been at work for three years in The Hague, at the gallery of Goupil & Co, where one of van Gogh's uncles was a partner. Vincent reports that of the three-and-a-half years he spent in The Hague, "The first two were rather unpleasant, but the last one was much happier."[\[20\]](#) Van Gogh's master at Goupil's was the 24-year-old Hermanus Gijsbertus Tersteeg, of whom the artist wrote:

I knew him during a very peculiar period of his life, when he had just 'worked his way up,' as the saying goes, and was newly married besides. He made a very strong impression on me then – he was a practical man, extremely clever and cheerful, energetic in both small and big undertakings; besides, there was real poetry, of the true unsentimental kind, in him. I felt such respect

for him then that I always kept at a distance, and considered him a being of a higher order than myself.

[\[21\]](#)