

"I Am but a Stranger Here"

Vincent van Gogh in His Centennial

Pieter Sol

The yellow, late July light shone into the small studio of the red-headed artist. He was not seated at his easel this morning, where he usually labored furiously to capture cornfields, peasant cottages, and villages in whorls of vibrant color. Instead, the young artist lay in bed. Incurably ill and plagued by mental instability, loneliness, and a sense of failure, he had shot himself with an old pistol in a wheat field near Auvers-sur-Oise, France. One of his few friends, neurologist Paul-Ferdinand Gachet, cared for him for two days as death came slowly. Rushing in from Paris, the artist's brother Theo arrived in time to hear him say, "I want to go home."

July 29, 1890, saw the death of 37-year-old Vincent van Gogh, today considered the greatest Dutch artist since Rembrandt. Centennial celebrations in the Netherlands and around the globe commemorated this man who, during his lifetime, sold only one painting, at a discount. Supported and encouraged unswervingly by his younger brother, though admired by few artists of his day, van Gogh was poor, unrecognized, and unloved. And yet, one hundred years after his passing, three of his paintings rank among the 10 most highly priced works on the auction block.

This is the story of the Father of Expressionism. In his art and letters we meet Vincent and gain some insight into his beliefs, intentions, convictions, shortcomings, and incredible talent. Modern fascination with van Gogh has only partially been explained in the numerous studies devoted to his work. To us he remains both accessible and puzzling.

Early Years

Vincent Willem van Gogh began his life on March 30, 1853, the first of six children born to a Dutch Reformed pastor and his wife. As a child, Vincent loved to wander through the countryside near Zundert, his hometown village in the province of Brabant in the southern Netherlands. His father taught him the catechism and his church's dogmatic Protestant beliefs. Vincent's mother took charge of his general education.

Enrolled in boarding school at 11, and secondary school at 14, the freckle-faced boy missed his freedom to roam the fields. He was ill-fitted for schoolwork. Recognizing this at last, Vincent's parents sent



Self-portrait, 1888.

him, at age 16 to The Hague to work in an international art dealer's shop where his uncle was a partner. During the next eight years Vincent worked in the of-

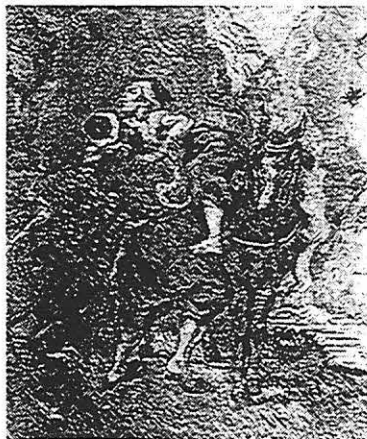
fices of Goupil & Co. in Paris, The Hague, and London.

Although Vincent enjoyed the contact with works of great painters, he did not like art dealership. Not finding satisfaction in his work, Vincent became reclusive and soon developed a reputation as an eccentric. He was dismissed from Goupil. Trying a new direction, the young man landed a job as Methodist preceptor in Ramsgate, and later in Isleworth, England. His voluminous and intimate correspondence with his younger brother, Theo, provides us a unique window into the artist's soul. On November 15, 1876, Vincent wrote of a sermon he had delivered the previous Sunday: "Standing in the pulpit I had the wonderful thought that, in the future I would become a preacher of the Gospel. I know that I am able to evangelize only when I have the Gospel in my heart . . ." The theme of Vincent's sermon that Sunday was drawn from Psalm 119:19, "I am but a stranger here on the earth." This theme was perhaps the most accurate reflection of the artist's personal situation, ever disappointed in love and hungry for friends, and foreshadows the solitary life that Van Gogh led.

His stint as lay preacher and language teacher in England ended in 1877 and he travelled to Dordrecht in the Netherlands, where he worked for a bookseller. But his intense desire to serve humanity did not let him remain long. He attempted to resume his studies in order to become a missionary. Since theological training put too great a strain on him, and because his superiors considered Vincent too much of a risk to appoint him to mission, he took mat-

ters into his own hands. The following year found him in southern Belgium, independently ministering to the poor coal miners in the Borinage, where a missionary society had agreed to sponsor him (\$10 a month) during a trial period.

In his desire to follow the example of Jesus, Vincent distributed all of his food and clothes, sold his few possessions, and gave his money to the poor. He refused to bathe, considering it a luxury, and lived on bread crusts, because the missionary society had withdrawn its sponsorship. Vincent soon became ill and mentally



The Good Samaritan, 1890.

instable. At this point, his family urged him to give up his "mission impossible" and come home. This marked the end of the first major phase of his life.

Turning to Art

Deeply disappointed by organized religion, Vincent turned to his other love, art. In 1880, he began drawing seriously, declaring that he would minister to humanity through this medium. "The world only concerns me," he later wrote, "in that I have a certain obligation and duty, because I have walked this earth for 30 years and out of gratitude I want to leave a token of remembrance in

the form of drawings and paintings—not made to please a certain taste in art, but to express a genuine emotion."

The next five years Vincent spent in the Netherlands learning to master the foundations of his trade, expanding his knowledge of previous artists, and extending his technique by painting still lifes, landscapes, and figures related to the peasant life. While his professional life improved greatly, his ardent desire to marry and have a family was frustrated time and again. In the meantime, his younger brother Theo had been working for Vincent's former employers, the art dealers Goupil & Co. in Paris. Although not an artist himself, Theo had a deep appreciation for art. His clients were mainly members of the middle class who bought traditional academic art, but this did not prevent the young dealer from collecting the "avant-garde" art of Impressionists, Pointillists, and landscape painters of Barbizon.

The modern artists of the day—Monet, Seurat, Cezanne, Pissarro, Gauguin, Degas, Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec and Bernard—often congregated at Theo's home to dine and drink. There they discussed politics, literature, the culture and art of the French colonies, Egypt, Tahiti, Japan, as well as the latest developments in their own art.

When Vincent visited his brother for a few months in February 1886, he was caught up in this enthusiastic wave of creativity. Meeting the artistic vanguard of the day, Vincent learned about life in Paris, the art salons, the academies of fine arts, and art dealers. He was inundated with the Impressionist and Pointillist light and color theories made possible by newly developed tube paints. These paints consisted of chemically developed pigments as bright as rainbow colors. Knowing that sunlight, when passing through a prism, divides into seven colors, the Impressionists conceived the idea that a mix of these colors would create every desired

color on the canvas. The dark pigments of the past were quickly abandoned in favor of these vivid colors.

The expressive power of complementary colors—blue against orange, red against green, and yel-



Digging Peasant, 1885.

low against violet—caused the impressionist's easels to erupt in glorious, shocking color. In order to keep the colors bright, the artists painted with small stripes or dots of pure color. The final mixing of the color was done by the eye of the beholder. Always eager to experiment, Vincent set aside his brown, ochre, brick red, green, and gray pigments and put vivid colors onto his palette, following the example of Pissarro and Seurat. This brilliant color scheme and the Parisian subjects converted Vincent into a somewhat clumsy, but enthusiastic Impressionist.

Constantly seeking to improve his painting, Vincent applied a variety of discoveries to his work. Photography, the ultimate consequence of the "central perspective system" described by Renaissance artists, became an auxiliary for composing horse races, city views, poses, and so on. Its use introduced new, loose, and casual compositions of subjects. Vincent's new friends, Gauguin and Bernard, taught him about the symbolic and

psychological value of color—yellow for light, warmth, and spirituality; blue for heaven, coolness, and abstract thinking.

Seeking a Style

Vincent became familiar with the Japanese woodcuts and their plain color patches, the Japanese artists Hiroshige, Yoshitoshi, Hokusai, and their Ukiyo-e tradition in which he discovered an "eastern" way of seeing. Inspired by their art, Vincent wrote his brother, "I envy the Japanese because of their exceptional clarity which all things have in their works." As so often with his discoveries, Vincent immediately introduced a number of "Japanese" features into his art. These Japanese examples probably influenced the painting of the beautiful apple trees and blossoms that he produced during this time. Another discovery that he incorporated was the suggestion of depth without linear perspective, a technique sometimes seen in primitive art. Vincent had found his unique voice in art, his personal style.



Madame Augustine Roulin, 1889.

In a period during which artists were forced by salons and convention to keep to the rules of perspective, anatomy, set color schemes, and to ethical, historical, religious, and mythical subjects,

Vincent and his companions brought reality as they perceived it to the canvas. "Do you know that it is very, very necessary for honest people to remain in art? Hardly anyone knows that the secret of beautiful work lies to a great extent in truth and sincere sentiment," he wrote.

Even though he had not completed secondary school, Vincent was nevertheless a cultured man interested in the deeper meaning of visible things. The great French naturalist novelists—Zola, Balzac, and Loti—who tried to explain the attitude of their characters in the context of social circumstances, genetic inheritance, psychological peculiarities and education, influenced Vincent, who discussed their novels with his brother. Dickens' descriptions of the social evils affected the artist, as did the French novelist Balzac. His interest in religion and literature together with his personal experiences made him an attentive observer and seeker of the deeper meaning of life and art. Vincent wanted art to be an exponent of the metaphysical as well as of the realities of life.

Spiritual Dimension

Was van Gogh a religious artist? Those who lightly skim over his formative years would perhaps answer "No." But the way he chose and treated his subjects is sufficient proof that he was a religious artist. Some of his paintings deal with biblical topics, such as "The Good Samaritan," "The Sower," and "The Raising of Lazarus." But it may be said that the artist wanted to highlight the religious alliance between God, humanity, and earth in a more general way. Living in a time where the social problems of factory workers and poverty-stricken workmen in a rapidly industrializing society demanded a solution, Vincent wanted to contribute to the happiness of people with his art.

Van Gogh refused to meet the art dealers' commercial demand

for traditional religious art, which he claimed was a sacrilege. Writing to Gauguin and Bernard in connection with this, he urged them to approach art intellectually and honestly, seeing God's creation and interpreting it personally with an open mind. Vincent himself painted flowers, landscapes, and portraits not to please art dealers, but to portray the mysteries of nature.

Examples of his interest in nature are the five paintings of star configurations he produced be-



Café-terrace at Night, 1889.

tween 1888 and 1890. One of these paintings was made after he read a scientific essay by Camille Flammarion in "Les Etoiles." Van Gogh wrote this enigmatic (and perhaps prophetic) comment, "For my own part, I declare I know nothing about it, but to look at the stars always makes me dream, as simply as I dream over the black dots of a map representing towns and villages. Why, I ask myself, should the shining dots of the sky not be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France? If we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star. One thing undoubtedly true in this reasoning is this, that while we are alive, we cannot get to a star, any more than when we are dead we can take the train. So it seems to

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me that cholera, gravel [kidney stones], phthisis [tuberculosis], and cancer are the celestial means of locomotion, just as steamboats, omnibuses, and railways are the terrestrial means. To die quietly of old age would be to go there on foot."

Commenting on "Starry Night," a now world-famous painting, Vincent revealed his love of nature, his need for a spiritual experience, and his intense desire for friendship: "This does not stop me from a terrible yearning for—shall I say the word—religion. And then I go outside at night to paint the stars, and I always dream of such a painting with a group of lively figures, friends."

The Final Months

Tired after his lengthy stay in the city atmosphere of Paris, in early 1888 Vincent went to work in the countryside of Arles in southern France. Fascinated by the light of Provence and the landscape of olive trees and cypresses, in a period of 15 months he produced what are considered some of his best paintings and drawings—more than 300 of them! Unfortunately, this was the last moment of relative calm he enjoyed.

Vincent had rented a little yellow house, hoping that his artist friends would join him to form a community of post-Impressionists. He worked for days at a stretch, from 7 in the morning until 6 in the evening in the same spot, with short, infrequent breaks to get food. "The outcome is that I work fast," he writes Theo. "I have the clarity and the dazzle of one in love, I am overwhelmed by colors and this new experience is leading to ecstasy. I am not tired and would like to start a new painting tonight." Gauguin visited Vincent in October, and they painted together for a short time. However,



The Bedroom at Arles, 1888.

their temperaments were violently incompatible, and their friendship came to an end. Increasing attacks of mental instability, which ran in Vincent's family, threw him into despair. He painted furiously, attempting to maintain his sanity, but to no avail. On Christmas Eve, 1888, the artist cut off a section of his left ear and was interned in a hospital.

Released for a short time, he soon requested internship in an asylum at Saint-Rémy, where he painted canvases which were bolder than ever. But Vincent grew homesick, and despaired at his inability to succeed. "What am I in the eyes of most people?" he wrote. "A good-for-nothing, an eccentric and disagreeable man, somebody who has no position in society and never will have. Very well, even if that were true, I should want to show by my work what there is in the heart of such an eccentric man, of such a nobody."

Travelling north to see his brother, the artist sought refuge at Auvers-sur-Oise, the village where Dr. Gachet, friend to Cézanne and Pissarro, lived. This stay in the country brought a brief respite,

but quarrels with Gachet, feelings of isolation, and overdependence on his now-married brother ended the period of tranquility and productivity. Seeing no hope of overcoming his loneliness or of being cured, the 37-year-old Vincent van Gogh brought an end to his life.

For the Christian who appreciates the visual arts, van Gogh remains a painful puzzle—sensitive and uncouth, creative and self-destructive, affectionate yet violent. While organized religion apparently failed him, he continued to reach for the transcendent. He was deeply insecure, constantly seeking companionship and feeling frustrated in his search for intimacy. His rich epistolary gives us insights into the unique art produced by a tortured soul. In ten brief years of painting, he created a rich corpus of art that speaks to us with the voice of a "stranger on this earth" who wanted "to go home."

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