

Finding Vincent

THE REAL VAN GOGH: THE ARTIST AND HIS LETTERS

*Royal Academy, London
23 January to 18 April 2010*

Before I went to this fascinating exhibition my personal picture of Vincent van Gogh was of a mad, rough genius who mutilated himself and almost botched his own suicide. The Royal Academy clearly felt the need to show us the 'real' artist to correct any such misconceptions and they certainly succeeded, at least for me. I also had no idea that, as well as spending short spells in Ramsgate and Brixton, Vincent also lived for a while just down the road from my old practice in an ivy-clad house at 395 Kennington Road, in south east London.

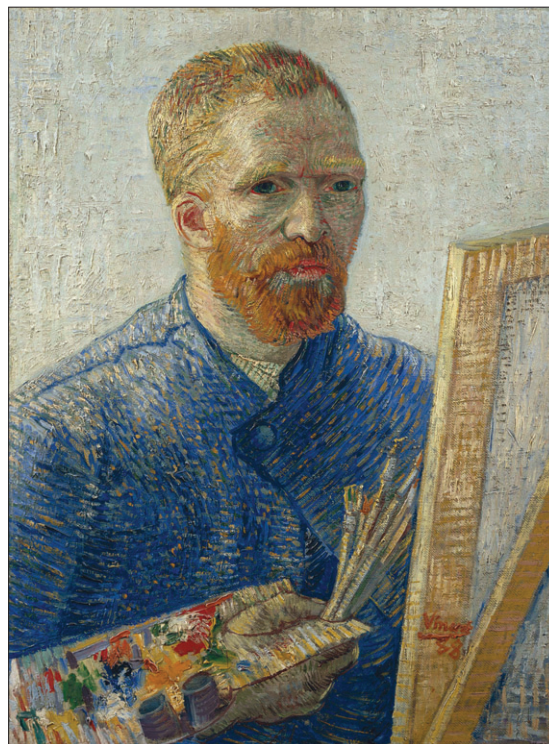
The exhibition is centred on a remarkable event, the publication in six volumes of all of van Gogh's 902 letters together with his own and others' paintings, to which they refer. In assembling this exhibition the curator, Ann Dumas, had plenty to choose from, because van Gogh produced over 800 paintings and 1200 drawings in a flurry of creativity between 1880, when he was 27, and 1890 when he died. Vincent van Gogh emerges from this exhibition as a highly intelligent, widely read, deeply sensitive, albeit difficult, genius who, from the moment he began sketching the lumpen Belgian peasants working in the fields was on an incredibly steep artistic learning curve. His early life was a series of false starts as a teacher, priest, and missionary and he was an entirely self-taught artist. He escaped Belgium and the Netherlands to Paris and then, famously, to Provence where, in Arles, his painting exploded to produce the galaxy of masterpieces that are now instantly recognisable around the world.

This exhibition of 65 paintings, many of them his finest works, are complemented by 30 drawings and a number of letters, most of which he wrote to his brother Theo. These letters are displayed as if they, themselves, are works of art and in many ways they are. They are beautifully written, mostly in Dutch, some in French and a few

in English. The letters describe the minutiae of Van Gogh's life and work and reveal fascinating glimpses of his understanding of the relationship between mood and colour, line and subject, thought and draughtsmanship. Many of these letters are illustrated by beautiful, intense miniature sketches of the paintings to which he refers, often describing to Theo how he was feeling when he did the painting and exactly how he went about addressing the technicalities of its production.

The exhibition, as well as revealing his intellect and his sensibility, also emphasises the breadth of his culture. He read widely, particularly enjoying Dickens and Zola, and was familiar with the works of many influential masters, including Rembrandt, Delacroix, and Millet, as well as being aware of the contemporary work of the impressionists, particularly Monet, Sisley, and Picasso. He famously spent 2 years with a prostitute and a couple of months with Paul Gauguin, but otherwise was a solitary soul, delighting in his little yellow house at 2 Place Lamartine in Arles, under a cobalt sky, eating his supper in the café next door run by Madame Ginoux, recording the glories of the Provencal countryside and finally the fields, trees, and skies around the asylum at Saint-Remy. The precise nature of Vincent's mental disorder remains a mystery.

My greatest discovery, however, was that the letters are available online, without the need to spend £350 on the books. Each letter is presented in three columns: the English translation, the original text, and a facsimile of the letter itself, complete with the lovely sketches ('*croquis*') that he included within them. There are letters to Theo from Ivy Cottage in Kennington Road, one with a sketch of Streatham Common, and detailed



*Vincent van Gogh. Self-portrait as an Artist, January 1888.
Oil on canvas, 65.2 x 50.2 cm. Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)*

accounts of almost everything he did, right up to a letter written on 23 July 1890, a few days before his death. Remarkably this last, un-posted letter to Theo gives no suggestion of his impending suicide; he requests more artists' materials and promises to be in touch again.

Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime, *The Red Vineyard*, now in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, sold in Brussels in 1888 for 400 Francs. His paintings are now, of course, almost priceless. This exhibition will give every visitor something new to take away and a chance to reflect on the relationships between genius, solitude, creativity, and the deep magic of paintings.

Roger Jones

The letters of Vincent van Gogh can be explored at www.vangoghletters.org/vg/

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