

Vincent Van Gogh: The Search for Style at Saint-Rémy

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The traditional approach to the study of Vincent Van Gogh's art is characterized by a preoccupation with the inner complexities of Van Gogh's personality and the sensational events of his life. This is understandable, if not justifiable, given the impact that Freudian psychology has had on Western society in the twentieth century. The new science of psychoanalysis seemed tailor-made for Van Gogh's peculiar perspective, bold colors, and prolific production. Publication of Van Gogh's letters in 1914, lent credence to psychological interpretations of imagery and technique, by attesting to his confusions, longings, and depressions. As a result, from Julius Meier-Graef in the 1920s to Meyer Schapiro in the present, few writers have resisted the temptation to scrutinize the artist's paintings and drawings for hidden meanings, portents of disaster, and blatant madness. Popular literature and the media further exploited Van Gogh's life, creating for generations to come, something of a cult figure in art—the paradigm of the tormented genius, abused in his lifetime, adored after death.

This is not to suggest that one should make light of Van Gogh's psycho-history, but I would argue that such one-sided emphasis has resulted in an imbalance in Van Gogh scholarship which is only recently changing.¹ As part of this new wave of study—one not based on psychodrama—there should be an increased focus on Van Gogh's determined professionalism. Throughout his career, Vincent Van Gogh was an artist consciously in search of style, and it is my contention that this was, at the very least, as responsible for his art as any unconscious neurosis. I submit that by stylistically relating to other artists, he hoped to legitimize his own work. Furthermore, I believe that these references are substantial. In particular, the art produced at the asylum at Saint-Rémy serves to demonstrate the point of departure between the standard approach and the new. A morbid fascination has always surrounded the Saint-Rémy images, owing to the nature of the institution, and from the hindsight of Vincent's suicide shortly after his departure.

Between May, 1889 and May, 1890, Van Gogh resided in Saint-Rémy de Provence. During that year he produced a body of work unlike any he had done before and any he would do after. Although some contend that this juncture in style is an outgrowth of the dramatic circumstances of his confinement, namely his depressions, hallucinations, and seizures, a change of style and subject matter is, in fact, entirely consistent with the pattern of Van Gogh's ten-year art career. He conceived of his art episodically, like chapters in a book, each a stylistic flirtation, individualized and distinct from the other, combining sensitivity to the environment with overt references to other artists.

During the early sketching years he is Van Gogh the draftsman—linear, colorless, concentrating on studies of miners in the Borinage. While these realistic, somber images are often taken to reflect the sobering experience of

living in that poverty-stricken district, and his failings as a lay preacher, they also mirror an interest in the graphic art of English periodicals, and remind us of a youthful aspiration to become a professional illustrator.² One engraving in particular, "The Empty Chair" (Figure 1), a commemorative to Charles Dickens by Luke Fildes, appeared later as a motif in several important Van Gogh paintings (Figure 2).³

Painting in the Hague, his palette darkened in imitation of Rembrandt and other seventeenth century painters whose works hung in the local museums. Thematic preoccupations with peasants during this time are often attributed to self-identification with the *downtrodden*, but they betray another motivation, that of the common heritage of subject matter of the Hague school of painters (which included his art teacher and relative, Anton Mauve) and his enduring idol, J.F. Millet: "I have to observe and draw everything that belongs to country life—like many others have done before and are doing now."⁴

The Antwerp period provided the artistically venturesome Van Gogh with fresh ideas. In the land of Rubens he was dazzled and inspired by the Flemish master's use of color and further modified his own technique. Later in Paris (1887), where he joined his brother Theo, his experiments with style continued. Making the acquaintance of many of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters, Van Gogh was overwhelmed by the vanguard art. Willing to be influenced by others, he quickly assimilated the new style and produced canvases with bright, light colors, and quick, broken strokes.

Enamored of the Japanese prints he had first been introduced to in Antwerp, the zealous Van Gogh collected them, copied several, incorporated Japonaiseries into his paintings, arranged a small exhibition of Japanese prints at a local café, and even painted several self-portraits with Oriental eyes (Figure 3). These bear silent witness to his capacity for devotion to other masters and their styles.

Once in Arles the Impressionist phase ended and a new one began. Combining *Japonisme* with some stylistic borrowings from Paul Gauguin, he intensified his palette, made use of decorative line, and disciple-like, executed several works in the symbolist-synthesist manner.

Following a tense year in Arles, highlighted by the notorious earlobe incident and subsequent hospitalization, the fragile Vincent sought refuge in Saint-Rémy. Within weeks of his arrival, Van Gogh reiterated the need for style and hinted of things to come: ". . . new things grow old so quickly," he wrote, and referring to a newly completed canvas, complained to Theo that the "problem . . . is to get some style into it."⁵ He continued, saying that he was patiently awaiting renewed inspiration, hoping that "little by little the idea of a fresh start will come."

One of the first manifestations of this "fresh start" concerned the use of color. Although Van Gogh never

abandoned color, contrasts were not as vivid as the year before; clarity yielded to shading and variation of tone; sunlight was softened by atmosphere. In all there was a greater sense of depth. Van Gogh described the light as "mysterious" and wrote of striving to capture this quality in paint just as Monticelli, Delacroix, and Pissarro had done.

Color in Saint-Rémy is described as "silvery" and "grey," and Delacroix's "Prussian blue" is often mentioned.⁶ "What I dream of," he wrote, "in my best moments is not so much striking color effects as once more the half-tones."⁷ The subtle, delicate harmonies Van Gogh perceived in Saint-Rémy conjured memories of Rembrandt, and the darker, richer, muted palette of his homeland. He wistfully mused to Theo, ". . . sometimes I felt a great need to begin again with the same palette as in the North."⁸ With this comment we are reminded that Van Gogh had difficulties in conceiving of his own singularity. To be meaningful, his art had always to be referential.

Ironically, while color became quieter, line grew more aggressive. Meyer Schapiro differentiated between two kinds of line in Saint-Rémy. One he called "coiling, wavy lines;" the other, "networks of sharp, angular and jagged diagonals" (Figure 4).⁹ The former, he claimed, indicated agitation and emotional upheaval, the latter, contradictions of mind.¹⁰ This is a perfect example of critic as psychiatrist. The art itself is an example of conscious stylistic choice. In a letter to Emile Bernard, Van Gogh wrote of being "able to divide a canvas into great planes which intermingle, to find lines, forms which make contrasts; that is technique, tricks. . . but a sign that you are studying your handicraft. . ." ¹¹ These remarks undermine the argument that the exciteability of line at Saint-Rémy reflects excessive mental agitation.

Without equivocation, Van Gogh reiterated his commitment to a dynamic artistic statement, but one sympathetic with that of others, when he wrote "I feel strongly inclined to seek style. . . by that I mean a more virile, deliberate drawing. I can't help it if that makes me more like Bernard or Gauguin."¹² Obviously, the artist was aware that his forceful linear quality also characterized the work of the two contemporaries he considered to have unquestionable merit (Figure 5).

Van Gogh clearly acknowledged the implications of his new drawing style. He justified the unusual tendencies with the explanation that he was achieving "individual intention and feeling" despite what he called exaggerations, and he relied on the examples of Delacroix, Bernard, and Gauguin for the authority to take such artistic liberties.¹³ Of Delacroix he wrote, ". . . by going the way of Delacroix . . . by . . . a more spontaneous drawing than delusive precision, one could express the purer nature of the countryside. . ." ¹⁴ Of Emile Bernard and Paul Gauguin, Van Gogh defensively wrote that they were right to be "exasperated by . . . photographic and empty perfection."¹⁵ Vincent, who persistently considered his art inferior to both Delacroix's and Gauguin's, would surely have enhanced and used this point of view, so convinced was he of their superior talent.

Hope for his own progress prompted him to suggest that the Dutch painter J.J. Isaacson postpone an article on some Van Gogh studies for another year, when he would have produced "more characteristic things, with more decisive drawing. . ." ¹⁶ In the same letter, Van Gogh urged his brother to convince Isaacson "to wait" until his art merited note.

Distinction may have been the end, but the means were still sought within the context of respected art. This is never revealed more clearly than by Van Gogh's statement, "—yes, I am something, I can do something. But I must have a foundation in those artists, and then produce the little I am capable of in the same direction."¹⁷ This attitude, having modified his style, modified his subject matter, as well.

In September of 1889, after having read art criticism, Van Gogh wrote "they are discussing modern art. . . speaking of 'what will last'. . . the landscape painters—that has been rather true, for Corot, Daubigny, Dupré, Rousseau, and Millet remain alive as landscape painters. . . so it is the landscape painters who will last. Very good, it was damn true."¹⁸ Attempting to make a lasting statement of his own, desperate to be considered a serious contender for a place in the modern art world, anxious to legitimize his endeavors, he seized the suggestion, all but abandoned figure painting and portraiture (which had been so important the year before), and concentrated on landscapes. The Barbizon school in particular served as inspiration.

References to Barbizon punctuated his letters. "I for one," he wrote, "cannot forget all those lovely canvases of Barbizon. . ." ¹⁹ Praising their "eternal youth" and individuality,²⁰ he compared his artistic intentions to their attainments, and in so doing, lent his work more meaning and respectability (Figures 6, 7). In a rambling tribute to Karl Bodmer he wrote, "I admire and love the man who knew the whole forest of Fontainebleau, from the insect to the . . . great oak and. . . the blade of grass."²¹ The Saint-Rémy period is distinguished by an extraordinary series of detailed nature studies (Figure 8). We may even find a precedent for his prolific output during this year—over 350 images—in the Barbizon school; as he reminded Theo, like those prolific artists, he, too, had the "necessity of producing a lot."²²

Copies made after the masters he most admired filled Van Gogh's need for models and mollified the desire for communication with other artists, but they were also anchored in tradition. Considering a series after Millet, he expressed the hope that they would be "something like the works of Prévot, who copied the less known Goyas and Velasquezes. . ." ²³ However, he cautiously refused to attempt these color interpretations until he was assured of the "usefulness of the thing."²⁴ He even justified his repetitious studies of Saint-Rémy's cypresses and olive groves (Figure 9) by comparing them to traditional studies of willows and apple trees.²⁵

Yet despite Van Gogh's reliance upon the artistic rôle-model of painters past and present, he betrayed a sense of his own artistic worth, when he envisioned that he, along with Bernard and Gauguin, might "exist. . . to prepare the way for. . . painting. . ." ²⁶

Between bouts of delirium, auditory hallucinations, attacks ending in violence, and loss of memory, Vincent Van Gogh worked to "attain command. . . from the artistic point of view."²⁷ With determined professionalism, despite his semi-seclusion, the artist stayed abreast of current art developments, corresponded with various art professionals, kept a constant flow of canvases between Saint-Rémy and Paris, and even discussed arrangements for exhibiting with the *Vingtistes* in Brussels.

A reading of the Saint-Rémy letters exposes a man suffering from serious personal problems, but it also reveals

an artist very much in control of his own artistic fate, someone of discriminating cultural taste, given to a sophisticated understanding of art theory and practice. Van Gogh's reliance upon the legacy of art to achieve distinction and

recognition should not cast aspersions on his creativity. He reminds us that creativity does not, as some would lead us to believe, spring rabbit-like from the top hat of psychological complexity alone.

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1 See: R. Johnson, "Vincent Van Gogh and the Vernacular: His Southern Accent," *Arts Magazine*, February, 1979, 131-135; S. Koslow, "Two Sources for Vincent Van Gogh's *Portrait of Armand Roulin*—A Character Likeness and a Portrait Schema," *Arts Magazine*, September, 1981, 156-163; B. Welsh, "Van Gogh and the French Avant Garde," *Connoisseur*, April, 1981, 310-315.

2 Van Gogh's enthusiasm for English graphic art was engendered during a stay in London between 1873 and 1874, during which time he worked for art dealers Goupil & Cie.

3 This Fildes wood engraving was part of Van Gogh's extensive collection of English graphics.

4 V. Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters*, I, letter 150.

5 *Ibid.*, III, letter 592.

6 *Ibid.*, letter 626a.

7 *Ibid.*, letter 604.

8 *Ibid.*, letter 601.

9 M. Schapiro, *Vincent Van Gogh*, 26.

10 *Ibid.*, 27.

11 V. Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters*, III, letter B-21.

12 *Ibid.*, letter 613.

13 *Ibid.*, letter 607.

14 *Ibid.*, letter 595.

15 *Ibid.*, letter 607.

16 *Ibid.*, letter 609.

17 *Ibid.*, letter 605. The artist refers to Delacroix and Millet.

18 *Ibid.*, letter 604.

19 *Ibid.*, letter 596.

20 *Ibid.*, letter 593.

21 *Ibid.*, letter 602.

22 *Ibid.*, letter 626.

23 *Ibid.*, letter 611.

24 *Ibid.*, letter 625.

25 *Ibid.*, letter 614.

26 *Ibid.*, letter 595.

27 *Ibid.*, letter 604.

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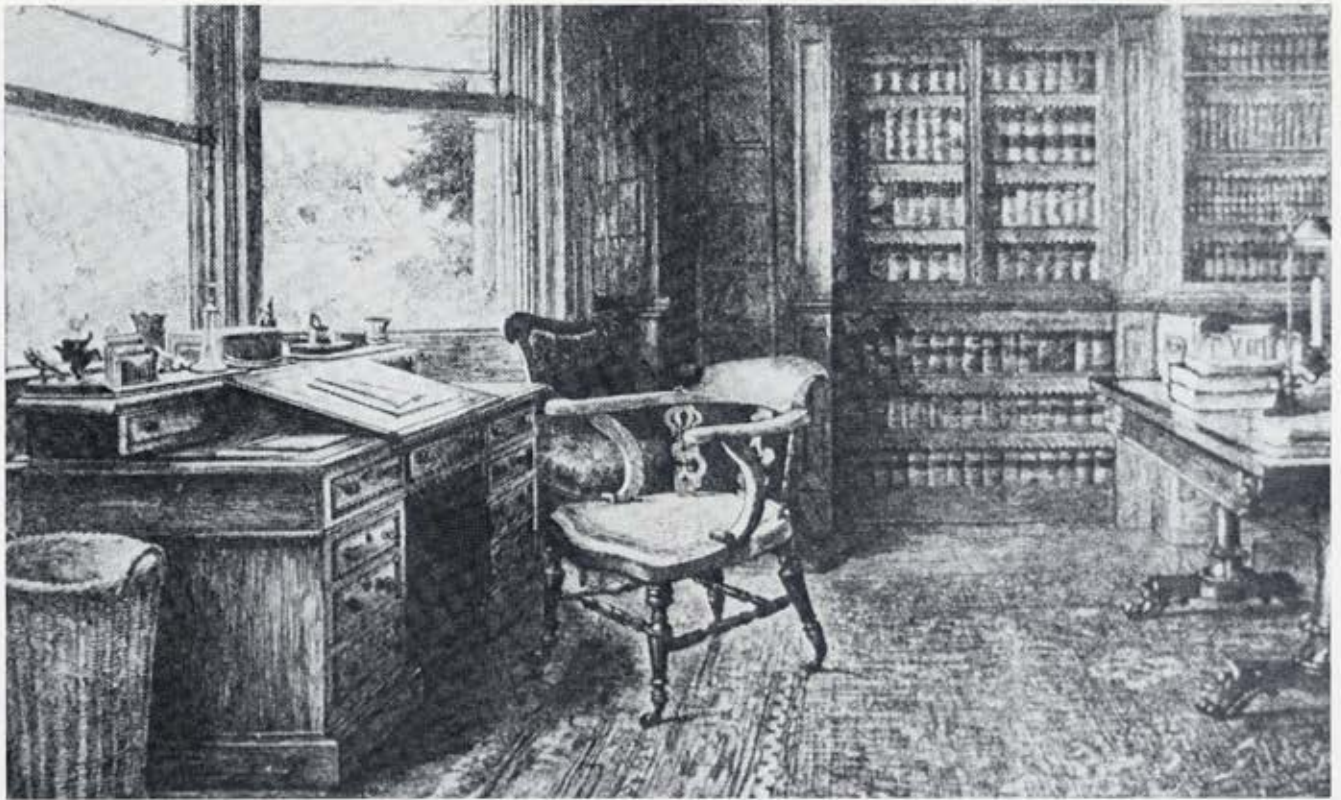


Fig. 1, Fildes, *The Empty Chair, Gad's Hill, June 9th, 1879*, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, Amsterdam (Hammacher, p. 36).

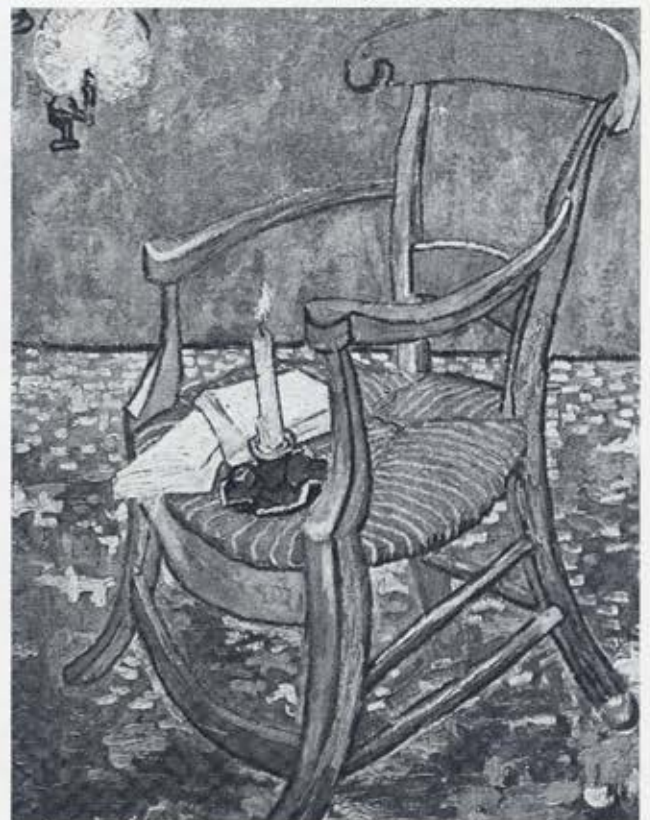


Fig. 2, Van Gogh, *Gauguin's Chair, Candle, and Books (The Empty Chair)*, Dec. 1888, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, Amsterdam (Hammacher, pl. 159).



Fig. 3. Van Gogh, *Self-portrait*, Sept. 1888, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge (Hammacher, pl. 140).



Fig. 4. Van Gogh, *Cypresses*, 1889 (Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum, New York).



Fig. 5, Van Gogh, *The Road-menders*, Dec. 1889 (Courtesy of the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.).



Fig. 6, Rousseau, *Landscape*, n.d. (photo: University of Miami, archives).



Fig. 7, Van Gogh, *Landscape*, 1889 (photo: University of Miami, archives).



Fig. 8, Van Gogh, *Stems*, 1889, collection V. Van Gogh, Laren (from W. Jos de Gruyter, *The World of Van Gogh*, New York, 1953, p. 74).



Fig. 9, Van Gogh, *Olive Trees*, Sept.-Oct., 1889 (Courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota).