



Letter to Theo, drawing on envelope,
March 1883

Van Gogh cannot resist drawing on an envelope addressed to Theo in March 1883. He was trying to convince his brother, who was actively supporting him, that he was making progress as an artist.

friend Anthon van Rappard just in case he should come in for some harsh criticism. Theo criticised Vincent as his brother and as an artist, passed comment on his behaviour as well as his work, and even contributed to the occasional silences between them – but he did not desert him. When his son was born at the beginning of 1889, he immediately posted a letter to Vincent: “As we told you at the time, we are going to name him after you, and I devoutly hope that he will be able to be as persevering and as courageous as you.”

Not only letter-writing drove van Gogh to extremes; it was simply not in his nature to do things by halves. When this late starter finally set out on the path to becoming a painter, for years he refused to do anything other than copy earlier artists and draw from nature, and time and again he diligently worked his way through his instruction manuals – even when his paper ran out.

Hardly any less enthusiastic, he spent years absorbed in the Bible, and later – no less painstakingly and systematically – he worked his way through the novels of the French Naturalists: Zola, Maupassant, Goncourt. He devoured them all, always in lively exchange with Theo: “Books, reality and art are one and the same thing for me.”

Almost always at odds with his – or rather Theo’s – means, van Gogh developed a fondness for collecting things that every once in a while prompted him to go on a

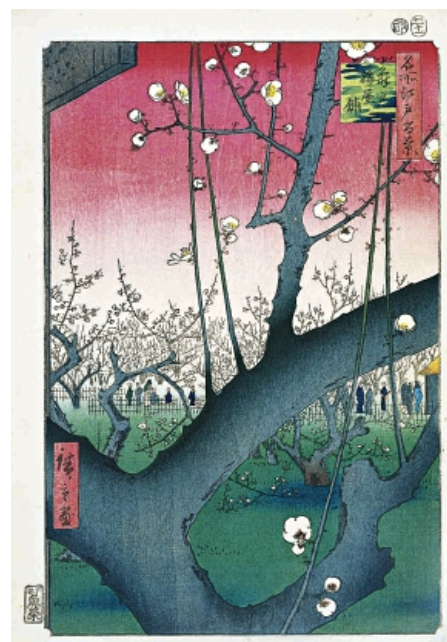


Flowering Plum Tree (after Hiroshige),
Summer 1887

spending spree. In 1889, he informed his brother that to continue studying he needed not just a few but “all the reproductions of Delacroix’s pictures that are still available at that shop where they sell, I think at a franc apiece, lithographs after other artists, ancient and modern.” By 1882, he had collected almost 1,000 woodcuts that were no less remarkable than his collection of Japanese prints. Barely able to stop himself writing, even on the items he had so eagerly collected, van Gogh at times released his pent-up energy by drawing along the sheet margins.

Van Gogh expressed his liking for Japanese art in his paintings in the style of Utagawa Hiroshige and Kesai Eisen. When living in Antwerp, he covered the walls of his room with ‘crêpes’ – just like Maupassant’s *Bel-Ami*. In Paris, where Japanese crêpe prints were popular in Impressionist circles, he even considered dealing in them. In his usual acquisitive style, he purchased vast numbers of them, barely able to tear himself away from the shops where they were on sale. Not only were the Impressionists ‘the Japanese of France’, Provence was his Japan!

Van Gogh’s road to becoming a painter could not take second place to such excesses. His examination of colour so completely preoccupied him for weeks on end that in his letters whole pages were covered in complementary colours. Just as the whole world was composed of nothing but Delacroix’s colour theories when he was studying



Hiroshige, **The Plum Garden at Kameido,**
1856



A Group of Cottages, May/June 1890

Opposite page
Self-Portrait in a Felt Hat, Spring 1886

In his first few months in Paris, van Gogh painted self-portraits to compensate for his lack of models. He spent a lot of time in his brother's apartment in front of the mirror and produced over twenty self-portraits.

them, van Gogh's short-term teacher Mauve was his one and all, with nothing and no one surpassing him.

Always dissatisfied and rarely happy with his work, he felt only a little of what he produced really worked; most of his works in oil he described as 'studies'. As if possessed, he produced prodigious numbers of pictures – in the two months he spent in Auvers around seventy paintings and thirty drawings alone.

Once something had entered van Gogh's head, he would not let it go. When his widowed cousin Kee became the object of his affections, he drove her whole family to despair with all his letters and visits – and presumably Theo, too, who was able, albeit a little later, to read all about it, down to the smallest

detail. And yet the whole thing was quite simple really: "... it is my intention / To love her so long / Till she'll love me in the end."

When he turned his back on the art trade as a way to earn a living, and began instead to study the Bible, he felt "it has seemed to me that there are no professions in the world other than those of schoolmaster and clergyman." What Vincent then pulled off as a minister's assistant in the coal-mining and industrial region of the Borinage was no less zealous. He not only ran Bible study classes and, possessed by self-sacrifice, tended the sick, but gradually gave away all his belongings until – in sackcloth and ashes, and dirtier than the miners around him – he ended up living in a hut.

It is little wonder, then, that even as a young man, van Gogh complained about sleeplessness, head and toothaches, an upset stomach, nervousness, emotional turmoil, panic attacks and nightmares. Stacks of letters and paintings testify to his phenomenal rate of work. Keeping Theo informed about his thoroughly unhealthy lifestyle, Vincent would often describe his meals to him – not always without a hint of reproach. Writing from Antwerp, he states that since the 1 May (he was writing in February of the following year) he had "not had a hot dinner more than perhaps six or seven times." It was not that Theo had not sent him any money; Vincent had just preferred to use it to pay his models. It is little wonder that Antwerp marks the first low point in the artist's health: he was at risk of losing ten of his teeth and he smoked to dull his hunger. In Provence, too, he paid little heed to his basic needs. At one point in Arles, he spent five days living







Crows in a Wheatfield, July 1890

Crows in a Wheatfield belongs to a series of large landscapes that van Gogh produced in the last weeks of his life in Auvers-sur-Oise. While Theo was happily embarking on family life in Paris, his brother roamed the wide, empty expanse of the surrounding countryside.



“mainly on twenty-three cups of coffee and bread.” These courses of ‘treatment’ were not solely responsible for the delusions from which he began to suffer in the south of France, but there is no doubt that they were of little benefit to his constitution. Whether there is more truth in the theory that it was syphilis, epilepsy, mental strain, excessive consumption of absinthe or problems with his neurotic development, remains to be clarified, but what is certain is that van Gogh suffered for years from fits that alternated with lengthy phases of complete lucidity. His attempts at poisoning himself with paraffin oil or paint during his convulsive attacks failed.

When he experienced no improvement after finally removing himself from what he came to regard as Provence’s dangerous sun, van Gogh put an end to his life in the north of France, even though there were no further indications of the sudden madness readily associated with him. Even at the outset of his career, he was fully aware of the hardships he faced: “The requirements are so great that at present painting seems like a military campaign, like a battle or war.”

Myths and legends about van Gogh’s life and work abounded shortly after his death. He was a lone wolf whose calls for artist friends went unheeded somewhere between dusty Brabant and the glaring sunlight of Provence; he was a misunderstood genius driven to madness by adverse circumstances. Such images about him still persist today. After all, they go so well with his work, starting – preferably at the end – with *Wheatfield with Crows*, a painting of deep foreboding that is presumed to be his last major work. Van Gogh’s short life has been the stuff of novels and screenplays; his pictures are found on coffee mugs and umbrellas. Devoid of success during his lifetime, here is an artist whose work is somehow familiar to everyone today and who, after his death, achieved a hitherto unknown degree of fame in the art world. Record sums for a madman’s sunflowers have regularly amazed us all and have only helped to distort the artist’s image still further. Is there any room for him among the appealing myths that the present is so mindful of cultivating? For a number of years, the popular image of the artist has slowly been changing, with a new figure gradually coming into view: ‘I, van Gogh’ – the artist seen through his own eyes.

Still Life: Vase with Twelve Sunflowers, August 1888

The colour yellow in the Mediterranean sun deeply impressed van Gogh. Before Paul Gauguin’s long-awaited arrival in Arles, he enthusiastically spent time on a decorative scheme – ‘a symphony in blue and yellow’ – for the house they would share. Van Gogh painted faster than ever before to capture the splendour of the sunflowers before they started to wilt.

mon cher Theo Bien merci de la lettre que m'a
fait bien plaisir arrivant tout juste au moment
où j'étais encore abêti par le soleil et la
tension de mener une assez grande toile
j'ai un nouveau dessin d'un jardin plein
de fleurs, j'en ai également deux études
peintes

Je dois t'envoyer une nouvelle commande
de toiles de couleurs assez importante
seulement elle n'est point pressée
ce qui à la rigueur serait pressé servir plutôt
la toile va que j'ai un tas de ~~toiles~~ de charpis
dont j'ai détaché les études et ou entre temps
je dois remettre d'autres toiles.



ciel bleu vert maisons
blanches à toit rouge cyprès
laurier rose et figuier
laureles

} bande blanc et jaunichou
- bande violette
} bande Orange et vert
} bleu et vert, jaune

} à gauche fleurs rouges à droite
vigne

A Letter-Writer and his Brother

Vincent's earliest exchange of letters with Theo was in August 1872. His younger brother often meant the world to him and it was to him that the artist addressed his very last letter. On some days, Vincent posted two letters to Theo, such as in April 1882 when he needed to clarify an important issue: "And what am I? Only a man who has difficult, trying work to do, for which he needs peace and quiet and some sympathy; otherwise the work is impossible."

Van Gogh's handwriting varies between the fastidiously neat and the utterly chaotic, and he also flits back and forth from one language to another. Even as a young man, van Gogh had a good command of English and French besides his mother tongue. In the heat of the moment – both in his letters and during conversations – he also resorted to his excellent Esperanto. He wrote the majority of his letters in Dutch, but in Arles he switched to French; some of his letters to Theo he also wrote in English. He underlined some things, scored other things out, signed off in between and picked up where he left off. He rarely used pencil, preferring instead to fill both sides of his cheap paper with ink.

Especially during the early years of their correspondence, an over eager van Gogh, who was equally lacking in moderation with regard to the Bible, would copy out pages and pages of theological explanations, quotations from the Bible and even whole hymnbooks for the edification of his brother and friends.

In the early days, the voice of big brother – at times older than his years – comes across in van Gogh's letters. He recommends books for Theo to read, foremost among them his beloved Zola whose works he described as 'healthy fare'. He is eager to guide Theo in his art education, and advises him on all manner of things ranging from the benefits of being a regular gallery-goer to medical advice: "Theo, again I urge you to smoke

Opposite page
Letter to Theo, 19 July 1888

Garden with Flowers, July 1888



Avez vous aussi vu les oliviers ? maintenant
j'ai un portrait du Dr Gachet à expression
navrée de notre temps. Si vous voulez quelque
chose comme vous disiez de votre Christ au
jardin des oliviers pas destiné à être compris
mais enfin là jusque là je vous suis et
mon père saisit bien cette nuance.

J'ai encore de là bas un cypri avec une étoile.



un demi-ciel - un ciel de nuit avec
une lune sans éclat dans à peine le
croissant mince émergeant de l'ombre
projetée opaque de la terre - une étoile
à éclat exagéré, si vous voulez, éclat doux
de rose et vert dans le ciel outremer.
ou couronné des nuages. En bas
une route bordée de hautes cannes
deuxième ligne des ^{bois} atpines bleues
à terre illuminées orange
une vieille auberge et un très haut
Cypri tout droit tout sombre.
Sur la route une voiture jaune attelée
d'un cheval blanc et deux promeneurs
attardés. Très romantique
si vous voulez mais aussi je crois

de la Provence. Probablement je graverai à l'eau forte celle là
et d'autres tous les paysages et motifs souvenirs de Provence alors
je me ferai une fête ~~par~~ de vous en donner un tout un
résumé un peu voulu et étudié. Mon père dit que Daubigny
qui fait les lithographies d'après Monticelli a trouvé bien
la tête d'Arlesienne en question

