



the treasures of
**vincent
vanGogh**



CORNELIA HOMBURG



ANDRE
DEUTSCH

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PREVIOUS PAGE Van Gogh's copy of flowering plum trees from a print by the Japanese artist Hiroshige (detail).

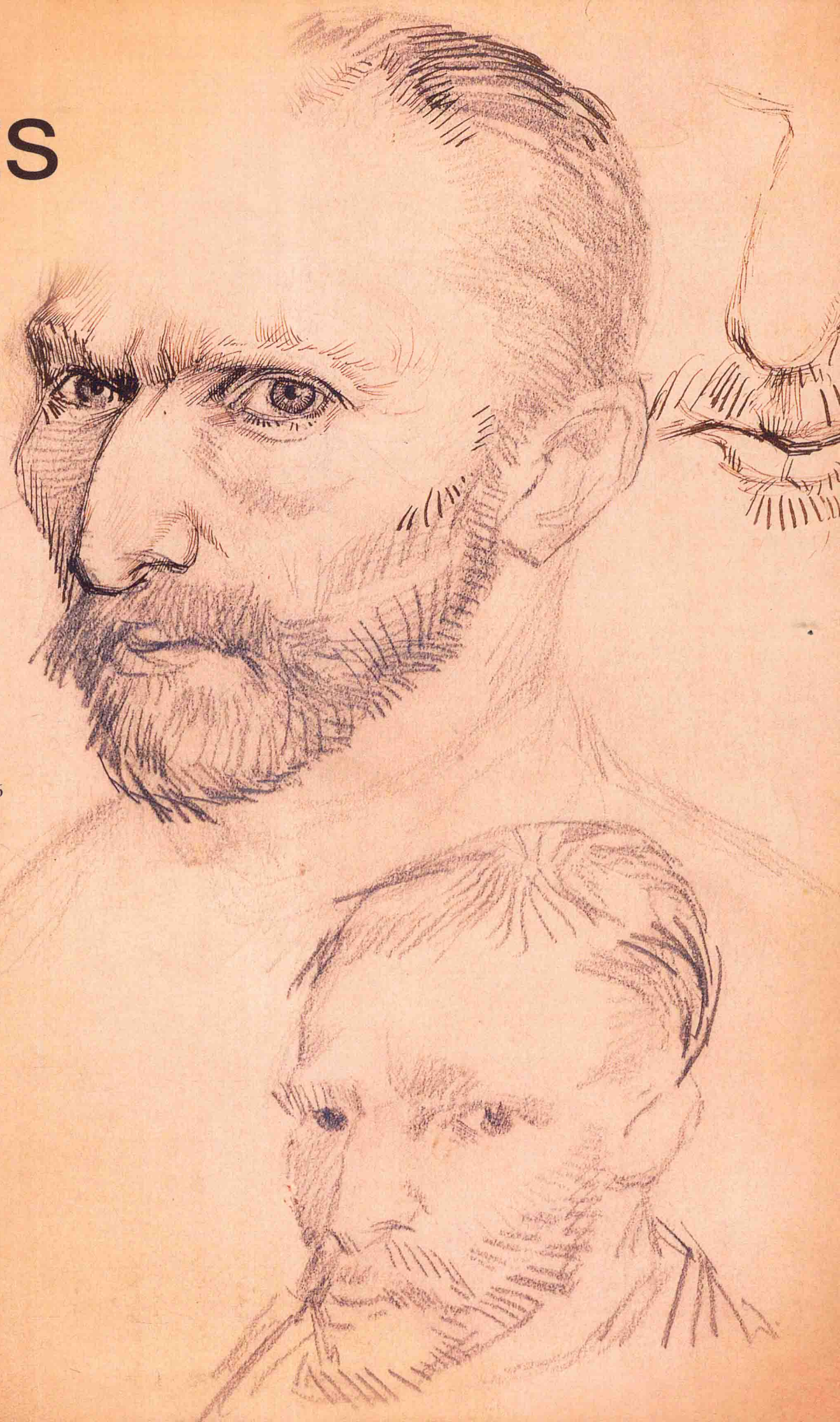
RIGHT Van Gogh painted these pine trees against an evening sky at the end of 1889 in Saint-Rémy.

OPPOSITE PAGE A sheet of drawn self-portraits that van Gogh executed in Paris.



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Introduction

As an artist, Vincent van Gogh was a late starter at the age of 27. He was largely self-taught, learning from books and artists' manuals or from conversations with other painters. But his earlier training as an art dealer, his temporary infatuation with religion and his deep, lifelong interest in literature also had a profound influence on his work. He was fluent in several languages, capable of recalling the paintings he had seen in amazing detail, and he read an impressive number of books. Van Gogh generally preferred the country life, but was well aware that he needed contacts with other artists and art dealers in the city, in particular Paris, to find an audience for his work. Throughout his career, he worked with extraordinary intensity, often focusing on specific topics or groups of works to explore an idea or an artistic concept. He was deeply inspired by the beauty of the countryside or by the people that he encountered, but when he transformed what he saw into his paintings or drawings, he generally did so with a specific conception.

For the public at large, facts such as these are often overshadowed by the famous dramatic events in van Gogh's life: his nervous breakdown at the end of 1888 during which he cut off part of his ear, his subsequent year-long stay

in a mental asylum and his suicide in the summer of 1890. These circumstances have been dramatized and have led to the popular image of a mad genius who worked in isolation to create his emotionally high-strung art. This perspective severely limits an understanding of the depth and seriousness of van Gogh's work. It also ignores his many connections in the art world and his solid commitment to modern art. The painter strove to create an oeuvre that both

reflected the modern times he was part of and which would continue to have an impact beyond his own life. Especially after his move to France in 1886, he made friends with many other avant-garde artists while at the same time forging a body of work that was uniquely his own. His extraordinary use of colour and his distinctive style of painting were radically new at the time and had a vast effect on the art of the

twentieth century. His approach to art became known through the publication of his numerous letters, which provide fascinating insights into his manner of working, his personal experiences and many of his pictures.

This book presents van Gogh's life and work by exploring his ideas and the central themes of his oeuvre. The facsimiles included provide a glimpse of the world that van Gogh lived in and the thoughts he expressed in his letters. The publication is intended for all those who would like to gain access to the richness of his art.

CORNELIA HOMBURG



ABOVE For this still life of 1887 van Gogh even painted the frame yellow. It was a present for his brother Theo.

OPPOSITE Towards the end of his stay in Arles, in the spring of 1889, van Gogh painted this avenue of flowering chestnut trees.



Prelude



ABOVE A photograph of Vincent aged 16 when he was working as an apprentice art dealer in The Hague.

It was only at the age of 27 that Vincent van Gogh decided to become an artist – and he did so with some hesitation, having tried out a number of careers without success.

Born on 30 March 1853 as the oldest of six children to Anna Cornelia Carpentus and Theodorus van Gogh, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, at the age of 15, Vincent was placed as an apprentice art dealer in the firm of his uncle Vincent van Gogh in The Hague, a branch of the prestigious Parisian gallery Goupil & Cie. The young van Gogh was eager to learn about the business and about art. He visited museums and exhibitions, read art journals and began to collect reproduction prints of famous works of art. He learned about the importance of seventeenth-century Dutch art and of the contemporary painters of The Hague School, as well as about the recognized French artists of the nineteenth century. Things went well and van Gogh was soon moved to the firm's offices in London (1873) and then Paris (1875).

During that time, his letters begin to reflect an increasing interest in religious topics and are filled with biblical and moralizing quotations.

His commitment to his work suffered and at the beginning of 1876 he lost his job. Looking for work in a new direction, he found a position as an assistant teacher in England, first at Ramsgate in Kent, then at Isleworth near London, where he soon joined the school of the Reverend Thomas Slade-Jones who allowed him to become active in his church as well. Van Gogh taught at the Sunday School and, after some months, preached his first sermon. He was very excited about this opportunity and copied the lengthy sermon for his brother Theo in one of his letters to him. Despite this new focus, Vincent continued to be interested in art – even in his sermon he made references to paintings he admired such as *Godspeed!* by the British artist George Henry Boughton. He visited museums, stayed in contact with friends from his art-dealing days and collected prints.

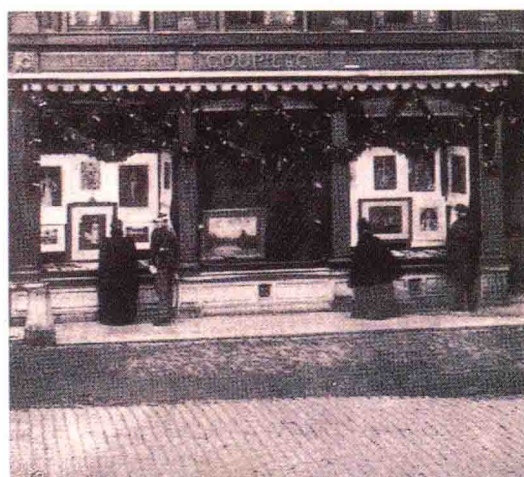
Most probably due to his meagre income in England, van Gogh became a clerk in a bookshop in Dordrecht in the south-west of Holland at the beginning of 1877. This did not work out, however, as he focused all his energies on reading the Bible and expressed his wish to follow in his father's footsteps and become a minister. He moved to



ABOVE A juvenile drawing of the Lange Vijverberg in The Hague, not far from the gallery where van Gogh worked.



ABOVE A letter to Theo written on the Goupil letterhead with a sketch of London after a painting by de Nittis that was for sale in the gallery.



GOUPIL & CIE

The art gallery Goupil & Cie was a prestigious name in nineteenth-century Paris. Specializing in the sale of reproductions of famous works of art, it opened branches in several major European cities. In the 1860s, the owners joined forces with Vincent van Gogh, the uncle of Theo and Vincent, who had established a thriving art business with paintings and drawings in The Hague. Both brothers began their careers in this gallery. Uncle "Cent" retired from the business in 1878. In 1884, a change in ownership led to the new name Boussod, Valadon & Cie, successeurs de Goupil & Cie.



Amsterdam to prepare for his entrance exams for university, but soon found the prospect of many years of theoretical study too daunting and gave up. Instead, he attended a three-month-long trial at a training school for missionaries near Brussels. Failing the course, he went off on his own to the Borinage, a poor mining district in the southern, French-speaking part of Belgium. He obtained an appointment as a preacher for six months to work with the coal miners. During this time, he carried his religious convictions to the extreme, giving away his belongings and living in poverty to share the life and misery of the miners. This behaviour did not recommend him to his superiors, and in the summer of 1879 his contract was not extended.

Van Gogh continued to work independently for a while, but soon became depressed. He was lonely, without prospects, and had no idea of what to do next, and he seems to have lost much of his religious fervour. When he began writing to Theo again in 1880, after a long silence, his letters were no longer filled with religious quotations; instead, he reported that he was making drawings of the miners and the countryside. He was not sure what to do with this activity, but wrote to Theo that he was longing for the "land of pictures". It was his brother who suggested that he become an artist and, after some initial hesitation, Vincent decided to try, and set out on the final career of his life.

ABOVE An early drawing of miners in the Borinage created at the time van Gogh decided to become an artist. It shows how difficult he found representing figures at that time.

BELOW A painting of the Borinage mining district of 1880–82 by the Belgian painter C. Meunier.



THEO VAN GOGH

Theo was four years younger than Vincent. He followed in his brother's footsteps and began his apprenticeship as an art dealer in 1873. At the end of 1879, he was transferred to Paris where he then became the manager of the Montmartre branch of Goupil & Cie. When Theo had achieved some level of financial security, he began to support his brother and enabled him to pursue his career as an artist. The two brothers began writing letters to each other at a young age, and Theo kept most of his brother's writings, which provide an extraordinary insight into the life and work of the artist.

ENCLOSURES

1. Van Gogh's birth was registered in the district of Zundert in the Southern Netherlands where the van Gogh family lived in 1853. (See Translations booklet, page 5.)
2. Van Gogh filled several albums with poems which he copied from a variety of authors. These are pages from one of them, which he made for his brother Theo.
3. In 1876, working for the Reverend Slade-Jones in Isleworth, near London, van Gogh was allowed to deliver a sermon, an event of great importance for him. He copied the text in a letter to his brother. (See Translations booklet, page 5.)

Beginnings as an Artist

Once he had decided to become an artist, van Gogh pursued his career with the same zeal that he had previously channelled into his missionary activities. Familiar with traditional patterns of training from his art-dealing days, he began by drawing two-dimensional models. He asked Theo to send him prints of compositions by Jean-François Millet and other artists that he admired. He also copied all the sheets in Charles Bargue's *Cours de Dessin*, a large portfolio which he borrowed from his former employer in The Hague. And he began studying artists' manuals

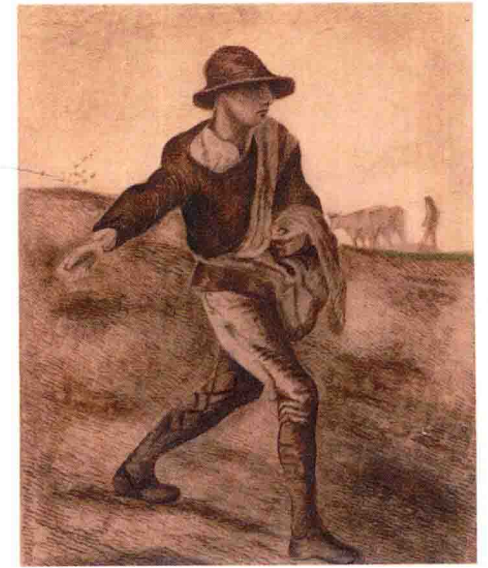


and books about technique, a type of study he would continue until the end of his life and which would constitute his main form of education.

In the autumn of 1880, van Gogh went to Brussels to meet other artists, and possibly to follow some classes at the art academy. There, he met the young Dutch painter Anton van Rappard who had already pursued more formal studies and who gave him some advice. Sometimes, van Gogh worked in his studio and the two became friends. As life in Brussels was expensive, Vincent decided in the spring of 1881 to move back into the home of his parents who lived in Etten, a village in Brabant. He continued his copying exercises, but also worked from life models whenever possible. He studied figures engaged in various tasks in the open air and he portrayed household activities, following models popular in the nineteenth century.

Van Gogh remained in Etten until the end of 1882 when yet another argument with his parents, for whom he was not easy to live with, prompted him to leave for The Hague. He had contemplated this move for a while. A group of landscape painters, known as The Hague School had gathered there, and van Gogh had earlier been to the studio of one of them, Anton Mauve. Having been received kindly then, he hoped once

LEFT One of the earliest still life paintings by van Gogh, executed while he was receiving lessons from Anton Mauve.



ABOVE In one of his earliest drawings van Gogh copied *The Sower* by Jean-François Millet.

BELOW LEFT One of several potato still lifes that van Gogh painted in 1884 and 1885. Its dark tones hide the fact that the artist experimented with colour contrast at the time, here red and green.



THE HAGUE SCHOOL

During the 1870s, The Hague became known as the centre of a group of artists who focused on the depiction of the Dutch countryside. These painters sought their motifs primarily in the rural surroundings of the city, portraying the nearby seashore, pastures with grazing cattle and the windmills and canals so typical of Holland. Inspired by the Dutch landscape painters of the seventeenth century and the nineteenth-century French artists working in Barbizon, the painters of The Hague School became famous for their lyrical representation of everyday life, often cast in the grey, luminous atmosphere that characterized their country.

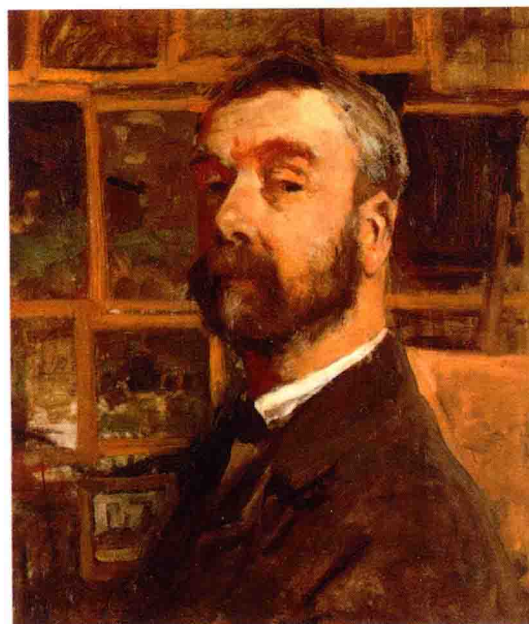


OPPOSITE A letter sketch with the perspective frame which helped the artist to grasp the relative measurements of a landscape.

ABOVE The beach at Scheveningen close to The Hague where van Gogh went to paint with other artists of the Hague School.

more for a welcome, paired with the opportunity to receive some lessons in painting. Mauve agreed and van Gogh reported to Theo: "Well, the next day we put up a still life and he began by telling me, 'This is the way to keep your palette.' And since then I've made a few painted studies...." (Letter 164.) These first paintings show traditional arrangements of bottles, bowls and other objects that would have been readily available at Mauve's. During the next few years, still life would serve the artist primarily as an exercise to try out compositional arrangements or the use of colour. It also reflected van Gogh's preference for common objects, such as earthen pots, clogs, or vegetables and fruits available in the countryside.

Through Mauve, van Gogh was introduced to other artists of The Hague School, especially the younger generation with whom he went painting in the surrounding countryside. The dunes, the beach, and the old fishing village of Scheveningen – The Hague's connection to the North Sea – offered manifold motifs. Van Gogh found that working with a perspective frame helped him enormously to grasp the proportions of a motif, in particular a vast land- or seascape. Under the influence of his fellow painters, with whom he could discuss his favourite artists and ideas, his style became gradually more fluid, and he worked in the tonal values that were favoured by his colleagues.



ANTON MAUVE (1838–88)

Mauve was a well-known member of The Hague School who helped found the Dutch Drawing Society and who was secretary to the influential artists' association, Pulchri Studio. He gained enormous success with paintings of the flocks of sheep that roamed the dunes and sandy paths around The Hague, and portrayed a great variety of people and animals in the countryside. Van Gogh was particularly impressed by his depictions of horses hauling fishing boats onto the beach of Scheveningen. Mauve, married to a cousin of Vincent, was very helpful to him early on, introducing him to other artists and enabling him to attend free life-drawing sessions at Pulchri Studio.

Local types

Van Gogh's time in The Hague was marked by intense work and emotional turmoil. Apart from learning how to paint, the artist focused on drawing figures. Inspired by popular magazine illustrations that he had first come to appreciate in London, he set out to create a body of work which he might offer to publishers. *The Graphic* had published a series of artworks called "Heads of the People", which presented images of workers, such as miners or sailors, a typology that led van Gogh to produce his own series of local types. He chose his models among the inhabitants of old pensioners' homes, local workers and the poor. "My ideal is to work with more and more models, quite a herd of poor peoples to whom the

studio would be a kind of harbour or refuge on winter days..." van Gogh wrote. (Letter 278.) Intending this work to be available to the common people, he made a group of lithographs. He was delighted when he heard that the employees of the lithography workshop wanted to display one of his images.

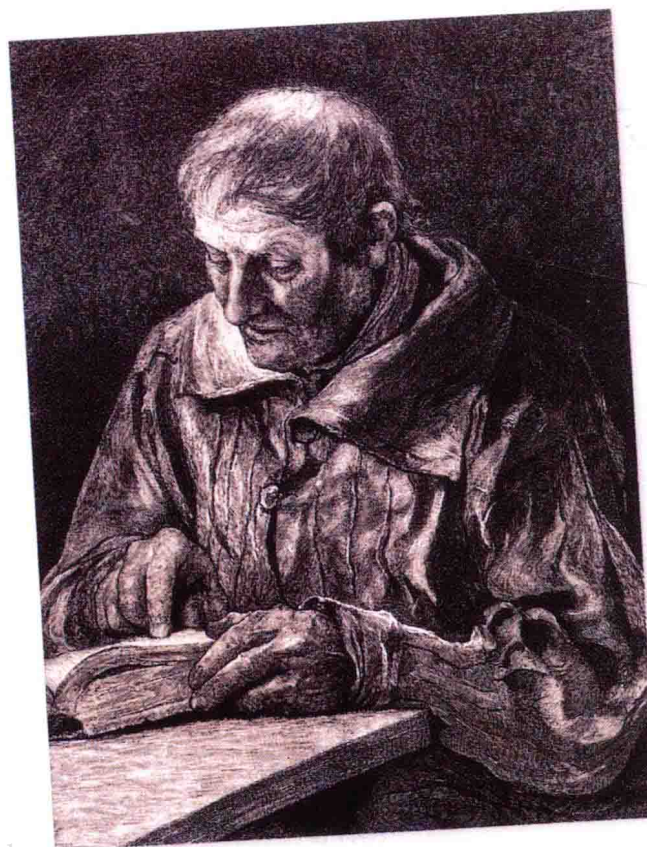
Among the people who posed for him was Sien Hoornik, a single mother who was pregnant with a second child and who earned her livelihood as a prostitute. Lonely, longing for a family and recognizing the opportunity to have a model available to him at all times, van Gogh took her into his home. He could thus extend his compassion to a person in need and, at the same time, imagine that he had a real family around him. He wrote to Theo, "It is a strong and powerful emotion which grips a man when he sits beside the woman he loves with a baby in the cradle near them." (Letter 213.) Vincent even sat by Sien's bed when she was in hospital for the birth of her child and the tenderness he felt is visible in his drawings of the children. Van Gogh drew Sien many times, clothed and in the nude, showing her with her children and working in the household, but also portraying her in independent poses. These compositions show her as a plain, haggard woman. Van Gogh was not looking for beauty, but for the common, even ugly, as long as it was true to life.

The relationship brought him into serious conflict with his family, and Anton Mauve refused to have any contact with him. Life was getting complicated, not only because in the long run van Gogh could not support a family on the allowance he

LEFT One of the impressive, large-sized lithographs that van Gogh made depicting working men, here a labourer taking a lunch break.



ABOVE This drawing reflects some of the tenderness van Gogh felt towards the children of Sien Hoornik.



"HEADS OF THE PEOPLE"

While living in London in the 1870s, van Gogh discovered the illustrations artists made for journals like *The Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News*. He collected images by artists such as Hubert von Herkomer, Luke Fildes and Frank Holl, which he felt had "something noble" and "serious sentiment" (Letter 240), especially the series "Heads of the People" in *The Graphic*, which portrayed members of the working classes. They captured van Gogh's interest and served as a major source of inspiration for him once he had decided to become an artist. Over the years he amassed a collection of about 1,600 prints that are now part of the collection of the Van Gogh Museum.



ABOVE Van Gogh drew his companion Sien many times. Here she is sitting by the fireplace smoking a cigar.

A FIRST COMMISSION

In 1882, C M van Gogh, one of the three art-dealer brothers of Vincent's father, commissioned Vincent to make some drawings of The Hague. Vincent was delighted and set about the task with much effort and enthusiasm. Unfortunately, his uncle was not very pleased with the result, most probably because the drawings were too unorthodox in terms of technique – the artist freely mixed various media – and because the images were not as picturesque as his uncle had hoped, but showed too much interest in the working-class aspects of the city.



received from Theo, but also because he realized that the relationship could not last in any meaningful way, especially since Sien was reverting to her old habits. In the end, van Gogh decided to leave The Hague for the province of Drenthe in the north-east of The Netherlands. In summertime it was a pleasant environment where artists went to paint, but now in the autumn of 1883, it was cold and desolate. Van Gogh spent three lonely months there, finding it difficult to get hold of painters' materials, and with few contacts among the rural population. It was a time of reorientation that made him realize that he preferred the rural environment to life in the city.

BELOW This man who lived in an old pensioners' home served van Gogh repeatedly as a model. The painter had collected a variety of clothes in which he dressed his models to create a specific type.



The Rural Landscape of Brabant



ABOVE Van Gogh depicted the old church tower in Nuenen repeatedly. This was a particularly important painting for him.



ABOVE Van Gogh painted the *Still Life with Bible* after the death of his father, making reference to his relationship with him.

In December 1883, after his sojourn in Drenthe, van Gogh went once more to live with his parents. Their home was now in Nuenen, where his father had become the head of the small congregation of the Reformed Church in an otherwise Catholic population. Relations between the artist and his parents were strained and continued to be so during the time he lived with them. In the rural community Vincent's interests and way of living were unusual, to say the least, and he made little effort to take into account his parents' preferences. The painter dressed like a peasant, preferred to spend his time with the rural workers instead of his family's acquaintances, and often behaved strangely in their eyes. He read modern books, particularly French novels that were considered amoral, and developed an increasingly critical attitude towards the church. All this led to frequent altercations, especially with his father. After the Reverend van Gogh died unexpectedly in March 1885, Vincent reflected upon their relationship in a number of compositions. In *Still life with Bible* the artist juxtaposed the heavy family Bible with a small paperback novel by Emile Zola, one of his favourite authors. The much-thumbed copy of *Joie de Vivre* with its bright yellow cover contrasts sharply with the ponderous, dark Bible, commenting on the distance between the allegiances of the father and the son's preference for modern literature and unconventional ways of life.

Apart from difficulties with his family, van Gogh was delighted by the rural landscape of Brabant where the changing seasons dominated the year's rhythm and provided new motifs. The natural beauty of his surroundings appealed to his romantic side, which he expressed eloquently in his letters and found reflected in the poems that he copied for his brother and friends. In those years the artist appreciated in particular the autumn with its golden light and coloured leaves. The views across the fields, or along a tree-lined road, also recalled for him famous examples of seventeenth-century Dutch painting. Since his art-dealing days van Gogh had become well versed in the art of his forefathers. He would have been inspired by both a motif seen in nature as well as existing compositions, such as the celebrated *Lane at Middelharnis* (1689) by Meindert Hobbema in the National Gallery in London. In fact, he even mentioned the painting in the autumn of 1884 when he advised his brother on what to see in London.

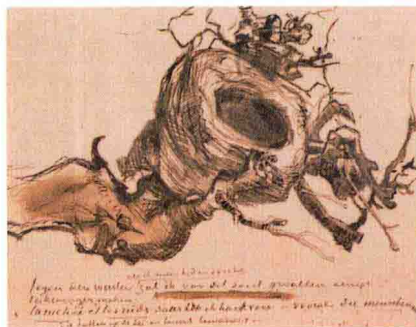


ANTON VAN RAPPARD (1858–92)

The Dutch painter van Rappard began his training at the Academy in Amsterdam in 1876 and continued his studies in Paris, and then in Brussels, where van Gogh met him in the autumn of 1880. They became friends and stayed in touch until the summer of 1885. The two artists were in frequent contact by letter, visited each other and worked together. They exchanged books and helped one another with technical and aesthetic questions. On several occasions, van Rappard inspired van Gogh to investigate a particular motif such as a series of peasant heads in the autumn of 1884. Van Gogh's letters to his friend provide fascinating insight into his thinking and artistic development at the time.

Many of van Gogh's paintings reflect his somewhat nostalgic appreciation for the traditional life in the countryside which he considered the "real life", unspoilt by modern ideas or technical advances. He loved the old cottages with thatched roofs, the humble dwellings of the poor rural workers that represented for him the true countryside. He compared them to birds' nests, cosy places in which a family was kept together, cared for and safe. An old church tower with a cemetery in the fields of Nuenen also fuelled his imagination. It was slated for demolition and van Gogh witnessed the sale of the crosses and other materials. He executed a number of compositions depicting the tower: "I wanted to express what a simple thing death and burial is, just as simple as the falling of an autumn leaf – just a bit of earth dug up – a wooden cross." (Letter 411.)

In addition to painting, van Gogh made great strides with his drawing during that time. He created a number of large-sized presentation drawings of extraordinary beauty, which reflect his growing technical skill and the seriousness with which he regarded the medium. His friend van Rappard admired them very much and van Gogh sent them to him so that he could show them to other people, but to his disappointment, there were no buyers.



ABOVE Van Gogh collected and depicted many birds' nests like this one in Brabant.

RIGHT Van Gogh liked to paint simple huts with thatched roofs. For him, they represented a typical aspect of rural life.



LEFT This large detailed drawing of the parsonage garden in Nuenen testifies to van Gogh's extraordinary accomplishment as a draughtsman.

BELOW The painting by Meindert Hobbema that van Gogh had admired in London.



ENCLOSURES

1. Van Gogh was fascinated by the old church tower in the fields outside Nuenen and depicted it repeatedly. As it was slated for demolition, its pieces were sold off by the municipality. Van Gogh witnessed the sale from which this is one of the bills. (See Translations booklet, page 5.)
2. In the Netherlands, van Gogh exchanged many letters with the artist Anton van Rappard in which they discussed their work and ideas. In this one he included several poems which he copied for his friend. (See Translations booklet, page 5.)
3. Van Gogh depicted these pages from the family bible in his *Still life with Bible* to comment on his relationship with his father.

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY DUTCH ART

The nineteenth century witnessed a great revival of interest in Dutch art of the seventeenth century. Political debates about democratic reforms were fed by ideas about the Dutch republic of the seventeenth century and a renewed focus on landscape painting brought about an admiration on an international level for the achievements of the earlier period. Van Gogh knew the work of seventeenth-century Dutch painters well and used it as a point of reference from the beginning of his career. His appreciation was stimulated by his reading, in particular by Thoré-Bürger's two volumes on *Les Musées de la Hollande* which was widely read in the nineteenth century.

Peasant Painter

Even more than on the landscape, van Gogh focused on the people working the land. He considered the peasant to be the human being most closely related to the earth and the cycle of the seasons and, as such, the symbol of life in the country. The artist was ambitious to make a name for himself as a painter of peasants, following in the footsteps of French painters, such as Jean-François Millet or Jules Breton, whom he admired deeply for their depiction of peasant life and who had become very famous for it.

Van Gogh was well placed to observe rural activities, such as the planting of potatoes, the sowing and harvesting of wheat, or the ploughing of fields. He made numerous studies on the spot, noting down how an activity was done, and then followed them up by having a model pose for him in the studio. In addition to drawn and painted studies of individual models, he tried to compose canvases with multiple figures engaged in work.



ABOVE Van Gogh made detailed figure studies of peasants such as this woman gleaning. It was most probably executed with a model in the studio.

ABOVE RIGHT The artist represented peasants at work in the Dutch countryside, such as this woman digging potatoes. Many of these drawings were made from a figure posing in the studio, which was then incorporated in a landscape.



JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET (1814–75)

Born as the son of a peasant in Normandy, Millet showed such promise as a student that he received a stipend to train as an artist in Paris. In 1849, he moved to the village of Barbizon, where he began to focus on the representation of the rural environment and the life of the peasant. During the 1850s, some of his paintings, such as *Man with a Hoe*, were initially seen as social criticism, but many of his images of country life were admired and collected. In van Gogh's eyes, Millet was one of the greatest artists, both for his choice of subject matter and for the way he portrayed it. He copied Millet's compositions for exercise and tried to emulate the painter in his own work.



JULES BRETON (1827–1906)

Breton pursued his early training at the academies of Ghent and Antwerp in Belgium before continuing in Paris. Born in northern rural France, he lived there most of his life and often represented this part of the country in his work. In the 1850s, Breton began to dedicate himself to the depiction of peasant life and his work garnered fame quickly. Contrary to some of Millet's compositions, which emphasized the peasant's toil, Breton's canvases celebrated the work of the fields and presented it in a charming, often sentimental manner. Van Gogh greatly admired Breton's paintings; he even tried to visit the artist in his studio in northern France in 1880.

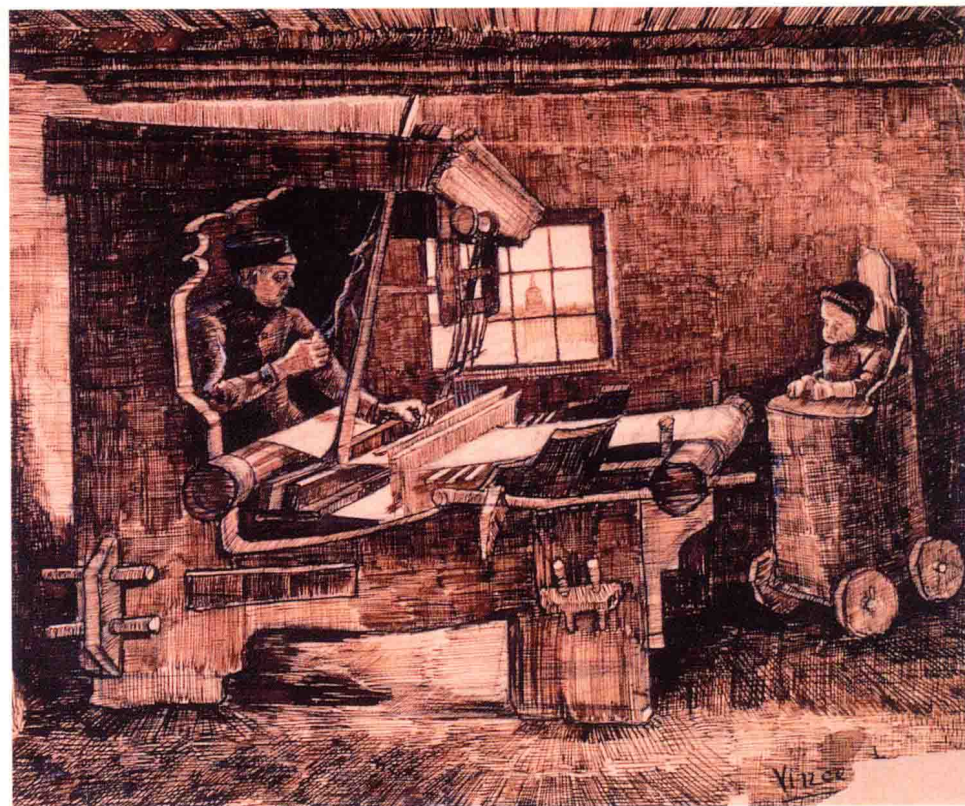
Many rural labourers augmented their income by working at the spinning wheel or the loom in their homes when their presence was not required in the fields. Van Gogh regarded weaving as an essential aspect of traditional rural activity, happily ignoring all modern developments and the industrialization of the weaving industry that had also been introduced in Brabant by the end of the nineteenth century. Van Gogh preferred to show the old hand-operated looms, ideally those that were already centuries old. For these compositions, he went into the homes of people, but often the spaces were so small that he could not sit far enough away from the machine to represent its proportions correctly. Also, the figure of the weaver was difficult to portray; he wrote to his friend van Rappard, "But what I wanted to express by it was just this: 'When that monstrous black thing of grimed oak with all those sticks is seen in such a sharp contrast to the greyish atmosphere in which it stands, then there in the centre of it sits a black ape or goblin or spook that clatters with those sticks from early morning till late at night.' And I indicated that spot by putting in some sort of apparition of a weaver, by means of a few scratches and blots, where I had seen it sitting. Consequently I hardly gave a thought to the proportions of the arms and legs." (Letter R44.)

In most of his depictions, van Gogh focused on the complicated machinery with a man working in the middle. Sometimes, he made reference to the weaver's household by including a spinning wheel which would have been used by another member of the family. He even introduced a high-chair with a little child whom the father had to watch while pursuing his work.

When van Gogh depicted the working conditions of these people – be it at home or in the fields – he did not intend to criticize their hard lot. Quite the contrary, he felt sympathy for their life and wanted to celebrate it in his paintings as something that had to be cherished and remembered, since it could soon disappear.



ABOVE Van Gogh was fascinated by the complicated structure of the looms that filled the largest part of a room in a peasant's hut.



LEFT This detailed drawing shows a weaver at work in his home. The child in its highchair and the church tower visible through the window suggest solid family traditions.

The Potato Eaters



ABOVE One of van Gogh's many drawings in preparation for *The Potato Eaters*. The profile shows that he exaggerated the rough features of his models.

In his focus on peasant figures, van Gogh became increasingly ambitious and wanted to create a more complex painting, one that would show his mastery of the subject matter. He chose a multi-figure composition, a large-sized painting that celebrated the essence of peasant life. Van Gogh decided to portray a family who had gathered for their simple evening meal after a hard day's work, having seen examples of such scenes by other nineteenth-century artists, such as the Dutch painter Jozef Israëls.

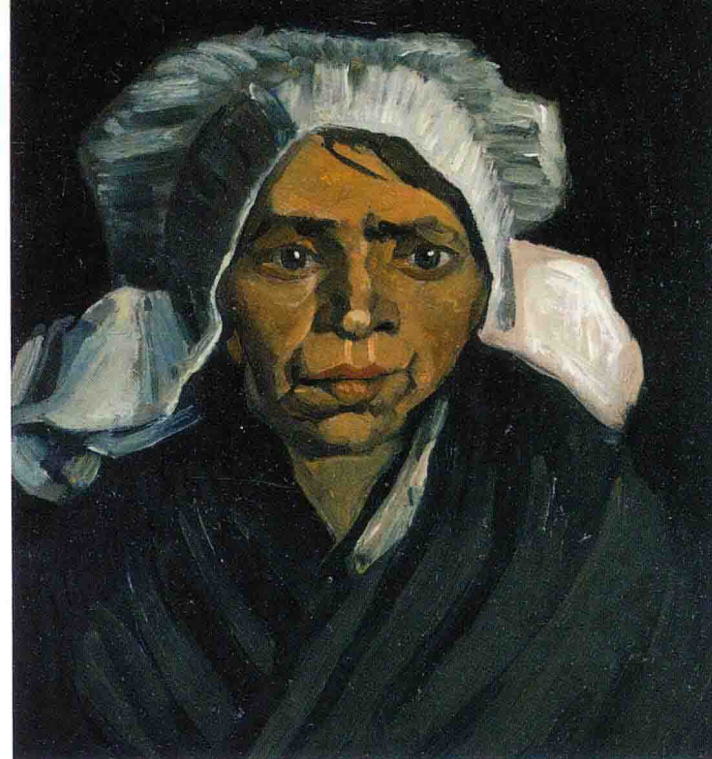
Van Gogh embarked upon this project with a vast number of preparatory studies. By the autumn of 1884, he had begun to paint and draw the heads of peasants, which was useful preparation for his masterwork. He also made studies of hands, and tried out various versions of people sitting round a table or doing household chores. He had befriended a family who gave him access to their home where he could study the interior and the family at table. Van Gogh was also looking for a special light effect and experimented with placing the figures against a window, but in the end he chose a centred arrangement in the hut with a lamp lighting the scene from above.

Van Gogh wanted to express the toil of the peasant in the manner in which he represented his figures, in the application of paint, and in the colours he used. As he explained to his brother,



JOZEF ISRAËLS (1824–1911)

After early studies in The Netherlands, Israëls continued his training in Paris. There, he discovered the open-air paintings of the Barbizon artists. In 1872, he settled in The Hague where he was president of the Pulchri Studio from 1875–78. Israëls was generally considered the most prominent member of The Hague School and his genre scenes of daily life were enormously successful on the international art market. Van Gogh admired Israëls greatly and studied his use of light and tonal gradations of colour. He was inspired by Israëls' paintings depicting a labourer's family gathering for their meal round a table, when he undertook his own composition of *The Potato Eaters*. He would have seen several such compositions at Goupil & Cie where Israëls' work was sold.



ABOVE This portrait stands out because of the intense gaze of the woman. The painting reflects van Gogh's interest in light and dark contrast at the time.



ABOVE One of many detailed studies for the hands in *The Potato Eaters*.

"I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labour, and how they have honestly earned their food." (Letter 404.) For the faces of his figures, he looked towards Millet, whose *Man with a Hoe* (1860–62) he considered the perfect representation of the peasant. Instead of seeking beauty, van Gogh was going for "rough, flat faces with low foreheads and thick lips, not sharp, but full and Millet-like". (Letter 372.) Van Gogh exaggerated the rough features of his models and gave them a particularly coarse appearance. At the time, such facial traits were frequently associated with the rural labourer and were based on pseudo-scientific writings on physiognomy and phrenology popular in the nineteenth century. Van Gogh had also read Emile Zola's description of miners in his novel *Germinal*, which further encouraged him in his efforts.

Van Gogh worked incessantly on his figures in the studio once he had put the composition together: "All the heads were finished, and even finished with great care, but I immediately repainted them, inexorably, and the colour they are painted in now is like the colour of a very dusty potato, unpeeled of course." (Letter 405.) Despite his