

THEO | THE OTHER VAN GOGH

MARIE-ANGÉLIQUE OZANNE & FRÉDÉRIQUE DE JODE

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MARIE-ANGÉLIQUE OZANNE & FRÉDÉRIQUE DE JODE

TRANSLATED BY ALEXANDRA BONFANTE-WARREN

A MARK MAGOWAN BOOK

THE

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PREFACE

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum,
December 1997

MY ENCOUNTER WITH THEO BEGAN WITH A MISTAKE.

I first met Theo's gaze one snowy afternoon on a trip to The Netherlands for the Christmas holiday. It was a lively, light-filled gaze, caught for posterity on the yellowed paper of a black-and-white photograph hanging on the wall of this fascinating museum.

As well acquainted with Vincent's work as I was, I thought that this was the master himself. The photograph showed a young man barely in his thirties, with delicate features and sporting a thick moustache. I was intrigued by his gentle expression, a world away from his tormented self-portraits. I knew—as many others do as well—the dark side of

the famous painter so I was surprised by the brightness of the image. When would he ever have looked so radiant? Upon checking the photograph's caption, it proved to be not Vincent, but the other van Gogh, his brother Theo.

My interest was piqued: Who was this Theo? The holidays were over, but the memory of Theo's image stayed with me. Back in France—just out of curiosity—I wanted to know more. I returned to *Lettres de Vincent van Gogh à son frère Theo*, which I had abandoned in my library some time ago. The preface of this paperback edition, and the books I had on Vincent, fueled my interest in Theo. A host of questions remained unanswered. I also searched for a biography of him, in vain. There were none. It became clear to me that the thing to do was write one. A historian by training, I have always believed that individual lives are essential to an understanding of history. Biographies are very interesting to write, but necessarily entail lots of research. Knowing this, I discussed the idea at length with Frédérique de Jode, a friend since my college days. We had written together before, so that when I decided to undertake writing a biography about Theo it seemed perfectly natural to enlist her to take on the project with me. My enthusiasm was more than shared—it was doubled.

Marie-Angélique Ozanne

MARIE-ANGÉLIQUE'S ENTHUSIASM was indeed contagious. As soon as she suggested we write a biography of Theo van Gogh, I very much wanted to join her. We had met at the Sorbonne, where we were studying history, and later became colleagues when we both worked at the same newspaper. We had often talked about wanting to write a book together. Creating something together would represent a new phase in our collaboration and deepen our friendship.

The opportunity to write a series of portraits of contemporary artists for the newspaper *Quotidien de Paris* introduced us to fascinating artists of our own time. Theo and Vincent van Gogh offered a chance to learn more about another moment in art, which was undoubtedly one of the most important. Now it was my turn to plunge into Vincent's letters to Theo—such poignant writing, in which the artist told his closest confidant of his sorrows and joys—and the many biographies devoted to Vincent. As time went on, Theo claimed more and more of our time and our lives, and became the focus of our long conversations. Compelled to learn as much as we could about Theo, we spent days at a time doing research in the libraries of Paris trying to uncover his story. There was no denying my attachment to Theo. Although I admired his unfailing loyalty to his family, and his natural goodness, I also grieved to think how painful his life had been.

Frédérique de Jode

AFTER SCORES OF RESEARCH TRIPS and countless hours in libraries, we had an outline of Theo's brief life: a happy childhood; a tormented adolescence; a vow binding him to Vincent forever; a career as an art dealer in the service of the Impressionists; an unexpected love story with Johanna Bongers, his best friend's sister; the birth of his son, Vincent Willem; and an end, at thirty-three years old, as tragic as it was premature, only a few months after his brother's death. An enthralling life, with many gray areas remaining to be clarified.

With this short synopsis under our arm, we knocked at the doors of the publishing houses of Paris, urged on by our fierce desire to share this story. In every meeting, the pub-

lishers were similarly amazed. No biography of Theo van Gogh had ever been written, in any language, until now?

Theo is familiar to us as his Vincent's loyal younger brother in biographies on the painter and other books and articles that explored their complex relationship. To many, he was simply known as the recipient hundreds of Vincent's letters.

We wanted our biography to allow his voice to be heard. Once we had a signed contract with our original publisher, we asked the Fondation Vincent Van Gogh, of Amsterdam, which holds the family's private archives, to allow us to consult all documents concerning Theo, from his birth certificate to the medical report from the asylum where he died, and all the family's correspondence. Hundreds of letters traced every aspect of the family's history: the joys, dramas, and ordinary moments of everyday life. They were a long-winded family, accustomed to taking pen in hand to stay in touch with every member of the clan, wherever he or she might be. From concise notes to long missives from parents, brothers, and sisters, all the correspondence is indexed and numbered for the convenience of researchers. Contrary to what we expected, our access to the correspondence was limited by the language barrier—whether typewritten transcriptions or facsimiles of the original manuscripts, the letters are almost all in Dutch. Since neither of us speak the language, we turned to an exceptional translator, Ancilla Bossenec. We first heard of her when we were visiting Claude Millon, the author of *Vincent van Gogh à Auvers-sur-Oise*, a former schoolteacher who, in retirement, has become a specialist on the van Gogh family and a tireless lecturer in the city where the two brothers are buried. Claude, who was curious to know more about Theo, introduced us to Ancilla. Like any resident

of Auvers, Ancilla, who is Dutch and married to a Frenchman, is well aware of the story of the van Goghs. Being involved herself in events relating to the Vincent, she was enthusiastic about our project. She was not with us on our first research trip to Amsterdam, so in Paris she translated orally the letters we brought back from the Fondation Vincent Van Gogh. We photocopied every single document that concerned Theo—a phenomenal number of letters. As it happened, to our great surprise, an international exhibition, *Theo Van Gogh: Art Dealer, Collector, Vincent's Brother*, was just then being mounted. The first major exhibition dedicated to Theo, it would inaugurate the reopening of Amsterdam's newly restored Van Gogh Museum before traveling to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

As Ancilla read, we would stop her at the passages that we needed for our work, and she would translate them in writing. Surprises emerged; for example, when we listened to the parents' voices in their letters to Theo, we heard how different the tone and content were from those in the letters to Vincent.

Before we left on a second research trip to Holland, our itinerary in France tracing following Theo's traces, took us from the usual places to unusual ones: museum libraries, Paris streets, the archives of the Paris hospitals and of the city of Auvers-sur-Oise, the Musée Goupil in Bordeaux, and Vincent's Provence.

En route to Amsterdam, we had to stop first in Brussels, where Theo made his debut as an art dealer, then in Zundert, his childhood home, and then in The Hague, where he experienced such a difficult period. Welcomed by Ancilla's Dutch family, we met up with our translator for more work sessions, this time on site, because the Fondation had given us permission to consult Theo and Johanna's corre-