VAN GOGH
and love

Hans Luijten

VAN GOGH MUSEUM

Van Gogh and love

VAN GOGH
and love

Hans Luijten

VAN GOGH MUSEUM


Bel-Ami

'In relationships with women one learns so much specifically about art'
Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, 14 February 1886.

LOVE OF CHRIST, of the overwhelming landscape, of literature. Love of painting and printmaking, of being an artist, of his parents and his family. Love of women. If anything stands out from the eight hundred and more surviving letters written by Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), it is the numerous loves he conceived in his thirty-seven years. It was axiomatic for Van Gogh: whatever is done with love is done well. This is something that was instilled into him throughout his formative years. When the children of the minister Theodorus van Gogh and his wife Anna Carbentus left home, they took with them this prayer: 'O Lord, join us intimately to one another and let our love for Thee make that bond ever stronger.'

1
Vincent van Gogh
Still life with plaster torso [and novels by Goncourt and Maupassant], 1887
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Van Gogh developed great yearnings for specific people and situations – in his youth for Christmas at home, when the whole family was together, and for 'the country of paintings' when he was cut off in a remote corner of Belgium in 1880. And above all for his brother Theo, four years younger, whom he often addressed in a fatherly manner in the early years. Later on, that same brother, by then a successful art dealer, was to emerge as the unconditional support and refuge of an artist who stood almost permanently in need of understanding and money (2, 3).

Van Gogh's love was always deeply engaged, impassioned, never noncommittal. He wrote: 'I regard love – as I do friendship – not only as a feeling but chiefly as an *action* – and particularly when it involves working and is an effort, it has another side of fatigue and powerlessness. Where people love sincerely and in good faith, they are blessed I believe, although that doesn't dispel difficult times.' Love gave him strength and acted on him like a fuel – an analogy he used repeatedly: 'This love of mine has made me choose sides, and I feel energy, new wholesome energy in me, as anyone experiences who truly loves.' This last outpouring describes the desire for a woman, a form of love that played a major part in his life.

One could compile a lengthy anthology of Van Gogh's pithy sayings about love for a woman – and these would certainly find a place in it: 'What a riddle life is, and love is a riddle within a riddle'; and 'I think that nothing sets us down in reality as much as a true love. ... But what should I compare it to, that strange feeling, that strange discovery of "loving"? For it is truly the discovery of a new hemisphere in a person's life when he falls seriously in love.'

WOMEN IN BOOKS

Many of Van Gogh's ideas about love and women prove to have been inspired by the literature he read: first by Bible stories, then above all by the books *L'amour* (1858) and *La femme* (1860) by the French writer Jules Michelet. He went so far as to describe these didactic treatises on the ideal relationship between man and woman – they should become two-in-one and together

2
John Peter Russell
Portrait of Vincent van Gogh, 1886
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

3
Theo van Gogh, 1889
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

bring about something real – as his gospel. He quoted passages from them and wove his letters through with phrases he derived from them – sometimes to put heart into himself or Theo, sometimes to justify his own decisions. Later in his life he became fascinated with the more recent, naturalistic school of novels (1) and waxed enthusiastic about the work of the American poet Walt Whitman, who wrote without constraint about 'generous, frank carnal love'.

In Michelet he chiefly found descriptions of modest, serious, rather melancholy women, but later Van Gogh came to know some very different types. These were women in books who, at such moments, came to life in his mind's eye and dictated his views. When he was painting women in Antwerp at the end of 1885 and found a prostitute who was willing to pose for him (4), he formulated his wishes in unequivocal terms – wishes that appear to have been prompted by the image of women he had read about: 'For the same motives that when I paint peasant women, I want them to be peasant women – for the same reason, when they're whores, I want a whore's expression.' He says that Edouard Manet and Gustave Courbet had led the way. 'I have the same ambition because, moreover, I have felt to the core the infinite beauty of the studies of women by the very great people in

literature, Zola, Daudet, De Goncourt, Balzac. Even Stevens doesn't satisfy me because his women aren't those whom I personally know anything about. And I think that he doesn't pick the most interesting there are.'

The last of these, the Belgian painter Alfred Stevens, chose his models from the upper middle classes (5), whereas Van Gogh had no liking for the more elevated reaches of society. In his thirties he felt much more at home with the rough ordinariness of the lower classes, He was, as he said himself, someone who was happiest moving on 'the ground floor' of life itself (6). 'Types of beauty', a set of engravings published by the English magazine *The Graphic*, left him cold; he much preferred women of the people, like the pit workers in the socially barbed print *Group of tip girls* by Francis S. Walker (7, 8). The idealized female form sculpted after a work by Jean-Léon Gérôme likewise failed to engage him (9).

In contrast, Van Gogh devoured the novels of Emile Zola, who dissected human motives with surgical precision, and he loved the honest stories by Guy de Maupassant, with their focus on troubled relationships. Women whom, as he himself put it so tellingly, 'life had given ... a drubbing' – these he had time for, these he could love. In 1887 he wrote from Paris: 'The work of the French naturalists Zola, Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, De Goncourt, Richepin, Daudet, Huysmans is magnificent and one can scarcely be said to belong to one's time if one isn't familiar with them.'

4
Vincent van Gogh
Head of a woman, 1885
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

5
Alfred Stevens
Teatime, between 1861 and 1900
Musée Royal de Mariemont, Morlanwelz

6
Vincent van Gogh
Potato planting: A man and a woman, 1885
Kunsthaus, Zurich

The story of Van Gogh's love for women is about a man and his misfortunes in love. For if one thing is clear, it is that Van Gogh was never lucky in affairs of the heart. We cannot be surprised that they were doomed to failure – we are, after all, dealing with a complex, determined and difficult personality.

THE QUESTION OF WOMEN

Letters are our most important source of knowledge about Van Gogh's love life, although when they were younger Vincent and Theo preferred to talk about their loves and their ideas of marriage face to face. So we read, 'Perhaps you remember that we talked this summer about the question of

7
Francis S. Walker
Group of tip girls
Engraved by William James Palmer, in *The Illustrated London News* 66 (27 February 1875)

8
Frederick Leighton
Type of beauty, no. 6
Engraved by C. Roberts, in *The Graphic* 24 (24 December 1881)

9
Alexandre Falguière
Phryné, 1868
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore
Marble statue after Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting *Phryné devant l'Aréopage*, 1861 (Kunsthalle, Hamburg). Goupil & Cie. marketed a replica

women, both with a kind of despondency.' This last was only too true: both certainly felt a desperate desolation. Until his marriage to Jo Bonger in 1889 (10), Theo's love life was no primrose path either. It was, in his own words, not always eating strawberries in the spring. All the same, Vincent wanted to know about it: 'If you have a love story, speak about it openly and trust in my discretion.'

People in the nineteenth century, though, were usually very reticent when it came to writing about things that were highly personal. They had a deep-seated fear of their words falling into the hands of the curious, and the way we show our feelings and emotions today would have been utterly inconceivable to them. People then were much more discreet. That being said, in later years the tone of some of Vincent's letters to Theo did become a little more candid. Despite this reserve, we can find plenty of passages that address amorous entanglements or at least give some hint of them. It is just that it often takes time before what has been happening on the love front becomes clear.

Who were the women Vincent fell for, and why did it always go wrong? A swift survey: in 1873 he looked too high and thought too little about himself: *Caroline*, his own age. In 1881 he was too insistent, persisting tiresomely, completely blind to family relationships: *Kee*, seven years older. In 1882 he risked everything to save a fallen woman from ruin: *Sien*, three years older. In 1884 he declared his wish to marry an extremely unstable neighbour: *Margot*, twelve years older. In 1886 he became very fond of an Italian woman in an awkward situation: *Agostina*, twelve years older. In 1887, out of the blue, he offered to rescue Theo from a complicated relationship by taking the woman off his hands if needs be: S., age unknown. It is greatly to be regretted that his correspondence with Kee, Sien and Margot has not survived. It would be fascinating to know just how he expressed himself towards them, and how they responded.

There are some who say that he had other amours, but the reliability of witnesses about Van Gogh's alleged affairs, much as they may appeal to the imagination, is often highly suspect. There were rumours, for instance, that

10
Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger, 1888
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

he made Gordina de Groot (11), one of his models in Nuenen, pregnant, and later it was asserted that in Auvers-sur-Oise he had had his eye on Marguerite, the daughter of the physician Paul Gachet in whose care he was. (Films like Maurice Pialat's *Van Gogh* (1991) dramatize their supposed amorous outings on the River Oise.) And according to the newspaper *Le Forum Républicain* of 30 December 1888, on the night of 23 December Van Gogh presented the piece of his ear he had cut off to a woman called Rachel, who worked in the 'Maison de tolérance no. 1'. However, we have no other information about this prostitute.

YOUNG LOVE

'What kind of love did I have in my 20th year?' wrote Van Gogh in 1881. 'Difficult to define, my *physical passions* were very weak then, perhaps owing to a couple of years of dreadful poverty and hard work. But my intellectual passions were strong, and by that I mean that I was determined, without asking anything in return or accepting any favours, only to give but not to receive. Absurd, wrong, exaggerated, haughty, arrogant. For in matters of

409

Waarde Theo, Zooeven heb ik Germinal ontvangen waar ik onmiddelyk aan begonnen ben. ik heb er een 50 paginas van gelezen – die ik prachtig vind. ik heb er ook eens geloopen.

love one must not only take but also give, and conversely, not only give but also take. He who turns aside to the right hand or to the left falls, there is no mercy for him. So I fell, and it was a miracle that I found my footing again.' This fall, when Van Gogh was twenty, must have happened in 1873.

The passage could refer to Ursula, the daughter of Sarah Loyer, with whom Van Gogh lodged in Brixton, London. On 8 January 1874, at any rate, their sister Anna wrote to Theo (in English): 'I suppose there will be a love between those two, as between Agnes and David Copperfield. Although I must say, that I believe there is more than a brother's love between them; I send you here Ursula's letter so you can judge for yourself.' It would seem that Theo returned Ursula's letter to Anna, since it was not among his papers when he died.

It is also possible, though, that Vincent was alluding here to his former love for Caroline Haanebeek of The Hague – he was on visiting terms with her family and asked Theo innumerable times to remember him to them all (12). He sent her several poems by the Romantic poet Keats, wrote to her – exceptionally for him – on blue notepaper, and sent her reproductions of works of art he liked. 'The last few days I have enjoyed reading the poems of John Keats. Herewith something by him. His most famous piece is "St Agnes' eve", but it's rather too long to copy out,' he told her.

'The Eve of St Agnes' (1820) is without doubt one of Keats's best known and most frequently quoted poems, and it is fairly long – 378 lines of verse – but this would have been no obstacle to someone like Van Gogh, whose passion for copying out great chunks of what he read was boundless. A more important reason for not sending it may very well have been the scarcely veiled erotic passages in the poem, which deals with a forbidden love and ends with the flight of the two lovers. Caroline later recalled how her family had tried in vain to make the young Vincent 'a little more natural'.

Theo, in turn, had a *tendresse* for Caroline's sister Annet. The remark made at this time that they were 'brothers in two senses of the word' could be interpreted in this light. In 1873 Caroline married Willem van Stockum, and Van Gogh manfully conquered his disappointment. He ended one of his

11
Vincent van Gogh
Head of a woman (Gordina de Groot)
Sketch in a letter to Theo van Gogh; Nuenen, on or about 28 May 1885
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

12
Family photograph with Caroline van Stockum-Haanebeek (third from left), 1911
Private collection

13
Kee Vos with her son Jan, c. 1881
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

letters to the young couple with a jovial: 'A handshake for you & Willem, like old times, so that it hurts your fingers.'

THE LOVE FOR KEE

Vincent was smitten with an 'intense, passionate love' for his cousin Kee Vos, a love that touched him deep in his soul (13). When she came to stay in his parents' Brabant parsonage in the summer of 1881, Van Gogh fell desperately in love with her. Kee, the daughter of Vincent's uncle, J.P. Stricker, lived in Amsterdam and had recently been widowed on the death of her husband Christoffel Vos. Van Gogh tried to win her, but his pleas went unanswered. 'I love her, her and no other, her for ever. And – And – And – Theo, even though the "no, nay, never" still "appears" to be in full force, there's a feeling of deliverance in me, and it's as though she and I had ceased to be two people and had been united for eternity.'

In the autumn Van Gogh made a final attempt to persuade her. He went to her house unannounced, and held his hand in the flame of a lamp to prove that he was serious. But even this intrepid act failed in its purpose. It felt as if he had a hole in his soul, and he threw himself into his work with an even greater passion.

His family thought that his love for Kee was unseemly, and at the end of that year his father asked him to leave home. The immediate cause, admit-

tedly, was Vincent's refusal to go to church, but he himself always believed that the true reason was the opposition of his parents and the rest of the family to a union with Kee. And this while he had such a need for intimacy.

LIVING WITH SIEN

Fobbed off by his Uncle Stricker, having yet again tried fruitlessly to beg for the love of his daughter, in 1882 Van Gogh turned to the welcoming arms of Sien Hoornik (14). He described her austere little room – an old rug on the floor, a kitchen stove and a simple but large bed – and the way they understood each other in their mutual misery. She was to be Van Gogh's companion for a year and a half and was the only woman he ever really lived with. Frankly, but at the same time circumspectly, he described his feelings for her in a succession of letters: 'This winter I met a pregnant woman, abandoned by the man whose child she was carrying. A pregnant woman who roamed the streets in winter – who had to earn her bread, you can imagine how. I took that woman as a model and worked with her the whole winter. I couldn't give her a model's full daily wage, but all the same, I paid her rent and have until now been able, thank God, to preserve her and her child from hunger and cold by sharing my own bread with her. ... I find what I did so simple and natural that I thought I could keep it to myself. ...'

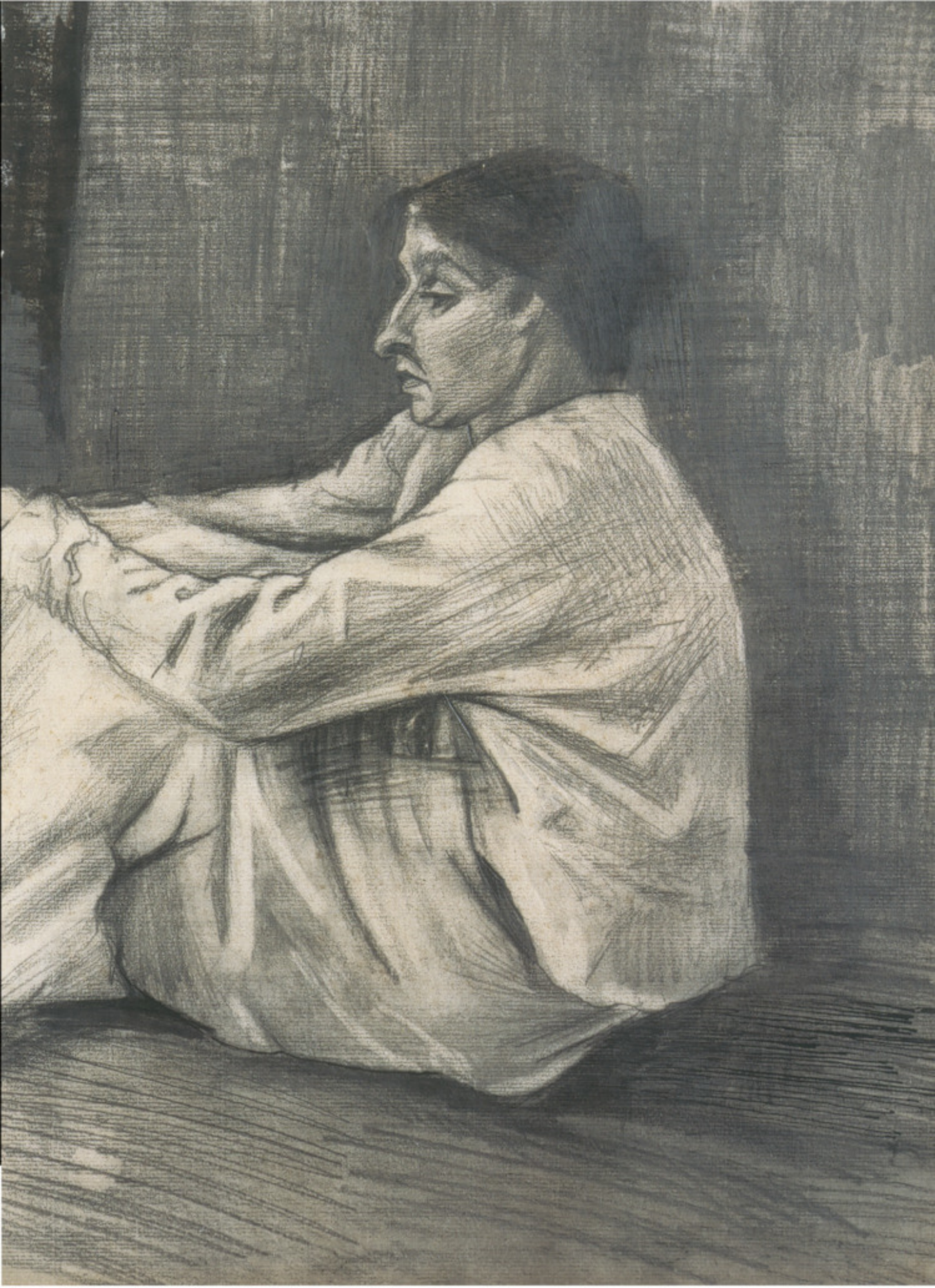
'I wish that those who wish me well understood that what I'm doing is prompted by a deep feeling of and need for love, that frivolity and arrogance and indifference are not the springs that drive the machine, and that if I take this step it's proof that I'm taking root close to the ground. ...'

'The position with Sien is that I am truly attached to her & she to me, that she is my loyal helper who goes everywhere with me, and who becomes ever more indispensable to me each day. ...' 'She & I are two unfortunates who keep each other company and bear the burden together, and it is in that way that unhappiness is turned into happiness and the unbearable is made bearable...'

'Anyone who loves an ordinary, everyday person & is loved by her is happy – despite the dark side of life. ...'

14
Vincent van Gogh
Sien feeding her baby,
1882
Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo

15
Vincent van Gogh
Sien sitting by the stove with a cigar, 1882
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo




Sorrow
Vincent

'No one cared for her or wanted her, she was alone and abandoned like a discarded rag and I picked her up and gave her all the love, all the tenderness, all the care, that was in me. ...'

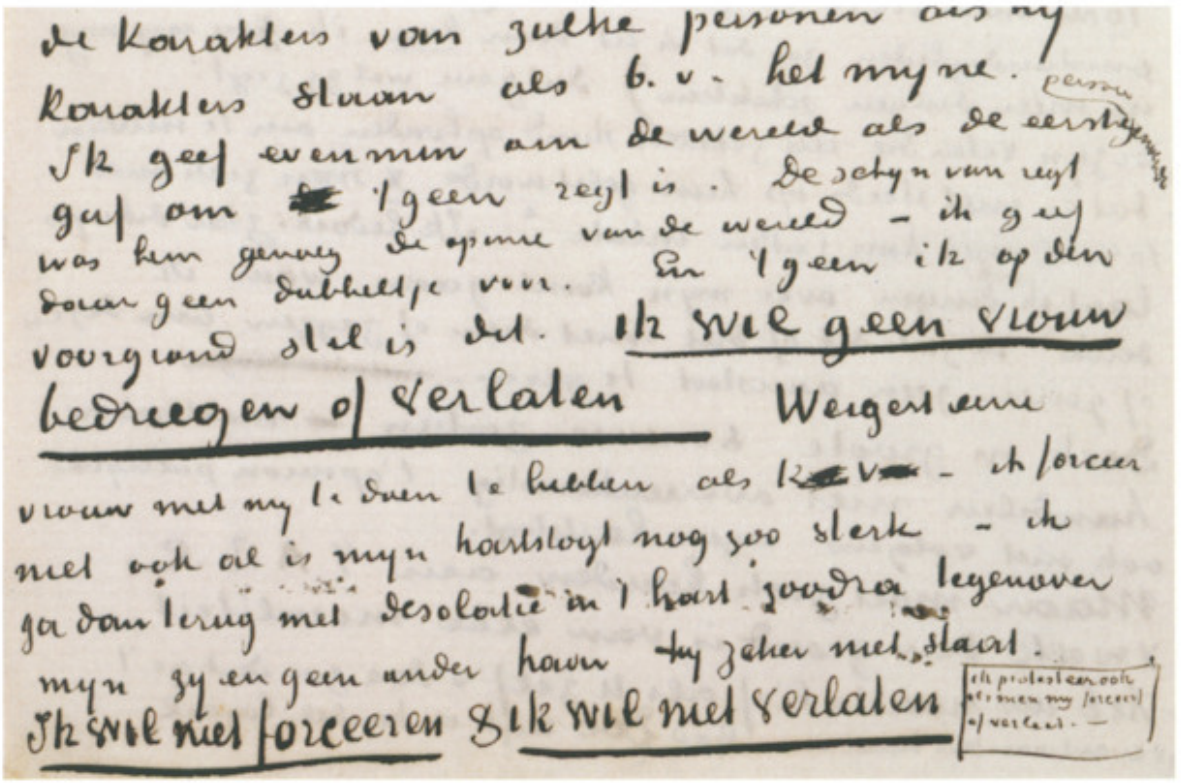
'This woman is now attached to me like a tame dove.' (15).

Despite his noble motives, his choice of an ex-prostitute, with whom, to make things even worse, he was cohabiting out of wedlock, met with very little sympathy. Theo, who by now was supporting Vincent financially, and Hermanus Tersteeg, Vincent's former boss and Theo's colleague at the Goupil art gallery, were anything but thrilled by this relationship. His father regarded it (in Vincent's words) as immoral to have a relationship with someone from a lower class. Van Gogh saw things very differently and immersed himself wholly in his headlong rush to become an artist, and in his life with his domestic hen, as he called her. With her he found peace and serenity – and the added advantage of a model permanently on tap.

More than once in his letters to Theo, Vincent tried to justify his affair with Sien using arguments borrowed from the work of Jules Michelet. In *La femme*, Michelet argues that a woman can only really be happy within marriage and under the guidance of the right man. He sets out the tasks and duties of each party and explains how the security and support provided by the husband, combined with the devotion and purity of the wife, can lead to a 'divine unity'. Michelet advocated a vigorous and active love. Men who were not prepared to protect and rescue a woman should be ashamed of themselves. He also asserted that 'the woman will come to grief if she does not have a domestic hearth and protection'. In November 1882 Van Gogh made the lithograph *Sorrow* (16), in which he wanted to express how empty a heart can remain and that nothing can fill it – he was inspired in this portrayal of desperate human sorrow by a quotation from Michelet's work and by Sien, who had been abandoned to her fate and whom he would not leave under any circumstances, as he emotionally confided to Theo in his letters (17).

Sien moved into Vincent's cramped lodgings in The Hague, and they tried to keep each other going. In the summer they camped like bohemians

16
Vincent van Gogh
Sorrow, 1882
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam


de karakters van zulke personen als my
karakters staan als b. v. het myne.
Ik geef evenmin aan de wereld als de eerste
gaf om 't geen zeyl is. De schyn van zyd
was hem genoeg de opinie van de wereld – ik geef
daar geen dubbeltje voor. En 't geen ik op den
voorgrond stel is dit. Ik wil geen vrouw
bedriegen of verlaten Weigert eene
vrouw met my te doen te hebben als k[illegible] v[illegible] – ik forceer
niet ook al is myn hartstogt nog zoo sterk – ik
ga dan terug met desolatie in 't hart regenover
myn zyn en geen ander haven dy zeker niet staart.
Ik wil niet forceeren & ik wil niet verlaten

17
Passage from a letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh; The Hague, 14 or 15 May 1882. 'What comes first with me is this: I DO NOT WANT TO DECEIVE OR ABANDON ANY WOMAN.'
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

for days at a time in the dunes near Scheveningen, where he would sit and work – he drew her in his studio, while she mended his clothes. He was delighted with the situation. He wrote page after page to Theo in Paris about the possible consequences if they were to stay together, but Theo continued to oppose the proposed marriage. Eventually he gave in and agreed that his brother and Sien would stay together, but on one condition: he did not want her name mentioned in the letters again.

Sien had meanwhile given birth to her second child; the father is unknown (it was later suggested that it was Van Gogh, but this was not so). 'When I'm with them and the little fellow comes crawling towards me on hands and knees, crowing with delight, I haven't the slightest doubt that it's all right. That child has very often calmed me down. When I'm at home he can't be kept away from me; if I'm working he comes up to tug at my jacket or works his way up my leg until I take him on my lap.'

Afterwards Vincent accused his brother of having driven a wedge between

him and Sien – whereas Theo must have realized that the situation was essentially hopeless and that in the end a parting would be the best thing both for Vincent and for Sien. When one knows how utterly opposed to the relationship the family was, it is arresting to read the following. It was October 1882, and Vincent's father had been to see him in his studio for the first time not long before. Vincent wrote to Theo: 'Imagine, this week to my great surprise I received a package from home – with a winter coat, warm trousers, and a warm lady's coat. I was very touched.' That coat was a sign that his parents in any event did not deny Sien's presence.

And yet the initial euphoria was to turn to discord, and in the course of 1883 relations between Vincent and Sien deteriorated. He no longer trusted her intentions. Members of her family also played a questionable role in the conflict. Vincent was certain that if she had any dealings with them she would end up working in prostitution again. In January 1884, four months after he had left her, he distanced himself from her for good, but it clearly pained him greatly to do it.

THE LOVE FOR MARGOT

In several periods of Van Gogh's life, his letters testify to his brooding about love. We read about his unfortunate choices, about the way his family objected and about how he was left with empty hands. It all hit him very hard. The people around him regarded him as a strange, singular man.

Early in 1884 the artist, now thirty-one, was living with his parents again in Nuenen, where he embarked on a relationship with their neighbour Margot Begemann, a rather uncultured woman who suffered from religious mania (18). History repeated itself: again there was love born of pity, and again his family – and hers – disapproved of the relationship. 'Something has happened, Theo, which most of the people here know or suspect *nothing* about – nor may ever know, so keep as silent as the grave about it – but which is terrible. Miss Begemann has taken poison – in a moment of despair, when she'd spoken to her family and people spoke ill of her and me, and she became *so* upset that she did it, in my view, in a moment of definite *mania*.'

Van Gogh deeply regretted not having met her earlier, because then he might well have been able to do something about her nervous disposition. 'Now she gives me the impression of a Cremona violin that's been spoiled in the past by bad bunglers of restorers. And in the condition in which I met her, it seems to me, a good deal too much had been bungled. But originally it was a rare example of great value. ... I certainly believe or know for sure that she loves me, I certainly believe or know for sure that I love her ... Theo, I feel such damned pity for this woman.'

Theo was kept fully informed of the affair by his parents, for, like Margot's three older sisters, Mr and Mrs van Gogh were terrified that the relationship would lead to marriage. They expressed their views of the situation and of the character of their oldest son in the frankest of terms: 'We have had difficult days with Vincent again. Apparently he wanted to arrange a marriage with Margot, who proved not entirely averse, but it came up against insuperable objections, on the part of her family too. After news of the business started to leak out, Margot went to Utrecht, where she still is. They still correspond constantly. ...At first V. seemed to be taking it calmly ... But this calm gave way to aggression.'

To make matters worse, Vincent's sister Willemien had found a flask containing liquor. 'Apparently he gives his models a drink when he's out in the fields with them, and he said himself that he therefore occasionally has one too. That could be the case. According to what V. says, he sometimes takes a drink in the evening on the Dr's advice because he has such sleepless nights. That remedy seems very unsuitable to us. But the business with Margot continues to occupy him very much and he is rather depressed at the moment. We are doing our best to restore him to calm. ... But his outlook on life and his ways are so different from ours, that it's questionable whether living together in the same place can continue in the long run. We are willing to tolerate and attempt *everything* to the utmost, if only he could become a bit normal. We do expect something to come of that in time.'

One can sense the tension that must have hung in the air in the Brabant parsonage, and because we know how difficult things would continue to be

18
Margot Begemann (third from left) and her sisters; far left Mrs van Gogh, c. 1883-85
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

and how vain the hope expressed was, a letter like this can only sadden us. Doomed love, with alcohol to dull the pain of a restless soul in the wheatfield (19). For Van Gogh love was always like a waltz on the sinking *Titanic*. The business with Margot was in 1884. Five years later, in the asylum in Saint-Rémy, she was in his thoughts again. He told Theo: 'I would like Margot Begemann to have a painting of mine.'

A little known trick Van Gogh played in 1885 tells us that not everything in his life was misery. A friend, Anton Kerssemakers, recalled how Van Gogh had been to Antwerp on his own and had returned with a nice surprise to get his own back on the priest who had been doing his utmost to prevent him from finding models. 'He came to see me once after a trip to Antwerp, and said I've brought something back from my trip to do that tiresome fellow in Nuenen a favour. Obviously I was very curious as to what this could be, and then he showed me a few dozen sheaths (*gants d'amour*); I shall hand

19
Vincent van Gogh
Wheatfield with stooks and a mill, 1885
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

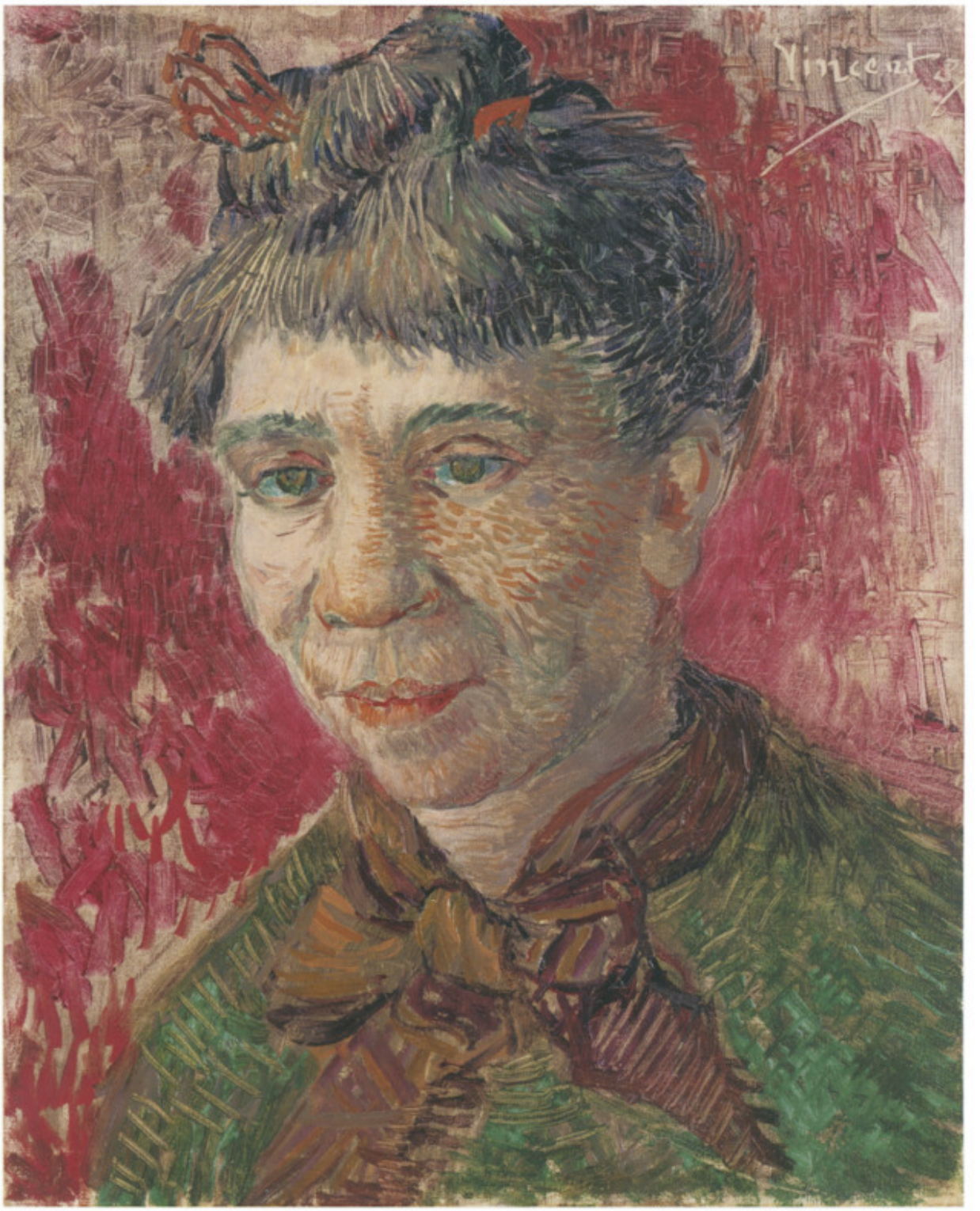
20
Vincent van Gogh
Portrait of a woman, 1886
Collection Rudolf Staechelin, permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel

them out to the peasant lads in Nuenen, and see what that does.' Clearly Van Gogh was not serious all the time, and a sense of mischief was never that far below the surface. His prank must have gone off like a firecracker in that respectable village community and caused the priest no little embarrassment.

We can see from the erotic drawing he did in Paris soon after this that he could be very candid and uninhibited when he chose. The explicit sexuality of the image is an exception in Van Gogh's oeuvre (22), but making naughty sketches like this was far from unusual in Paris studios.

PARIS LOVES

Since there are just eight known letters dating from his Paris period (1886-87), much of Van Gogh's love life in these years remains shrouded in mist. Cupid was active, but his arrows missed again. Vincent wrote about a woman identified only as 'S', a girlfriend of Theo's, who was evidently at his wits' end as to what to do about her: 'This much is certain, if both you and she were willing to accept it, then I'm prepared to take S. over from you,



21
Vincent van Gogh
Nude woman crouching over a basin, 1886
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

22
Vincent van Gogh
Couple making love, 1886-87
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

23
Vincent van Gogh
Reclining female nude, 1887
Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania

> 24
Vincent van Gogh
Dance-hall, 1886
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

preferably, though, *without* marrying her, but if it works out better then *even with* a marriage of convenience. I'm writing this to you in a few words so that you'll still have time to think about it.' We do not know the true course of events, but this unexpected proposal of marriage in the summer of 1886 is grist to the psychologists' mill. It defines Van Gogh's character. Shortly before he went to Paris he had said that a permanent relationship was a prerequisite for a stronger life.

Unlike the countryside of North Brabant, Antwerp and Paris gave him the opportunity to look around in dance-halls (24) and to make candid and challenging nude studies in studios (21, 23). The liberation the city offered him was reflected in his work. One of his models in Paris – she had a distinctive head and, according to Emile Bernard, was a streetwalker – also posed dressed for Van Gogh (20). The nude studies he had drawn in the evening classes he took at the art college in Antwerp at the beginning of 1886 were more restrained and academic (25, 26). Paris in those years must have been a revelation to him: it gave his art a real shot in the arm. He came into contact with the more established Edgar Degas and young modern painters like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Bernard, and he was intellectually stimulated by this new circle. He went to their studios, saw their portraits of women (27), their view of the modern city (29), and must have been surprised to find that they had been seeking their subjects in the brothels (28). He was also able to paint alongside them and exchange work with them.

Through Vincent's contacts, Theo, who was an art dealer, developed an interest in the work of these avant-garde artists. Van Gogh's palette changed dramatically – dark tones gave way to more light and colour – and he broadened his outlook: he painted cafés, parks and restaurants (30, 31). In pencil he recorded couples walking in the street, bound up in each other (32), and he incorporated a Japanese print of a prostitute in his colourful painting *The courtesan* (33).

Then there was Agostina Segatori. Exactly what went on between Van Gogh and the Italian manageress of *Le Tambourin*, a restaurant and cabaret in boulevard de Clichy in Montmartre, remains vague. He painted this

25
Vincent van Gogh
Standing male nude and seated female nude, 1886
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

26
Vincent van Gogh
Standing female nude, 1886
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

former model in her *établissement*, sitting at one of the little tambour tables that gave the place its name (34). *Le Tambourin* was a favourite spot for artists, and Van Gogh exhibited work there. We do not know what sort of a relationship they had between December 1886 and May 1887. According to Gauguin,

27
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
Carmen Gaudin in the artist's studio, 1888
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of John T. Spaulding

28
Edgar Degas
Waiting, c. 1876-77 or c. 1879-80
Musée Picasso, Paris

Van Gogh was 'very much in love' with her (35). When her business was in danger of going bankrupt, he had to try to get his paintings back, and from a very few remarks he made about it we can infer that there must have been a degree of intimacy between them: 'As far as Miss Segatori is concerned, that's another matter altogether, I still feel affection for her and I hope she still feels some for me. But now she's in an awkward position, she's neither free nor mistress in her own house, and most of all, she's sick and ill. Although I wouldn't say so in public – I'm personally convinced she's had an abortion (unless of course she had a miscarriage) – whatever the case, in her situation I wouldn't blame her.' Bernard later claimed that Van Gogh got free meals from her in return for paintings, mostly flower still lifes, and that he gave them to her. The walls must have been crammed full of his studies. It was at precisely this time that Van Gogh painted his first couple – it can hardly be a coincidence. A man and his sweetheart stand at the foot of the Moulin de la Galette. Their hands are clasped on the woman's shoulder (36).

In October 1887 Van Gogh may have been hinting at his love for Segatori when he wrote to his sister, Willemien: 'For my part, I still continually have the most impossible and highly unsuitable love affairs from which, as a rule,

29
Emile Bernard
Railway bridges in Asnières, 1887
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Grace Rainey Rogers Fund

I emerge only with shame and disgrace.' Nonetheless, he continued to find opportunities to work and to paint several nudes (37). In 1889 Bernard recalled how extraordinarily sympathetic Van Gogh always was towards the Parisian street girls. The nude woman who stretched out so voluptuously to be painted was just such a *pierreuse* (23).

FLEETING LOVES

Aside from the love affairs we know about, Van Gogh also had various casual amorous encounters. Between 1881 and 1888 he sought comfort in loves he paid for, in most cases in brothels in The Hague, Antwerp, Paris or Arles: we know no names or ages.

The brothers did rather yearn for the comfort a woman can provide. In September 1875, when Theo was eighteen and living in The Hague, Vincent advised him: 'Go out often, if you can, I mean of course to visit Caroline van

30
Vincent van Gogh
La Guinguette, 1886
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Stockum, the Carbentuses, Haanebeeks, Borchers &c.; not to Kraft's or Marda's, you understand! Or it would have to be because you couldn't do otherwise, just once or twice can do no harm.'

Cryptic, that last remark. By 'Marda' Van Gogh must have been referring to Jeanette Marda, who ran a tobacconist's on the Kneuterdijk, where she and her sisters were registered. And 'Kraft's' was the establishment of publican Johannes Kraft in Bagijnestraat. This street had a shady reputation at the time; people talked about the Bagijne hunt, because there were so many clandestine brothels there where men could go hunting for women. The fact that he is talking here about two Hague houses of ill repute must be the explanation of Vincent's comment that 'just once or twice can do no harm'.

31
Vincent van Gogh
Le Moulin de la Galette,
1886
Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo

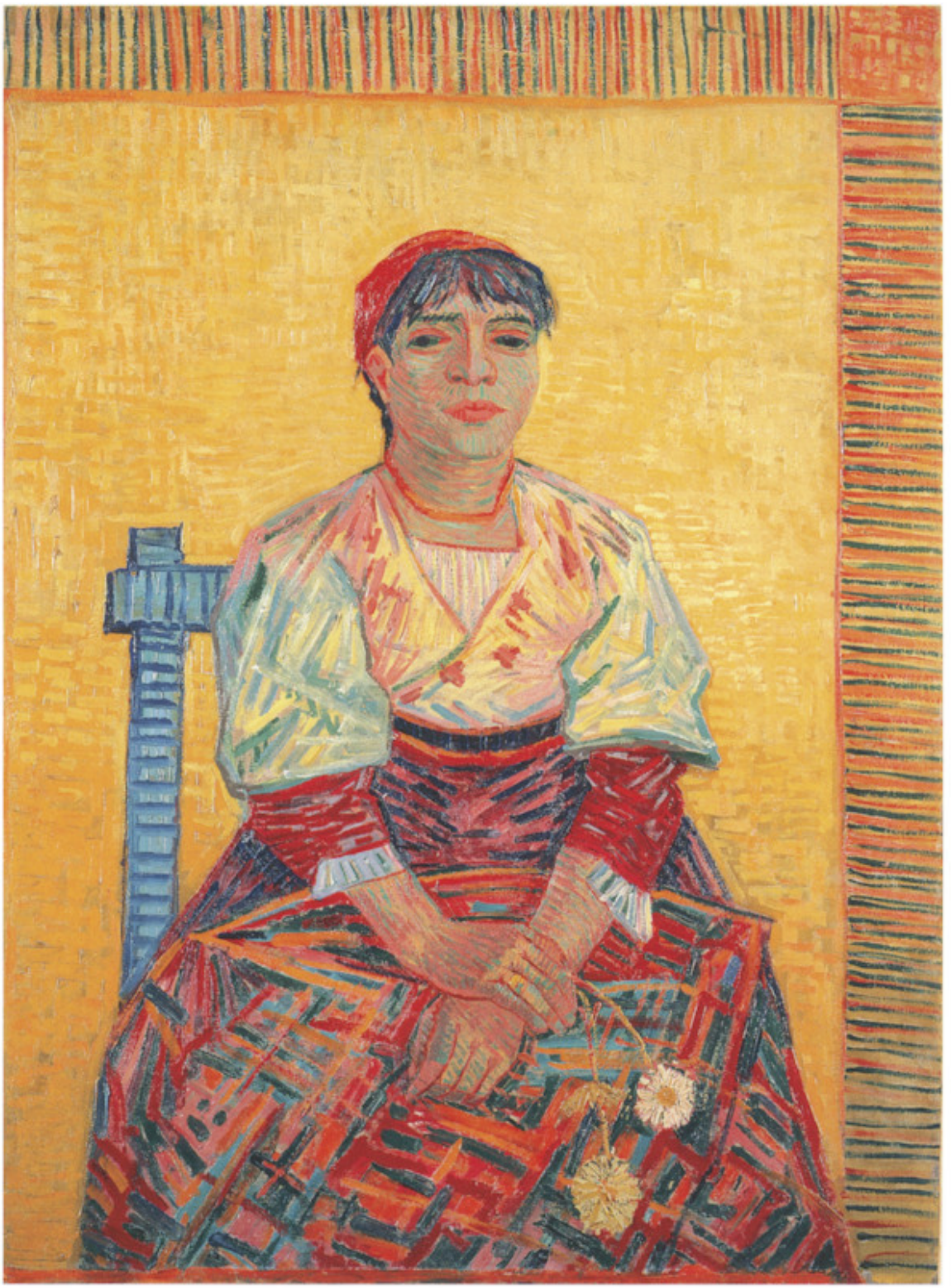
32
Vincent van Gogh
Man and woman seen from the back, 1886
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

33
Vincent van Gogh
The courtesan (after Eisen), 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

> 34
Vincent van Gogh
Agostina Segatori in the Café du Tambourin, 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

>> 35
Vincent van Gogh
The Italian woman with carnations, 1887
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Eight years later he did warn Theo against *femmes fatales* like Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. Theo was in love and Vincent wanted to know: 'This woman of yours, is she good? Is she sincere? Is she *simple*, does she stand on the ordinary ground, or is there a little weed of a rather dangerous desire



for what I will call greatness running through her wheat?' The fact that Theo had been tempted was normal, but he had to take care that this woman did not bring him down. Again literature provided the analogy, and the tone of this admonition is typical of Vincent's tutelary attitude.

In the nineteenth century a visit to a prostitute was thought to be beneficial in countering melancholy – and the Van Gogh brothers were certainly proponents of this therapy. Paul Gauguin, who lived with Van Gogh in Arles for two months in 1888, wrote that they had three pots for their joint housekeeping: one to pay for their tobacco, one for purchasing painting materials and one, as he unambiguously expressed it, 'for nocturnal excursions of a hygienic sort'. They evidently did not go to brothels just to paint (38).

In that same year – 1888 – Van Gogh wrote, 'I took advantage of the opportunity to go into one of the brothels in the little street called 'des Récollets'. Which is the limit of my amorous exploits vis-à-vis the Arlésiennes.' The price of the ladies of easy virtue he visited once a fortnight in Arles was two or three francs. (He received an average of 150 francs a month from Theo to live on.) His friend Paul Milliet, in contrast, could get as many women as he wanted (39). This Zouave lieutenant 'makes love so easily that he almost has contempt for love'. Van Gogh, who was much more awkward in his dealings with women, said he could use this philanderer in a painting of lovers. He painted another model, a Zouave, seated, virile, with widespread legs (40).

In the last years of his life Van Gogh formulated his ideas about love and sex predominantly in relation to his work as an artist. While he was in Paris and Arles he smoked and drank to excess, and he knew that this was bad for the libido. Moderation, or sometimes even abstinence, suited him since, as he remarked, 'painting and fucking a lot aren't compatible'. In his view sex was disastrous for the brain and hence for the concentration. He wanted to live as a *bonze* – a simple Japanese worshipper of the eternal Buddha – and he painted himself in that guise (41). A monk, to be sure, but one who was allowed to go to the brothel once a fortnight.

Not once, but twice he declared that true love had to yield to the love of

36
Vincent van Gogh
Le Moulin de la Galette, 1886
Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires

> 37
Vincent van Gogh
Female nude, seen from the back, 1887
Private collection


Vincent 87

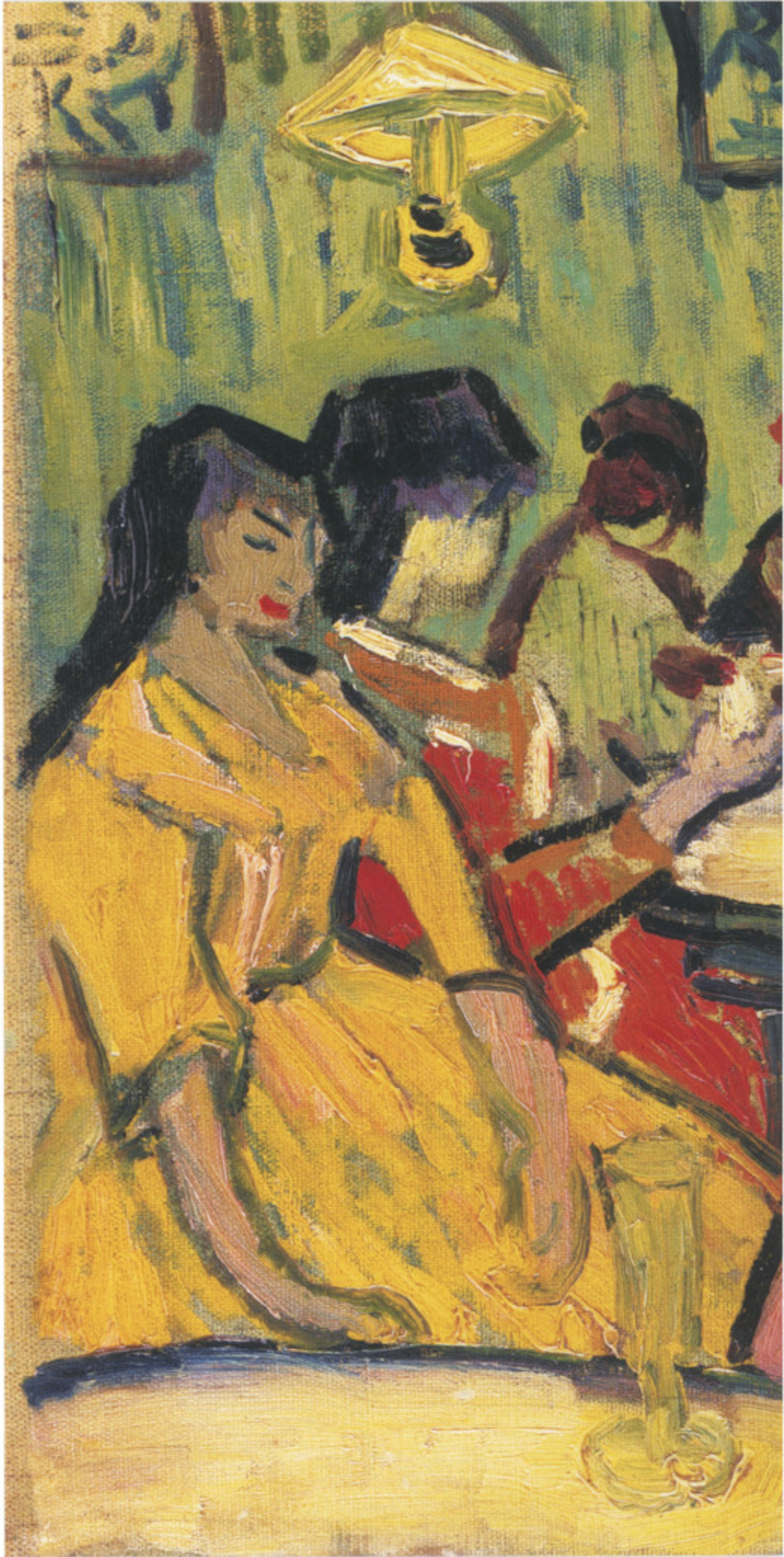
38

Vincent van Gogh

The brothel, 1888

Barnes Foundation,

Merion, Pennsylvania



art. And he told his friend Bernard, who sent him saucy drawings of prostitutes (42), 'When *Delacroix paints it's like the lion devouring his piece of flesh*. He fucked only a little, and had only casual love affairs so as not to filch from the time devoted to his work.' One can read passages like these as a form of self-consolation, an attempt to reassure himself that he had chosen the right path.

He tried to depict women as types, but at the same time he was always able to capture them accurately in a portrait. Marie Ginoux, manageress of the Café de la Gare in place Lamartine, where Van Gogh lived, modelled for the Arlésienne, as a woman of her time with books in front of her (44). We do not know who posed for the *mousmé*, 'a Japanese girl – Provençal in this case – of twelve to fourteen'. Van Gogh took her title from the novel *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti, who described the mysterious reserve and the deferential manners of the Japanese. He said that he had had to give the utmost of himself so that he could make this portrait (43).

In August 1888 he watched a girl passing in the street with a true painter's eye; it provoked an erotic description: 'I saw another very tranquil and quite beautiful thing the other day, a young girl with a café au lait complexion – if I remember rightly – ash-blonde hair, grey eyes. Bodice of pale printed calico, under which you could see her high, firm little breasts. This against the emerald foliage of the fig trees. A real countrywoman, a great virginal look.'

Although Van Gogh declared in 1889 that he could do without love, there were numerous signs that in fact he felt a real need of it. It is telling that a year earlier he had painted *two* pillows on the bed in his room (45). Long before this he had written, 'If you wake up in the morning and you're not alone and you see in the twilight a fellow human being, it makes the world so much more agreeable.' To him this painting symbolized repose in general, and he wanted it to provide repose for the imagination of anyone who looked at it. He who once observed, 'One doesn't live too long without a woman without going unpunished,' and remarked with a degree of irony, 'Certainly it's quite indispensable to kiss, otherwise serious disorders arise,'

39
Vincent van Gogh
The lover (portrait of Lieutenant Milliet), 1888
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo


Vincent

40
Vincent van Gogh
The Zouave, 1888
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

41
Vincent van Gogh
Self-portrait as a bonze, 1888
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

42
Emile Bernard
A prostitute washing (from the series *In the brothel*), 1888
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Text: 'Il faut finir par où l'on commence' (One must finish where one starts)

knew all too well that he would never have a lasting relationship with a woman and that his marriage would forever be a union with art and nature.

WEDDED TO ART

All in all, Van Gogh's love life was a succession of impossible relationships: as the saviour of fallen women he always chose precisely the wrong ones in the eyes of his family and friends, he made himself too dependent on them or began relationships out of pity – and it is well known that these are seldom the most successful. And this while he was expressing the longing for affectionate companionship with complete conviction in pictures of lovers strolling in a park, a garden or the countryside. This intimate image is a striking and recurrent motif in his paintings (46, 47).

> 43
Vincent van Gogh
La mousmé, 1888
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection

>> 44
Vincent van Gogh
L'Arlésienne (Madame Ginoux with books), 1888
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Van Gogh also had an eye for family scenes, as we see in the drawing of the weaver and his child (48). He believed that he was missing out to some extent on a full life and pointed to his great exemplar, Jean-François Millet, who had pictured family life so evocatively. In July 1885 he painted peasant's cottages that he described as 'people's nests' because they reminded him of wrens' nests (49). He asked Theo rhetorically, 'Do you think that Millet would have become Millet if he'd lived childless and without a wife? He found his inspiration the more easily and sympathized with the simple folk better and deeper because he himself lived like a labourer's family.' (50) Van Gogh was convinced that a family would have a calming and inspiring effect

45
Vincent van Gogh
The bedroom, 1888
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

on him. Eventually he accepted that this would never happen for him, and he compensated for this lack by making art. The conflict between his longing for a family on the one hand and his resigned acceptance of the fact that he would always be alone is symbolized in two paintings he did after works by Millet in 1889-90: *Night* versus *Snow-covered field with a harrow* (51, 52).

Theo did have a family. On 31 January 1890 Theo and Jo had a son, Vincent Willem, named after his uncle and godfather. When he heard the news, the new arrival's uncle immediately started work on *Almond blossom* to hang in their bedroom (53). Shortly before his death he drew a remarkable comparison between bringing up children and making paintings: 'I believe that certainly it's better to bring up children than to expend all one's nervous energy in making paintings, but what can you do, I myself am now, at least I feel I am, too old to retrace my steps or to desire something else. This desire has left me, although the moral pain of it remains.' He must have suffered that agonizing pain for years.

When he learned that Theo was going to be a father, he wrote from the asylum in Saint-Rémy to explain his idea of being wholly subsumed in art and nature. 'Do you know what I hope for once I set myself to having some hope, it is that the family will be for you what nature is for me, the mounds of earth, the grass, the yellow wheat, the peasant. That's to say that you find

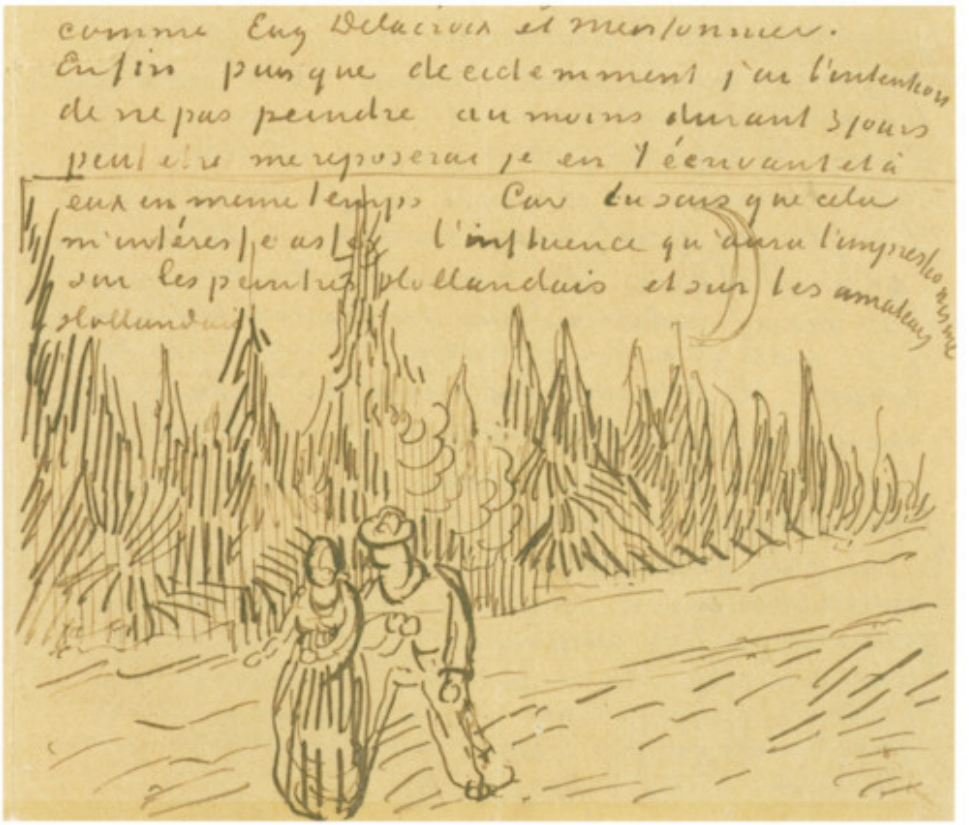
in your love for people the wherewithal *not only to work* but the wherewithal to console you and restore you when one needs it.'

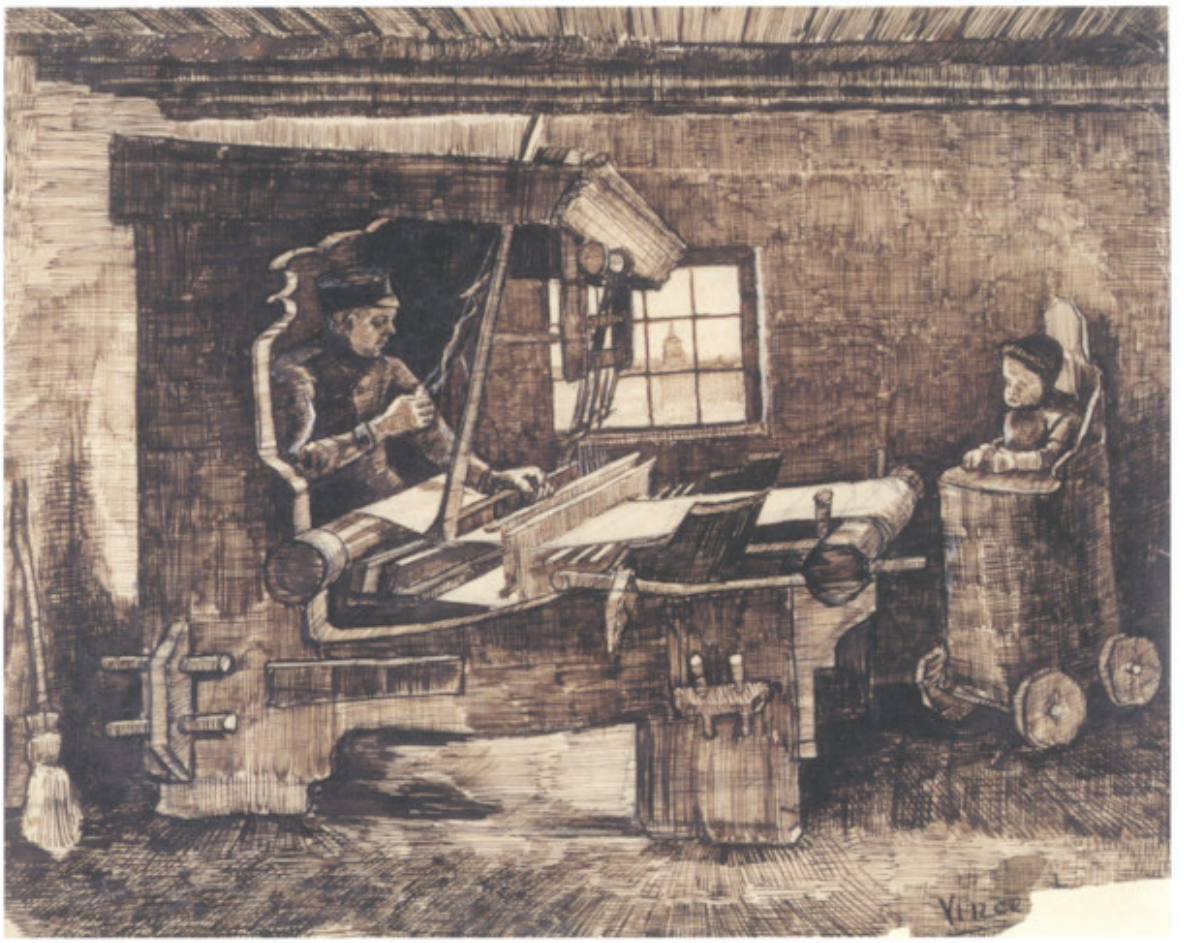
If he could not express his love in a family, well then, he would have to do it through paint, and the colours and forms he could create with it. Somewhere Van Gogh says that he tried to express love through a marriage of two complementary colours, their blending and their contrasts, and the mysterious vibrations of kindred tones. 'To express the thought of a forehead through the radiance of a light tone on a dark background. To express hope through some star (54). The ardour of a living being through the rays of a setting sun.' This is his love – love of art and life. And he is absolutely certain of it: 'if I felt no love for nature and my work, *then* I would be unhappy.'

Earlier, writing from Paris, he gave his sister Willemien advice about love and life. Anyone who, after so many setbacks and so much loneliness, was still able to raise someone else's spirits must have been a very strong

46
Vincent van Gogh
An avenue of cypresses with a couple walking, 1888
Sketch in a letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 21 October 1888
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

> 47
Vincent van Gogh
Courting couples in the Voyer d'Argenson Park in Asnières, 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



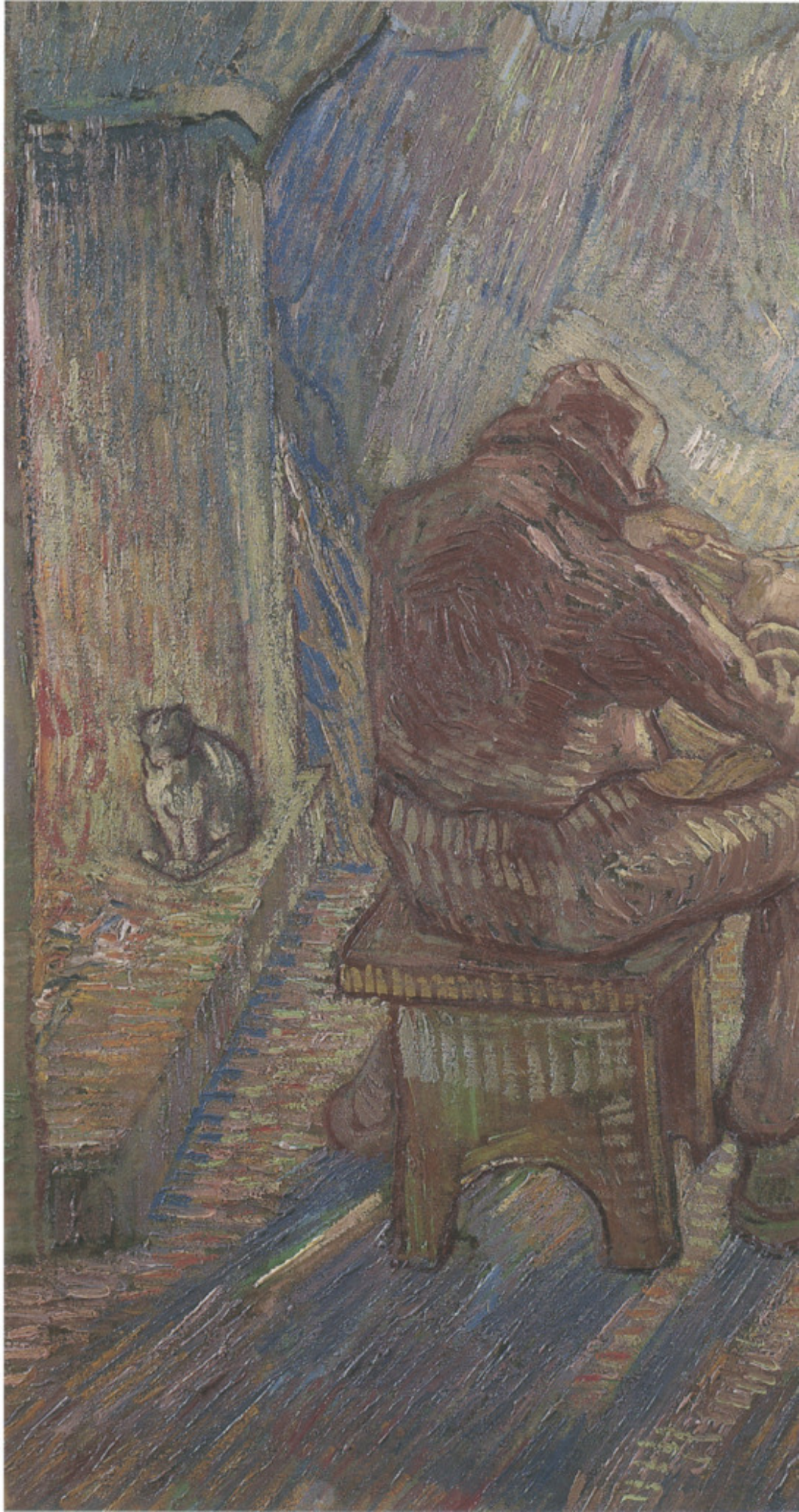


48
Vincent van Gogh
Weaver, with a baby in a high chair, 1884
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

character. When Willemien, who loved writing, told him that she was planning to study, he urged her to live rather than study. 'To write a book, to perform a deed, to make a painting with life in it, one must be a living person oneself. And so for you, unless you never want to progress, studying is very much a side issue. Enjoy yourself as much as you can and have as many distractions as you can, and be aware that what people want in art nowadays has to be very lively, with strong colour, very intense. ... No, my dear little sister, learn to dance or fall in love with one or more notary's clerks, officers, in short whoever's within your reach; rather, much rather commit any number of follies than study in Holland, it serves absolutely no purpose other than to make someone dull, and so I won't hear of it.' It was the advice of a man who had learned from bitter experience but nonetheless could still

49
Vincent van Gogh
Cottage with a peasant coming home, 1885
Museo Soumaya, Mexico City

50
Vincent van Gogh
The first steps (after Millet), 1890
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



51
Vincent van Gogh
Night (after Millet),
1889
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

52
Vincent van Gogh
Snow-covered field with a harrow (after Millet), 1890
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

53
Vincent van Gogh
Almond blossom, 1890
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

proclaim his faith in love. He knew that his own chances of ever living with a woman had become very remote indeed.

Not long before his death he confessed, 'I still love art and life very much, but as to ever having a wife of my own I don't believe in it very strongly. I fear, rather, that towards let's say the age of forty – but let's not say anything – I declare that I know nothing, absolutely nothing, of what turn it may yet take.' What he was afraid of as he approached forty he does not say, but he was certainly not in a hopeful frame of mind. Life had meanwhile dealt him too many blows. And yet, at the end of his life, he painted several more strikingly powerful portraits of young women (55, 56, 57).

BROTHERLY LOVE

There was, in fact, just one great love that would not waver throughout his life: that between him and his brother Theo. Their dependence on each other became ever greater as the years passed – although this was preceded by a great deal of strife. Vincent could be offensively harsh and unkind to Theo, and he always had to be in the right. It meant that more than once he put their relationship under almost unbearable pressure, even to the extent that at one point he became convinced that that it would be better if they went their separate ways. He accused Theo of being petty-minded, uncooperative and too reserved. In December 1884, for instance, he was adamant: 'For – I still have my future too – and I want to progress. If a girl won't have me, very well, I can hardly blame her – but – nothing is surer than that I'll try to find recompense elsewhere. So, too, with other relationships. I won't foist myself on *you* nor try to force your affection – but – as a friend – let alone as a brother – you are too cool to me. Not where the money's concerned, old chap, I say nothing about that. But personally you are of *no use whatsoever* to me, nor I to you. And we could and should have been of more mutual use to each other.' In the final analysis, the fraternal bond was proof even against such a determined onslaught, and Theo, who had a great deal to put up with in this regard, hauled Vincent through his difficult life with his absolute moral and financial support (58).

Theo, the gentle man who felt responsible throughout his life, took his impulsive and irritable brother under his wing and saved him in so many ways. In March 1887, when the brothers shared an apartment in Paris, things really did seem to go irretrievably wrong. Theo confessed to Willemien in unusually forthright terms, 'There was a time when I loved Vincent very much & he was my best friend, but that is over now. It seems to be even worse as far as he is concerned, for he loses no opportunity to let me see that he despises me & that I inspire aversion in him. This makes it almost intolerable for me at home.' It conjures up a picture of two men condemned to each other: Vincent talented and at the same time heartless, Theo long-suffering and forgiving. In April they made their peace again, and in May

54
Vincent van Gogh
Starry night over the Rhône (detail), 1888
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

55
Vincent van Gogh
The young Arlésienne, 1890
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Theo had to acknowledge, 'He's an odd fellow, but what a head he has on him, it is enviable.' When Vincent went to Arles in February 1888, Theo felt that there was 'definitely an emptiness now that I'm alone in the apartment again. If I find someone I will live with him, but it's not easy to replace someone like Vincent.'

Similarly revealing about the loving relationship between the brothers is a remark in a letter Mrs van Gogh wrote to Theo on 29 December 1888. He had told her about what had happened in Arles just before Christmas. Vincent, who had been sharing a house there with Paul Gauguin, had cut off part of his ear in a fit of recklessness and rage. Gauguin sent Theo a

56
Vincent van Gogh
Portrait of Adeline Ravoux, 1890
The Cleveland Museum of Art

57
Vincent van Gogh
Marguerite Gachet at the piano, 1890
Kunstmuseum Basel

telegram informing him of the incident, and Theo immediately left Paris and went to Arles. A detail in Mrs van Gogh's letter shows how deep the bonds between the two brothers – who had grown up together in the Brabant town of Zundert – must have gone despite all their clashes. Shocked by the news, their mother observed 'how touching about Zundert, together on one pillow'. In the hospital in Arles the brothers had evidently been reminiscing about the time when they were small boys sharing a bed.

The day before, Theo had told his fiancée Jo Bonger in poignant terms just how much he feared losing Vincent. 'The prospect of losing my brother, who has meant so much to me & has become so much part of me, made me realize what a terrible emptiness I would feel if he were no longer there.' Jo

58
Meijer Isaac de Haan
Portrait of Theo van Gogh, 1889
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

knew all too well the strength of Theo's feelings. The night before she gave birth to her baby, unsure whether she would survive, she wrote to her brother-in-law, asking him to tell Theo, if she died, how happy he had made her, 'for there's no one in the world whom he loves as much'. An extraordinarily humble yet perceptive view of the life of two brothers who had become so close. Theo himself said that he had given Jo a glimpse into his heart, and he spoke of the closeness of the bond with his brother – he said he had Vincent to thank for his love of art. This gratitude and this sense of obligation were what informed Theo's love for his brother.

We can criticize Van Gogh for making other people's lives a misery, we can feel compassion for him, admire his tenacity and determination, and deplore his obstinacy. But above all we can be astonished by his love for his brother: 'Do let's continue to support each other and to seek brotherly love.' If there is one thing they found, one thing that helped them sustain one another, it was indeed that.

On 1 August 1890, two days after Vincent's funeral, Theo wrote to his mother, 'he was so very much my own brother.'

LITERATURE

- *The complete letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 3 vols., London & Greenwich, Conn., 1958
- Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, exhib. cat. *Emile Bernard (1868-1941): The theme of bordellos and prostitutes in turn-of-the-century French art*, New Brunswick (Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum) 1988
- Jan Hulsker, *Vincent and Theo van Gogh: A dual biography*, Ann Arbor, 1990
- Elly Cassee, 'In love: Vincent van Gogh's first true love', *Van Gogh Museum Journal 1996*, Amsterdam & Zwolle 1997, pp. 108-17
- Leo Jansen and Jan Robert (eds.), *Brief happiness: The correspondence of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bonger*, introduction and commentary by Han van Crimpen, Amsterdam & Zwolle 1999
- Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Fieke Pabst, 'Paper endures: Documentary research into the life and work of Vincent van Gogh', *Van Gogh Museum Journal 2002*, Amsterdam & Zwolle 2002, pp. 26-39
- David I. Kertzer and Mario Barbagli (eds.), *Family life in the long nineteenth century, 1789-1913*, New Haven & London 2002

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to offer his warmest thanks to Natascha Veldhorst, Nienke Bakker, Leo Jansen, Louis van Tilborgh, Suzanne Bogman, Chris Stolwijk, Fieke Pabst and Lynne Richards for their kind collaboration.

VAN GOGH IN FOCUS

Van Gogh in focus is a series of books, initiated by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam on the life and work of Vincent van Gogh. Although so much has been written about this extraordinary artist, many questions still need to be answered or have been addressed only in specialist publications. These small, compact books examine the artist's oeuvre in different contexts throughout the various stages of his life. Each book focuses on unusual viewpoints in Van Gogh's art – such as his remarkable paintings of sunflowers, his passionate correspondence, or his deep love of nature – and presents many new facts and insights. The series is fully illustrated with documents, as well as paintings and drawings by Van Gogh.

Already published in this series:
Peter Hecht, *Van Gogh and Rembrandt* (2006)
Louis van Tilborgh, *Van Gogh and Japan* (2006)
Leo Jansen, *Van Gogh and his letters* (2007)

For recent information about new and upcoming titles:
www.vangoghmuseum.nl/museumpublications

ILLUSTRATIONS

Front cover: Vincent van Gogh, *Two lovers* (fragment), 1888. Private collection
Title page: Vincent van Gogh, *The poet's garden* (detail), 1888. Private collection
Back cover: Vincent van Gogh, *Man and woman seen from the back* (detail), 1886.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Van Gogh in focus is published under the auspices of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Editorial board *Van Gogh in focus*
Chris Stolwijk, Leo Jansen, Heidi Vandamme, Suzanne Bogman

With the collaboration of
Nienke Bakker, Hans Luijten, Michael Hoyle

Head of publications
Suzanne Bogman

Editorial assistant
Geri Klazema

Translation
Lynne Richards

Text editing
Michael Raeburn

Production
Tijdsbeeld & Pièce Montée, Ghent
Ronny Gobyn (director)

Coordination
Barbara Costermans, Tijdgeest, Ghent

Graphic design and typesetting
Griet Van Haute, Ghent

Colour separation and printing
Die Keure, Bruges

www.vangoghmuseum.nl
ISBN 90 6153 729 8, EAN 978 90 6153 729 8, D/2007/703/19

In his thirty-seven years Vincent van Gogh conceived many intense and passionate loves. But fortune seldom smiled on the man who wrote 'I can't live without love, without a woman.' Van Gogh's story is punctuated by an extraordinary succession of unrequited, rejected and doomed loves, which he chronicled from the depths of his emotions. Some of the women in his life feature in his drawings and paintings. The only great love that would endure throughout his life was the love between him and his brother Theo.

HANS LUIJTEN is research curator at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

VAN GOGH IN FOCUS

ISBN 90-6153-729-8