



Koncent

VAN GOGH
and Rembrandt

Peter Hecht

VAN GOGH MUSEUM

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'I THINK MORE ABOUT REMBRANDT than my studies might suggest,' Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo from Arles in the winter of 1888. It was no exaggeration. Anyone reading his letters soon realises that he was preoccupied with Rembrandt throughout his life, and that his idea of Rembrandt shaped him both as a man and as an artist in many respects. When Vincent still thought of becoming a clergyman or an evangelist, Rembrandt was a Christian after his own heart. Later, he was the artist who could work spells and say things 'for which no language has words'. For Vincent, he was also the realist who had shown that an artist's hand should always be guided by nature, while his sincerity had even enabled him to depict the supernatural as if it were natural. When Vincent was being treated in the asylum in Saint-Rémy, Theo sent him some reproductions of etchings by Rembrandt, and as soon as he was well enough to work again Vincent translated the print after Rembrandt's *Raising of Lazarus* into colour (1). In Auvers, a few weeks before his suicide, he was still speaking of Rembrandt in his letters.

1
Vincent van Gogh,
detail of *The raising
of Lazarus*, 1890
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam





2
Vincent van Gogh,
*Head of a woman with
her hair loose*, 1885
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

3
Rembrandt, *Saskia*,
1633. Photograph by
Kunstverlag Braun,
Clément & Cie
Netherlands Institute
for Art History (NIKO),
The Hague

WHY REMBRANDT: AN EXAMPLE

It is not often, however, that Vincent's work calls Rembrandt to mind. A study like the *Raising of Lazarus* is a very exceptional case, and even this is not imitation in the usual sense of the word. It was rather Rembrandt's attitude and style of doing things that interested Vincent. He wanted to work as Rembrandt had done, but in the spirit of his own day and in his own way.

In Antwerp, for instance, he saw a photograph of a woman's head by Rembrandt, a whore's head, as he called it, which made a deep impression on him because the painter had captured the woman's mysterious smile, 'so infinitely beautifully' (3). At the time Vincent had himself just found a model in a *café chantant* whom he understood to have rather busy nights. While posing, she told him about her work and said that the champagne that went with it made her sad rather than merry. And that was precisely what Vincent was looking for.

'Then I knew what I had to do,' he wrote, and tried to capture both the desire and sadness of that woman from the *café chantant* in her likeness, with the result that she took on something of the air of a man of sorrows (2).

Vincent was happy with the result and with what he considered to be a contemporary subject. In addition, he felt that something like that counted as 'high art', as long as one managed to penetrate to the heart of the matter, not making the form serve 'as a sort of hatstand for ribbons & bows'.

The soul, not the clothes, was what he was after. No one seeing that *Head of a woman* would immediately think of Rembrandt's painting of 1633 (now known as *Saskia*), because the two works are unrelated in pictorial terms. However, anyone reading the letter of December 1885 that refers to it will find it hard to deny that the old master, or rather Vincent's perception of the old master, played a significant role in the genesis of this *Head of a woman*.

FULL OF REMBRANDT AND HALS

Vincent was full of Rembrandt and Hals in those days, he wrote in that letter from Antwerp of December 1885, and that was not 'because I see many of their paintings but because I see so many types among the people here who make me think of those days.' These people he was able to see on the streets and at the *bals populaires* that he went to, but for Rembrandt he had to make do with a photograph of the artist's so-called whore's head. And when one speaks of Van Gogh and Rembrandt, it should be remembered that Vincent often had to rely on prints and photographs for his impressions and had little access to the originals. That was also true in Antwerp, for all four paintings in the museum there that went under Rembrandt's name have in the meantime been reattributed. Vincent already knew that two of them might not be by Rembrandt but were possibly by Maes (4).

But he was not concerned about the names. Maes had drunk in the correct way from the right wellspring, and that was enough. The only faithful copy that Vincent made after a Rembrandt, a study of *An old woman on her deathbed*, which had been bought by the Brussels museum in 1880, is based on a painting that no longer bears his name (5, 6). But it is a raw, powerful little piece for all that, and for anyone who wants to see Rembrandt as a sensitive realist who found no subject beneath him it is as good as genuine.



4
Nicolaes Maes (7),
A fisherboy, with the
false signature
Rem. 1659
Koninklijk Museum
voor Schone Kunsten,
Antwerp

REMBRANDT IN THE RIJKSMUSEUM

Shortly before he left for Antwerp, never to return to Holland, Vincent went to Amsterdam, where there were genuine Rembrandts to be seen. After a long period of isolation in the village of Nuenen in Brabant, it was a trip he made on impulse, prompted by the desire to look at paintings again, 'long-



5
Vincent van Gogh,
copy after *An old
woman on her deathbed*
(formerly attributed
to Rembrandt), 1880
Private collection

6
Circle of Jan Lievens
(formerly attributed
to Rembrandt),
*An old woman on her
deathbed*, c. 1630
Musées Royaux des
Beaux-Arts, Brussels





ing for Rembrandt and Frans Hals, above all'. Three days barely sufficed for the museum, and, if his friend and companion Anton Kerssemakers is to be believed, Vincent would have given ten years of his life if only he could have sat before *The Jewish bride* for a fortnight, 'with a crust of dry bread for food' (7).

Hals also made a great impression on him, but because he always kept both feet on the ground it was possible to talk about his art, as Vincent told Theo. Rembrandt, on the other hand, broke through that barrier even when he painted the portraits of the syndics of the drapers' guild, for which his commission required him to be true to life. However, when he had more freedom, 'when he was allowed to be a poet', as in *The Jewish bride*, then something very different happened. 'What a noble sentiment, unfathomably deep.' Vincent believed that 'you have to have died a couple of times to be able to paint like that.'

7
Rembrandt,
The Jewish bride,
c. 1665
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam

> 8
Rembrandt,
*The anatomy lesson of
Dr Joan Deyman*, 1656
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam, on loan
to the Nederlands
Historisch Museum





grande F. 166

In his response (now lost) to Vincent's report of his visit to Amsterdam, Theo evidently asked what he thought of *The anatomy lesson of Dr Joan Deyman*, a painting that had been bought in England in 1882 and was now the fourth Rembrandt in the newly opened Rijksmuseum on Stadhouderskade (8). Theo had clearly found it superb, and Vincent was also deeply moved: 'Yes, I was amazed by it,' he wrote, and continued: 'do you remember those flesh colours – it is earth, those feet above all.'

THE BEGINNING

Vincent was already a painter through and through when he went from Nuenen to Amsterdam for those few days in 1885. He therefore believed that he was now looking at paintings with a fresh eye, because he had also come to understand the technique of the old masters. He was thirty-two at the time, and the path to becoming an artist, which he had chosen five years earlier, had been anything but direct. But his love of art was older than his vocation, and he had admired Rembrandt from the very start.

In the mid-1870s, when Vincent's job in the art trade had taken him to live in Paris for a year, the Rembrandts in the Louvre made an impression on him that he would feed off for years. *The Holy Family*, better known as *The carpenter's family* (9), was the point of departure for Vincent's first attempt at writing a sermon four years later, and no painting by Rembrandt is mentioned more often in his correspondence than *The supper at Emmaus*, another of the Louvre's highlights that he got to know at the time (10).

He experienced those paintings in a very personal way and also recognised his own world in them. It was good, he believed, to think of *The supper at Emmaus* while having a simple breakfast of bread and beer, and once, when he saw his uncles Jan and Cor seated together, he regretted that they were not like the disciples in Rembrandt's painting. If his father, the pastor, had also been with them, the parallel could have been complete, because 'Pa has what they lack – it is good to be a Christian, and almost and altogether, for that is eternal life.' One might smile if Vincent had not been so honest and his struggle so great.



9
Rembrandt, *The Holy Family*, known as *The carpenter's family*, 1640
Musée du Louvre,
Paris

This is Vincent in the days when he still appreciated the work of Ary Scheffer, an artist who would later irritate him because 'he is so little a painter'. At the time, though, he was as happy with a reproduction of Scheffer's *Christus consolator* (11) as he was with a print after Rembrandt's painting *The Holy Family at night* (12). It was not the bright light falling on the holy book that interested him, nor the superb visual rhyme of figure and shadow, but the way in which Rembrandt depicted the reading of the Bible:



'A large, old Dutch room (in the evening, a candle on the table), in which a young mother sits beside her child's cradle reading the Bible; an old woman listens, it's something that makes one think: Verily I say unto you, "where 2 or 3 are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them".'

The reproductions of Scheffer's *Christus consolator* and Rembrandt's *Holy Family at night* both hung on the wall of Vincent's room in Paris, and they were also given a place in the small house that he furnished in 1882 when he began living with Sien, the pregnant woman he had picked up in the street in The Hague. He actually hung the etching after Rembrandt above the cradle while waiting for her to return home after giving birth in hospital, 'for it is a strong and mighty emotion that seizes hold of a man when one has sat by the side of a woman one loves with a baby beside her in the cradle. And even if it was a hospital where she lay and I sat by her, it is always the eternal poetry of Christmas night with the baby in the stable as the old Dutch painters have interpreted it.'

10
Rembrandt, *The supper
at Emmaus*, 1648
Musée du Louvre,
Paris

11
Ary Scheffer, *Christus
consolator*, 1837
Amsterdams
Historisch Museum



After Rembrandt,
*The Holy Family at
 night*, c. 1645.
 Etching, 1787,
 by Dominique Vivant
 Denon
 Bibliothèque
 Nationale, Paris



Vincent would never lose that feeling for the genuineness of Rembrandt's experience of the gospel, any more than he did his own admiration for it, not even after he had rejected the idea of the pastor as 'godless' and had recognised that his own desire to become a preacher had been a 'crack-pot undertaking'.

ART AND LIFE

The fact that Vincent was reminded of Rembrandt's *Supper at Emmaus* when he saw his two uncles, who were not very spiritual at all, or of Sien and her unwanted child when looking at the print of *The Holy Family at night*, was typical of his early way of experiencing art. The doctor who treated him so well and candidly when he caught a dose of the clap had a true Rembrandt head, 'a superb forehead and a very appealing expression'. And the *Portrait of Jan Six*, which he probably knew only from a reproduction, gave him the idea as a young man that a person like that 'must have led a beautiful and serious life' (13). He later mentioned that very painting to cheer up his



13
After Rembrandt,
Portrait of Jos Six,
1654. Engraving,
1874-78, by Johann
Willem Kaiser
Rijksprentenkabinet,
Amsterdam



14
Rembrandt, Old
woman, fallen asleep,
c. 1635
Rijksprentenkabinet,
Amsterdam



15
Rembrandt,
Amsterdam seen from
the north-west, c. 1640
Rijksprentenkabinet,
Amsterdam

brother Theo: 'You know that portrait of old Six, of course, a man *who leaves*, glove in hand. Fine, *live* until you leave like that; that's how I see you: married, in a prominent position in Paris. That way you'll prosper.' No painter was as present in the reality of Vincent's life, and there were not many who had helped him so much in learning how to see. For that is what artists do; they 'understand nature & love it & teach us how to see.'

When Vincent was still in Amsterdam studying for the university entrance examination in the hope of becoming a preacher and believed that 'Godly sorrow acts like leaven in the dough', he went out for a walk each day, unhappy as he was. He saw Rembrandts everywhere. 'I turned left at the station, where that crowd of mills is, on a road beside a canal with elm trees; everything there makes one think of Rembrandt's etchings' (15). And in one of the churches that he visited so obsessively at the time, he saw a little old woman who – again – reminded him of an 'etching by Rembrandt: a woman who had been reading the Bible and has fallen asleep, leaning her head on her hand' (14).

Vincent recognised the art he had seen in the reality around him, and then saw reality through the eyes of the artists he admired. Or, as he himself put it: 'I think that if one has tried to follow the masters attentively, one rediscovers them all at a certain moment deep in reality. I mean one will also see what one calls their *creations* in reality, the more one has similar eyes – a similar sentiment – to theirs.'

THE SOUL

So Vincent learned from the masters not only how to look but also how to experience what he saw. His Sien was beautiful in the same way as Hals's *Malle Babbe*, a hefty Dutch woman of the people, and Rembrandt's etching confirmed his feeling that 'there is no such thing as an old woman', by which he meant that advanced old age can be very beautiful too.

On the other hand, Vincent had 'precious little sympathy' for Gérôme's *Phryné*, a rather titillating painting that was famous at the time, 'for I see not a single sign of intelligence in her, and a pair of hands from which one



can see that they have worked are more beautiful than what one sees in that picture' (16). When his Uncle Cent, the art dealer, was surprised by this and asked him whether he 'had no feeling, then, for a woman or a girl who was beautiful', Vincent felt that he 'would have more feeling for and would prefer to be with one who was ugly or old or impoverished or was unhappy in some way, and had acquired understanding and a soul through experiencing life and trial and error, or sorrow.'

Vincent was twenty-four at the time and still very much preoccupied with Christ, but his feeling for beauty would never change in this respect. Just before leaving for Antwerp he wrote to Theo that he was greatly looking forward to seeing Rubens's work but was not happy with the way that this artist

16

Jean-Léon Gérôme,
Phryné, 1861.

Photograph by Goupil
& Cie

Van Gogh Museum
Library, Amsterdam



had handled his religious subjects. Rubens's sentiment in works of that kind struck him as theatrical, even vulgar and hollow. Rembrandt's biblical figures, such as Christ in *The supper at Emmaüs*, had a soul, according to Vincent, whereas Rubens's look as if they had 'retired to a corner in order to speed their digestion'. His encounter with Rubens's work in Antwerp merely reinforced this unfavourable impression, and nothing touched Vincent less

17
Rubens, *The raising of the Cross*, 1610-11
Cathedral of Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe, Antwerp

18
Anonymous, *Man with a stick*, known as *The traveller*, with the false signature Rembrandt f. 1651
Paris, Musée du Louvre



than the artist's expression of human sorrow. Even 'his most beautiful heads of weeping Magdalens or Mater Dolorosas recall the tears of a beautiful girl who had caught a chancre, for example [...], as such they're masterly, but there's no need to search for anything else in them.'

Rubens also failed to come up to the mark as a dramatist. His *Raising of the Cross* merely showed a bunch of exaggeratedly muscular men 'performing a *tour de force* with a heavy wooden cross' (17). Vincent found a painting like that absurd the moment he adopted 'a standpoint of a modern analysis of human passions and feelings', and he considered that the facial expressions of Rubens's figures were utterly trivial compared to that of the man in *The Jewish bride* or *The traveller* in the Louvre, which at the time was still thought to be by Rembrandt (18). However, he did see that Rubens could conjure up a mood by the way in which he combined his colours, composing with colour as if it were music. In his *Descent from the Cross*, for instance, 'the white patch, the body accentuated with light, is dramatic in its contrast with the rest, which has been kept so low.' This was new for Vincent, and he was ecstatic about it.

THE SIMPLICITY OF THE TECHNIQUE

Rubens's 'symphonies of colours' that Vincent admired so much confirmed his feeling that the great masters never allowed themselves to be guided by exaggerated attention to local colour, and he now also knew that they were not interested in 'petty precision'. Vincent was very pleased that Rubens 'paints and above all draws with such a swift hand and without hesitation', and here he recognised the same verve that had struck him so forcefully in the work of Rembrandt and Frans Hals in Amsterdam.

'I have particularly admired the hands by Rembr. and Hals – hands that lived but were not finished in the sense that people nowadays want to force – certain hands in the *Syndics*, even in the *Jewish bride*, in Frans Hals. And heads too – eyes, nose, mouth done with the first brushstrokes, with absolutely no retouching.' Drawing and painting were at one here, and nowhere was the work finished; it retained its lively touch. So it turned out



19
Rembrandt, detail
of *The night watch*,
1642
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam

20
Bartholomeus van
der Hecht, detail of
*The celebration of the
Peace of Münster*, 1648
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam



that Rubens could do that as well – ‘and how fresh his paintings have remained, precisely because of the simplicity of the technique.’

Vincent was clearly looking first and foremost with a painter’s eye at the manner of other artists’ paintings, and he called the old masters to his aid against what he rejected in contemporary art. ‘When one looks at the best paintings & technically the most perfect from close at hand, they are touches of colour beside each other, and have their effect at a certain distance. Rembrandt persisted in that, despite all the trials he had to endure (the worthy burghers found V.d. Helst much better after all, because one can also see it from close by’ (19, 20).

Vincent now turned his back on Scheffer’s insipid art, because the slickness with which he painted his religious subjects had come to disgust him (11), and he found it ‘a terrible pity that a fellow like Gérôme [...] has so much that is cold and sterile in him’ (16). His dislike of Paul Delaroche, whom he had also admired at first, was even greater, and he was delighted that the portrait of the artist in the museum in Antwerp had been damaged, leaving a hole in the head. He thought that this was only fitting, he told Theo, because otherwise you might have thought that there had been something in it. But ‘one can be mistaken. And – it’s sometimes a relief to realise that one has been mistaken – even if one then has to start all over again.’

HONEST AND NAIVE

In Vincent’s case, starting all over again did not mean that he now rejected the entire nineteenth century, or that he ever thought that he could do without those who had preceded him. He considered Delacroix to be as good as Rubens, and he found something of Rembrandt in Millet, the painter of peasants, and in Jozef Israëls. However, he was measuring art more and more against a unified principle, with the result that he had a sort of artistic family whose work would never be entirely superseded or outmoded. ‘A work that is good, it won’t last for all eternity, but the idea expressed in it will, and the work itself will then continue to exist for a very long time, and



if others come along later they can do no better than follow in the footsteps of such predecessors and do something similar,' he wrote on the occasion of the death of Charles Daubigny, a landscape painter he admired. He did not mean 'follow in the footsteps' in the sense of literally imitating one's models, but that one should try to do as they had done.

'What good it does one to see a beautiful Rousseau that has been laboured over in order to be faithful and honest. [...] How beautiful an Isaac Ostade is, or a Ruisdael (21). Do I want them to come back, or have people imitate them? No, but I do want the honest, the naive, the faithfulness to

21
Jacob van Ruisdael,
View of Haarlem with
bleaching grounds,
c. 1670
Mauritshuis,
The Hague



remain.' That honesty and naivety was related to his own attitude towards nature and the world, and that attitude had consequences both for his repertoire and for his technique. The rule was that one must paint as one feels, not as one has learned. As a result, he did not understand what people saw in the history paintings with their implausible subjects that were so extravagantly praised at the time, for 'what purpose does it all serve, and what do people want with it? Most of it will become stale and dull in a few years' time, and it will become more and more boring.' And as far as technique was concerned, Vincent stated very early on that even 'if I master my brush far better than now,' he would continue to maintain that he 'cannot paint'. He did not want an acquired skill, but truth. He needed his technique to enable him to say what he wanted, but it was not a goal in itself. A realist in every respect was what he wanted to be. And when, later, he tried to persuade his younger colleague Bernard to adopt the same attitude, it was Rembrandt he used to make his point.

22
Rembrandt,
The evangelist
Matthias, 1661
Musée du Louvre,
Paris

PARIS

That, however, was not until 1888, when Vincent had not only completed his studies in Antwerp but had also lived in Paris for two years. For after those few months in Antwerp in the winter of 1885-86, when he had studied Rubens so closely, he moved in with his brother Theo in Paris. That could not have been easy for Theo, who was working for the same art dealers who had once employed Vincent. It is true that he was accustomed to paying for Vincent's livelihood and work, and to writing to him almost weekly, but sharing his apartment with him was quite a different matter.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of March Theo received a note saying that Vincent had arrived and that he hoped to see him around noon in the Louvre, in the so-called Salon Carré. Vincent's first steps in Paris were thus directed to the museum that had impressed him so deeply ten years earlier, and as the spot for meeting his brother again he chose the gallery in which the most famous paintings in the collection hung together—works by Leonardo and Raphael, by Titian and Correggio, but also by Rembrandt and



Rembrandt 1668

Rubens and by Holbein and Van Eyck. There were two or three Rembrandts in the Salon Carré at the time, among them the so-called *Carpenter's family*, an old love of Vincent's (9). Other highlights, such as *The supper at Emmaus* (10), *The evangelist Matthew* (22) and *The slaughtered ox* (23) were not far away, among the other paintings of the Dutch School, and there were also one or two Rembrandts in the Lacaze Collection, which had been bequeathed to the Louvre in 1869 and was hung separately. This included the *Bathsheba*, with its simple humanity, whose subject had not yet been identified so that it was just titled *A woman bathing*, and also the so-called *Traveller*, a painting that is no longer held in high regard today, but which Vincent loved dearly (18).

There were not many other museums at that time where one could see Rembrandt so well or that displayed so many facets of his art, and his later letters show that Vincent gratefully seized the chance that was given him. Several Rembrandts, as well as works by other Dutch artists in the Louvre, never lost their hold on him, while the Italian and French schools hardly seem to have appealed to him at all. Because Vincent and Theo were now living together, practically no letters were written in the period 1886-88. However, we do know that Vincent's dialogue with the old masters certainly continued in those years, while he had also received a full initiation into avant-garde circles by the time he left Paris. In addition to that, a few insiders were beginning to take notice of his work.

THE SOUTH: COLOUR AND LIGHT

After two years in Paris Vincent decided to go south to escape the pressures and high costs of the capital. And as he saw it, the south was where the future of the new art was to be sought, which had something to do with powerful colour and bright light. If the new art had to rely on that, as he had discovered in Paris, and Japanese prints provided the shining example, then one ought to go south immediately, 'to what is the equivalent of Japan'.

Vincent's south was Provence, and he settled in Arles, where, perhaps for the first time in his life, he knew for certain – at least some of the time –

23
Rembrandt,
The slaughtered ox,
1655
Musée du Louvre,
Paris





24
Vincent van Gogh,
The harvest, 1888
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

that his work was going well. He was doing better than before in every respect and was even working 'in the middle of the day, out in the full glare of the sun, without any shade, in the wheatfields, and look, I'm as happy as a cricket. My God, if only I'd known this country when I was 25 instead of coming here at 35!'

Before that he had been under the spell of 'grey, or rather of the colourless', but now he had found what he was looking for. That does not mean to say that he had forgotten his old loves: the Camargue reminded him of Jacob van Ruisdael, and he wanted to paint the plain of La Crau 'completely like a Salomon Koninck, you know, the pupil of Rembrandt who made those immense, flat landscapes' (24, 25). If Vincent had not been so lonely, he would have been happy in Arles.

A SHARED STUDIO

He found being alone difficult, and the fact that his love life was limited to paid sex made his need for friendship all the greater. Life proved difficult to bear without Theo, and he was eager to share his house in Arles with one or more colleagues from Paris. A studio in common would also cut costs and stimulate the exchange of ideas, while painters who 'loved each other as friends instead of making each other's lives a misery', as the Impressionists did, would also be happier.

Vincent tried in vain to win over the much younger Emile Bernard for his plan. His other candidate, Gauguin, whom he admired, also kept his distance at first. Gauguin did eventually come to Arles, but his stay with Vincent was an unmitigated disaster. Quite apart from their personalities and pathologies, there were serious differences of opinion about the way that painting should be practised and the course that modern art should take. It is clear from Vincent's letters to Bernard that the significance of Rembrandt and his so-called realism played a major role in all of this.



Rembrandt.



Gauguin sc.

Imp. A. Salmon

Le Christ à la colonne



26

After Rembrandt,
Christ bound to the
column, c. 1646.
Etching, 1881,
by Eugène Goujean
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

27

After Rembrandt,
Self-portrait, c. 1665.
Etching, 1881,
by Jules Jacquemart
Van Gogh Museum
Library, Amsterdam

REALISM AND METAPHYSICAL MAGIC

Vincent had met Bernard in 1886 in the studio of Fernand Cormon, where they both briefly worked. Bernard was only eighteen at the time and had real talent. They took to each other, and Vincent clearly played the part of mentor. Bernard sent him drawings and poems and wrote telling him his ideas about art, while Vincent, for his part, was keen to have Bernard come to Arles and took his letters very seriously. In July 1888, Bernard, who had started to be enthusiastic about medieval art, evidently spoke dismissively of Rembrandt, citing Baudelaire as his authority. Vincent simply could not understand: 'Ah, Rembrandt! ... despite all admiration for Baudelaire I dare to assume [...] that he knew almost nothing about Rembrandt. I've just found and bought a small etching after Rembrandt here, a study of a naked man, realistic and simple. He is standing, leaning against a door or column

in a dark interior, a ray of light skimming past the bent head and the bushy red hair. A Degas, you would say, because the body is so true and felt in its animality' (26).

Vincent also believed that Bernard had probably not looked very closely at *The slaughtered ox*, and Baudelaire even less so (23). He would have liked to take him to look at the Dutch artists in the Louvre some time and show him the 'miracles and mysteries' that had had the effect of stifling the development of his own love of the primitives. Vincent cared more for the art of his compatriots, who, according to him, had little fantasy or imagination and of whom only Rembrandt, as the exception, had made figures of Christ and the like, or so Vincent said. They, however, 'barely resemble anything by other religious painters; it's a metaphysical magic.'

With a lyrical description of Rembrandt's *The evangelist Matthew* (whose subject he had not recognised) (22) Vincent then tried to make clear what he meant by this. He spoke of the painting as if it had been made after Rembrandt had painted his self-portrait in front of a mirror, 'old, toothless, wrinkled, wearing a cotton cap, a painting from life' (27). Then, however, Rembrandt began to dream, 'he dreams, and his brush begins again on his own portrait, but now from memory, and its expression becomes sadder and more saddening. He dreams, dreams on, and why or how I do not know, but just as Socrates and Mohammed had a good genie, so behind that old man who resembles himself Rembrandt paints a supernatural angel with a Da Vinci smile. I am showing you a painter who dreams and who paints from the imagination, and I started off by asserting that the characteristic trait of the Dutch is that they invent nothing, that they have neither imagination nor fantasy. Am I being illogical? No. Rembrandt invented nothing, and that angel and that strange Christ, it's because he knew them, felt them there.'

CONDEMNING THE SHAM

It is possible that Vincent felt that he had not been clear enough with his characterisation of the painter who had no fantasy yet worked from the imagination, for a few days later he sent off another letter in which he again

urged Bernard to take a long look at the Dutch painters, just as he himself had studied French art when he came to France. He now stressed that the Dutch artists were first and foremost portraitists of their time and society. Frans Hals actually painted nothing but portraits, 'but that is certainly as valuable as Dante's Paradise and the work of Michelangelo and Raphael, and even of the Greeks.' According to Vincent, you could also best understand Rembrandt by regarding him first of all as a portraitist. The magic comes later, but that, Vincent now says, is indeed later and less important.

According to Vincent, Bernard's best work to date, like the portrait of his grandmother (28), was realistic in the Dutch manner, as well as providing proof that serious study of any subject whatsoever was sufficient to produce something original. Nowhere had Bernard been more himself and never had he 'been closer to Rembrandt than then'. That he now wanted to immerse himself in the Italian and German primitives, 'in the symbolic meaning that can be contained in the abstract and mystical drawing of the

28
Emile Bernard,
Bernard's grandmother,
1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam



29
Emile Bernard,
The Annunciation, 1889
Stuart Pivar
Collection

30
Carel Fabritius,
Self-portrait, c. 1645
Museum Boijmans
Van Beuningen,
Rotterdam



Italians', well, that was up to him, but Vincent saw little point in it. He was shocked, however, when he saw the results of Bernard's enthusiasm eighteen months later, and his criticism was crushing (29). According to him, that kind of work was 'sham, something affected. [...] So, my dear fellow, your biblical paintings, it's hopeless [...] and it's a mistake.' 'But,' the wise teacher added, 'it is through mistakes that you sometimes find the right path.' It seems that Bernard never replied to this letter and that Vincent never wrote to him again.

FROM THE MODEL OR NOT

Bernard wanted to bring the aesthetics of the middle ages back to life. There can be no doubt that this, together with his interest in the symbolic meaning of line, was stimulated by his contacts with Gauguin, who at the time was also experimenting with painting from the imagination and with highly stylised religious scenes. The two of them believed that the Impressionists'



programme had shown itself to be inadequate as a mission for art, and even Vincent saw a kernel of truth in that, because Impressionism had restricted itself so much to landscape and had left too little room for the human figure. There was work to be done there, and Vincent wanted to be the one to make the breakthrough. He felt that portraiture was the most relevant choice for the modern age. He had also wanted to execute larger figure paintings, but he realised that he was unable to do this because he could not work from his imagination or memory. That was also why he could not depict events described in the Bible.

What he wanted to do in his paintings, however, was to 'say something consoling like music. I would like to paint men or women with something of the eternal, the symbol of which used to be the halo, and which we try to achieve with the radiance itself, with the vibration of our colours.'

He wanted to make portraits 'that contain the thoughts, the soul of the model – in my opinion that is what absolutely has to be done.' Portraits, in other words, that would achieve what Rembrandt had achieved in his portraits, as in the one of the so-called *Traveller in the Lacaze Collection* (18), which Vincent spoke of often and lovingly compared to the so obviously Rembrandtesque *Self-portrait by Carel Fabritius in Rotterdam* (30). These were exceptional paintings, from a 'special category in which the portrait of a person acquires something inexpressibly radiant and consoling'. Such portraits were admittedly done from life, but they were not conventional depictions of the sitter, let alone looked like photographs. They did not derive their significance from the likeness as such, but from the special way that the maker had experienced the model and shared that experience with the viewer. That, to Vincent, would be ideal.

Gauguin and Bernard wanted to go a step further and produce an even more abstract and richly imaginative form of art by avoiding the use of a model. Vincent tried to do the same during the short time that Gauguin was in Arles, but he was not happy with the result (31). He also had long discussions with his colleague about the problems inherent in those abstractions, and once again Rembrandt's realism played a key role. As Vincent told Theo,



31
Vincent van Gogh,
Woman reading
a novel, 1888
Private collection

those discussions were often very heated: 'sometimes, at the end, we have a head that is as empty as a discharged electric battery.' Something else that was almost certainly discussed was the possibility of painting a *Christ in the Garden of Olives*, which Vincent had just recently twice attempted to do without success.

He had embarked on his first effort in July 1888, but soon scraped the paint off again, feeling that one should not make such important figures without models. In September, a second attempt had also been abandoned, 'because I can see real olive trees here'. He had a very clear idea how his painting should have looked, and he also described it at length, but to paint the scene from his imagination just did not work. The old Dutch artists were familiar with the same problem, and their dependence on models was often regarded as a shortcoming, because they did indeed make many scenes from the Bible or antiquity look odd. It was only Rembrandt who, working from reality, had succeeded in depicting the story of salvation convincingly, as if it were something natural.

vérités - Car malgré l'inscription les personnes ont l'air triste en contradiction avec le titre. Sur ce bois cire il y a des reflets que donne la lumière sur les parties bossues qui donne de la richesse -



Je vais l'envoyer à Paris dans quelques jours. Peut être cela plaira plus que une peinture. De Haam vous dit bien des choses.

Cordialement à vous

P. Gauvain

P.S. Je suis que vous fatiguez quand vous écrivez ainsi je ne demande rien de lettre (malgré tout) le plaisir que j'ai à vous lire.

Le service militaire de Bernard a été remis à un an pour (santé) -



au Pouldu près Quimper (Finistère)

BREAKDOWN AND HOSPITALISATION IN SAINT-RÉMY

Gauguin disagreed sharply with Van Gogh as to whether an artist should work from a model or not. In addition, he realised within a couple of weeks that he could not possibly live under the same roof as Vincent, so he decided to go back to Brittany, where he had been working before he came south.

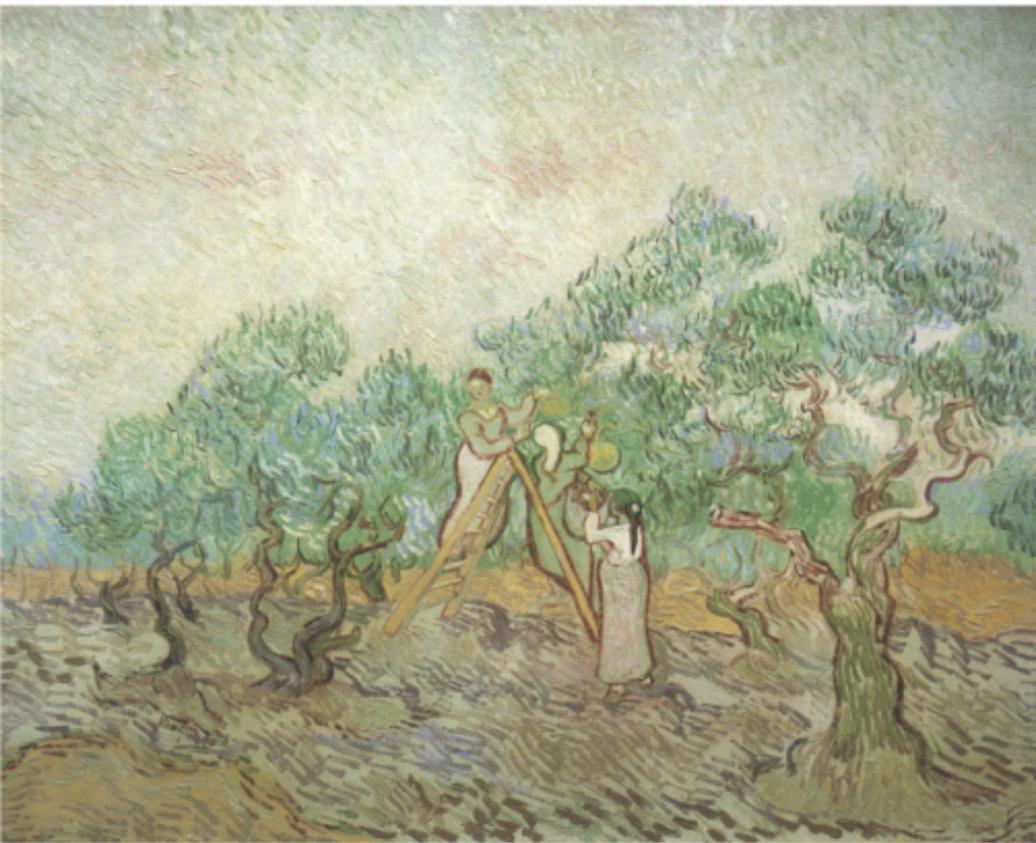
Vincent, who remained behind, suffered a breakdown and, after cutting off part of his ear and nearly bleeding to death, was admitted to hospital in Arles. He recovered but was returned to hospital after gossip in the neighbourhood and then decided he would probably be better off in the asylum in nearby Saint-Rémy. His stay in that clinic turned out to be a terrible experience. Even so, he did have a room of his own where he could paint and he was often allowed to work out of doors. Although he suffered several very serious breakdowns, during which he was literally out of his mind, his work developed with an unyielding consistency despite all the misery he was in.

He and Gauguin got in touch again, too, and in November 1889, almost a year after he had left Arles, the latter wrote him a letter containing a sketch of the *Christ in the Garden of Olives* that he had painted (32). Bernard had also made a painting of the subject, which he showed to Theo, who could not make head or tail of it and even called Bernard's figures ridiculous. We have already seen what Vincent thought of those experiments of Bernard's, but the letter-sketch of Gauguin's painting also stuck in his throat. He saw nothing in these biblical scenes and wrote to Theo that he himself would steer well clear of them. He had told Gauguin and Bernard in the past that he believed Rembrandt and Delacroix had interpreted the Bible admirably and 'that I loved that even more than the primitives, but thus far and no further – I don't want to go into that again. If I remain here I will not attempt to paint a Christ in the Garden of Olives, but I will do the olive-picking, as you still see it done today.'

If that were well done, Vincent thought, it would perhaps recall the other Garden of Olives. And after that he did start working in the olive groves around Saint-Rémy (33), for his colleagues had 'enraged [him] with their *Christ in the Garden*, which is devoid of any observation.'

32

Letter from Gauguin with a sketch after his *Christ in the Garden of Olives*, Le Pouldu, c. 8 November 1889, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



THE GARDEN OF THE ASYLUM

Vincent also painted the garden of the asylum where he was living, which he described in very personal terms in the letter cited above in which he was so critical of Bernard's religious works (34). If you gave the large tree struck by lightning the character of a human being, he believed, then that dark giant, 'his pride wounded [...] contrasts with the pale smile of a late rose on the bush opposite, that has almost finished flowering.' In addition, the colour scheme would evoke a sort of feeling of dread, which was reinforced by the motif of that blasted tree facing 'that unhealthy pink-green smile of the last flower of autumn'. Vincent described the painting in this way in order to explain that 'you can express a feeling of dread without referring directly to the historical Gethsemane'. He thought that Bernard was right to be moved by the Bible, 'but modern-day reality has us so much in its grip that even if you try to imagine a former age in your thoughts, the petty incidents in our lives tear us from those musings at the same moment, and our own adventures irrevocably throw us back on our personal feelings.'

Gauguin and Bernard had got hold of the wrong end of the stick with their biblical scenes. Vincent knew that for certain. He could evoke Christ's dread in the Garden of Olives by painting the garden of his asylum. Nevertheless, a few months later Vincent himself made another attempt at the religious repertoire – with Rembrandt as his source.

AN IMPORTANT GIFT

Given Vincent's great interest in Rembrandt and in figure painting, biblical or not, it was a good idea of Theo's to send him several reproductions after etchings by Rembrandt for his birthday on 30 March 1890 – which was to be his last. It was also a beautiful gesture, as once, when the two brothers were in their early twenties, Vincent had shown Theo Rembrandt's original prints in the Amsterdam print-room because he himself had been so moved by them (35). However, when Theo's letter arrived in Saint-Rémy, Vincent had been sick for some weeks and was unable even to look at his post. Not until 24 April did he write that he had tried to read the letters he had been sent

33

Vincent van Gogh,
The olive artyard, 1889
National Gallery of
Art, Washington.
Chester Dale
Collection





34
Vincent van Gogh,
The garden of St Paul's
Hospital, 1889
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam





but that his mind was not yet clear enough for him to understand them. By the beginning of May he had improved, and he reacted to the prints from Theo: 'I thank you so much for the etchings – you chose a few of the very ones that I have loved so long: the David [36], the Lazarus [39], the woman of Samaria, and the large etching of the Wounded man, and you also added the Blind man [37] and that other tiny etching, the last, which is so mysterious that I am scared of it and do not want to know what it is of, I didn't know it: the Small goldsmith [38], but the Lazarus ...'

And a little further on in this letter of 2 May he wrote: 'I may perhaps try to work after the Rembrandts; above all I am planning to make the Man praying in the colour range of light yellow to violet' (36). As far as is known, Vincent never did paint *David in prayer*, but as early as 3 May he wrote that he had completed a *Lazarus* based on Rembrandt. He sent a sketch of it (41).

35
Rembrandt, *The fight into Egypt*, 1651
Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam

36
Reproduction after Rembrandt, *David in prayer*, 1652
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

37
Reproduction after Rembrandt, *The blindness of Tobit*, 1651
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

38

Reproduction after
Rembrandt,
The goldsmith, 1655
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam



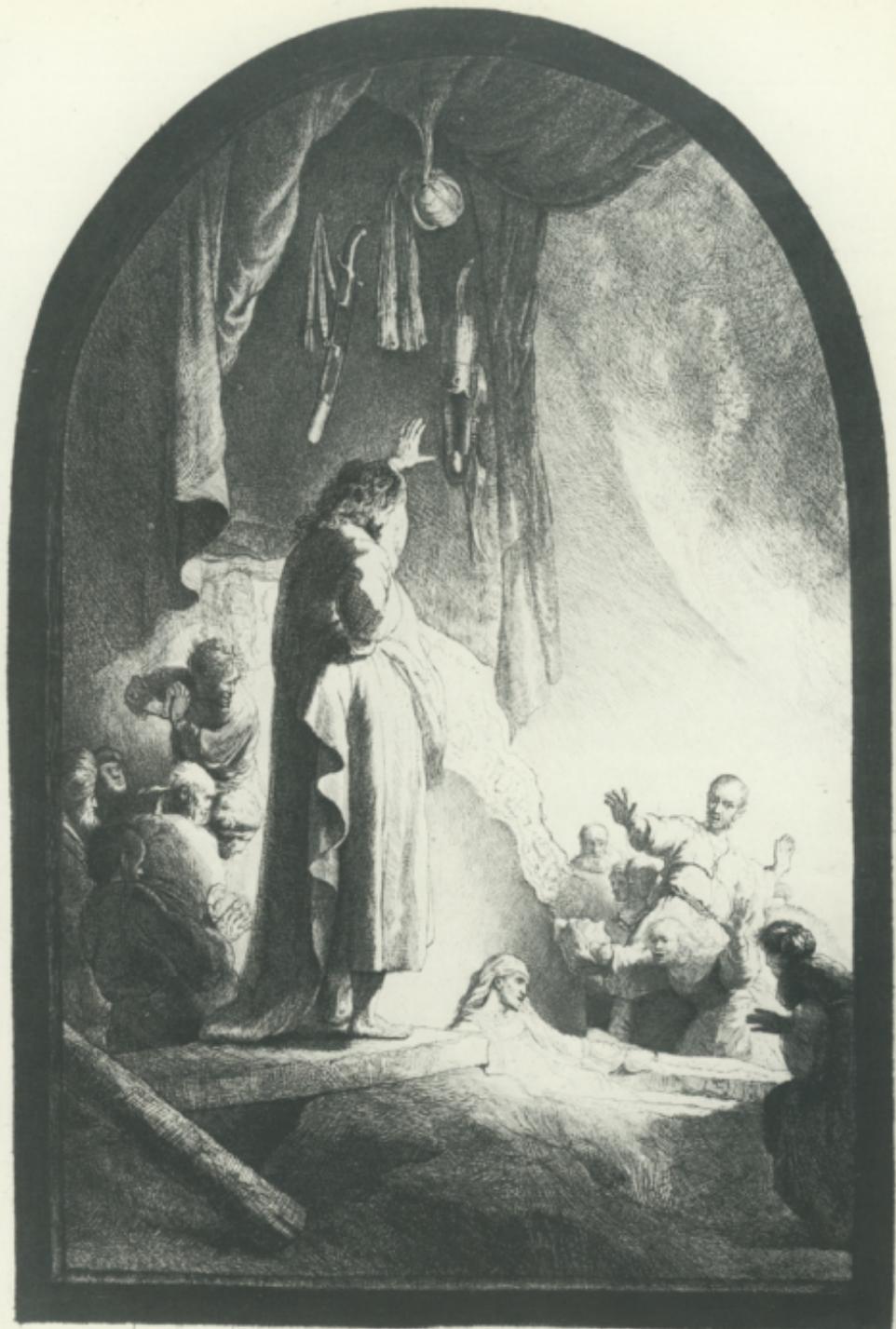
39

Reproduction
after Rembrandt,
The raising of Lazarus,
c. 1632
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

RESURRECTION AND DEPARTURE FROM SAINT-RÉMY

One does not need much imagination to understand that the story of Lazarus appealed to Vincent and that he experienced his own recovery from sickness as a raising from the dead. And while some of his translations of works by other artists, such as his reproductions after Millet, are no more than exercises that he did on the days he could not go outside, his study after Rembrandt's *Raising of Lazarus* was more ambitious (40). If he had had the models who had posed for him in Arles, Madame Roulin and Madame Ginoux (42, 43), he would also have tried to paint a large canvas of the subject, especially as the roles of the women would have suited them. He also wrote to Theo that he still remembered exactly what Charles Blanc had said about the *Lazarus* in his much read book about Rembrandt. If that was really true, then the combination of colours in his painting, 'which as such express the same as the chiaroscuro of the etching,' must depict the contrast between life and death, for according to Blanc that was the meaning of Rembrandt's use of light and dark (39). In the same sense, the large rising sun in Vincent's *Lazarus* might also be read as a metaphor, since Blanc considered that night, for Rembrandt, was the equivalent of death.

It is just as if Vincent was resuming the discussion with Gauguin and





40
Vincent van Gogh,
The raising of Lazarus,
1890
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

41
Letter from Vincent
with a sketch after
his *Raising of Lazarus*,
Saint-Rémy, 3 May
1890
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

Bernard, now that he was brave enough to take on a biblical story after all. His point of departure was not medieval art but Rembrandt, and he still could not or would not paint a work of this kind from the imagination. Perhaps the way in which he took only Lazarus and the two women from Rembrandt's composition has something to do with this. He could use his own face as the model for that of Lazarus (44), and the women could be the two from Arles. Portraying himself as Lazarus was not inappropriate, but he had had no model for his Christ in the *Garden of Olives*, which is why the subject was beyond him. He probably felt it would be going too far to play the role of Christ, as Gauguin had done (45). Several things fell into place with his Lazarus, and this study gave him the feeling that he would be able to tackle repertoire of this kind in the future. Now that his health was improving,



Mon cher théo, encore une fois je t'écris pour dire
que la santé continue à aller bien, pour
je me sens un peu éreinté par cette longue vie
et j'ose croire que le changement projeté
me raffraichira d'avantage les idées
je crois que le mieux sera que j'aille
moi-même voir ce médecin à la campagne
le plus tôt possible ; alors on pourra bientôt
décider si c'est chez lui ou provisoirement
à l'auberge que j'irai loger ; et ainsi on
évitera un séjour trop prolongé à Paris, chose
que je redouterai.

St. Rémy Avril 1840







he wanted to leave the asylum as soon as he could. Theo supported his decision, and within a fortnight of completing *The raising of Lazarus* Vincent passed through Paris on his way to Auvers, where the art-loving Dr Gachet would look after him.

AUVERS

On 28 May 1890 Vincent arrived in Auvers, which he thought was a beautiful place. The doctor struck him as being rather eccentric, and possibly even more sick than he was himself, but after a while he began appreciating Gachet as a friend and as a lover of modern art. He moved into an inn and threw himself into his work, as the doctor had advised him to do in order to forget his worries. Here, too, he rapidly produced one masterpiece after another, including some of his best landscapes and portraits, but he did not attempt any more figure paintings.



<< 42

Vincent van Gogh,
Le Brasseur (Madame
Roulin), 1889
Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam, on loan
to the Van Gogh
Museum

< 43

Vincent van Gogh,
L'Église (Madame
Ginoux), 1888
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
New York. Bequest
of Sam A. Lewisohn

44

Vincent van Gogh,
detail of *The raising
of Lazarus*, 1890
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

45

Paul Gauguin,
*Christus in the Garden
of Olives*, 1889
Norton Gallery of Art,
West Palm Beach

That may have been because, while passing through Paris, he had seen a painting by Puvis de Chavannes that made a great impression on him and set him thinking again about the problems facing the modern figure-painter. Puvis's painting was a sort of allegory in which representatives of Nature and Civilisation mingle in a landscape as peaceful as paradise ⁽⁴⁶⁾.

If you look at it for a long time, he wrote to his sister Wil, 'you get the feeling that you are witnessing an irrevocable but benevolent rebirth of everything you have believed in, have desired, a strange and fortunate meeting between distant antiquity and harsh modernity.' And he wrote to the critic Isaacson that in the south of France Puvis could have done what he himself had been unable to do, because he could have depicted the people there in a way that would have given new meaning to 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed the pure in heart'.

And all at once Vincent, the Dutchman and realist, felt inferior to this



kind of southern idealism. All at once he asked himself, 'however convinced we may be by Rembrandt's vision', whether this work by Puvis did not perhaps achieve 'what Raphael meant, and Michelangelo and Da Vinci? I do not know, but I think that Giotto, who was less of a heathen, sensed it better, that great worrier to whom one remains close as a contemporary.' Giotto's medieval vision, admired by Vincent on an excursion from Arles to the museum in Montpellier (47), Mediterranean idealism, and Rembrandt yet again. It is as if Vincent were once more sitting around a table with Gauguin and Bernard, and once more ideas were fermenting in his head.

But he was no Puvis, and his art was not calm or serene, and he could not make it so. He painted Gachet with 'a face the colour of an overheated brick', which he deliberately made pale by setting it against a blue landscape and giving the doctor clothes of ultramarine (48). There was passion in a modern head like that, and he was happy with it. People would also look



at heads like that for a long time to come, he thought, and perhaps yearn for them in a hundred years' time. Gachet is painted with 'the sad expression of our age', and in his 'vast wheatfields under turbulent skies' of this period Vincent also tried to express 'the sadness, extreme loneliness' that he experienced as being typical of his day (49).

THE END

A fortnight after writing about this sadness and extreme loneliness, Vincent put an end to his life. He had visited Theo in Paris shortly before and came away with a feeling of foreboding. He could not go on. His death caused a great stir in the small world of modern art and must have been terrible for Theo. Bernard assisted at the funeral, at which a deeply moved Gachet spoke about Vincent's art and humanity.

Art and humanity, Vincent would have liked that. For the purpose of his art was to console people, to 'say something consoling like music'. In that respect he remained a true 'Christian workman' who, modest as he was, wanted above all to do good. Initially he was convinced 'that everything that is truly good and beautiful, the inner, moral, spiritual and lofty beauty in people and their works, that that comes from God, and that everything that is bad and evil in people's works and in people, that that does not come from God, and that God does not find it good either'.

In Vincent's earliest view of the world art led to God, and God revealed himself in it. 'The one, to take an example, loves Rembrandt, but seriously, he knows very well that there is a God, he will really believe in him [...], another has only briefly attended the free lessons at the great university of wretchedness and has paid attention to the things that he sees with his eyes and hears with his ears, and has thought about them – and he too will ultimately believe, and he may learn more from them than he can say.' 'Try,' he wrote to Theo, 'to understand the essence of what the great artists, the serious masters, say in their masterpieces, you will rediscover God in them.'

But later, too, when he had completely turned his back on the pastors he had initially respected so much and on Christianity as an institution, he





never doubted the inspiring religiosity of artists like Millet or Rembrandt. Gradually, in his view of things, even Christ became an artist who, 'greater than all other artists, disdainful of marble and clay', had worked in 'living flesh' because he 'had declared the non-existence of death and the necessity of serenity and devotion to be the chief certainty', and had thus made 'living people immortal'.

Art and religion had become inextricably intertwined in Vincent's life, and he found in Rembrandt the consolation he wished to offer others with his work. It was the old master's way of looking that he encountered and recognised time and again – even in a Christmas play about the Nativity in Arles.

Vincent and Rembrandt are the only two northern European artists whom the whole world calls by their forenames, and they are indeed related.

48
Vincent van Gogh,
Portrait of Dr Gachet,
1890
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

> 49
Vincent van Gogh,
Wheatfields under
thunderclouds, 1890
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam





THE SOURCES

Van Gogh's bible for seventeenth-century Dutch art was the work that Théophile Thoré ('everything he says is true') published as *W. Bürger, Les musées de la Hollande*, 2 vols., Paris 1858-60. He also knew Eugène Fromentin, *Les maîtres d'autrefois*, which first appeared in instalments in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* of 1876, and Charles Blanc, *L'Œuvre complet de Rembrandt [...]*, 2 vols., Paris 1859-61. It is likely that he also used Théophile Gautier's small guide to the Louvre of 1867, which was reprinted as *Guide de l'amateur au Musée du Louvre*, Paris 1882. Vincent rightly observed that the French at that time had written about Dutch art 'better than the Dutch'. From the overwhelming mass of publications on Van Gogh I would here single out the catalogue of the exhibition *Vincent's choice: the Musée imaginaire of Van Gogh*, Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2003.

QUOTATIONS FROM THE LETTERS OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

The quotations from Vincent's correspondence have been translated from *De brieven van Vincent van Gogh*, ed. H. van Crimpen and M. Berends-Albert, 4 vols., The Hague 1990. The letters from which quotations have been taken are listed below. The first number refers to the edition cited above, the second to *Verzamelde brieven van Vincent van Gogh*, ed. J. van Gogh-Bonger and V.W. van Gogh, 4 vols., Amsterdam & Antwerp 1953.

p.5: 537 [426]; p.7: 553 [442]; p.8: 553 [442]; p.11: 536 [425]; 537 [426]; p.14: 539 [428]; 128[108]; p.15: 554 [443]; p.17: 37 [30]; 245 [213]; p.18: 153 [132]; 239 [208]; 46 [37]; p.20: 617 [492]; 17 [13]; 114 [95]; 115 [96]; 483 [393]; 115 [96]; 138 [117]; p.21: 138 [117]; p.23: 546 [435]; p.24: 555 [444]; 538 [427]; p.26: 555 [444]; 542 [431]; 554 [443]; 551 [440]; pp.26-27: 141 [120]; p.27: 293 [251]; p.29: 522 [418]; 440 [R43]; p.31: 623 [500]; p.34: 630 [87]; 626 [496]; 647 [B11]; pp.37-38: 651 [B12]; p.39: 653 [B13]; pp.39-40: 659 [B14]; p.40: 824 [B21]; p.42: 677 [531]; 799 [602/602a]; p.43: 730 [564]; 689 [540]; p.45: 822 [614]; 825 [615]; p.47: 824 [B21]; p.51: 866 [630]; p.52: 867 [632]; p.60: 883 [W22]; pp.60-61: 878 [614a]; p.61: 883 [W22]; p.62: 893 [643]; 903 [649]; 677 [531]; 109 [89]; p.65: 154 [133]; 635 [B8]; p.69: 19 [14]; 651 [B12]

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Front cover: Vincent van Gogh, detail of *Head of a woman with her hair loose*, 1885
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Title page: Vincent van Gogh, *The garden of St Paul's Hospital*, 1889
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Back cover: Rembrandt, *Saskia*, 1633. Photograph by Kunstverlag Braun, Clément & Cie.
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Van Gogh was inspired by Rembrandt his whole life long, both spiritually and artistically. Paintings like *The Jewish bride* and *The supper at Emmaus* made a profound impression on him, but even simple reproductions fascinated and moved him deeply. Vincent often mentioned Rembrandt in his letters to his brother Theo, and occasionally he produced works that were based directly on those of his famous predecessor. The well-known *Raising of Lazarus* is a free and very personal translation in colour of Rembrandt's etching of the subject, and it was painted at a time when Vincent was very despondent and hoped to experience a similar resurrection himself. *Van Gogh and Rembrandt* is a journey of discovery that reveals how Van Gogh gave Rembrandt a special place in his own life and work.

PETER HECHT is a specialist in Dutch seventeenth-century art with a particular interest in its interpretation, later reception, and influence. He was a guest curator at the Rijksmuseum in 1989 for the exhibition *De Hollandse Fijnschilders van Gerard Dou tot Adriaen van der Werff*; he is a professor of Art History at Utrecht University and a long-standing editor of *Simiolus, Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, in which many of his best-known articles have appeared.

VAN GOGH IN FOCUS

