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Van Gogh's letters: the artist speaks

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Van Gogh's Letters. The Artist Speaks

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

9 October 2009–3 January 2010

"What I mean to say as regards the difference between old and contemporary art is: perhaps the new artists are deeper thinkers."

Vincent van Gogh, c. 21 July 1882

"Artistic research" is a buzzword in the contemporary art world and artists engaged in the practice are to be found working in all fields, from curating to investigating the visual and ontological relationship between art and science. As last fall's exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam shows, however, there is nothing new in this approach. Van Gogh himself may have been the first, and undoubtedly most prolific, of this new breed of artists.

*Unless otherwise noted,
photographs were taken by
the author.*



Fig. 1. Vincent van Gogh, Letter to Theo van Gogh, April 13, 1888. Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), Amsterdam. Photograph courtesy of the Van Gogh Museum.



Fig. 2. Horizontal case for the display of letters, designed by Wim Crowel.



Fig. 3. Vertical case for the display of letters, designed by Wim Crowel.

With the publication of the entire corpus of Van Gogh's letters this past autumn^[1] and this accompanying exhibition—which includes some 120 letters held by the Van Gogh Museum itself, plus several loans from the Morgan Library and Museum in New York—the myth of the Dutch artist as a primitive or pure expressionist (or worse yet, madman) has finally been laid to rest (fig. 1). The proof of his profoundly intellectual stance towards art-making lies in the letters themselves, but can only be fully understood in relation to the paintings. This was the great achievement of *The Artist Speaks*, which skillfully combined the written and painted evidence of Van Gogh's thought in a clever installation that allowed the visitor to retrace, more or less, the artist's every step. At the end we came to understand both the letters and the paintings in a new light: both were part of a process of thinking and, moreover, knowledge production.

The museum was almost entirely re-hung to accommodate the show, creating "chapters" dealing with the various artistic (and occasionally personal) issues with which the artist was confronted during his career. The ground floor established some of the themes that would preoccupy Van Gogh throughout his life: artistic identity, family, color, the countryside. Quotations on the wall introduced these themes, while the labels reproduced passages from the correspondence related to the work displayed. By keeping the technical information to a minimum, the curators forced the visitor to see the painting purely in light of the extract. A very moving example revolved around the birth of Theo's son, Vincent Willem, for whom Van Gogh painted the famous *Almond Blossoms*. Here we are directly confronted with the feelings of the artist at a crucial moment; not only can we imagine him composing his epistle and working on the canvas, we immediately understand that each is a different, but intimately related means of expressing the same emotion.

Ascending the stairs to view the continuation of the exhibition, we were treated to enormous screens, onto which the letters were projected—a nice device for piquing the curiosity of the casual visitor and spurring her on to a treasure hunt. The first floor was devoted, as ever, to an overview of Van Gogh's work, divided by location (Nuenen, Paris, etc.). The usual chronology was punctuated, however, by the specially designed cases containing the letters related to the nearby

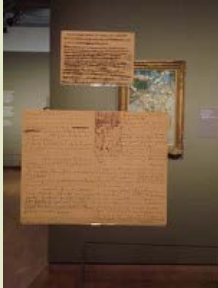


Fig. 4. View through vertical glass case showing letter, sketch, and painting in relation to one another.



Fig. 5. Vincent van Gogh, Letter to Theo van Gogh, May 12, 1888. Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), Amsterdam. Photograph courtesy of the Van Gogh Museum.



Fig. 6. Intermediate floor display of the letter-sketches, cases, and installation by Wim Crowwel.



Fig. 7. Installation showing various versions of the Sower motif.



Fig. 8. Vincent van Gogh, Letter to Theo van Gogh, Etten, mid-September 1881. Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), Amsterdam. Photograph courtesy of the Van Gogh Museum.

pictures. The two types of cases, one horizontal, the other vertical, were designed to encourage maximum closeness in viewing the letters displayed (figs. 2 and 3). The standing version in particular functioned extremely well, as one almost had the feeling of being able to touch the letter in question. Labels were kept well out of the way, and again contained only minimal technical information, supplemented by the occasional commentary, transcription and translation. The personal and intimate quality of the letters was thus given physical expression in the installation itself.

Closeness to the objects on view was not the only aim, however. Indeed, the curators did their utmost to prevent the public from fetishizing the letters as they do the paintings. With the upright cases, one could actually look through the glass to the related work of art, making it possible to view the two together (fig. 4). This was especially illuminating when the letter contained a sketch (or "scratch," as Van Gogh often called them) of the work in question. Such sketches were meant to give the artist's correspondent an additional idea of the picture being described, its composition, coloration, and execution (fig. 5). By viewing the letter, sketch, and painting simultaneously we came to comprehend them *all* as ways of working through the same, specifically *artistic* problems.

In other instances, we could look at the letters first and then at the artworks, but with our understanding of them completely changed. For example, the discrepancy between the white frame mentioned in a letter concerning *The Bedroom*, and the gold frame surrounding the work now, jolts us into thinking about the importance of framing in general, and at the same time allows us to imagine how the artist intended the work to be seen. The inclusion of the letters regarding the colored copies made in Saint-Rémy after black and white prints, in which, among other things, Van Gogh explains that for him color had the same expressive quality as the chiaroscuro in the etching, allowed us to view the copies with fresh eyes. The letters thus come to have more than merely documentary value, while the paintings' "cult status" is reduced—to the benefit of both, and undoubtedly, to the world of Van Gogh scholarship.

Arriving at the intermediate floor, the sometime print room, the viewer was first confronted with a wall-size diagram of Van Gogh's artistic and personal network. This underlines once again the curators' aim to demonstrate that Vincent was by no means the isolated *madman* the popular imagination (and indeed many so-called scholars) would hold him to be, but rather a thoughtful if rather prickly character, extremely well-read and erudite, and above all, a rational and well-connected *artist*. Along the wall were arrayed a series of letters to several correspondents other than Theo, again displayed for maximum readability. On this floor, too, was a display of prints and books with their related letters. Their inclusion illustrated not only Van Gogh's passion for reading and collecting, but also showed how the two were an integral part of both the letters *and* the art. For Van Gogh, it seems, life, painting, visual culture, and literature were one; all were equally involved in his effort to create a new and modern art.



Fig. 9. Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888. Oil on canvas. Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), Amsterdam. Photograph courtesy of the Van Gogh Museum.



Fig. 10. Vincent van Gogh, *Letter to Theo van Gogh*, November 21, 1888. Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), Amsterdam. Photograph courtesy of the Van Gogh Museum.



Fig. 11. Installation of the third floor, showing Van Gogh's artistic connections.

Passing through a display of previous editions of Van Gogh's letters—in all possible languages—and computers for exploring the online version of the new edition, [2] we entered a room devoted entirely to the letter-sketches (fig. 6). This unique viewing opportunity was once again optimized by the installation, the cool white of the space drawing the viewer towards the warm yellowed paper of the letters, exhibited along the walls and in the same transparent vertical cases mentioned above. Perhaps the most intriguing display here, certainly in connection with the question of Van Gogh's thinking approach to art-making, was the series of five letters in which the artist discusses his techniques, tools and materials. These included sketches of his studio window, a frame, brushes, a palette (with color indications) and the famous perspective frame.

Thinking back to both the paintings and the letters seen before, one is struck here in general by a certain continuity in the work, by the fact that Van Gogh seems to have returned again and again to the same themes and problems throughout his career, albeit later in a far more advanced and technically proficient style. This was brought home in one of the cleverest displays in the exhibition, a standing case containing an 1881 drawing of a peasant sowing, executed in the awkward manner typical of Van Gogh's early work, set at an angle to the Van Gogh Museum's own painted version of the same theme from 1888, with its accompanying letter (figs. 7-10). This visual demonstration of both development and continuity in Van Gogh's oeuvre told us more about the artist than many a scholarly text, and emphasized the importance of viewing that oeuvre holistically.

The third and final floor of the show explored Van Gogh's conception of his own practice as a form of "art for the people", as well as presenting a further contextualization of the artist in relation to his fellow painters, both friends and contemporaries (fig. 11). Although perhaps less charming than the rest of the exhibition—being largely filled with studies for the *Potato Eaters* and other "heads," and Van Gogh's early efforts to create work for illustrated magazines, again displayed with related letters—the first of the rooms

demonstrated clearly not only Vincent's social engagement, but also his desire to reach out to the wider world with his art, to be a (commercial) *success*. Far from being preoccupied with his innermost feelings, in the beginning his focus was clearly directed outward, beyond himself and beyond any notion of artistic autonomy. In the later period—again evidence of continuity in both thinking and making—this appears to have changed little: the exchange of portraits and other work with friends and colleagues bears witness to a deeply felt yearning for community, for new forms of living and working. This effort to emerge from an isolation that was not self-imposed but rather part and parcel of the condition of the artist in modernity, and to break with notions of artist-hood originating in the Renaissance and prevalent in intensified form since the Romantic era, failed, but certainly not for lack of trying, as the letters testify. Last but not least, the display of some of Van Gogh's favorite works and artists, again accompanied by quotations from the letters, added yet another dimension to the presentation. The extracts allowed us to understand with great precision not only *what* the artist liked, but also *why*. Although many of Vincent's choices seem strange to us today, within the context of his artistic worldview, they made perfect sense. A Michel or a Monticelli will never look the same after having seen them through Vincent's eyes.

The exhibition *The Artist Speaks* is a superb complement to the herculean effort that went into producing the new edition of the artist's letters (fifteen years of work, fifteen kilos worth of book!). It was a unique opportunity to view not only the highlights of the correspondence, but also to examine these in direct relation to works of art. The conclusion one must draw is not only that both letters and paintings are invaluable to understanding Van Gogh's work, but also that they are most valuable when taken together, as part of the same whole that constituted Vincent's unique manner of

artistic thinking. From now on, we must regard the Van Gogh Museum not only as a museum of art, but of letters as well.

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Note: A related exhibition will take place at the Royal Academy in London: *The Real Van Gogh. The Artist and His Letters*, 23 January – 18 April 2010. See <http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibitions/vangogh/>. It will be accompanied by its own publication: Nienke Bakker and Leo Jansen, *The Real Van Gogh. The Artist and His Letters*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2010.

[1] *Vincent Van Gogh – The Letters*, ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker, 6 vols., (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009).

[2] See www.vangoghletters.org