

How Van Gogh Learned to Draw

Vincent van Gogh was already twenty-seven years old when he finally decided to become an artist. This was after a short-lived obsession with the notion of becoming a minister like his father and then actually working as a lay preacher, living among the coal miners in the Borinage in Belgium. With the manic zeal that characterized his previous attempts to find a suitable profession, Vincent set about mastering his new craft. Although he would become famous for his explosive use of vibrant color and expressive brushwork, his first steps as an artist concentrated on drawing and on the figure. A failed attempt at formal training at the art academy in Brussels was followed by self-tutoring through instruction manuals and the copying of beloved prints, as well as a commitment to drawing after the live model, wherever he could find and afford them. Already, Van Gogh's deep admiration for earlier artists, such as Rembrandt, Delacroix, and the plein-air painters of the Barbizon school, found its way into his decidedly eccentric manner of drawing. These early attempts culminated in his first self-proclaimed "masterpiece," *The Potato Eaters*, featured here in its lithographic version. Even his good friend, the artist Anthon van Rappard, could not help but express disdain for such an outlandishly brutish depiction. Vincent's initial optimism soon evaporated into despair. One of the two painted versions of *The Potato Eaters* remained with brother Theo, who recognized its foreshadowing of the path from which his brother would never swerve for the ten years of life remaining to him. ✨

Van Gogh and his Imaginary Museum

Van Gogh's initial profession was through his uncle Cent (after whom he was named), who was the co-owner of an art dealership in The Hague called Goupil & Cie. Employment at Goupil Gallery's other branches in London and Paris (where Vincent's younger brother, Theo, would ultimately establish himself as an aspiring art dealer) would shape Van Gogh's formative journey to London and then, Paris. Two consequences of his experiences at Goupil Gallery were his exposure to reproductive prints after well-known paintings that the firm sold in abundance; and, particularly in London, his exposure to prints, often of a social realist nature, featured in the popular publications, *The London Illustrated News* and *The Graphic*. Before the widespread use of photography, prints were the means by which visual culture was disseminated. For Vincent, the prints that he revered and collected became a constant source of spiritual and artistic

solace and inspiration. His visual fluency in the history of art, both of the past and his near contemporaries, is reflected in the diversity of the many prints to which he alludes in his letters and in his personal collection. Interestingly, his taste in prints was decidedly not in the direction of the most cutting-edge art of his time, but more often, nostalgic for the Realist art of the preceding generation.

The other constant for the 'imaginary museum' that he carried in his mind's eye were the woodcut illustrations of the many novels that he read and reread; most notably, to illustrate the social realist novels of authors like Charles Dickens and Émile Zola. Like his siblings, Vincent read in four different languages (Dutch, French, English, and German), and often memorized and recited entire paragraphs of his favorite novels, as if they were biblical passages. ✨