

The Dutch Roots of Vincent van Gogh

by

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On the most elementary level, Vincent van Gogh's Dutchness can be encapsulated by his signature, *Vincent*. Van Gogh began signing certain of his works, in particular selected large drawings, while living in The Hague. He signed these with self-conscious style using only his first name, which he underscored with a flourish. Several years later, writing to his brother Theo from Arles, van Gogh declared that his name ought to appear in the catalogue for the Société des Artistes Indépendants as he signed his canvases and not as "van Gogh," because the French did not know how to pronounce his surname. Stylistically this type of signature, underscored from right to left with a long, vigorous flourish, emulates the signatures of several Hague School artists, in particular Anton Mauve, his cousin by marriage, but also that of Hendrik Willem Mesdag and Jan Hendrik Weissenbruch. Vincent's intense involvement with the Hague School immediately after his arrival there in 1881 would partially explain this kind of imitation. However, another Dutch master also comes to mind, Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn. Early in his career, Rembrandt signed his works with a monogram that referred to his full family name. After he settled in Amsterdam, Rembrandt progressively dropped the reference to van Rijn and simply signed his canvases with his first name. Van Gogh's lifelong admiration for Rembrandt found early expression in his serious study of Rembrandt's prints in London and Amsterdam. Many of these prints are prominently signed Rembrandt and must have inspired Vincent to follow this illustrious antecedent.

As a young man, Vincent van Gogh's relationship to the art world was tempered by his familial and personal connections to the art trade. Three of his uncles ran art galleries, in Amsterdam, The Hague, and Rotterdam. His uncle Vincent (Oom Cent) sold his gallery in The Hague to the Parisian firm Goupil and Company, which maintained these operations as well as galleries in Brussels, Paris, and London. Vincent began his career at the age of sixteen working in the Goupil premises in The Hague, but he was subsequently transferred to London and then to Paris. Goupil carved out a unique niche in the art trade by the commissioning, distribution, and sale of extremely high quality reproductive prints after well-known works of art. These ranged from the old masters to paintings by popular contemporary artists, primarily those of the French school. Not surprisingly van Gogh acquired certain of these images for himself. For example, when working for Goupil's in Paris in 1875, he hung on the walls of his apartment a diverse range of engravings, which he itemized in a letter to Theo. Among those he describes *Panoramic View of Haarlem from Overveen* and *The Bush*, after Jacob van Ruisdael, and *Bible Reading*, after Rembrandt. He also acquired a Goupil print after one of his favorite Rembrandt paintings in the Louvre, *Pilgrims at Emmaus*, and added this to his décor. . .

Interwoven into van Gogh's experience of modern culture was his keen interest in the Dutch old masters. Above all, he admired Rembrandt as a portraitist and religious painter who uniquely represented the mission of Christ. He marveled at Rembrandt's ability to convey inner feeling in his portraits and his seemingly magical handling of light, with all its associated spiritual symbolism and mystery. Frans Hals's portraits also captivated van Gogh, who admired their virility and the way they

mirrored an age of moral conviction and a sense of social connectedness. He appreciated the energy, spontaneity, and sketchiness of Hals's bold painting technique and saw him as the supreme technician. Van Gogh was also attracted to certain of the great seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painters, in particular Ruisdael, Jan van Goyen, Paulus Potter, and Philips Koninck. Specific genre painters also interested him, especially Adriaen van Ostade but also Jan Steen and Gerard Terborch.

Van Gogh's appreciation of the Dutch old masters was deeply influenced by the views of certain contemporary French critics. He was familiar with the writings of Théophile Thoré (Willem Burger), Charles Blanc, and Eugene Fromentin, who had done much to revive interest in these artists, some of whom, like Vermeer, had fallen into almost total obscurity. All these critics admired the naturalism, the sense of truth, and the technical virtuosity of the Dutch old masters, whom they saw as the source for modern naturalist art, especially that of the Barbizon School. Van Gogh identified closely with this assessment. In a letter to Theo he states,

How much good it does one to see a beautiful Rousseau on which he has drudged to keep it true and honest. How much good it does to think of people like Van Goyen, Old Crome and Michel. How beautiful an Isaac Ostade or a Ruysdael is.

Do I Want them back or do I want people to imitate them? No, but I want the honesty, the naïveté, the truth, to remain.

In contradistinction to the eighteenth-century preference for the licked finish and enamel-like precision of the so-called "Dutch little masters," these mid-nineteenth-century French critics particularly admired the bold brushwork, daring painting technique, and even the degree of unfinish in the paintings of Rembrandt and Hals. Rembrandt's unique exploitation of light commanded their highest respect as well. They equated these painterly qualities with modernism and galvanized artists, van Gogh among them, to appreciate the vitality and even audacity of these Dutch old masters.

For van Gogh these sources of inspiration intermingled and merged as he drew upon them to shape his own art. He could focus on each for its perceived modernity and topicality, yet also recognize how these sources could equally and simultaneously relate to the past. For him the Dutch old masters seemed truly modern, and Vincent conflated them and their supposed naturalism with that of the Barbizon and Hague Schools and with his own endeavors as an artist. The Dutch old masters represented something else of extraordinary significance to van Gogh's sense of the continuity of Dutch culture and a harking back to a truer, simpler world of shared values as opposed to the fragmented reality of modern, industrialized society. This was a utopian construct superimposed by van Gogh on the tradition as he perceived it. The tradition as he chose to understand it focused on several themes: the edifying portrait; the peasant wedded to the agrarian traditions of the land as a mainstay of the social order; representations of landscape showing mankind in harmony with nature; and a perceived naturalism that expressed truth. These points buttressed van Gogh's assumption that there is a continuum between past and present and enabled him to embrace traditional subject matter as a valid concern for modern art.