

The Grounding and Visionary Role of Vincent van Gogh's Family

By Ricki Morse

Part of an ongoing series for the Van Gogh exhibit, Fall 2022



Ricki Morse

To gain a sense of Vincent Van Gogh's early years, recall the sunless moors of the Hague School painters, the subject of last March's article in *La Muse*. Vincent remembers his

childhood as austere and cold, a reflection perhaps of his parents' staunch respectability and devotion to duty. And while his father's ministry to a small

Dutch Reformed congregation in the largely Roman Catholic Brabant region afforded the family a house, carriage and other amenities, the rector's stipend was small. Vincent, born in 1853, was the oldest of six, with three sisters and two brothers. He was named for his grandfather (1789-1874), a widely respected intellectual and minister from The Hague.

Vincent was a sometimes indifferent student, preferring to wander alone in the fields near his home, fascinated with animals, plants, flowers and insects. A sensitive child, he dressed differently, adopted his own eating habits and was viewed as odd. When he was sent away at 11 to a boarding



Pollard Willow, 1883. Watercolor, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



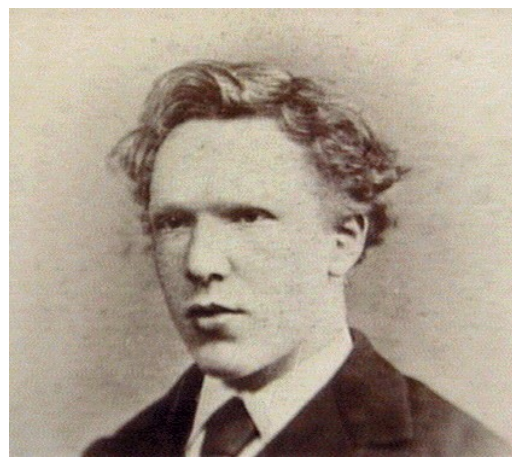
Barn and Farm, 1864. Earliest known painting by 11-year-old Vincent VG

school in a nearby town, he felt further alienated and begged to come home. He entered the village middle school, was drawn to the study of languages and excelled in English, German and French and became a dedicated reader in a wide range of subjects. However, due to the cost of schooling for a ministerial family, he dropped out at 15 and spent much of his time with his Uncle Cent who was an art dealer with Goupil & Co. His father encour-

aged the relationship with his wealthier brother, and Uncle Cent trained Vincent in his agency which led the next year to Vincent's placement as a clerk with Goupil & Co in The Hague.



Top. L-R: Theodorus van Gogh (1822-1885), nicknamed Dorus, the artist's father, "the handsome reverend." Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1819-1907), 1888, oil on canvas, VGM Amsterdam. Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of Vincent van Gogh*, 1881 (the artist's grandfather), pencil, wash, ink on paper. VGM, Amsterdam. **Below, L-R:** Uncle Cent van Gogh (1820-1888), elder brother to Vincent's father, intro-



duced Dorus to his wife's sister, whom Dorus married, thus the families were very close knit. (Middle) Theo van Gogh, (1855–1891). Parisian art dealer; brother, confidant and financial supporter of his older brother, Vincent. R: Vincent at age 19.

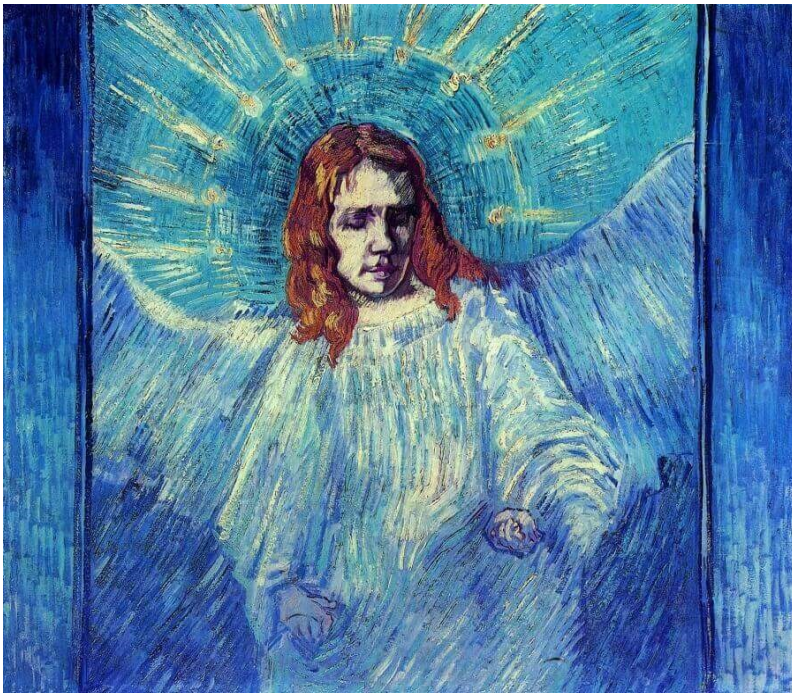
The Goupil & Co. Years, 1868–1876, The Hague, London, Paris

Thus Vincent was seen by his parents as now launched on a respectable and worthwhile career, confirmed when he was 19 by his placement in Goupil's London office. His younger brother Theo, also under Uncle Cent's tutelage, had become a clerk with Goupil in Paris, and the lifelong correspondence between the brothers began. Vincent was successful at the firm, fascinated with London



and English culture, especially their museums and literary tradition—Shakespeare, Keats and Dickens. But he wrote to Theo of his loneliness and homesick sadness, which soon took on another passion, his love for his landlord's daughter. She was already secretly committed to another man and rejected his advances as well as his

Vincent van Gogh, *Vicarage and church at Etten*, 1876, pencil on paper. VGM, Amsterdam

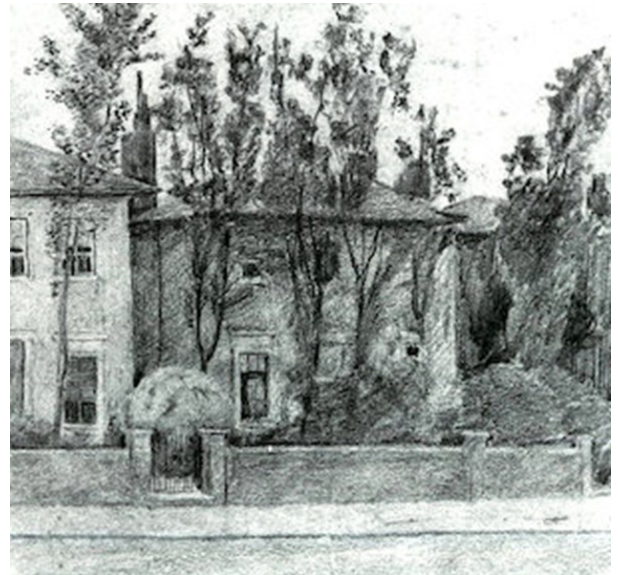


Vincent van Gogh, *Head of an Angel, After Rembrandt*, 1889, based on a Rembrandt lithograph

proposal of marriage. In 1875 Uncle Cent came to his rescue and arranged Vincent's transfer to the Paris branch of Goupil. But something had shifted in Vincent. He was disillusioned with the art world, the merchandizing of works of art, the commercialization of the artist. Above all he had lost his sense of meaningful work, of having a worthwhile place in the world, and his thoughts turned increasingly to spirituality, which had always had an important place in his life. In 1876 he was released from Goupil having often left work to visit his family in the Netherlands, neglecting his appearance and his duties. Vincent returned to his family's new home in Etten in search of a calling in the ministry.

A Religious Calling 1876-1880, London, Belgium

Vincent's long held spirituality was coming to the fore, his identification with simple people, his desire to be of use to others. Against his father's advice he, took an unpaid position as an instructor at a church school in Kent, England, and then a paid position in another school in Islesworth, which also afforded him an opportunity to preach. His letters to Theo included sketches of the countryside, his earliest known works, and from this time forward we see



Vincent van Gogh, *Houses at Islesworth*, 1876, pencil on paper.



Vincent van Gogh, *Coal Mine In the Borinage*, 1879, watercolor and pencil on paper, VGM Amsterdam

the increasing prominence of sketches in the correspondence. Though he devoted the next four years to an intense devotion to ministry, the sketches became a prominent part of his communication with Theo. We can see his visual acuity and skill emerging, as he became more deeply involved in the



Vincent van Gogh, *Bearers of the Burden*, 1881, pencil, ink, paper, from an earlier drawing, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands

lives of his flock.

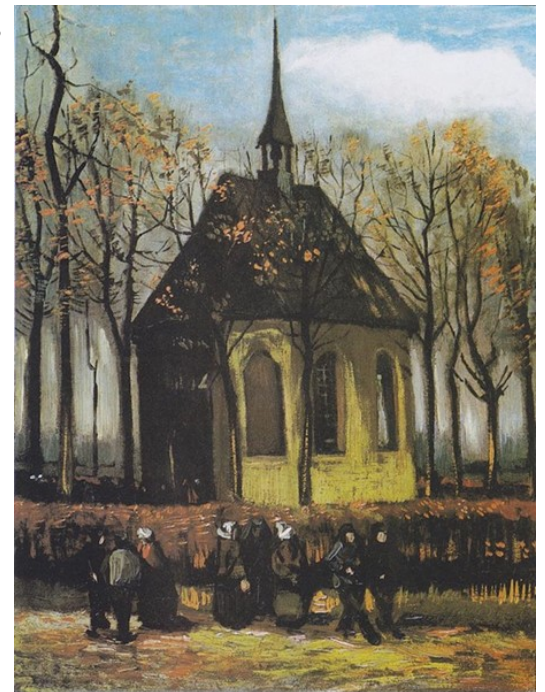
His family, increasingly concerned about the intensity of Vincent's religious fervor, persuaded him to return home during a Christmas visit. He longed to pursue ministerial studies and in 1876 went to live with an uncle in Amsterdam who was a theologian. His father hired a tutor to assist in the Greek, Latin and mathematics courses, but Vincent saw no relevance in ancient languages and chose a shorter course which would allow him to become an evangelical preacher.

However, Vincent was motivated by a deep, long-held value system, a concern for the downtrodden, a deep respect for hard working

laborers, and soon abandoned his studies and volunteered as a lay preacher in the impoverished Borinage district in southern Belgium.

Within a few months of living among the coal miners, Vincent had given away his lodging to a homeless man and was sleeping on a straw pallet, ministering to the overwhelming needs of the miners. His employers found his lifestyle insufficiently dignified, and he lost his contract, living on Theo's generosity. After an explosion at the mine he tore up his clothes to make bandages for the injured. Beginning to doubt his capacity to minister effectively, he more often turned to drawing as a respite. Theo, concerned for his health, came to visit in 1879, was appalled by his brother's living conditions, his hygiene, and angered Vincent in a confrontation, which precipitated a searing self-assessment during which Vincent terminated his correspondence with his brother, the only time this occurred in the rest of their lives. For ten months Vincent found himself turning completely toward art as his life's direction, and when he did write to Theo it was with a firm resolve which remained fixed for the rest of his life.

"Wait, perhaps someday you will see that I too am an artist," he wrote to Theo in his last letter from the Borinage, on September 24, 1880. "I don't know what I can do, but I hope I shall be able to make some drawings with something human in them ... The path is narrow, the door is narrow, and there are few who find it."



Vincent van Gogh, *Congregation Leaving the Dutch Reformed Church in Neunen*, 1884-85, His father's church revised to commemorate his father's funeral ceremony

Jo van Gogh-Bonger: The Phoenix Who Rose

Vincent van Gogh may have seemed cursed by the fates, but he was certainly blessed by angels in Theo's choice of a wife. Johanna Bonger was a 22-year-old English teacher in Amsterdam when Theo first met her in 1885. Smitten, he proposed on their second meeting, and she declined as she was seeing someone else. But Theo persisted and wrote to Vincent of their engagement in 1888. Though reared in a conservative, very proper family, Jo, as she preferred to be called, longed for a larger life to satisfy her intellectual curiosity and her love of the arts, as well as her growing political liberalism.

As Theo's wife, she was plunged into the heart of belle époque Paris, her husband a champion of the new artists providing shows and gallery space not afforded them by the Académie des Beaux-Arts. She was deeply in love—with Theo, with Paris, with the changes she was witnessing in *avant garde* art. Their apartment was full of Vincent's canvases—hanging, still packaged, stacked in closets—and Theo shared Vincent's letters, his quest for a new personal expression on the canvas.

Nine months later the new Vincent was born, actualizing their dream. Vincent came to meet the heir and namesake in May 1890 on his way from Saint-Remy to Auvers sur Oise, north of Paris, where he was to settle under the care of Dr. Paul Gachet. Jo recorded in her journal, "Before me was a sturdy, broad-shouldered



Jo and little Vincent in 1891, the year of her husband's death.

man with a healthy color, a cheerful look in his eyes and something very resolute in his appearance. He looks much stronger than Theo, was my first thought." She watched the brothers standing over the baby's cradle as tears came to their eyes.

Just two months later Theo rushed to his brother's bedside, hospitalized with a gunshot wound and was with him when he died. Their sisters gave Theo rights to all Vincent's art work—400 paintings and several hundred drawings—in recognition of his support of Vincent through the years. And just six months later, in early 1891, Theo died of a brain disease after months of illness. "It's all nothing but a dream!" Jo wrote in her journal. "What lies behind me—my short, blissful marital happiness—that, too, has been a dream! For a year and a half I was the happiest woman on Earth." And she adds, "As well as the child, he has left me another task—Vincent's work—getting it seen and appreciated as much as possible."

An old friend suggested she move back to the Netherlands and open a boarding house in order to support her son and to enjoy the comfort of her homeland. She chose a leafy Dutch village, Bussum, with a cultural scene, at a nice distance from her parent, to insure her independence.

As she was leaving Paris, Émile Bernard, an artist and friend of Vincent, advised her to leave Vincent's paintings in Paris with him to sell, close to the art market. Vincent had never been well enough known to warrant a one-man show. She made at this point the first of several acute judgements. She declined his offer and had already launched a study of art history and the art market. She began reading the trove of letters



Johanna van Gogh-Bonger (1862-1825) Editor of the letters of the Van Gogh brothers, published in 1914, collector and curator of the family Vincent van Gogh collection.

from Vincent to Theo, learning what Vincent intended in the paintings, and finding comfort and kinship in her loneliness.

Dressed in her mourning clothes she began settling into her new house, renting rooms, sorting her silver and china and hanging Vincent's paintings. *The Potato Eaters* went over the fireplace in the living room, *Almond Blossoms* and two other paintings of flowering tree branches adorned her bedroom. Every wall was covered with paintings. Continuing her study of Vincent's letters, she found a comradely identification with his love for simple, hard-working people and an understanding of his sense of isolation among his peers—an experience she faced constantly as a woman approaching dealers. She came to see the letters as a necessary part of the paintings, the personality of the artist—integral to the work, which we now see as the basis of expressionism. She approached two art historians in Amsterdam, persuading them to read selected letters related to paintings she showed them. She was persistent, passionate, charming. She convinced them both.

The first exhibition was held in Amsterdam in 1892. The art historian, Hans Luijten wrote of Jo, "She identifies an important gallery in Amsterdam and she goes there: a 30-year-old woman with a little boy at her side and a painting under her arm. She writes to people across Europe." When Jo was 33 the Parisian dealer Ambrose Vuillard included 30 of Vincent's paintings in his gallery show. Jo was gaining the confidence and the craftiness of a pro. When she sent works to a gallery she included works



Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night*, 1889, oil on canvas, MoMA,

from what she considered "the family pictures," works that were never to be sold, adding quality to the show and adding to Van Gogh's reputation. Remembering Theo's concern about *A Starry Night* as perhaps delusional, she sold it, but upon further reflection, she bought it back to join the family pictures, which were years later, through the generosity of her son and grandsons, to become the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. We now recognize Jo as the original collector and curator of the ultimate Van Gogh exhibition.

Nellie Hermann, "Idle Bird," *The Paris Review*, June 2015.

Russell Shorto, "The Woman Who Made van Gogh," *New York Times Magazine*, April 14, 2021

Richard Kendall, *Van Gogh's Van Goghs, The Masterpieces from the Van Gogh Museum. Amsterdam*, 1998. Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

H. Anna Suh, editor, *Van Gogh's Letters, The Mind of the Artist in Paintings, Drawings and Words, 1875-1890*, 2006, Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers