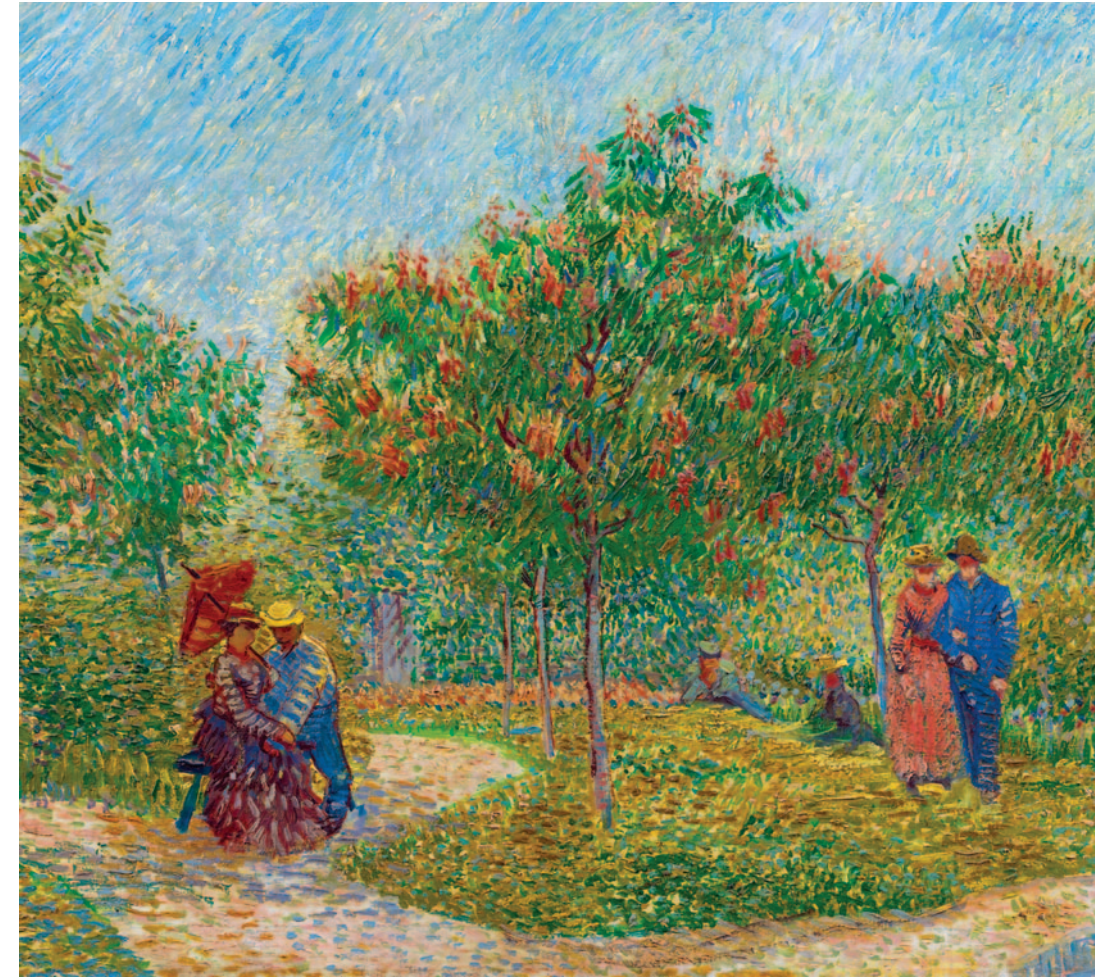


ELIZABETH RIPLEY



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VINCENT VAN GOGH



VINCENT VAN GOGH

A Biography by
ELIZABETH RIPLEY

PURPLE HOUSE PRESS
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Art History Biographies from
Elizabeth Ripley

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SELF-PORTRAIT, June 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Title page: **GARDEN WITH COURTING COUPLES**, May 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Vincent van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo, artists Paul Gauguin, Émile Bernard and others may be read in English at vangoghletters.org
Painting names are taken from the museums where they reside and may differ from the 1954 edition

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Written in 1954 by Elizabeth Ripley

Text is unabridged, with corrections. This book originally used Irving Stone's *Dear Theo* for quotes from van Gogh, which abridged and modified his letters. Van Gogh's quotes are now taken from unabridged letters which were transcribed, translated and researched in collaboration with the Van Gogh Museum, the Huygens Institute, the Kröller-Müller Museum and several scholars. They may be accessed at vangoghletters.org

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ILLUSTRATIONS

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Garden with Courting Couples | 35 Wheat Stacks in Provence |
| 2 Self-Portrait | 37 Fishing Boats on the Beach |
| 5 Miners in the Snow | 39 The Painter on the Road to Tarascon |
| 7 The Bearers of the Burden | 40 Drawing of Joseph Roulin |
| 8 Woman Sewing | 41 Portrait of Joseph Roulin |
| 9 Man Reading at the Fireside | 43 The Yellow House |
| 11 Ditch along Schenkweg | 45 Sunflowers |
| 11 Carpenter's Workshop and Laundry | 46 Le Zouave |
| 12 Worn Out | 47 Le Zouave (Half-figure) |
| 13 Sorrowful Old Man | 49 The Night Café |
| 15 Woman Seated | 51 The Bedroom |
| 17 Weaver | 53 L'Arlesienne |
| 19 Peasants Planting Potatoes | 54 Madame Roulin and her Baby |
| 21 The Potato Eaters | 55 La Berceuse, Woman Rocking a Cradle |
| 22 Self-Portrait sketch | 57 Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe |
| 23 Self-Portrait with Grey Felt Hat | 59 Garden of the Asylum |
| 25 View from Theo's Apartment | 59 Fountain in the Garden of the Asylum |
| 26 Courtesan (after Eisen) and tracing | 61 Wheatfield with Reaper and Sun |
| 27 Portrait of Père Tanguy | 63 Starry Night |
| 29 In the Café: Agostina Segatori in Le Tambourin | 65 Portrait of Dr. Gachet |
| 31 Pink Peach Trees (Souvenir de Mauve) | 67 Crows Over the Wheatfield |
| 33 Bridge at Arles | 68 Almond Blossom |

In the gray light of dawn a group of coal miners trudged along a snow-covered path on their way to work. At the entrance to the mine sat a young man with a red beard and ragged clothes. He held a pencil and sketchbook and he sketched the weary men and women as they passed by. The man's name was **VINCENT VAN GOGH**. For two years he had worked as a missionary in the mining country of Belgium. He gave the workers his clothes, his money and his food. He took care of the sick and injured. His bed was the bare floor of a wooden hut. He even smeared his face with coal dust so that he looked like a worker. The miners loved him and called him the "Christman."

Vincent was the son of a minister in a small town in Holland. When he was sixteen he had been given a job in an art gallery belonging to his rich uncle, Vincent. The boy worked hard and learned a great deal about pictures. Four years later he was sent to the London branch of the company.

"It is such a fine business," Vincent wrote enthusiastically to his younger brother Theo, who had just started to work in his uncle's firm.

Vincent loved pictures, but he didn't know how to get along with people. His crude manners frightened customers in the shop. He would argue with them, spitting out his words in a disorderly fashion. Finally his uncle decided to dismiss him from the company.

Vincent found a job teaching in a boys' school near London. In his free time he studied the Bible and read religious books. He became fired with the desire to be a preacher. When school was over he went back to his home in Holland and told his parents that he wanted to study for the ministry.

He plunged into his work with zeal, but after fifteen months of furious study he failed the examinations. Vincent still had a great longing to help the poor and needy; so, in the winter of 1878, he asked to be sent as a missionary without pay to the grim coal-mining country in Belgium.



MINERS IN THE SNOW, September 1880
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

For two years Vincent prayed and preached and cared for the unfortunate miners. In the suffocating blackness of the coal pits he saw men working twelve hours a day to earn enough money to buy bread for their families. When the workers struck for more pay, Vincent took their side. A fire broke out in the mine, and he dressed the wounds of the injured and sat by the bedsides of the dying.

One day a committee of missionaries from the city of Brussels visited Vincent. They found him dressed in rags, living in a squalid miner's hut. When they ordered him to live in a more dignified manner, Vincent stubbornly refused. In a few days word came from Brussels that he had been dismissed.

Vincent did not dare to go home, because he felt he had disgraced his parents. For weeks he wandered barefoot through the country. At night he slept on the ground under the stars. He drew pictures of the miners and tried to exchange his sketches for crusts of bread. He described his sufferings in long letters to his brother Theo. Sometimes he enclosed sketches. Theo was moved by the depth of feeling expressed in his brother's crude drawings and urged him to send more. Suddenly Vincent knew that he must become an artist. He was then twenty-seven years old.

"I'm writing to you while drawing and I'm in a hurry to get back to it," he wrote Theo. He sketched dingy miner's huts, black cold dumps and stark chimneys. He drew a group of women staggering under the weight of the coal sacks they carried on their backs. In his drawings he tried to tell people of the miseries of the Belgian miners. "Provided that I succeed one day in being able to actually draw what I wish to express," he wrote.

From Paris, Theo sent him pictures to copy and books to read. Then one day he sent money which he had saved from his salary. He wanted his brother to go to the city and study drawing.

In the fall of 1880 a haggard and shabby Vincent arrived in Brussels. With Theo's money he bought pencils and sketchbooks. He rented a small garret room and there in a frenzy of enthusiasm he began to draw.



THE BEARERS OF THE BURDEN, April 1881
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Vincent often met his friends at a little restaurant called the Café Tambourin. The owner was a strange looking, black-haired woman whom the artists called La Tambourin. She liked Vincent and allowed him to pay for his meals with paintings. She gave him permission to hang Japanese prints on the walls of the restaurant, and it was against this background that he painted La Tambourin's portrait. Arms folded, she sits at a drum-shaped table, her parasol on the stool beside her.

One day Vincent took down the Japanese prints and he and his friends decorated the walls with their startling canvases. In this way, Vincent believed, the working people of Paris could learn about modern art. The young artists waited anxiously for their paintings to sell. Toulouse-Lautrec, Bernard and Gauguin each sold at least one painting. Vincent sold nothing.

Some months later the Café Tambourin went bankrupt. La Tambourin closed its doors and refused to give back the paintings which were left. Enraged, Vincent pushed a cart to the restaurant door, loaded it with pictures and wheeled it through the winding streets of Paris to the Rue Lepic. Vincent's idea of bringing art to the people had failed.

Winter came, and Paris grew dark and gloomy. A friend had told him about a town in the South of France called Arles, where the sun shone brilliantly and living was cheap. So, one February day in 1888, Vincent decided to leave Paris.

For the first time since he had lived with his brother, he swept and scrubbed the apartment. He hung his paintings on the walls for he wanted Theo to feel he was still there. He wrote a note to his brother.

"I'm striving to be less of a burden to you," it said.

Then he pulled his fur cap over his red hair, took a last look at the apartment and closed the door behind him. A little later he boarded the train for Arles. Vincent was on his way south in search of a stronger sun.

IN THE CAFÉ: AGOSTINA SEGATORI
IN LE TAMBOURIN, March 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



The streets of Arles were covered with snow when Vincent stepped from the train, but the sun shone in a hard blue sky. He rented a small room above the café where he had eaten lunch. After he had paid his landlord a week's rent, he rushed out to look at the town. He wandered into the country where the orchards were bursting into bloom. The almond trees "are an intoxicating vision," he wrote to Theo. He brought a branch of blossoms to his room and painted a picture of it in a vase.

One day he set up his easel in an orchard of plum trees. A gust of wind stirred the blossoms and made the little white flowers sparkle. He painted like a man possessed, covering his canvas with thick dots of pure bright color. Every day he returned to the orchards. He painted a blossoming pear tree, glistening white against a violet earth and a very blue sky.

"I had to spend almost everything on colors and canvases," he wrote to Theo, "I'm in a fury of work as the trees are in blossom and I wanted to do a Provence orchard of tremendous gaiety."

One evening he returned to his little room and found a letter from Holland telling him of the death of his cousin Mauve, the artist who had taught him how to hold his palette and mix his colors. Against the wall of his tiny room stood the picture he had just painted of two rose-colored peach trees against a bright blue sky. He picked up his brush and wrote in the corner of the picture, *Souvenir de Mauve*. Then he signed his name. He would send the painting to his cousin's widow, because, as he wrote to Theo, "...in memory of Mauve we needed something that was both tender and gay."

PINK PEACH TREES
(SOUVENIR DE MAUVE), March 1888
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

