

EYE TO EYE WITH VINCENT

I should like to do portraits which will appear as revelations to people in a hundred years' time. – Vincent van Gogh, in a letter to his sister Wil, 3 June, 1890

I numbly handed my pass to a faceless clerk and stepped inside the echoing expanse of the cavernous dome. All I could think of was him. He was here and I had to find him. I hurried past dancers by Degas and Millet's millers and sped up the clattering stairs. I heard the murmur of the crowd and my own clicking footsteps as I rushed through Cezanne's vibrating colors toward Room 35.

On the 5th floor of Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the rooms flow into each other through one long passage down the middle. I twisted through seven-year-olds with bulky backpacks, slow moving seniors, and young lovers holding hands.

His strong, vivid presence hit me like an electric shock before I even entered the room. I moved closer to stand eye to eye with *Self Portrait, September 1889*, and Vincent stared at me from his canvas thick with turquoise and grey swirls. His eyes bore into mine, weary from his quest to express himself against insurmountable obstacles. I remembered his wish, written in 1887: "What I really hope to do is paint a good portrait." And here it was, leaping off the wall straight into me.

Communication can take place between an artist and his viewer hundreds or even thousands of years after his death. I am certain that the four skinny boys who discovered the cave at Lascaux, France—when they lit a lamp and lifted it to see the paintings along the cave wall—

had a direct encounter with the Paleolithic man who, 350,000 years before, took it into his head to depict man vs bison upon the cave wall in red, gold, and black outlines. His careful determination flew into those boys as they stood in the dark, cold cave that day in 1940. Sparks fly from artist to viewer: this is the mystique of art.

I was primed for my encounter with Vincent by reading *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*. The connection I felt with him the moment our eyes met continues to charge me today, and I look to him in many ways: as a muse, a kindred spirit, a fellow sensitive soul, an artist who shows me how to focus and persevere.

The Letters of Vincent van Gogh are his century-old personal letters—written to his brother Theo, his mother and sister, and friends like Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard—discussing everything from the waxing and waning of his faith in God to his feelings about fellow artists and his pain at the dismal failure of his art to move anyone at all. Through the years since their publication in 1914, many have analyzed these letters to try to pin down the spirit of van Gogh. I saw the mass of contradictions which make him, and all of us, human: discouragement *and* optimism, joy *along with* despair, victory *in the midst of* defeat.

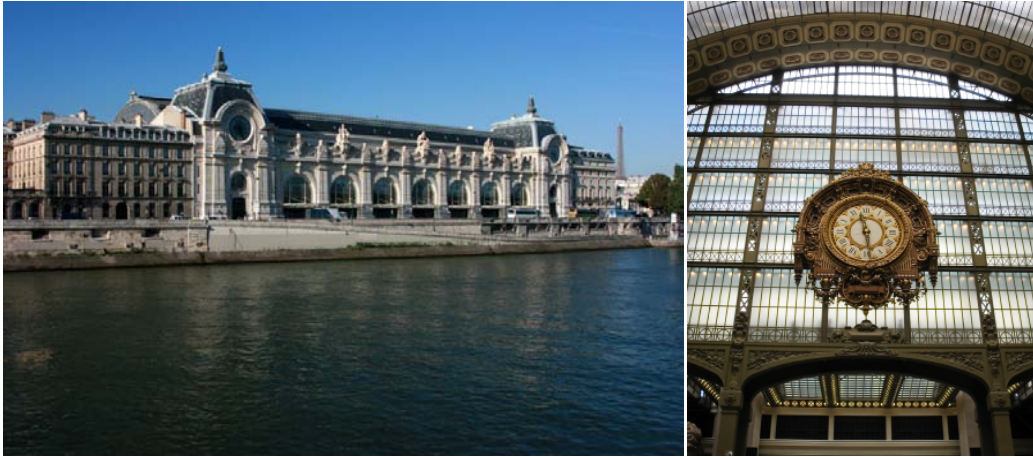
The letters written during Vincent's last tumultuous months—in the asylum at St Remy and in the little village of Auvers-sur-Oise—reveal his anxiety that repeated hallucinatory spells would threaten his “infinite objective to paint a portrait without telling a lie.” Again and again he felt “too feeble to fight”, but persistently painted until he could no longer pick himself up. In and out of lucidity and mental hospitals he went, and I went with him, admiring his tenacity more with each entry.

I remembered slides on the wall of a college classroom: bold yellow sunflowers, simplistic faces, exaggerated forms that showed a stark vision of the world. I had wondered why people were so passionate about these childish paintings, and thought maybe if my favorite color was yellow instead of blue, I'd like them better. I just hadn't met Vincent yet.

After reading *The Letters*, I opened my old college book of van Gogh's paintings. This time I saw more than mere color and form. The brightly vivid room in *The Bedroom* had previously struck me as a seasick-esque scene of lurching furniture. Knowing that Vincent painted it partly “to rest the brain, or rather the imagination”, I looked at the image, walked across the wood floor, sank down upon the bed and burrowed under the red blanket. Vincent loved this painting, and had it hanging in the yellow house in Arles when Gauguin arrived for their idyllic artist's retreat, which ultimately ended in ear-mutilating agony.

I turned the page. *The Church at Auvers* filled me with a hollow feeling; the dark cobalt blue inside that church has the same quality of the air outside it . . . it's a church empty of *anything*, which I knew was how Vincent felt about faith during the months before his suicide. Religion for me has often felt like the emptiness in that church. I knew I would view van Gogh's work differently when I went to Paris, but I never dreamt I would so clearly see Vincent himself.

Musée d'Orsay in Paris, originally a train station and hotel, has retained its original feel of hustle and bustle. It opened in 1986 as a museum in which the whole range of the fine arts between 1848 and 1914 are represented. Three million annual visitors scurry around inside the arched glass and metal structure—gazing out the giant wall of windows under the famous ornate clock, gliding up and down ten escalators, enjoying *foie gras* in the elegant Café des Hauteurs, and milling around the sculpture, decorative arts, architecture, photography . . . and paintings.



Self Portrait, September 1889 was painted as Vincent's bouts with madness became more frequent. His brow is furrowed, haggard. His eyes struggle to be calm. His sensitive mouth shows a warrior's steely resolve, and his lips are rimmed with the thinnest of blood-red lines. Vincent looks frightened, but focused.

It took courage for Vincent to portray himself honestly, for his was a harsh truth. As I'd read *The Letters*, I had learned there were times he had to dig deep to find the strength to pick up a paintbrush. Was it absinthe liquor, epilepsy, or plain old insanity that lashed at him and made it a battle to the death? We still don't really know. He conquered starvation, fear and madness to paint not just what he saw, but the very essence of what he *was*.

Vincent wrote, "Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I see before me, I make more arbitrary use of colour to express myself more forcefully." In his self-portrait, the copper vibrancy of his beard and the china blue creases in his coat made the reproductions I had seen in the art history books literally pale in comparison. "Ah, portraiture, portraiture with the mind, the soul of the model – that is what really must come, it seems to me." This self-portrait expresses Vincent's intensity and high hopes with white layers and delicate outlines of deep blue. "It is difficult to know oneself - but it isn't easy to paint oneself either," Vincent had written.

Vincent was not a worldly success. In his lifetime he sold only one painting, yet he slogged on, not wanting to be thought of as melancholy, sour or bitter. He thought trials refined his character. He said of his experiments with color, "I dabbed the dirty mixture over the painting,

behold, at a distance it softens.” Van Gogh knew the human messiness, the imperfections and dirt in his life softened his own character.

“In my pictures I want to say something consoling, as music does. I want to paint men and women with a touch of the eternal, whose symbol was once a halo, which we try to convey by the very radiance and vibrancy of our colouring.”

On 27 July 1890, a shot rang out in the wheat fields behind the chateau at Auvers. Vincent’s sister-in-law Johanna wrote, “Fear of the illness that was threatening him once again, or an actual attack, drove him to his death.” I think he just lost his grasp on life. Perhaps this is what Vincent meant when he wrote, “A painter, as a human being, is too absorbed in what his eyes see to have enough grasp on other things in his life.”



Inside the vast Musée d’Orsay, I looked at the painting of the artist for a long, quiet moment, and I did see a touch of the eternal.

When I write, I often require extra courage to include the dirty smudge along with the purest colors—the emptiness of the church, the frightened look in the eye, or my own oddest perceptions and weaknesses. It is easier and often times prettier to leave out the sad, silly-sounding, or strange details. A postcard of *Self Portrait, September 1889* sits to the left of my keyboard. When I waver, I raise my head and meet his eye. The thin red line between Vincent’s lips whispers to me to write my own truth.

So he speaks to me still, teaching me to be true. And—though you may doubt those boys in the Lascaux cave encountered the Paleolithic man, you may be skeptical about the mystique of art, unbelieving that I took a nap inside a painting, or doubtful that Vincent’s essence flows into mine from a postcard on the wall—in writing these words, true is how I’ve been with you.