



EYE TO EYE WITH VAN GOGH

I should like to do portraits which will appear as revelations to people in a hundred years' time.

—Vincent van Gogh, letter, 3 June, 1890

I was there to see his work, but it shocked me to bump straight into *him*.

A faceless clerk took the museum pass and I stepped inside the cavernous, echoing expanse of Musée d'Orsay in Paris. I hurried past dancers by Degas and millers by Millet, clattered up stairs, and twisted through backpack-toting kids, slow moving seniors, and hand-holding couples. Cézanne's colors vibrated in my periphery vision as I rushed toward *his* room.

I entered and there he was, across the room: *Self Portrait, September 1889*.

His eyes bore into mine from a canvas thick with turquoise and grey swirls. I recognized Vincent, not with the usual: *This is a van Gogh painting*; but in a more personal way: *Ah, Vincent.*

I knew by the time he painted this, he was weary from his quest to express himself against insurmountable obstacles. Vincent had his first mental breakdown in December of 1888 when he was in the south of France in Arles, spent time in a mental hospital there, continued to suffer mental collapse, then moved to another asylum in nearby Saint-Rémy. In July, he swallowed dirt, paint, and turpentine, and was kept from painting, but allowed to resume at the end of August.

I remembered his wish, written a few years earlier: *What I really hope to do is paint a good portrait.* And here it was, leaping off the wall toward me.

I had recently read *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, century-old personal letters written to his brother Theo, his mother and sister, and artist friends, which discuss everything from the waxing and waning of his faith in God to 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 essence of van Gogh.

The letters reveal the mass of contradictions which make Vincent, 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 Saint-Rémy and during the last few months of his life in the little village of Auvers-sur-Oise—reveal his anxiety that repeated hallucinatory spells would threaten what he called his infinite objective: to paint a portrait without telling a lie:

Supposing I get out of here one day, wouldn't it be far better if I came back infinitely capable of doing a portrait with some character?

Again and again he felt *too feeble to fight*, but persisted as he lurched in and out of lucidity. About this self portrait, he wrote:

... when you put the painting with the light background that I've just done next to those portraits I did of myself in Paris, you really will see that I look saner now than I did then, indeed much more so.

This self portrait does differ from others Vincent did—one is dark and streaked with intense blues and oranges; another shows a nearly bald, gaunt van Gogh, his red beard in hideous contrast to a green background; another a grim man in a fur hat with a bandaged ear. His expression in *September 1889* is intense but focused, and his face blends with the pastel colors of the background to create a peaceful mood.

I looked around the room, crowded with Vincent's work: a peasant couple napping in the hay next to a wagon, their feet touching, *The Arlesienne*, a woman with fine, narrow features; *A Starry Night* painted in 1888, of reflected stars and lights on water.

The Church at Auvers filled me with a hollow feeling. The dark cobalt blue inside the church has the same quality of the air outside it, a church empty of anything. Loneliness had a torturous grip on Vincent in those months before his suicide, and his faith toppled. Religion for me has often felt like the emptiness in that church.

I remembered slides on the wall of a college classroom: bold yellow sunflowers, stark and simplistic faces, and wildly exaggerated forms. I had wondered then, years earlier, why people were so passionate about these childish paintings, and they had failed to move me.

Seen in reality, Vincent's work cuts deeper than mere color and form. *The Bedroom* had previously struck me as a seasick scene of lurching furniture, but knowing that Vincent painted it partly *to rest the brain, or rather the imagination*, the actual canvas made me feel as if I entered the room, walked across the wood floor, sank down upon the bed and burrowed under the red blanket. Vincent loved this painting, and carefully positioned it on the wall inside The Yellow House in Arles to greet Paul Gauguin when he arrived for what Vincent had planned as their idyllic artist's retreat, but which ultimately ended in ear-mutilating agony.

Musée d'Orsay has been remodeled since that earlier visit, with the works of different artists mingled together, Monet next to Manet, Renoir alongside Cézanne. In one of the new rooms, van Gogh is side-by-side with Paul Gauguin in a way he couldn't be in reality. This is an intriguing arrangement, but the punch of purity I felt when standing in a room surrounded by the work of one artist is diluted. When I go there now, I miss Vincent's room.

Musée d'Orsay has retained the hustle and bustle of the hotel and train station it once was. 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 of the giant wall of windows under the famous ornate clock, gliding up and down ten flights of stairs, enjoying *foie gras* in the elegant Café des Hauteurs, and milling around the sculpture, decorative arts, architecture, photography . . . and paintings.



That day I was drawn to Vincent's room, I remembered something I'd read about creativity. Fernand Pouillon, twentieth century architect, wrote this about what he called Real Work, work that is true, direct and honest:

Never is one's courage courageous enough, never is one's sincerity sincere enough, nor one's frankness frank enough. You have to take the greatest possible risks; even recklessness seems a bit halfhearted. The best works are those that are at the limits of real life; they stand out among a thousand others when they prompt the remark, "What courage that must have taken!" Enduring work follows from a leap into the void, into unknown territory, icy water or murderous rock.

Self Portrait, September 1889 was van Gogh's leap into the void. He looks fearful inside his cocoon of gentle swirls, but his eyes sustain calm. His sensitive mouth shows a warrior's steely resolve, and between his lips is the thinnest of blood-red lines.

The bloody line is Vincent's harsh truth. It emerged during those times he had to dig deep to find the strength to pick up a paintbrush, for any stability he had was fragile. Was it

absinthe liquor, epilepsy, or plain old insanity that lashed at him and made it a battle to the death? The answer is unknown. He conquered starvation, fear and madness to paint not just what he saw, but the very essence of what he *was*.

It is difficult to know oneself, but it isn't easy to paint oneself either, Vincent had written. In this work, he did both.

We know van Gogh was not a worldly success. In his lifetime he sold only one painting, yet he slogged on, writing that he didn't want to be thought of as melancholy, sour or bitter. He wrote of his experiments with color, *I dabbed the dirty mixture over the painting, behold, at a distance it softens*. Vincent felt the human messiness, imperfections—the dirt in his life—softened and refined his own character. I could see this in the way he painted his own face, but there was more.



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.

This Real Work holds inside it an eternal truth: It requires extra courage for all of us to include the dirty smudge that smears—the emptiness of a church, a frightened look in the eye, or our own oddest perceptions and weaknesses. It is easier and often prettier to leave out the sad, silly-sounding, or strange details. If Vincent could reveal himself so honestly to the world at his weakest moment, so can all of us.

What courage that takes.

That day as I moved away from Vincent's portrait painted over a hundred years earlier, I imagined him dipping a tiny brush in red paint, leaning in close to the canvas of pale greens and blues, and with delicate care, touching the brush to his fragile lips to add the thin, bloody line.

Behold, at a distance it softens.