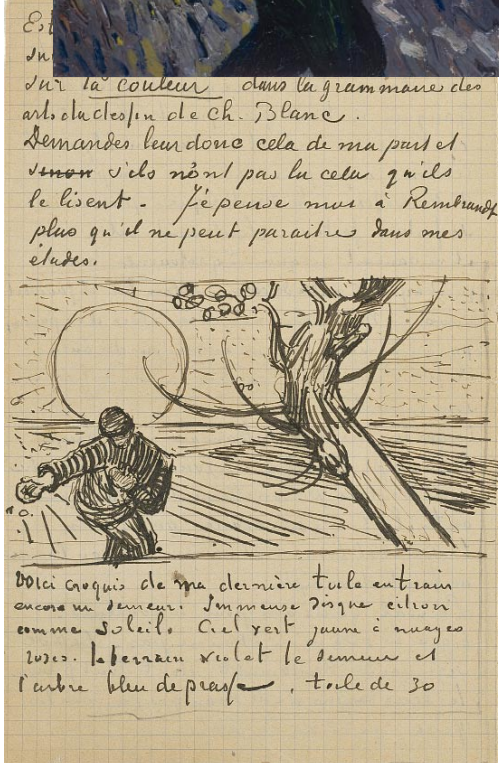


A Life in Letters

A NEW EDITION REVEALS THE FULL SCOPE OF VINCENT VAN GOGH'S ASTONISHINGLY SELF-REVELATORY CORRESPONDENCE. BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



times deeply impractical, sense of religious vocation. It was Jo's son, the engineer V. W. van Gogh, who supervised the first comprehensive edition of all the known letters to or from Vincent, a three-volume collection published in 1953, the centenary of the artist's birth; an English translation appeared five years later. Although long considered definitive, this 56-year-old version of Van Gogh's correspondence will now have to make room for something vastly superior.

The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, working in partnership with the Huygens Institute of the Dutch Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences, has issued a new annotated and illustrated edition of Van Gogh's letters, available in Dutch, French and English, each version running to six volumes. The culmination of 15 years' intensive scholarship, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters* constitutes nothing less than the most thoroughly documented primary-source biography ever published on any artist. The intelligence, depth of knowledge and scrupulous attention to detail that editors Nienke Bakker, Leo Jansen and Hans Luijten have brought to their task make this a work that every literate person should own—or, in light of the \$600 price tag, at least aspire to own.

"You have a more complete Van Gogh now," says Luijten, speaking in his office across from the museum. "We wanted to give Van Gogh back his letters as he really wrote them."

This edition's new, triple-vetted transcriptions of the original documents reveal numerous errors in the older published versions, ranging from the comical—words rendered as a series of numerals due to Van Gogh's sometimes cryptic handwriting—to the art-historically significant. For instance, writing to Bernard from the asylum at Saint-Rémy in 1889, Van Gogh discussed an optical phenomenon called *voir rouge*, or "seeing red," that legend held to be common

VINCENT VAN GOGH'S letters have offered the general public an intimate view of the artist's life and psyche since at least 1893, when the French painter Émile Bernard published a selection of items that he had received from Van Gogh in the *Mercur de France*. This was just three years after the troubled Dutchman's death by suicide at the age of 37, during a period when the name Van Gogh was little known beyond a small community of avant-garde artists. As Van Gogh's reputation grew, however, so did interest in his biography, especially when presented in his own words.

The now-famous correspondence between Vincent and his brother Theo first became available in book form in 1914, albeit in a text bowdlerized by Theo's widow, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, who downplayed issues ranging from Vincent's mental illness to his affinity for prostitutes to his awesome, and at

From top: Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888; Letter from Vincent to his brother Theo, Arles, circa Nov. 12, 1888.



among the mentally ill. The idea affected Van Gogh's paintings from this period, but its importance until now has been lost to history. In Bernard's transcription this phrase became *noir rouge*, or "black red," a term that, having no clear meaning, was all too easy to dismiss as gibberish.

Passages previously omitted for reasons of pride or propriety have been restored. In 1880, for instance, when Van Gogh was 27 years old and experiencing one of his periodic bouts of religious fervor, his father—an ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church—wanted to have him committed to a mental institution in Belgium to spare the family undue embarrassment. The following year, in a letter to Theo, Vincent referred back to the incident "when Pa wanted to put me in an asylum against my will," but this quote is nowhere to be found in previous editions.

Luijten and his colleagues provide a vivid context for these events in their annotations, which draw upon a wealth of materials from the Van Gogh Museum's archives, including unpublished correspondence between members of the Van Gogh family other than Vincent and Theo. "The


word 'concern' is the one you read most in those family letters," Luijten notes. "We are so concerned. What are we going to do with him?" They cared about Vincent, but he was a quite difficult personality."

The letters, of course, also reveal Van Gogh's intense and obsessive interest in art. The painter often worked out visual ideas through his correspondence, describing specific motifs to his brother or to Bernard. Likewise, he was constantly making art-historical allusions. Luijten and his colleagues have identified 1,400 specific references to paintings by artists other than Van Gogh—as well as 600 to Van Gogh's own paintings—documenting these and, in most cases, providing photographs. In total the new edition is accompanied by some 4,300 images, laid out with consummate skill by the designer and typographer Wim Crowel, who has brought the illustrations, printed text and facsimiles of the original letters into a consistently revealing dialogue.

Also impressive is the project's website (vangoghletters.org), which makes the entire contents of the print version available online, free of charge, although with an admittedly less eye-popping presentation. Specialists may in fact find the website to have certain advantages over the printed books, which contain approximately 1 million words of text, while an additional 500,000 words of scholarly commentary, much of it fascinating, are available online. The full text of the website is searchable by keyword, date and other helpful criteria.

"If you want to know every reference Van Gogh made to Shakespeare," Luijten says, "then you go to the advanced search, type in Shakespeare, and there you have it."

The logic behind making this mammoth scholarly endeavor freely available on the Internet derives partly from the way the project was funded. Half of the money came from the museum—mostly from entrance fees—and half from the Dutch government, via the Huygens Institute.

"With the website, we're giving people what they've paid for," says Luijten. "People constantly tell me, 'I'm very happy to hear that my taxes went to this.' It's part of our cultural heritage." 

From top: Letters from Vincent to his brother Theo; Van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*, 1885.

