

## A Milestone, A Monument

### The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition of Vincent van Gogh's Letters

Between 29 September 1872 and 23 July 1890 Vincent van Gogh wrote 819 letters. Long ones, most of them, rarely less than 300 words while more than 2000 is quite normal. They have been published several times before. For instance, I have an edition dating from 1952. It has no index, the letters in French have not been translated (and there are rather a lot of them), detail regarding dates is scanty and there have been a lot of changes to the original spelling and idiosyncrasies of the author. On top of which, a great many letters are missing.

At the end of 2009 a new and complete edition of all the letters written by Vincent van Gogh was published in three languages (Dutch, French and English). In *The Letters. The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*, compiled by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker, the original letters have been followed as closely as possible, the date of writing ascertained

wherever possible and there is a comprehensive index; or rather, I should say, there are several indices. But what makes the new edition brilliant beyond compare is the illustrations and the notes. All the sketches in Van Gogh's letters are reproduced in facsimile. Illustrations are included, often in colour, of every work of art referred to, whether by Van Gogh or someone else. And if Van Gogh talks about a particular painting he is working on, you will find a beautiful reproduction of it. *All* the names of friends, acquaintances, writers, painters, musicians, periodicals, addresses, plates, books, biblical and other quotations, all the paintings by other artists that are referred to, have an explanatory note from the compilers. Sometimes their obsession with completeness reaches almost comical proportions. Van Gogh was an ardent collector of engravings from periodicals.

The compilers made it a point of honour to trace all these plates and print them in the book, so that

Vincent van Gogh,  
*Stubborn Willow, 1882.*



Vincent van Gogh, Letter to Theo van Gogh, Den Haag, 31 July 1882 (with a sketch of Stubborn Willow).



you don't have to leaf backwards and forwards all the time. Of course, it's slightly mad, but I enjoyed it enormously. You are reading marvellous letters and at the same time you are provided with a complete encyclopaedia of what counted in the life of Van Gogh, whether you want to know it or not. And I did want to know, gradually I began to see, think and feel as Van Gogh did – at least, I had that illusion. You cannot get closer to a painter than that. This incredibly detailed accompaniment to the letters marks *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters* as a milestone. I can throw away my old edition, though it did have a couple of illustrations all the same. More's the pity, I paid 125 euros for it about six years ago in Brussels.

But to the letters themselves. After the rather stiff letters of his youth, over the years Van Gogh developed into someone with a great talent for letter-writing, which may have something to do with the enormous quantity of literature he consumed. He was an omnivorous reader on a gigantic scale. It is a miracle he managed to read it all in among his obsessive paint-

ing, bearing in mind that he re-read writers such as Dickens, Hugo and Balzac, to mention just a few names, in their entirety. He immediately saw the greatness of the work of his contemporary Zola. He was continually searching for what he called the 'essence' of these writers, for what constituted 'the soul' and the 'power' of their characters, just as in paintings he also looked for the soul of the work, for what made a work 'powerful', 'natural' and 'wholesome'.

To my astonishment, Vincent van Gogh read and appreciated poems by Walt Whitman, making him one of the first readers of this poet's work in the Dutch language area. In 1888 (Whitman was still alive!) he wrote a brilliant and touching commentary on him to his sister. *'Have you read Whitman's American poems yet? Theo should have them, and I really urge you to read them, first because they're really beautiful, and also, English people are talking about them a lot at the moment. He sees in the future, and even in the present, a world of health, of generous, frank carnal love — of friendship — of work[...]. They make you smile at first,*



*they're so candid, and then they make you think, for the same reason.'* In Whitman Van Gogh must have recognised a soul-mate. He could not have known that Whitman was just as great an admirer of the painter Millet as himself, and if he had known his enthusiasm would probably have been even greater.

Vincent van Gogh taught himself to write just as he taught himself to paint. After a few years there was nothing you could teach him about appropriate imagery, the right degree of tension, jokes that aren't really jokes, irony, self-criticism and the ebb and flow of rationalisations about his own work and that of others. And the Oedipal problems of his youth (endless rows with his father) remained a major source of inspiration throughout his life. He even adapted himself to his readers: the letters to his sister Willemien are clearly less intimate and crude than those to Theo or his fellow artists. His descriptions of nature are often breathtaking, his self-criticism cutting if sometimes overly modest, his commentaries on colleagues are constructive but occasionally devastating, so much so that you cannot believe what you are reading. Some of the unjust accusations he makes against his brother are utterly shameful and so downright selfish that you feel embarrassed for him.

As you read further you are frequently surprised. The biggest surprise is that Vincent van Gogh is by no

Vincent van Gogh, *Wheatfield with Crows*, 1890.

means the holy fool portrayed in many biographical works, films and documentaries. What a relief. He operates in a totally rational way, reasons in an exemplary manner, argues at length, sometimes rather too dogmatically, doesn't often strike a pose and deals with adversity just like anybody else. With anger, with sadness, with despair and always ready to have another go. When suffering from depression he doesn't write any letters, because he knows that if he did he would only write nonsense. It is also surprising that he says very little about his everyday life, though there is plenty to be read between the lines. He focuses his letters at what, for him, it is all about: his work, studies, family, art, books and money. So you don't have to see Van Gogh as a prophet in every field, as regularly happened in earlier works about him. Many of the social developments that were going on under his nose simply passed him by. Socialism meant nothing to him, the name Marx doesn't appear at all in the letters. As a result, the names of painters and writers feature all the more.

Van Gogh's letters are always beautifully written, rough, to the point and utterly uninhibited. And so his new publication, annotated down to the finest detail, is – I'll say it yet again – a monument. And there is more.

## Music

At [www.vangoghletters.org](http://www.vangoghletters.org) you can find a wealth of additional information that could not be included in the publication because it would have made it too unwieldy. As it is, it's a marvel to look at and a delight to handle. This edition is compulsory fare for painters, students at art school, writers and everyone else with an interest in art. I felt at one with Van Gogh like a teenage girl with her first boyfriend, and I hereby solemnly swear that I shall never forget him. I began to feel more and more ashamed of all the prejudices I had ever developed for myself or let myself be talked into. They were all stripped away from me; I think that is the most accurate description of what happened to me as I read. This publication enabled me to jettison everything I thought I knew about the life and work of this great painter and writer. With *The Letters: The Complete and Annotated Edition* the time has come to affirm his stature in international literature once and for all. Van Gogh deserves a place alongside Multatuli, Proust, Zola and Whitman.

Kees 't Hart

*Translated by Sheila M. Dale*

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[www.vangoghletters.org](http://www.vangoghletters.org)

### Between Django and Dire Straits Absynthe Minded

It took Bert Ostyn ten years to reach an important stage in his career as a pop musician: Consolidation. His group Absynthe Minded, which is based in Ghent, won a second gold disc with their fourth album *Absynthe Minded*. And this was with the first release on their own label Absynthe Minded Records. On 11 November 2009 listeners to the Flemish youth broadcasting station *Studio Brussels* chose *My heroics, Part One* from the 2005 album *New Day* as the best Belgian song of the last decade. The competition was tough and Absynthe Minded had certainly not been tipped to win. At the beginning of 2010 the band received an MIA (Music Industry Award, the Oscar of the Flemish music industry) for *Envoi*, the second single in the new album. *Envoi* is a freely translated adaptation of a poem by the same title by the greatest Flemish writer of the twentieth century, Hugo Claus (1929-2008). This respectable connection to poetry raised Absynthe Minded to a higher level in the eyes of the critics. A nice compliment, but the group did not need any ego-trip or media hype to get to the top.

In 2004 Absynthe Minded became the five-man band it still is. In that year the group was the audience favourite at Humo's Rock Rally, the biennial competition for young musical talent in Flanders, and eventually came second. At that time they had already produced two CDs bursting with promise. The next album, *New Day*, won a gold disc. New doors began to open. The band played at prestigious festivals and conquered the highly discriminating club circuit. They didn't have any great hits, but in 2006 Studio Brussels included *My Heroics, Part One* from *New Day* in *De Tijdloze 100*, an annual top hundred timeless songs, on Flemish radio. Most bands cease to exist after seven to ten years. What happened as a result of *Absynthe Minded's* success came at just the right moment for the group's spiritual father Ostyn and now they can go on for years.

Absynthe Minded has a lot of musical knowledge and practical experience under its belt. Two members of the band have done the conservatory course on Jazz/Pop. So jazz and rock form the basis of their