

VAN GOGH



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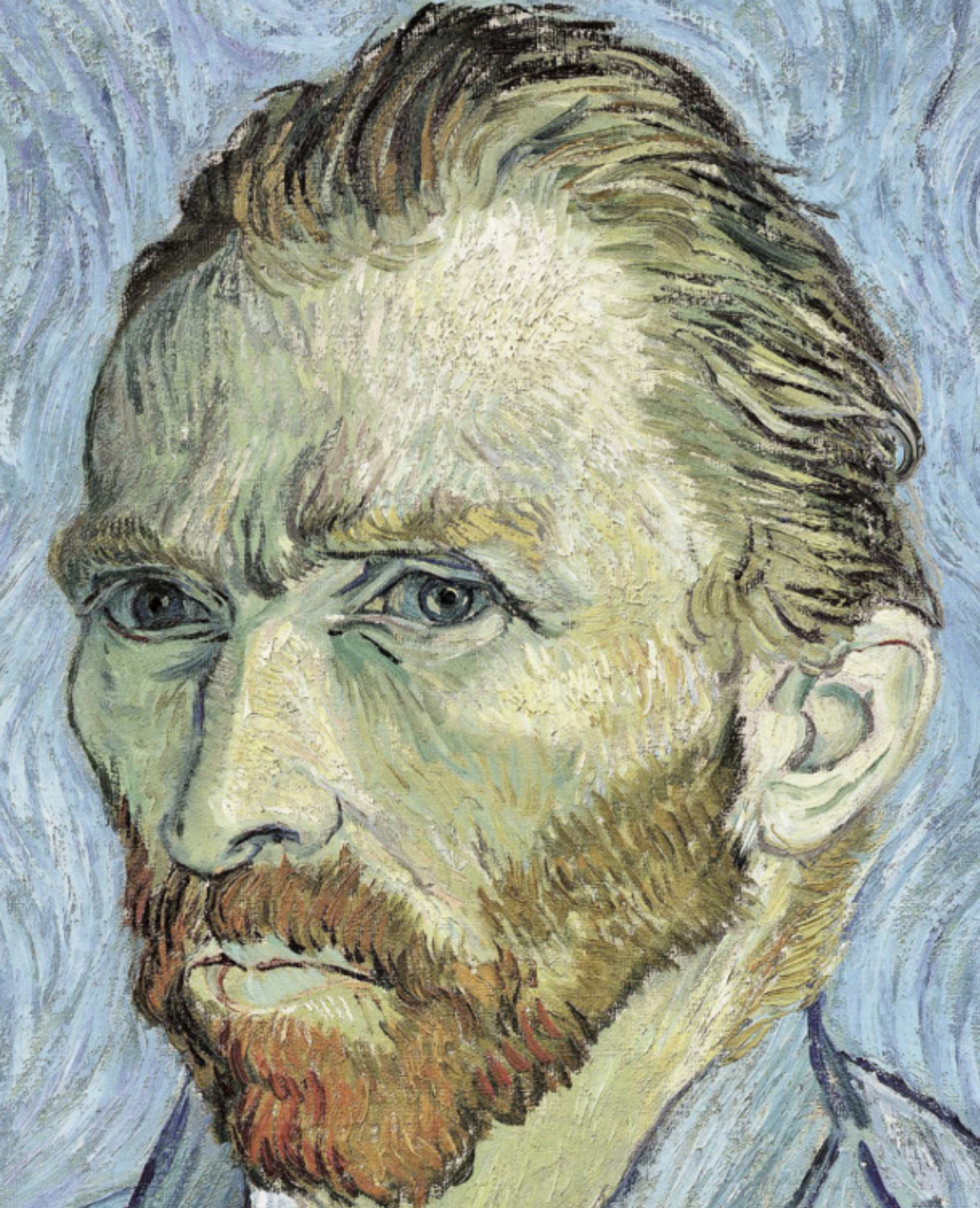
# VAN GOGH

THE BIGGER PICTURE

**PRESTEL**

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# Introduction

October 1885. Vincent Van Gogh painted a still life – “in one day”, he wrote to his brother Theo. The work features a large open Bible, a candlestick with an extinguished candle and, in the foreground, a popular edition of Émile Zola’s novel *La joie de vivre* (see pp. 22-23). Two books, two metaphors: a big, dark, heavy book, rife with prohibitions, threats and curses, symbolising his past, his struggles and his dramas; and, in the foreground, a little novel featuring a bright yellow cover, whose title alone speaks volumes. Produced precisely in the middle of Van Gogh’s artistic career – which, in reality, only spanned the course of ten years –, this work admirably summarises the turning point that the painter had reached at the time. A page was being turned, and Van Gogh’s yearning for renewal and for freedom would become a reality a few months later when he left the Netherlands. This impetus would drive him to forsake his dark palette and soon let colours resound in a vibrant light.

*I have a more or less irresistible passion for books and the constant need to improve my mind – to study, if you like – just as I have a need to eat bread.*

This emblematic painting also testifies to the essential role that books would hold throughout Van Gogh’s life. The first book to come to his attention was, of course, the Bible, and he would read it every day. His father, Theodorus van Gogh, was a Calvinist pastor in the small village of Groot-Zundert in the Province of Brabant, where Vincent Willem was born on 30 March 1853. Van Gogh was born one year to the day after the birth of a first stillborn child, who bore the same name as him – a strange coincidence that would not be devoid of consequences for the child. According to his father, however, there was one book that carried answers to all forms of human anguish: the Bible, which reminds us all that we are God’s creatures and that we must obey His will.

Believing in the word of God was a given, in the world where Vincent grew up. However, submission was hardly the temperament of this solitary, taciturn youth, who was prone to sudden temper tantrums. He liked to take long walks in the countryside, a taste for nature that would never leave him. He also enjoyed drawing, and was encouraged by his mother, who was quite talented herself. Vincent did not deal well with school discipline; he attended a variety of institutions,

## **Self-portrait** (detail)

September 1889, oil on canvas, 65 × 54.5 cm, Paris, Musée d’Orsay

with no remarkable results, apart from learning foreign languages. On the other hand, he devoured books of all kinds – treatises on philosophy, theology and novels –, and fuelled by a singular particular passion for Dickens. This reading frenzy would last throughout his life.

Growing up, his social relationships remained difficult, and he needed affection and the presence of his brothers and sisters (five children were born after him); for their part, his brethren were concerned about this unpredictable boy. It was with Theo, four years his junior, that Vincent would develop the most intimate relationship. He penned over six hundred and fifty letters to him over the course of his life, once again testifying to his passion for the written word; these would establish Van Gogh as the most “literary” artist of his time.

When this fraternal correspondence began in 1872, Vincent had been working for three years in The Hague, in a branch of the Parisian gallery Goupil & Cie, thanks to recommendations by his paternal uncle, who had himself made a career in the art trade. His seriousness and eagerness to learn were appreciated. Indeed, immersed in this new world, the young man carefully studied all the works that he had access to, read and learned; he advised Theo to do the same, when his younger brother embraced the same trade as him, first in Brussels, and later in The Hague. He wrote to him, in November 1873: “[...] And if you get the chance, read about art, and especially magazines about art, the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, etc.” In March the following year, he insisted: “Read about art as much as possible.” The gallery mainly presented landscapes painted by artists of the Barbizon school (Camille Corot, Julien Dupré and Charles-François Daubigny), as well as contemporary works by painters of The Hague school, whose realism appealed to Vincent. It also sold many engravings, which allowed Van Gogh to discover the works of Jean-François Millet, whose works immediately captivated and moved him. Millet would remain a model and guide throughout Van Gogh’s life (see page 21). “*The Angelus*; that is magnificent, that’s poetry,” he wrote to Theo. Through his profession, Van Gogh thus acquired a solid culture, which he would continue to develop. The way that he was sometimes later depicted – as a spontaneous painter, feverishly obeying his impulses alone – is a far cry from reality.

At the time, however, becoming an artist was not on Van Gogh’s agenda. Vincent was then promoted by his manager, who sent him to work at the London branch. While his time in London came off to a good start, with the thrilling discovery of English painters such as Joshua Reynolds, J. M. W. Turner, and John Constable, and the comfort of Mrs. Loyer’s boarding house, it ended dramatically. Vincent fell under the spell of his landlady’s daughter, Ursula. He was briskly entranced, and felt a deep and lasting shock when she spurned him.



Goupil & Cie then sent him to Paris, where he resided for three months, from October to December 1874, hardly ever leaving his home, before returning to the London branch, with a heavy heart. Disappointed love had instilled a powerful feeling of guilt in him: he, himself, was the cause of this failure; God had punished him for his sins, and he needed to make amends. He immersed himself in pious reading, encouraging those around him – Theo, in particular – to do the same. In May 1875, the deeply troubled young man returned to Paris, in the Goupil & Cie Gallery, which had passed into the hands of Messrs Boussod and Valadon. This second stay in Paris, which in part planned to distract him from his despair over love, nevertheless enabled him to assiduously frequent the Louvre Museum, where he marvelled at the works of Rembrandt Van Rijn and Jacob van Ruisdael, in particular. He would also be a frequent visitor to the Musée du Luxembourg, which was dedicated to living artists, and attended the exhibition devoted to the recently deceased Camille Corot, whom he considered to be one of the leaders of the “revolution in art”, possessing “that which is the eternal quality in the greatest of the great: simplicity and truth”. However, he failed to embrace modernity – a trend represented by those painters who were recently named “Impressionists” and who, in the spring of 1874, were featured in an exhibition in the studio of the photographer Félix Nadar. He would finally meet them some ten years later. Van Gogh’s reading, at that time, was almost exclusively limited to the Bible, which was, for his father, “a light on his path and a lamp ahead of his feet”. However, his mystical preoccupations were such that he neglected his work, and was eventually dismissed in April 1876. This time, his uncle Cent refused to help him, while his father did not hide his deep dissatisfaction. From that moment on, Van Gogh began to feel that he was misunderstood, rejected by all and destined to find redemption only through sacrifice.

*It is a delightful thought that in the future, wherever I go,  
I shall preach the Gospel.*

He then decided to return to England: by means of a classified advertisement, he found a job as a teaching assistant at a primary school in Ramsgate, near London, with Reverend Stokes. In this working-class neighbourhood, Vincent lived “in the world of Dickens”, as he wrote in his letters, and developed a deep empathy with the unfortunate folk that he encountered there. He soon aspired to spread the word of God among them. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,” says the Gospel. Two months later, he moved to nearby Isleworth, where he was hired by a Methodist minister, Reverend Jones. Van Gogh would assist him in his parish, write his first sermons and, at last, preach in the London



suburbs. The idea of saving souls, of guiding them, even at the cost of sacrificing his own life, grew in the young man's mind. Van Gogh worked hard, cared for the parishioners, and prayed, barely feeding himself; and when his parents took him in, in December 1876, he was exhausted, but still exalted by the love of God.

He then spent a few months working as a bookshop assistant in Dordrecht, which did not deter him from what he felt was his calling. Furthermore, he proved to be a mediocre employee, and spent his days translating passages from the Bible into French, English and German. He was certain, he would repeat, that he wanted to become a pastor: why would that be unusual, considering his ancestry, where so many men had devoted their lives to God, starting with his father? His family finally agreed, and Vincent began – though not without great difficulty – studying theology in Amsterdam. He also sought to learn mathematics, Latin and Greek; however, theoretical education was hardly suited to a mind like his, and his results were less than adequate, forcing him to give up his exams.

This didn't really matter to Vincent, however; what he really yearned for was to bring the light of God's word to the poor. A few months later, he regained hope when he joined a missionary training school in Laeken, near Brussels, which accepted him as a trainee for three months. Once again, Van Gogh's difficult character, his nervousness and his propensity to all manner of excesses did not work in his favour; at the end of his training, he was not offered a job. Rejected once again, he decided to carry out his apostolate outside any institutional framework, and settled in the Borinage, Belgium's most destitute region. There, he lived among the miners, the better to understand their misery and bear its burden with them. He tended to the sick, taught catechism, barely ate, and slept in a hut on a heap of straw; he exhausted himself, and no longer washed. The local population thought Pastor Vincent to be very strange... and maybe even slightly mad, some whispered. Faced with his excessive ardour, the Evangelical Council attempted to supervise him by sending him to Wasmès. There, he would work with Pastor Bonte, who would quickly grow exasperated with the young man's zeal. And when Vincent sided with the miners during their uprising, to protest against the use of child workers, the Council could no longer stand by him, and refused to renew his contract.

So, in July 1879, Vincent was left to his own devices; he wandered the roads, and met with the miners to whom he preached in the region of Cuesmes, occasionally trading in a sketch for a handful of potatoes or temporary accommodation. However, he no longer had a heart for this life; he doubted his role, his ability to alleviate the misery that surrounded him, which he had likely chosen to bear in vain. The assessment of his life, at the age of twenty-six, reflected an accumulation of failures and disappointments for those around him.



Even Theo, who disapproved of the life that he had chosen for himself, had ceased writing. So Van Gogh took up his pencils, drawing everything around him whenever he could – men and women at work, desolate landscapes and miserable houses. Every day, his interest for the depiction of the reality of the mining world grew stronger. Amidst this profound crisis, art was, for Van Gogh, a consolation that became a passion; the notion of art's soothing power is indeed pervasive throughout his correspondence. This passion would in fact lead him, the following year, to choose a different path and become an artist.

Many reasons can explain why he embraced this new career: from childhood, Vincent showed a remarkable talent for drawing, as can be seen from the few surviving sheets. Later, he never ceased to adorn his letters with pencil drawings and sketches, to the extent that in the 1870s, Theo suggested that he should cultivate his talents more seriously. At the time, however, his elder brother had dismissed this temptation; he was busy with his faith, a priority far greater to him than what he considered to be selfish pleasure. It wasn't until ten years later, depicting miners and peasants, that art appeared to him as a new mission, another way of loving humanity. And indeed, he would commit himself to it with the same thirst for the absolute as when he embraced evangelisation.

In fact, long before he chose the path of art, Vincent had already been looking at the world with a painter's eye. His correspondence is filled with descriptions of landscapes and references to the great masters. In a letter to his parents in April 1876, he wrote: "At dawn the next morning, on the train from Harwich to London, it was beautiful to see the black fields and green meadows with sheep and lambs, and an occasional thorn bush and a few large oak trees with dark twigs and grey moss-covered trunks; the shimmering blue sky with a few stars still, and a bank of grey clouds at the horizon." Even the bleak Borinage region awakened pictorial memories: "There was snow these last few days, the dark days before Christmas. Then everything was reminiscent of the medieval paintings by Peasant Bruegel, among others, and by so many others who were so good at expressing the singular effect of red and green, black and white."

*That one runs a high risk of going under oneself, that being a painter is like being a forward sentry...*

Van Gogh's correspondence with Theo, which had been on hiatus for almost a year, resumed in July 1880, and Vincent announced his decision to devote himself to painting. His younger brother had a successful career as an art dealer, and was now based in Paris, where he ran one of the two Boussod & Valadon galleries, located in Montmartre.