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# The Sociogenesis of Vincent van Gogh's Fundamental Artistic Disposition

## Abstract

Vincent van Gogh is one of the most well-known and influential artists in the western tradition. A sociological analysis of his creative practice, therefore, not only illuminates particularly consequential interventions in the history of art, with its knock-on effects for cultural consumption, but affords an opportunity for deepening our understanding of cultural production per se. At stake, I argue, is a fundamental artistic disposition – in this case, an aesthetic orientation toward nature and sentiment – persisting through if not underpinning changes of style, and the paper reconstructs the myriad forces involved in the genesis of this disposition in van Gogh's early years. It draws upon the conceptual tools of Pierre Bourdieu to do so, but goes beyond them by stressing the importance of familial heritage and 'second order' field effects in shaping the young van Gogh's aesthetic sympathies long before he briefly entered the French artistic field in his final year of life.

Keywords: Art, Bourdieu, disposition, habitus, Vincent van Gogh

## Introduction

Vincent van Gogh is possibly the most famous of 'modern' western artists. His artworks, easily identifiable, sell for record-breaking prices and take pride of place in galleries and private collections around the globe. Whatever the socio-historical reasons for his posthumous fame (on which see Heinich, 1996), he is widely regarded within the art world as a fundamental spur for the emergence and flourishing of post-Impressionism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries and commands wide recognition and appreciation across an extensive span of the population (in the UK, for example, see Bennett et al, 2009: 129). He is, therefore, a cultural producer of such broad and long-lasting significance that – as for Manet, Mozart, Flaubert, Kafka and others before him – a rigorous sociological analysis of the genesis of his artistic work is not only warranted but surely overdue. The major task in this case is to unravel the production of van Gogh's unwavering dedication to depicting *nature* and its workers – fields, trees, groves and agricultural labourers – and subordinating accuracy and technique in artworks to *feeling*. His precise style underwent considerable mutation over time, from the dark and sombre hues of his early works through the colour-filled quasi-pointillist experiments picked up from contact with post-Impressionist painters in France to the expressive impasto of his later paintings. Yet his double orientation not only formed a unifying thread from his earliest sketches and first major tableaux (*The Potato Eaters*) to his later renderings of sunflowers,

cypresses, cornfields, shepherds, reapers and sowers in Arles, but it underpinned his sympathy for and appropriations from specific artists and movements, including Impressionism. He did, of course, paint café scenes and portraits at various points too, but these were extensions of his focus on ‘the people’ and their everyday lives, are less numerous than his paintings of rural scenes and contrast with the consistent interest in castles, city scenes and urban life among the Impressionists and other post-Impressionists like Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Georges Seurat or Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

At stake here, ultimately, is a *fundamental artistic disposition* – an aesthetic proclivity acting as the baseline for all van Gogh’s creative endeavours. The purpose of this paper is to sketch the social forces involved in the genesis of this disposition. It synthesises and reframes biographical accounts provided by others, wary of the interpretations and narratives that may be imposed by authors in line with their own interests, as well as the letters of van Gogh himself, and it focuses – following the evidence – on the artist’s early years. In so doing the paper aims to bridge sociological biography and the sociology of culture and, at the same time, provide a general model for understanding not just Vincent van Gogh’s creative output, far-reaching as it was, but, *mutatis mutandis*, the practice of individual cultural producers *per se*. The conceptual foundation for this model derives from the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, but his tools are being mobilised in a specific manner that needs some explication.

### **Fields and their Effects**

Bourdieu’s conceptual framework orients around the notion of *field*. This is a specific set of relations between individuals struggling for a form of capital, which is nothing more than the properties and symbols securing a specific type of authority and legitimacy. Art, politics, business, religion and so on – all can be conceived as specific systems of positions between individuals endowed to greater and lesser extents with pertinent capitals, often of different species, and thus considered more or less valid and authoritative definers of how things should be in the field (e.g. Bourdieu 1993, 1996a, 1996b). Possessing a certain stock of capital, and thus having the specific experiences and possibilities it furnishes, generates a sense of the possible and desirable in the field – a perception of what can and should be done in the pursuit of capital – which lies at the core of what Bourdieu (1977, 1990) famously labelled *habitus*. This feel for the game and one’s own possible lines of action within it underpins the various *strategies* that agents within the field pursue – whether, that is, they seek to steadily accumulate

or defend their capital or strive to upend the game entirely and establish new principles of worth within the field. All players, however, are united by the belief that the game is worth playing to some extent – an *illusio*, as Bourdieu called it – as well as a set of taken-for-granted beliefs about how the field works and what is done within it – which Bourdieu labelled *doxa*.

Art, politics, business and religion can be considered fields, but so too can the class structure more broadly (Bourdieu, 1984). Comprised of the fundamental principles of misrecognition of a social order – which, in capitalist societies, are economic capital, the social capital of connections and the cultural capital of mastery of specific legitimated systems of symbols consecrated by the education system (languages, arts, sciences, etc.) – this ‘social space’ thus pits the dominant against the dominated and the intermediate. Many of the dominant are also contenders in the fields of art, politics, business and so on, and in fact Bourdieu posited the existence of a ‘field of power’ at the top of the class structure in which cultural producers and business leaders contend to define the dominant principle of domination (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1993). At the other end of the scale, meanwhile, *family relations* can be considered a type of micro-field oriented around struggles for legitimacy and authority within the family, over what family members can and should do, and implicating imbalances in economic resources, physical force and affection (Bourdieu, 1998, 2000a). If the *doxa* in relation to the social space takes the form of unquestioned belief in the value of money and educational qualifications, and awareness of what one has to do to acquire them, then the *doxa* in relation to the familial field takes the form of a ‘family spirit’, or sense of who is who and what is and should be done within the family, including within the specific sub-sectors oriented around domestic relations.

Bourdieu’s *modus operandi* was usually to focus on specific fields – to map out their structures, struggles and transformations, that is. Individuals were treated as the carriers of specific portfolios of relevant capital – often a translation of class-capitals into field-specific capitals – and associated *habitus* (see Bourdieu, 1988: 21ff). Manet, for example, was a revolutionary within the French field of art – breaking with the classicism of the Parisian Salon and championing unorthodox subjects and techniques – because of his specific heritage of economic, cultural and social capital in the context of a growing and mutating field of art and consuming bourgeoisie (Bourdieu, 2017). Getting bogged down in the specificities of individual personalities (Bourdieu, 1988), or treating the events and activities of a single biography only in relation to one another – thereby producing a teleological account – rather than the fields providing their conditions of possibility (Bourdieu, 2000b), are fundamental

errors that must be avoided in order to progress toward rigorous construction of the object of analysis.

This orientation has been criticised by Bourdieu's compatriot, Bernard Lahire. Keen to establish a 'sociology at the level of the individual', Lahire (2003, 2011, 2015, 2017) argues that Bourdieu's reduction of individuals to 'beings-within-a-single-field' provides only a partial explanation for the specific output and activities of agents within a field. Inspired by Norbert Elias' (1991) study of Mozart and taking Franz Kafka as his model, he makes the case that if we are really to understand and explain his literary output, knowing the state of the Czech literary field at the time only goes so far: we also need to know how his basic dispositions and orientations were forged in his early family environment and carried forward and consolidated, or counteracted, through schooling and then translated into, or offset by, participation in specific fields or games (Lahire, 2010). There are echoes of Sartre's old project, against which Bourdieu railed, of reconstructing the full range of forces shaping Gustave Flaubert's literary practice, and indeed Lahire is less dismissive of this endeavour than Bourdieu, but he works with a more nuanced understanding of social structures and human dispositions.

Lahire's insight is sound enough. The structure of a specific field, identifying the major oppositions and similarities in terms of capitals, possibilities and habitus, is a fundamental element in constructing the conditions of possibility of specific practices and outputs. If we want to delve further into the social forces involved in the construction of a specific artwork, however, or the formation of a specific biography and set of dispositions, it is not exhaustive. Early family relations and schooling, and the dispositions they establish, are surely vital in this regard, and so too are the operations of fields the individuals themselves are not participating in. These too provide experiences and possibilities feeding into individual perceptions of what can and should be done within a 'home' field.

While Lahire is certainly right about the 'extra-field' (or, we might say, 'heteronomous') effects feeding into individual activities and strategies within fields, however, the tools for making sense of them are *already there* within Bourdieu's framework (see Atkinson, 2016). Bourdieu's allusions to the family as a field of struggle, for example, are situated in a discussion of the sublimation of early strivings for parental attention and affection, via the models and censures provided by parents, into desires for specific non-familial forms of capital. This is an elaboration of his earlier comments on immersion within a specific familial milieu yielding not just specific masteries but specific tastes and desires – a 'primary habitus' which is then consolidated or modified by schooling to form a secondary habitus, which is then in turn given

specific meaning and possibilities with entry (or ‘transposition’) into a post-school field (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Particularity comes in the form of the specific family spirit, as the doxic sense of the proper and the desirable given the family heritage (cf. Bourdieu, 1998: 64ff). Bourdieu did, moreover, presuppose that individual schemes of perception and possibilities were moulded by fields that individuals did not themselves participate in, as evidenced, for example, in his comments on the symbolic power of the state (Bourdieu, 1998, 2000, 2014) and struggles over space (Bourdieu, 1999; Fogle, 2011) as well as his general argument that non-field events and experiences are translated into effects and possibilities within the field in focus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 105). That he made relatively little of these ‘second order’ field effects in *his* studies of specific individuals does not obviate the possibility of making something more of them in other studies of individuals using his tools.

Ultimately, then, we accept the utility of switching perspective, when a specific individual is under the sociological microscope, and looking beyond the history and dynamics of a single field. This is all the more necessary for someone like Vincent van Gogh, who entered the French artistic field late in life – marked by his recognition in Parisian avant-garde circles and, especially, Albert Aurier’s famous review in the year Vincent died – and whose major orientations and sympathies were established early on – before contact with the Impressionists and post-Impressionists in Paris, and before his ready acquaintance with the *plein air* innovations of the Barbizon School. His class origin is a big part of the picture, without doubt, but so too is its specification by his particular family spirit and, on top of that, by struggles within fields he had absolutely no agency in at the time.

## **Materials**

Since Vincent van Gogh is one of the most famous and influential artists of the modern period there is no shortage of biographies, memoirs and narratives attempting to account for his contribution in one way or another. They necessarily form a large part of the material drawn on and integrated in what follows, but they must be handled with caution. Each is infused with the interests of their authors, from the psychoanalysts keen to demonstrate the power of their worldview to the art historians content to assume ineffable genius (see Welsh-Ovcharov, 1974; McQuillan, 1989). Even non-academic accounts more or less rinsed of specifically scholarly interests and priding themselves on comprehensive research and detail, like that of Naifeh and

Smith (2011), reflect the exigencies of the literary field in which they are enmeshed – in Naifeh and Smith’s case, the florid and exaggerated use of language, yielding a chaotic image of van Gogh, is mobilised to generate a ‘compelling’ account so that sales might be maximised. They thus require a critical reading, suspicious of descriptions and interpretations of events and alive to the limits of the evidence and alternative construals. This is true even for two of the most famous biographies of van Gogh which might otherwise be considered more ‘authoritative’ since they were penned by family relations: that composed by his sister, Lies (Duquesne-van Gogh, 1913/2017), and that written by his sister-in-law, Jo van Gogh-Bonger (1978). Both had their interests in promoting van Gogh, and both only had specific contact and experience with him and need to be read circumspectly in the light of later biographies.

Critical reading of biographical materials is aided by the ready availability in raw form of the prime source for most accounts: van Gogh’s own letters to family and friends (though mostly to his brother, Theo).<sup>1</sup> Numbering several hundred and often of great length, these letters detail the events, experiences and decisions of van Gogh’s life as well as his evolving perceptions, fears and hopes. They are not without their own interests, of course – van Gogh is presenting certain events, memories and thoughts, and doing so in a certain way, for a reason, but that in itself is indicative of his schemes of perception and practice across fields. Since van Gogh only began regularly writing letters once he had already left home, however, we only get occasional and retrospective invocations of the childhood experiences that were key to the formation of his fundamental dispositions. The letters are less helpful for understanding this period of his life, therefore, than later periods, demanding greater reliance on the biographical sources and memoirs.

### **The Multi-layered Genesis of an Artistic Disposition**

The core argument is this: Vincent van Gogh’s fundamental artistic disposition – his overriding orientation toward nature and those who work it as well as a subordination of technique to sentiment – was forged in his early years through immersion in a very specific field of family relations and consolidated by his schooling. However, the social forces shaping and reinforcing the effects of those specific family relations – and thus crucial elements of the explanatory model – include class relations, the structure and struggles of the Dutch religious field, its own shifting place in the field of power and the fallout of global geopolitics in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. I will start with the geopolitics, which are themselves tied up with the structure and struggles of

a very particular field, before working down through the relevant layers of social structure to van Gogh's family field and schooling.

### *The Global Field and the Dutch Field of Power*

The rise and fall of empires and nations on the world stage is bound up with struggles and strategies within what some have called the 'global field': a world-spanning system of relations between states (or those delegated to act on behalf of states) premised on disparities in economic, military and cultural power (Go, 2008). Armed conflict, trade deals, annexations and secessions are explicable in good part by adaptation of the key players to the state of the field and the likely futures built into it – events that have far-reaching consequences for the lives of resident populations and seep into their specific dispositions.

In the case of Vincent van Gogh, the relevant element of the story is the declining trajectory of the Dutch Empire. The 'Golden Age' of Dutch prominence that had dovetailed with an expansion of education, scientific-technical innovation and a flourishing of the arts (this was the time of Vermeer and Rembrandt) had long since ended with the rise of England and France (Israels, 1995; de Vries and van der Woude, 1997; Wallerstein, 2011) and the Netherlands itself had been split into Northern and Southern states. The latter, redubbed Belgium, was largely Catholic and monarchist in outlook, distinguishing it sharply from the Protestant and republican north. The partition of the countries, however, ran right through the old former duchy of Brabant, leaving within the borders of the shrunken Netherlands a frontier of Catholic-Protestant conflict. By the time of van Gogh's birth, most Protestants had been driven away, leaving a tiny congregation suspicious of and embattled by a Catholic majority, though decreasingly so (Naifeh and Smith, 2011: 20-21; see also Stokvis, 1926, cited in Anon, 1978: 593). Belgian independence, moreover, robbed the Netherlands of what industry it had. In order to conserve some kind of standing in the global field, and dovetailing with domestic reconversion strategies among the urban bourgeoisie, the Dutch state adopted a policy of enforced industrialisation.

The evolving shape of the Dutch social space in the wake of these global strategies, specifically the rise of economic and secular cultural capital and their prime bearers, the urban bourgeoisie, at the expense of the aristocratic symbolic capital of the patriciate, can be gleaned from Wintle's (2000) account of *fin de siècle* Holland. Wintle does not, however, give due place in the Dutch social space, and field of power, to the clergy. For if the members of the old nobility



and new bourgeoisie vied for position at the ‘temporal’ pole of the field of power, both stood opposed to the ‘spiritual’ pole occupied by the clergy (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1993). As Kodera (1990) makes clear, for the first three-quarters of the 19th century the latter exercised a profound influence over both politics and culture. In terms of culture, the clergy were dominant among the intellectuals of the day, producing revered literary and philosophical works of their own, writing frequently in art periodicals, lecturing on science and art or literature as well as theology, translating foreign literary works and generally mediating the public’s reception of art through their essays and sermons, both of which commonly used artistic images and literary motifs as platforms for religious messages. The universities too were still disproportionately training theology students (Kodera, 1990; Bos, 2011).

The struggle between the temporal and spiritual poles played out in the creeping secularisation of Dutch society. The eventual so-called ‘pillarisation’ of the Netherlands, whereby religious denominations as well as socialists and liberals were segregated into distinct schools, universities, clubs and trade unions and had distinct newspapers, shops and political parties, was in many ways a defensive strategy pursued by the clergy as a means of shoring up its position within the field of power (Wintle, 2000). Be that as it may, however, the writing was on the wall: the clergy, and the religious capital it commanded, eventually lost political and cultural sway and were overtaken at the spiritual pole by secular cultural capital.

The clergy were not all of a piece, however, and their struggles in the field of power were complicated and co-produced by struggles and strategies within the religious field itself.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of Enlightenment thought, with its focus on reason and freedom, as well as the trend toward secularisation that followed it and the recognition granted to Catholics, impacted upon the religious field by splitting the dominant Protestant church into several warring factions. One of these, seeking to accommodate and assimilate the rationalist impulse and scientific and artistic interest in nature, was somewhat heterodox: the ‘Groningen School’, led by Petrus Hofsted de Groot of Groningen University and influenced by the writings of Thomas à Kempis and Erasmus. Its advocates were essentially pursuing a defensive strategy in the field of power, attempting to shore up religion in new times, but it was also opposed by conservative orthodox Protestants, associated with the broader anti-modern *Réveil* movement, who bewailed the concessions and ‘heresies’ of the Groningen School. In 1842 a collective of prominent members of the *Réveil* – the ‘seven gentleman of the Hague’ – delivered a tract to the general synod of the Dutch Reformed Church demanding they denounce the ideas and teaching of the Groningen School as heretics. The conflict eventually led to an official split within the Dutch

Reformed Church in the 1860s, with the orthodox wing forming the Association of Netherlands Reformed Ministers and establishing a Confessional Association tasked with driving out modernisers, while the heterodox wing formed the Assembly of Modern Theologians. A new school of ‘ethical theology’ also emerged as a ‘mid-way’ solution, rejecting the baldness of the Groningen School’s claims and offering a more palatable alternative. The Groningen School was superseded, key members left the clergy, and conservative Protestants like Abraham Kuypers went on to positions of power – modernism had failed.

### *Position and Trajectory of the van Gogh Family*

Now we can situate within this context the van Gogh family at the time of Vincent’s birth in 1853. First and foremost, both of van Gogh’s parents were of thoroughly bourgeois stock, with prosperous merchants, magistrates, lawyers and ambassadors on each side of the family line. More specifically, though, both sides of the family were characterised by orientation toward both art and the Dutch religious field. On the maternal side, there were close connections with Hendrik van der Sande Bakhuyzen, a Romanticist painter of pastoral scenes who tutored his own children to become prominent artists – one of whom, Julius, would become a reference point several times for van Gogh in years to come – and an uncle, Johannes Stricker, who was a revered theologian and preacher within the Modern Theology movement (Kodera, 1990: 19). On the paternal side, van Gogh’s grandfather was an affluent and respected minister in Breda ‘of great intellect’ who, by all accounts, expected at least one of his children to follow him into the ministry (van Gogh-Bonger, 1978: xvii). His oldest son, Hendrik (known as Hein), went into the book business and had his own shop in Rotterdam at twenty-one. His next son, Johannes, went into the navy and eventually rose to the position of vice-admiral, while his youngest son Cornelius (Cor or CM) entered the civil service. Another son, Cent, began studies for ministry but soon dropped out on health grounds, working with Hein before entering the art business, initially as a vendor of paints and materials and then opening a gallery.

It was left to van Gogh’s father, Dorus, to embody direct social reproduction. After successes at school (finishing *cum laude*), and in spite of earlier aspirations to become a doctor, he attended university to train as a minister. Compared to his brothers, who had entered the rising bourgeoisie and flourished, Dorus, for all his *illutio* (he described preaching as a ‘beautiful profession’), was entering a declining profession (Naifeh and Smith, 2011: 60). Not only that, but after graduation Dorus struggled for three years to obtain a position, and when he did he

was exiled to a rural backwater parish: the village of Zundert in Brabant. This was ‘anything but an important post’ (Stokvis, 1926, cited in Anon, 1978: 593), where the Protestant congregation, thanks to the operations of the global field, was tiny and the pastor was essentially charged with the lowly task of being present and visible to the Catholic majority to remind them of their existence. ‘For twenty years’, wrote Jo van Gogh-Bonger (1978: xviii), ‘he lived forgotten’ in the village.

Compared to the impoverished farmers, agricultural workers and home-based brewers and tanners that comprised the Zundert parish (Brekelmens, 1953), Dorus and his family appeared capital-rich, but compared to the wider family, on both the maternal and paternal sides, they had declined. This was less to do with the decline of the clergy, however, than Dorus’ own dominated position within the religious field. Jo van Gogh-Bonger (1978: xviii) records that, for all his academic success, he was ‘not a gifted preacher’, i.e. he lacked oratory skills and charisma, part and parcel of religious capital (see also Naifeh and Smith, 2011: 61; Stolwijk, 1999: 18). At the same time, having studied at Utrecht University, then a stronghold of the Groningen School, Dorus had allied himself to a school of thought that was thoroughly on the decline (McQuillan, 1989: 23). Not only that, but even *within* the Groningen School he occupied a dominated position (Tralbaut, 1969: 12). The grand leaders of the movement had taken issue with the accommodationist stance on Catholics and focus on agriculture over urban crafts and trades that characterised the ‘Society for Prosperity’, a charitable mission in which Dorus’ father held a leadership position, and formed their own organisation to usurp it. The van Gogh name had thus become somewhat stigmatised through these battles even amongst the school Dorus was allied to, further preventing him from securing permanent positions in the more urban parishes he delivered guest sermons in, and it was only his father’s localised connections that managed to secure him a place at all.

### *The van Gogh Family Spirit*

The doxa of the familial field, therefore, including the domestic sub-field rooted in Zundert in which young Vincent van Gogh’s first struggle for recognition first took flight, was thoroughly bourgeois. The children were immersed in a world where family leisure time took the form of entertaining local notables, reading aloud to one other from the works of writers such as Schiller, Goethe, Shakespeare, Dickens and George Eliot (often sent in bundles by Uncle Cor), learning the fairy tales of Hans Christen Anderson by heart, taking piano and singing lessons

and composing poetry (van Gogh Museum, 2009: s. 1.4; Naifeh and Smith, 2011: 28-9, 36). Additionally, however, there were three intertwined pillars to the family spirit in van Gogh's youth: religion, art (i.e. painting and drawing), and nature.

The religious component of familial doxa was manifest in the constant references to God and his will among family members – assuming the letters between them reflect something of how they spoke to one another – as well as the bible readings and prayer meetings that took place in the parsonage, and indeed the ritual of prayer for routine events (e.g. mealtimes) and biographical milestones (e.g. leaving home) (van Gogh Museum, 2009: s. 1.4). It also extended to the décor of the house, filled with religious paraphernalia – a chalice, statue of Christ, crosses and so on – as well as religious images on the walls by artists such as Ary Scheffer and J.J. van der Maaten (Naifeh and Smith, 2011: 53; see also L36 and L85). Art, meanwhile, was present as a thoroughly worthy pastime but also a feasible living via familial heritage, family business and social contacts, all of which are likely to have fostered appreciation for and talk and evaluation of art within the home. Van Gogh was also encouraged to draw from an early age and praised for his efforts, producing several pictures still in existence as well as other drawings which were subsequently destroyed (van Gogh-Bonger, 1978: xx, lv-lvii).

Both religion and art were bound to nature on a general and a more concrete level in van Gogh's life. At the general, abstract level, Romanticism was in full swing within the artistic field as a reaction against industrialisation and rationalisation, i.e. transformations in the social space and field of power – paintings of twee bucolic scenes glorifying a 'simpler' past way of life or tableaux depicting the majesty of nature were fashionable among the bourgeoisie and well stocked at Uncle Cent's gallery. Not only that, but the movement, especially its German version, had been embraced by the Protestant Dutch clergy, and pushed in their artistic interventions, as an aid to delivering messages on God. The pictures that hung on the parsonage wall reflected that (both Scheffer and van der Maaten were Romantic painters – Kodera, 1990: 20), but so too did the literature and poems that the van Goghs turned to. Dorus, for example, was fond of reading and quoting the poems of P. A. de Génestet, a classic poet-theologian from the heyday of the Dutch clergy's cultural dominance who used Romantic motifs to moralise (van Gogh Museum, 2009). As Naifeh and Smith put it, both Dorus and Anna van Gogh 'loved nature', marvelled at its vistas and set out to find them because they 'embraced the mystical union of nature and religion' popularised by the Dutch clergy, that is, the belief that 'beauty in nature sounded the "higher tones" of the eternal, and that appreciating nature's beauty qualified as "worship"' (Naifeh and Smith, 2011: 39).

There were more practical interconnections of religion, art and nature too. Being located in a rural parish thanks to his father's positions and trajectory, what many in the cities who would have romanticised as 'nature' only experienced infrequently was part and parcel of van Gogh's lifeworld: the heath, the rolling fields, the streams and brooks, the trees and flowers, the animals and the peasants were ever-present in quotidian experience. The daily walks that the van Gogh family took together as a visibility tactic on Dorus' behalf ranged over village and countryside, and Vincent would accompany his father on longer walks over the heathland to visit far-flung parishioners – all with parents known to be awe struck by nature and to frequently feel moved to communicate that sentiment (Naifeh and Smith, 2011: 26, 53). Meanwhile, Dorus' sermons, which Vincent eagerly attended, regularly took rural themes – the parable of the sower, for example – to fit their audience. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that flora and pastoral scenes – flowers, trees, streams, brooks, goat herders, diggers and barns – were van Gogh's first artistic models.<sup>3</sup>

### *Scholastic Consolidation*

At age 13, Vincent van Gogh was sent to the Rijksschool Willem II in Tilburg, recently opened as part of the Dutch state's push to expand the education system as a strategy of rebuilding the nation's standing in the global field (Van den Eerenbeemt, 1972). By all accounts the boy – who had already been educated by a governess and at a previous boarding school – flourished there, excelling in his studies and surpassing his contemporaries. His schooling allowed his orientation toward nature to take on a quasi-scientific bent at times, as he spent his time at home 'watching and studying the life of the underbush and the birds', collecting beetles, birds and flowers and mounting them in display cases with their Latin names (Duquesne-van Gogh, 1913/2017: 5-6). Art class, meanwhile, was taught by Constantin Huysmans, who had, in his early adulthood, been an agent – in the sociological sense – within the French artistic field. At that time the field was structured around a polarity between, on the one hand, the orthodox neo-classicism favoured by the state-sponsored Paris Salon and, on the other, Romanticism (Bourdieu, 2017: 103). The former, personified by Ingres, focussed on historical or mythological scenes from antiquity and the mastery of form and technique, while the latter, personified by Delacroix, was oriented more toward the immediately pre-industrial past, often took grand bucolic vistas as its subject and aimed at the invocation of emotion. At the same time, however, the Realism of the Barbizon school was an emerging heterodoxy – figures like Courbet, Daubigny, Corot, Jules Breton and Jean-Francois Millet, reacting against the

grandiosity of Romanticism, preferred to focus on the real, contemporary French landscape and its workers (sowing seeds, harvesting, etc.), pioneered *plein air* painting and tended to use looser brushstrokes to render their subjects (Fowler, 1997). They were the prime source of inspiration for the Impressionists, though the latter adapted their methods to depict urban life and leisure. When they did venture out into the countryside, viewing the landscape through the ‘tourist gaze’ of the bourgeois urbanite, the resulting *tableaux* were almost always expunged of workers.<sup>5</sup>

For his part, Huysmans had been a landscape painter in the Romantic tradition – and a relatively successful one, given the acceptance of his work into the Salon. He was, however, sympathetic to the Barbizon school and the ideas that would seep into Impressionist practice (Van den Eerenbeemt, 1973).<sup>4</sup> He had been wrenched from the field and returned to his native Holland, taking teaching positions to make ends meet, so that he could look after his blind father. In the process he had written a popular instructional book on art. Plugging into the generalised sense of decline that came with the downwards trajectory of the Netherlands in the global field – a desire for a return to the past that Bourdieu (1984) identified among declining social classes, but just as applicable at the global scale – he made the case for the pedagogical necessity of art if the decline was to be halted and a new Dutch Golden Age kindled. Codifying the dispositions acquired and honed in the French artistic field into an artistic philosophy, in it he eschewed the focus on ‘technique’ and precision common to art schools preparing apprentices for Salon exhibition in favour of using art to tap into the ‘power of expression’ and seeking to capture ‘the impression the object makes rather than the object itself’. The philosophy was carried over into his pedagogical practice: his pupils, including van Gogh, copied from the Old Masters, as was standard, but, unusually, they were also encouraged to sketch and paint van Gogh’s beloved nature, not only from models in the classroom (stuffed birds, botanical illustrations), but *en plein air*, venturing out into the country to render ‘the source of all beauty, God’s glorious nature’, as well as the people who work it. The sole picture remaining from van Gogh’s Tilburg period is a pencil sketch of a peasant resting on his spade.

The only allusion to van Gogh’s early art training later in life is a complaint about his lack of instruction in perspective (L394), but that hardly matters. Huysman’s approach harmonised almost completely with, and thus reinforced, van Gogh’s pre-existing penchant for nature, including its religious and artistic glosses, and from the very start of van Gogh’s earnest efforts at art he simply *took it for granted* that it would be nature and its workers that would be his object, and that the sentiment of the picture outweighed its morality or accuracy in importance

– he never aspired to paint allegorical historical or mythical scenes beyond a few religious pictures later in life, and even then they rejected the grand, precise form of the classicists and were themselves linked to nature in their own way (Kodera, 1990). It was to be overlaid and deepened with subsequent experiences and artistic influences, but van Gogh's fundamental artistic disposition, the baseline through which all else would be received and evaluated, was forged in the accord of his familial doxa and very specific educational experiences. When he entered the art trade it was the Barbizon school and their Dutch homologue, the Hague School, that disproportionately attracted his attention and advocacy, much to the chagrin of his employer who favoured the popular neo-classical style; when he later desired to join the priesthood it was transformed into a sense of nature and its workers as the true locus of faith and piety; and when he finally embarked on art as a vocation it was Jean-François Millet that became his hero, and his painting of *The Sower* the guiding beacon that van Gogh endeavoured to reproduce again and again (compare, for example, L156 and L850).

In a letter to Theo from September 1880, after a trip to Courrières to (unsuccessfully) meet Breton, van Gogh's orientation as a novice artist is made plain not only in his paean to the 'haystacks', 'brown farmland', 'coffee-coloured soil' and moss-covered thatched roofs of farmhouses and sheds of the region; not only in his prioritisation of the 'picturesque figures' of diggers, woodcutters and farm-hands; not only in his expressed desire to 'one day' draw workmen and tradesmen so that they may be 'brought to notice'; and not only in his desire to depict that which is 'touching and heart-rending' in 'poor and obscure workers'; but also in his heartfelt valorisation of those masters who can put 'something of the human soul', or 'sentiment', into their artworks, whether it be a certain melancholy or 'a power to love' (L158). Two years later, while still extolling 'the mood of a landscape', the capacity to 'appeal to a human being as a human being' through figure painting and the need to express what one 'feels' through drawing, he even explicitly (if briefly) drew a connection between this artistic orientation and his 'childhood in Brabant' (L274).

### **Modulation by the French Artistic Field**

Even van Gogh's later attunement to the French artistic field, before and while he was an effective agent within it, yielded only a *modulation* or *elaboration* of his fundamental artistic disposition. After a period of self-study, in which he dedicated himself to the portrayal of peasants and cottage weavers, and a false start in Antwerp, he enrolled at the Parisian atelier of

Fernand Cormon in 1886. Though Cormon himself was a classicist painter, Impressionism was, by that time, a prominent heterodoxy in the French artistic field toward which many students oriented themselves. Van Gogh had become slowly aware of the Impressionists via Theo, who was then a prominent champion of Monet and others in the art trade, but now he was exposed to the experiments of fellow students and budding artists to go *beyond* Impressionism. Prime among these was the divisionism or pointillism of Georges Seurat and Vincent's young friend Paul Signac, which strove to break down a scene into dots of contrasting colour so as to maximise its sensory impact.

Structural affinities between van Gogh and the (post-)Impressionists provided the conditions of possibility for him to be receptive to and incorporate their ideas. Van Gogh was, like many others in the avant-garde, from a relatively bourgeois family, with enough distance from necessity to enable artistic experimentation (his father and then his brother supported him economically), and so he stood opposed to the petit-bourgeois classicists seeking security through orthodox methods (Bourdieu, 2017), while sympathy with Impressionism in particular was consolidated by the shared orientation toward Realism. Contact with the people and products of the French artistic field thus yielded an undeniable transformation in the *form* of van Gogh's paintings: where previously he had employed dark, sombre hues and solid, thick lines to render his subjects (e.g. *The Potato Eaters* or his numerous studies of potato diggers), his palette now lightened considerably and he played with pointillist techniques (see e.g. *View from Theo's Apartment*).

However, while his peers were intently depicting work and leisure in industrial Paris, van Gogh not only routinely traipsed to the outskirts to find pastoral subjects (windmills, vegetable gardens, wheatfields) but, ultimately, desired escape. His departure for Arles in 1888 was the product of many factors, for sure, but one of them was his open distaste for urban life – its people, its prohibitions and its unrelenting greyness (see Tralbaut, 1969: 217ff; Hulsker, 1985: 259ff). In the luminous south of France he could, he wrote, 'look at nature under a brighter sky' (L801), and he could also deploy his new-found looser brushwork and vivid colours to paint sowers once again, as well as olive pickers, diggers, shepherdesses and ploughmen and the groves, wheat fields, cypresses and sunflowers that constituted their everyday environment. Subsequent hospitalisation narrowed his subjects to flowers and gardens, of necessity, but he soon returned to depicting fields, cottages and cattle once he settled, in the months before his death, in Auvers, even if his relative isolation and prickliness by that time made it harder to find willing models to populate his landscapes with figures.



Van Gogh's interest in Impressionism and pointillism's colour contrasts, moreover, was filtered through his *pre-existing* fascination with Delacroix's colour theory (see L449, L494, L496, L683) and eventually morphed into commitment to a self-devised notion of 'suggestive colour', that is, the use of colour and brushwork – now, breaking from the direct influence of pointillism, becoming longer in its strokes and thicker with paint – to express something of the artist's inner emotive or mental state on the canvas (L683). A bridge to later artistic developments, of course, this was, ultimately, a harnessing of new-found ideas, prompted by contact with figures in or struggling to enter the French artistic field, to elaborate the old disposition, forged in his childhood home and schoolroom, of making form merely an instrument for expressing a certain sentiment regarding nature and those who work it.

## **Conclusion**

Trying to explain, sociologically, Vincent van Gogh's artistic output by focussing solely on the structure and dynamism of the French artistic field at the time of his training and eventual entry would be like trying to explain a destructive blaze only in terms of the factors facilitating its spread and mutation from one building to the next. The incendiary spark would be absent from the account, as would its specific conditions of possibility. Likewise, to account for van Gogh's *oeuvre* fully, we need to reconstruct the myriad social forces – the first-order *and* second-order field effects – shaping his early experiences and orientations.<sup>6</sup> This paper hopes to have gone some way toward fulfilling that task. To recap the argument, van Gogh's baseline artistic disposition, his 'primary habitus' through which all subsequent experience was filtered and his sympathies and appreciations established, comprised an overriding orientation toward nature and its workers coupled with a focus on art as a conveyer of feeling rather than technical mastery. This disposition was forged in the context of a very specific familial field. Class position certainly set basic parameters for receptivity to art as a vehicle for 'higher-order' messages, but specifically Romantic ideas prevailed (a) because of his father's membership of the Dutch religious field, wherein Romantic themes were constantly mobilised to shore up the clergy's cultural power; and, enabling that move, (b) because of the Romantic turn in the art field in the first place, spurred by industrialisation which, in the Dutch case, was being rapidly undertaken as a strategy to recoup position in the global field.

On top of that, however, Vincent van Gogh's love of nature over urban life is inseparable from his rural childhood – his early immersion in bucolic surroundings and exposure to the people

living there and the nostalgia that would forever bring him back mentally to Brabant no matter where he was in the world. Had he have been urban-born, like many of the French Impressionists, he may well, like them, have taken city scenes as subjects more often than he did. This immersion, itself, was a product of struggles and strategies within fields that Vincent himself had no agency in. On the one hand, he was thrown into the world at Zundert because of his father's alignments and lack of relevant capital within the religious field, which had banished him to a backwater parish. On the other hand, the very nature of that parish – the spread of what few Protestants remained over large tracts of countryside necessitating long and joyful walks with parents – was the outcome of geopolitical strategies in the global field. Finally, van Gogh's disposition was consolidated in his later schooling by exposure to an art teacher who, following a specific trajectory in the French artistic field and in the shadow of the Netherlands' international decline, imparted artistic practice based on an ethic that would resonate in van Gogh's artworks until his last days.

The subsequent twists and turns in van Gogh's life and artistic experience were not inconsequential. The modulation of his aesthetic disposition following contact with certain events and agents of the French artistic field, particularly the experiments of Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, have been indicated, but there is more. The vast catalogue of artistic awareness accumulated through his days working in the art trade, his exposure to graphic art depicting the life of the poor in London, contact with other artists from Anton Mauve to Paul Gauguin, not to mention specific life experiences like the death of his father or his later confinement to sanatoria, etc. – all undoubtedly had their effects on the style and sometimes the content of specific paintings produced by his hand and are worth exploring further as a means of documenting the nuancing and overlaying of primary dispositions. We have sketched the sociogenesis of the starting point, upon which all else builds, and noted the effects of his last major waystation, but not the whole journey.

## **Endnotes**

1. The letters are freely available online, with accompanying notes, at [www.vangoghletters.org](http://www.vangoghletters.org). They are cited here in the form Lxxx, replacing xxx with the letter's number as designated by chronology.
2. The following account draws from Kodera (1990) and Bos (2011). On the concept of the religious field, see Bourdieu (1971, 1987).

3. See Anon (1978), as well as van Gogh's juvenilia up to the 1860s archived online at <http://www.vggallery.com/juvenilia/main.htm>.
4. All quotes in this paragraph come from this source.
5. The major exception in this regard is Camille Pissarro, the oldest of the Impressionists, who had been trained directly by Corot.
6. And what goes for van Gogh goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for any other cultural producer and, indeed, any other participant in the field of power, whether it be a case of accounting for the specific business interests of an entrepreneur in the economic field or the 'specialism' of a participant in the sociological field.

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