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Van Gogh's Ghost Paintings: Chapters 1-3

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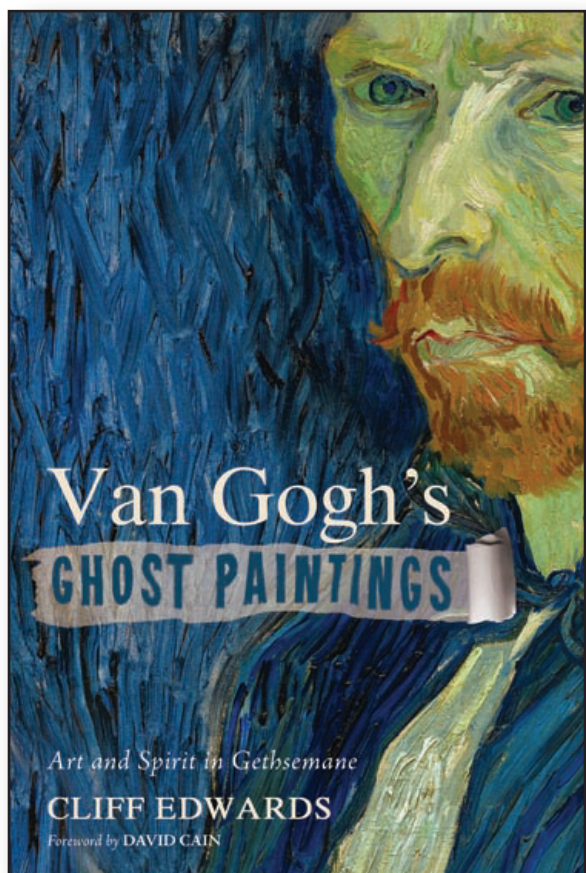
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One of the most significant and revealing paintings by the world-famous artist Vincent van Gogh was never seen by anyone but the artist himself. The painting was so important to the artist that he painted it twice. He was so conflicted about the painting that he destroyed it twice. Cliff Edwards argues these two unique paintings Vincent created and destroyed are at least as important to understanding the artist and his work as are the two thousand or more paintings and drawings that do exist. In *Van Gogh's Ghost Paintings*, Edwards invites his readers on a journey that begins in a Zen Master's room in Japan and ends at a favorite site of the artist, a ruined monastery and its garden in the south of France. Recovering the intent of van Gogh and the nature of his "ghost paintings" becomes a "zen koan" waiting to be solved. The solution offers access to the deepest levels of the artist's life as painter and spiritual pilgrim. The journey leads to the artist's choice of the biblical theme of the Garden of Gethsemane. The answer to the mystery of the lost paintings illuminates the relationship of joy and suffering, discovery and creation, religion and the arts in van Gogh's life and work. In this fascinating book Edwards solves a long-ignored mystery that provides a critical key to the relation of van Gogh's religion and art.



Van Gogh's GHOST PAINTINGS

Art and Spirit in Gethsemane

CLIFF EDWARDS

Foreword by DAVID CAIN

"This is a superb work. The author's fearless journey into the life of van Gogh and the interiority of the writing take the reader herself into solitude, loneliness, labor, triumph, and sorrow. It is a complex work . . . [W]e tread with this book the very path van Gogh himself hesitated on and wrestled with himself on: the seeming contradiction between the intellect and the spirit in art, a contradiction that survives to the present."

—ELIZABETH C. KING, sculptor, university professor, 2002 Guggenheim Fellow, 2006 recipient of the Academy Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and author of *Attention's Loop*

"Cliff Edwards' *Van Gogh's Ghost Paintings* is at once a riveting mystery and a beautiful meditation on sacrifice and art. The book extends a compelling invitation to sit at the feet of a master teacher as he takes readers on a fascinating, heartbreaking, and heart-healing journey to discover what has never been. This is a richly rewarding investigation that illuminates the darkest intersection of van Gogh's spirituality and art with uplifting tenderness and compassion. Gorgeous, inspiring, and wise."

—DR. KRISTIN M. SWENSON, author of *Bible Babel*, and co-author of *What is Religious Studies? A Journey of Inquiry*

"After all these decades of van Gogh studies, finally someone opens up for us Vincent's deepest quest and convincingly shows that the art of the 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing' Dutch painter is of deep theological and spiritual significance. Edwards' astute understanding of Zen Buddhism, as well as of Christianity, has allowed him to portray Vincent as one of the most significant spiritual figures of the nineteenth century—an artist who fully deserves the attention of modern theologians interested in interreligious dialogue."

—A 1989 assessment of Edwards' contributions to van Gogh studies by Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen

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Cliff Edwards is Professor of Religion in the School of World Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. His education spans East and West. With a PhD in biblical studies and world religions at Northwestern University, he has studied in France, Switzerland, Israel, and a Zen monastery in Japan, and has been a Coolidge Fellow in New York and a Visiting Fellow at Oxford University in England. Among his books are *Van Gogh and God*, *The Shoes of Van Gogh*, and *Mystery of the Night Café*, as well as a biblical commentary and two books on the Japanese haiku.

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VAN GOGH'S
Ghost Paintings

Art and Spirit in Gethsemane

CLIFF EDWARDS



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VAN GOGH'S GHOST PAINTINGS

Art and Spirit in Gethsemane

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Dedication

I am delighted to dedicate this book to my father-in-law, Professor Fernand Lucien Marty, Professor Emeritus of French at the University of Illinois, whose passion for French literature and linguistics at several colleges and universities has inspired friends, family, and students for many decades. His early work on language learning labs in the 1940s and 50s, computer-assisted language learning in the 1960s and 70s and automatic text-to-speech systems in the 1980s and 90s broke boundaries and established new benchmarks for excellence across numerous disciplines. In all this work, Professor Marty created a long list of books, monographs, and articles that continue to guide and enrich others. More recently, Professor Marty returned his attention to French literature, with a particular focus on the writings of Emile Zola, including an expert critique of Vincent van Gogh's reading and comments on several of Zola's works. Our conversations on French culture and the arts go back many years. Almost thirty years ago Professor Marty helped me get access to French periodical sources important to my earliest book on Van Gogh, and he has since then kept me up on his research that bears on the life and work of Vincent Van Gogh in their cultural context. To Professor Marty's long list of books, monographs, and articles on the teaching of French and pioneer work with computers, he has now added a Van Gogh connection that has enriched many, and certainly stimulated me. Few scholars have continued active research and publishing into their tenth decade of life, and fewer still whose work continues to inform new understandings of the world around us. Professor Marty is one of those rare individuals. It is my personal honor to know him as his friend, colleague, and son-in-law. His continuing intellectual curiosity, his work ethic, and his practical wisdom all continue to inspire me, as they have so many others.

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Foreword

To write a book on two paintings we have never seen is an accomplishment. For Cliff Edwards, the absence of the paintings is a kind of presence—revelatory at that. With *Van Gogh's Ghost Paintings*, which can be read as mystery narrative and detective adventure, Edwards adds a fourth work to his previous three on the artist: a Vincent van Gogh quartet. Here again we meet Vincent van Gogh as an artist in paint who is also a painter in words: “Let us work with our heart and love what we love.” Vincent did. So does Cliff Edwards. Edwards suggests that Vincent “is doing in paint what Christ himself was doing in words. Vincent was painting parables.” Consider this: “we shouldn’t judge the Good Lord by this world, because it’s one of his studies that turned out badly.” On “a simple journey by train,” which he compares to the journey of life, Vincent writes, “you go fast, but you can’t distinguish any object very close up, and above all, you can’t see the locomotive” (Letter 656). If we cannot see the locomotive pulling the artist’s train, we can certainly feel that it is there and that this is a train worth riding. The text is punctuated and animated by questions, questions inviting us to climb aboard this train and join Edwards in his adventure and engagement with the life and death of Vincent van Gogh. Personal and geographical passages are welcoming as Edwards takes us with him to a monastery in Kyoto, Japan, where the quest begins. The Japanese and Zen connections are important: a concern of the text is “the recognition that there are symbols that reach across all cultural divides.” We travel to Amsterdam, Otterlo, Paris, Arles, Montmajour, Auver-sur-Oise. Edwards’s love and dedication show. He writes of “the antitheses that pulled Vincent’s religious consciousness and artistic adventure taut.” So we may be pulled taut in an appreciation of the emptiness and of the beauty of Vincent’s

FOREWORD

Gethsemane, of how the “erasure” of Gethsemane is the actualization of Gethsemane. We arrive at insight into the relation of religion and art—of how “religious art is a way of seeing rather than a what is seen . . .”

David Cain
Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Religion
University of Mary Washington

Acknowledgments

This book makes full use of the six volumes of *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters* edited by Leon Jansen, Hans Luitjen, and Nienke Bakker, and published by Thames and Hudson in association with the Van Gogh Museum and the Huygens Institute in 2009. I have purposely used the new numbering system for Van Gogh's correspondence introduced by this new resource. I have also taken all quotations from Van Gogh's correspondence from this same source. Periods and spaces, capitalization and bold type in the English text are the translators' attempts to indicate features of Van Gogh's own handwriting in the original letters. Only ellipses composed of three periods with one space before and after each are my own addition to the quotations, indicating omissions I have made for purposes of focus and space.

I have used this new six volume resource and its electronic version on purpose so that every reader can explore the letters and related art. The source is also available on the internet by simply typing Ar in a web browser. One can then click on any piece of Van Gogh correspondence available and see it in English, the original Dutch, or French, or view a facsimile of the handwritten letter itself. If one clicks on "art work," one can view every art work available that is mentioned in each letter, in color when available. Clicking on "notes" gives one observations by the experts. I am deeply grateful for this new work, and believe it will add an important dimension to my book and will open doors to your own exploration of Van Gogh's life and art. An index at the end of my book will allow you to find and view many key works of art mentioned by Van Gogh and in my own discussions.

My personal gratitude to those who have provided the space and help for my research is so extensive that I must be satisfied with just a few brief references. Family and friends have provided the rich community in

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which I live and do my work, and deserve my deepest thanks. Colleagues at Virginia Commonwealth University in the religious studies program, the School of World Studies, The College of Humanities and Sciences, and the Anderson Gallery have given major inspiration and support. The staff of the Cabell Library has been a great help, and its staff in the Special Collections and Archives unit has given me a wonderful space for working with the Van Gogh volumes, as well as creative support and advice. Albertien Lykles-Livius in the Rights and Reproductions department of the Van Gogh Museum has been a wonderful help in arranging for the use of most of the images in this book. My current Commonwealth Society Class sponsored by the VCU School of the Arts has been a great inspiration. A special thanks is due, as in all my Van Gogh books, to Marcia Powell. Over thirty years ago Mrs. Powell, a teacher of French language and culture residing in Richmond, Virginia, translated every line of every letter of Van Gogh as a resource for our discussions of Van Gogh's paintings. That translation and those discussions have played a key role in my understanding of Van Gogh. Marcia Powell later gathered support to establish the Powell-Edwards Fund in Religion and the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University, bringing major lecturers on the arts and conferences on religion and the arts to our campus. I am deeply grateful for her interest and labor. Chelsea Wilkinson, in the midst of preparing for graduate work in art therapy, has taken time to coach me in computer skills needed to get this text in order, and of course my editor, Dr. Chris Spinks, and the entire enterprise at Cascade Books have worked with me thoughtfully and with great expertise. I hope that it is clear to the reader that my gratitude to a great "cloud of witnesses" has shaped this book from beginning to end. What is best in it is to their credit, but I claim any and all its faults.

Locating the Ghost Paintings

Imagine that one of the most significant and revealing paintings by the world-famous artist Vincent van Gogh was never seen by anyone but the artist himself. Imagine that it was so important to the artist that he painted it twice, but he was so conflicted about it that he destroyed it twice. Those imaginings are reality. I call those paintings Van Gogh's "ghost paintings."

Vincent, as the artist preferred to be called, composed those two paintings during his most creative year as an artist. It was 1888, the same year he painted his *Sunflowers*, *The Yellow House*, *The Bedroom*, numerous blossoming orchards and fields of wheat, flower gardens and harvest scenes, fishing boats on the Mediterranean, and portraits of peasants, housewives, a postal worker, and children.

What is especially puzzling about Vincent creating and destroying his ghost paintings is that never before had he ever composed such a painting, and never again would he attempt such a painting. Those two destroyed paintings were unique among all his works. The closest he would come to those paintings was a copy of a work by Delacroix, but that was a copy, and that was not the subject he would choose for his own work.

I believe the two unique paintings Vincent created and destroyed are at least as important to understanding the artist and his work as are the two thousand or more paintings and drawings that do exist. I believe devoting attention to the ghost paintings will reveal an illuminating new dimension

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of Vincent's struggle to discover the spiritual dimension of art for the culture of his day and ours. I believe that hidden in those paintings and their story is Vincent's final word on "the art of life."

For me, the ghost paintings are much like Edgar Allan Poe's "Purloined Letter," hidden in such plain sight that their very existence, brief though it might have been, has remained largely invisible to us. My guess is that you have never heard of them, and I know you have never seen them. Yet I am convinced those two works did much to determine the course of Vincent's art for the last two years of his brief life as artist. In those two paintings he struggled with the meaning and direction of his intended contribution as an artist. The struggle and provisional solution arrived at by Vincent as revealed in those two works and their destruction played a critical role in the future direction of art, and contributed to the future relationship of religion and spirituality to the arts.

Let us go to the hiding place of those paintings and allow the artist himself to tell us their secret. On Sunday, July 8 or Monday, July 9 of 1888, worn out by a day of painting outside the city of Arles in Provence, just thirty miles from the Mediterranean, Vincent likely sat at a table in the Café de la Gare, on the ground floor of the Ginoux Inn. He often ate, drank, and wrote letters to his brother Theo at one of the café tables. One can see the very setting in the painting he titled *Café de la Nuit* (*The Night Café*). Upstairs was his rented room, filled with paintings drying before he could roll them up and send them to his brother Theo. Vincent was writing a six-page letter to Theo, manager of an art gallery on Montmartre in Paris. Most of the six pages dealt with responses to a now lost letter by Theo inquiring about debts Vincent may have left behind when he departed their apartment on February 19 for the sixteen-hour train trip to the south of France. Vincent informed Theo that he owed nothing to the paint-dealer Père Tanguy, but did owe Bing's Art Nouveau Shop for Japanese prints he had taken on consignment. Then, after commenting on newly completed drawings and a collection of recent paintings that were drying, Vincent began on page three of the letter some nine lines that are likely to surprise anyone who has studied the 1,500 or more drawings and paintings Vincent had completed from his beginning as an artist in 1880 to the moment he wrote that letter in the summer of 1888. He describes this painting whose subject matter stands alone among all his works. In a deceptively off-hand manner, he writes:

LOCATING THE GHOST PAINTINGS

I've scraped off one of the large painted studies. A *Garden of Olives*—with a blue and orange Christ figure, a yellow angel—a piece of red earth, green and blue hills. Olive trees with purple and crimson trunks, with grey green and blue foliage. Sky lemon yellow.

I scraped it off because I tell myself it's wrong to do figures of that importance without a model. (Letter 637)

Vincent then abruptly turns to other subjects: the likelihood of Gauguin joining him at the Yellow House in Arles, news of other artists, Bing's collection of Japanese prints, and Pierre Loti's novel about Japan, *Madame Chrysanthemum*.

Vincent confesses he had destroyed his large painting of Jesus and an angel in the Garden of Olives, or Gethsemane. But his confession has its peculiarities. He had been worried that the expense for tubes of paint was driving his brother, who paid for them, to illness. He suggested to Theo that perhaps it would be best to give up painting in favor of the far less expensive pursuit of drawing (Letters 601, 615). Yet he admits here to the purposive loss of a good deal of paint. Even his use of the words "I tell myself" in "I tell myself it's wrong to do figures of that importance without a model" gives the impression that he is involved in a conflict within himself regarding his painting the figures of Christ and an angel. Perhaps he is hiding more than he is revealing regarding the significance of this painting and his decision to destroy it.

Nevertheless, we might treat the destruction of this one painting of a single scene selected from the life of Christ as an impulsive singularity among all his works if it were not for the fact that another surprise awaits us. Seventy-five days later, after some thirty-three more letters to Theo, Vincent has a second confession to make. On September 21, 1888, Vincent was in the midst of "a passion to make—an artist's house," planning his sunflower decorations for the Yellow House, just a block from the café where he rooms and where he writes his letters to Theo. He is ecstatic that he will finally have a studio-home that will bring him "great peace of mind." In the midst of his euphoria, he makes his second confession:

For the second time I've scraped off a study of a Christ with the angel in the Garden of Olives. Because here I see real olive trees. But I can't, or rather, I don't wish, to paint it without models. But I have it in my mind with color—the starry night, the figure of Christ blue, the strongest blues, and the angel broken lemon yellow. And all the purples from blood red purple to ash in the landscape. (Letter 685)

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About two weeks later, on October 5, both the Garden of Olives or Gethsemane paintings were still on his mind when he wrote his young artist friend, Emile Bernard:

I mercilessly destroyed an important canvas—a Christ with the angel in Gethsemane—as well as another one depicting the poet with a starry sky—because the form hadn't been studied from the model beforehand, necessary in such cases—despite the fact that the color was right. (Letter 698)

It appears that for over three months the Gethsemane painting with Christ and an angel had haunted Vincent. The first version with its yellow sky had over time transformed to a “starry night” scene. He admits that his Gethsemane painting was an “important canvas” and that “the color was right.” The impulse to paint it remained too strong to resist, yet the conflicting feelings about having such a painting among his works necessitated the destruction of the second painting following in the wake of the destruction of the first. He has, of course, told us that he doesn't “wish to paint it without models,” but why then attempt it twice? Further, what might he have imagined his models for such a painting would be? Would he have accepted someone who matched his imagined image of Christ or an angel? Or had he perhaps expected a vision of the scene to come to him in his act of painting? Further, Vincent tells us that his seeing “real olive trees” encouraged him to do the paintings. He would, in fact, draw and paint eighteen works focused on olive trees during his months in the asylum. Are those “olive trees” further attempts at the Mount of Olives Gethsemane scene? Might the very absence of Christ and an angel add to our sense of Vincent's struggle with the meaning of Gethsemane for himself as artist? Is there a movement toward a “negative way” to call the sacred to mind, a presence of Christ and angel as absent, refused, or erased essential to the depth of Vincent's search for a spirituality for the art of the future? Should showing a place in nature reflecting the Gethsemane scene bring the narrative to our memory? Or has Vincent refused the story as a visual narrative in favor of the here and now of actual olive orchards?

Exactly what is it about painting Jesus and the angel in Gethsemane that led to this double creation and double destruction during the height of the artist's creativity? Why had he never composed a scene from the life of Christ before, and why would he never compose such a scene again? These are all questions for which we will seek answers, or at least direction. I believe our very asking of these questions will take us more deeply than

LOCATING THE GHOST PAINTINGS

ever into the imagination and intentions of one of the greatest Western artists, and so into art as “spiritual biography” and an illumination of human creativity and the quest for meaning.

2

A Zen Master's Question

Before attempting answers to the several questions I've raised regarding the ghost paintings, allow me to introduce a quite different sort of question, one that is often addressed to me. I lecture on Vincent's art, life, and spiritual quest in museums, university classrooms, and religious institutions, in this country and abroad. During a question and answer period, I can count on one of the first questions asked to be some variation on the following: "What led you to get so interested in the painter Van Gogh?" Such a question might be expected, especially from those who know that my early studies and much of my teaching and writing have focused on the religious classics of the world's religions, especially on the relationship between Asian religious texts and practices and Western religious texts and practices. I believe my answer to that often-asked question may help you locate me and the direction my passion for the life and work of Vincent van Gogh has taken.

My early studies and degrees were in biblical studies and the history and literature of the world's religions, largely at Northwestern University, the University of Strasbourg in France, the University of Neuchatel in Switzerland, and Hebrew Union School of Bible and Archaeology in Jerusalem. But my growing interest in comparing Asian religions with Western traditions led me to travel to Japan, where I became interested in Buddhist religious art. That is when I was introduced to a zen master who was custodian of one of the world's most famous zen paintings.

A ZEN MASTER'S QUESTION

It was the question posed by that zen master over a bowl of tea that initiated the journey of discovery that led to my passion for Vincent van Gogh's life and work and that has brought me to the book you have in hand. In 1971, fresh out of my Western studies, I traveled to Japan on a grant and was studying the Japanese language in a Kyoto language school. My teacher asked if I would be interested in teaching English to a zen monk. The monk was from a famous zen monastery in the city, Daitokuji, and was being sent to America to found a zen temple. I knew that a famous abbot at Daitokuji not only knew a great deal about the zen arts, but had in his temple treasury one of the most famous of all zen ink-paintings, Mu-ch'i's *Six Persimmons*. I traded English lessons for an introduction to my student's abbot, Kobori-Sohaku. The day came when I was ushered into his private chamber. Sitting on tatami mats, he served tea, and asked how he might help me. When I asked permission to see the famous zen ink painting, he smiled, and said, "If you can answer my question, I might be able to open our treasury and let you view the painting. My question is, why do the Japanese want to see Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and you want to see Mu-ch'i's *Persimmons*? I will make it a simple koan. A Van Gogh sunflower and a Mu-ch'i persimmon: are they the same or different?" Perhaps there was some immediate response in koan style that might have suited the moment. But my thoughts were on how little I knew about either Van Gogh or the Japanese people's views on art. I promised Abbot Kobori I would attempt someday to solve his koan. That was the start of my life-long study of Van Gogh.

Beginning as an attempt to understand the relationship between Vincent's art and Japanese art, my interest broadened into a study of Vincent's spiritual quest and his way of seeing the world and living his life. After a stay at Daitokuji, I traveled to Amsterdam and Otterlo in Holland to see the greatest collections of Van Gogh's art, and to view some of his original letters to brother Theo. While in Amsterdam I bought my first set of volumes containing the letters of Van Gogh. Studying his letters fascinated me, for much of my early education had focused on interpreting the New Testament, and the New Testament is composed largely of letters. From Holland I traveled to Paris, and was fortunate enough to arrive during a major exhibition of Impressionist art at a museum on the Place de la Concorde. A banner over the exhibit contained a Van Gogh quotation: "We love Japanese art. All the Impressionists have that in common." A poster for the exhibit contained a copy Vincent had made of a woodblock print by the

famous Japanese artist Hiroshige, along with this quotation: "All my work is based on Japanese art."

It was not until 1989 that I published my first book on Van Gogh. It was titled *Van Gogh and God*, and its fifth chapter titled "The Oriental Connection" was my first attempt to answer the koan posed by Abbot Kobori years before. But my attempt at an overview of Vincent's life and work in that book left me with many more questions than I had answered. I took a humbler approach in my second book, *The Shoes of Van Gogh* (2004). It responded to just nine of Vincent's paintings that I believed were most critical to understanding his life and art. Even that book seemed too broad, lacking the depth of focus necessary to get at the artist. My third book, *Mystery of the Night Café*, chose just a single painting, Vincent's *le Café de la Nuit*, and I felt that it got more deeply into the mind and vision of the artist than I had accomplished before.

Nevertheless, there remained a sense that something of vital importance had eluded me in all three of those books. Was there a natural progression from the whole of Van Gogh's life to a work on nine paintings to a work on a single painting? If so, where could one go beyond the focus on a single critical painting?

This year I decided to retrace my steps and begin again. Now I had an exciting new resource prepared by the Van Gogh Museum and the Huygens Institute in the Netherlands: *Vincent van Gogh—the Letters*, a six-volume set of all the existing letters sent and received by Vincent van Gogh, along with every remaining image he sketched, drew, and painted, plus every available image by other artists that he mentioned in his letters. Further, the scholars who created the six volumes also placed the material on the web (vangoghletters.org) and this electronic resource allowed me to study the facsimiles of all the letters as well. Years ago a Dutch scholar in Amsterdam had told me to take seriously the fact that Van Gogh "drew or painted" his letters, and one needed to study images of the actual letters to get the full sense of their meaning. This is now possible, and those images could be brought directly to my desk.

And so I began again and worked my way carefully through the six volumes and the facsimiles. It was during this past year of research that I made the discovery that I had missed in four decades of study and viewing. The discovery was the "ghost paintings," and the result of the discovery is this book. It is as though the next step on my journey of discovery had been waiting for me to listen to Vincent's words and see with new eyes what the

A ZEN MASTER'S QUESTION

artist himself was saying and seeing. It opened for me a new doorway to the artist's creative life and thought.

I invite you to join me in searching out the meaning of the ghost paintings, critical works that at the outset may seem inaccessible. Yet I believe the struggle necessary to discover what we can of these works will open a dimension of the artist's own spiritual search that has been locked away for too long. What we can know of them has eluded most, and generally been largely ignored even when noticed. As far as I can find, they have never been assessed as having the critical role they deserve. But to locate these paintings and their significance, we must be willing to open our vision to that of the artist himself, to appreciate the power of negation, the odd twists and turns of the play of presence and absence, the revealing nature of irony, paradox, contradiction, and destruction that lurk in some of the deeper recesses of symbolic expression. We must be willing to examine the consequences of life's critical choices, the meaning of roads not taken as well as those traveled. In a sense, this search for the significance of Vincent's ghost paintings promises to bring me full circle back to themes met in Asian art and spiritual philosophy, and so back to the question posed by Abbot Kōbori at that zen monastery in Japan. The ghost paintings, I think we will find, are in some ways like a koan waiting to be solved. They will confront us with frustrations, puzzles, surprises, and perhaps finally will offer some enlightenment to the dedicated seeker.

As I sit viewing my computer screen, I look above it to the wall where I have taped four quotations that remind me of the wider significance of this search for the ghost paintings, as well as provide a clue or two that have helped me along the way. Perhaps these quotations may be of help to you as well on our search for the meaning of the ghost paintings.

The first quotation I have taken from a famous philosopher-theologian who escaped Nazi Germany many years ago to teach in the United States. Several times, while I was a student at Northwestern University, I took the elevated train to the University of Chicago to hear him deliver lectures. These words from his little book, *Dynamics of Faith*, constantly remind me of the illumination that can come through the arts: "All arts create symbols for a level of reality that cannot be reached in any other way. . . . In the Creative work of art we encounter reality in a dimension which is closed for us without such works."¹ Tillich goes on to claim that such art "also unlocks dimensions and elements of the soul which correspond to the dimensions

1. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 42.

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and elements of reality.” If Tillich was right, imagine how impoverished our lives would be without the experience of creative works of art. We would be robbed of a depth dimension of our world, and there would be rooms in our own souls locked away from us. And so the question asked by Abbot Koberi becomes a question of the depth dimension of cultures East and West, the recognition that there are symbols that reach across all cultural divides, from sunflowers to persimmons, and so issue a global invitation to discover ways to live more completely, more creatively.

The second quotation above my desk is from a masterpiece of literature by Marcel Proust, a work of many hundreds of pages that is more often talked about than read. The work is titled *A la recherche du temps perdu*, sometimes translated *Remembrance of Things Past*. The words of Proust that tell me something about the very reason I view and study the life and work of Vincent van Gogh with such interest and persistence are: “The only true journey, the only bath in the Fountain of Youth, would be not to visit new lands but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another.”² If life’s true journey is to share in the vision of others, why not choose the most creative eyes one can find? For me, this has led to the attempt to share the vision of Vincent van Gogh’s extraordinary creative eyes. Those eyes have illuminated the life presence of sunflowers and wheatfields, cypresses and blossoming orchards. They have seen and shared with sensitivity and compassion the faces of peasants and miners, weavers and housewives, children and prostitutes. They are the eyes of an artist who searched his own face in times of discovery and failure, loneliness, and illness. Perhaps our sharing in his vision will offer a personal transformation akin to Proust’s promised “bath in the Fountain of Youth.”

The third quotation is by George Steiner, a fascinating critic of culture who has written twenty-six books over half a century, including a book titled *My Unwritten Books*, from which I take these words:

A book unwritten is more than a void. It accompanies the work one has done like an active shadow, both ironic and sorrowful. It is one of the lives we could have lived, one of the journeys we did not take. Philosophy teaches that negation can be determinant. It is more than a denial of possibility. Privation has consequences we cannot foresee or gauge accurately. It is the unwritten book which might have made the difference. Which might have allowed one to fail better. Or perhaps not.³

2. Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 3:762

3. Steiner, *My Unwritten Books*, ix.

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Those words written by Steiner at the University of Cambridge in 2006 describe much of what I have been seeking in the two ghost paintings of Van Gogh. Those paintings go beyond the “book unwritten” to a work twice created and twice destroyed. That they followed the rest of Vincent’s work like an “active shadow,” and that they involved a “journey” he took only provisionally, a journey that he then wrapped in a “negation” that made “the difference,” seems evident to me, though solving the meaning of that negation and difference requires a steep climb.

The fourth and final slip of paper taped above my computer screen is by Vincent van Gogh himself, and has served me as a clue and goad toward solving the meaning of the ghost paintings. Vincent had written a letter to brother Theo around September 5 of 1883. Soaked from painting “crooked, windswept trees” in a rain-storm, Vincent mused on the way sorrow developed a sense of character in human beings. He concluded: “Yes, for me the drama of a storm in nature, the drama of sorrow in life, is the best. A ‘paradou’ is beautiful, but Gethsemane is more beautiful still” (Letter 381). Vincent was likely thinking of the enclosed garden named “paradou” in an Emile Zola novel he had recently read, *The Sin of Abbé Mouret* (who, interestingly, has his ear cut off at the end of the novel). That garden for both Zola and Vincent is the reflection of the Bible’s Garden of Paradise. Vincent’s preference for one garden over the other, Gethsemane over Paradise, may well be a clue to the puzzle of the artist’s choice of the one biblical scene he selected for painting twice, and perhaps also a clue to their destruction.

Our search for the deeper significance of Vincent’s ghost paintings and their vision of Gethsemane requires at least a thumbnail sketch of his life that led from a Dutch parsonage to his journey to Arles. And so I provide a sketch of his life in the next chapter, followed by a chapter on his decision to journey to Arles where he would create and would destroy the Gethsemane paintings.

3

Quest for the Artist

Vincent van Gogh arrived in southern France at the old Roman city of Arles on February 20, 1888. He was not yet thirty-five years old, and had been painting for less than eight years. After two years living with his younger brother Theo in a Paris apartment, Vincent had become disgusted with the constant bickering among warring factions of the city's artists. He was ill from drinking "too much bad wine," and was suffering from the freezing weather of a very severe Paris winter. He decided he must regain his health and paint in the light such favorite artists as Delacroix and Monticelli had enjoyed in the warmth and clarity of the Mediterranean sun. He took the train along the "route of the sun" from Paris some 482 miles south to Arles in Provence, a trip of about sixteen hours. In a later letter to Theo, Vincent emphasized the artistic reasons for the move:

My dear brother, you know that I came to the south and threw myself into my work for a thousand reasons. To want to see another light, to believe that looking at nature under a brighter sky can give us a more accurate idea of the Japanese way of feeling and drawing. Wanting, finally, to see this stronger sun, because one feels that without knowing it one couldn't understand the paintings of Delacroix from the point of view of execution, technique, and because one feels that the colours of the prism are veiled in mist in the north. (Letter 801)

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His assertion “I threw myself into my work” is an understatement. He would remain in Arles for 444 days, during which he would create two hundred paintings and over a hundred drawings and watercolors. As the art specialist Ronald Pickvance wrote in *Van Gogh in Arles*, that accomplishment remains “a prodigal and quite astonishing outpouring, sustaining a pace that no other artist of the nineteenth century could match.”¹

Van Gogh was surprised to find that Arles was under a thick layer of snow when he arrived, but even that did not stop him from painting almost from the very day of his arrival. As the snow melted and spring arrived, he discovered that Arles had periods with a powerful “mistral” wind that made painting difficult, but he adjusted as best he could to the difficulties. Further, he found that there really was no established colony of artists with whom he could associate and exchange ideas. Fortunately for us, this gave him even more reason to write letters to Theo and to a series of artist friends, including Gauguin and Bernard. In those letters, he describes the landscape, inhabitants of Arles, his paintings and drawings, and the questions he was struggling with regarding his mission as artist. But there remained the issue of loneliness and isolation. He found that in that city of twenty-three thousand, he was the only Dutchman, and though his French was good, the people of Arles spoke a dialect of Provence that made communication difficult. He also found that most of the people of Arles looked upon foreign painters as either wealthy dandies playing at art or as madmen. A plan to bring other artists to Arles to form a “monastery” of artist-monks sharing meals and painting together grew in his mind and in his letters to Theo. It would lead to an invitation to Paul Gauguin to come to Arles as the “abbot” for such a community. Gauguin did eventually come to Arles, but for only two months, and then Vincent van Gogh was alone again, alone and hospitalized.

We will have a number of occasions in the pages ahead to look back at Vincent’s life and art before his arrival in Arles, but we must remind ourselves at this point that even at age thirty-five, Vincent had already been through much, suffered several life-changing failures, and labored hard to find his own direction and mission in life. He carried a good deal of baggage with him to Arles, had much to sort out, and had critical decisions to make about his intent as an artist. Even a few pages sketching the journey he had already undergone may be a help as we seek to locate the place and critical role of his ghost paintings.

1. Pickvance, *Van Gogh in Arles*, 11.

Who was this strange Dutchman who arrived at the Arles railroad station on February 20, 1888? Biographies of the artist are easily located, psychological studies of the artist are readily found, and colorful picture books of his art are offered on discount shelves of almost every large bookstore. Similarly, several one-volume abridged collections of his letters are available, selected by museum directors, artists, and poets. Sites on the internet take us to Vincent's paintings, drawings, and letters. Above all there is the amazing new six-volume set I mentioned earlier, *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters*, and its website is prepared by the experts at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and the Huygens Institute in The Hague.

I will offer here simply a thumb-nail sketch of Vincent's life before his arrival in Arles. Such a sketch should at least hint at the fact that Vincent had already lived a surprisingly varied and often difficult life. He had been raised in a parsonage in a small village surrounded by fields, forests, and the homes of peasants. He eventually worked in three world capitals known for their art and culture. He was required to employ three different languages for daily communication at various times in his life. He had served the rich and lived among the poor. He had suffered serious deprivations, some due to unavoidable circumstances and others due to his voluntary ascetic practices. Vincent, even at age thirty-five, had developed a complex character formed in part by the immense variety of the influences of his time and place, his family, his aspirations, his suffering and failures, and his passionate reading of scores of books and equally passionate viewing of hundreds if not thousands of paintings, drawing, and prints. We will provide a few way-markers that suggest the route his "pilgrimage" took. Citing a few passages from his letters may also help us locate his feelings and voice.

Vincent was born on March 30, 1853, a year after Pastor Theodorus and Anna van Gogh's first child was stillborn. Following Vincent's birth were the births of five siblings, Anna, Theodorus, Elizabeth, Wilhelmina, and Cornelis. The Dutch Reformed parsonage where Vincent spent most of his first fifteen years, about 40 percent of his lifetime, was in the agricultural village of Zundert. The village, near the Belgian border, was largely Roman Catholic, hence Pastor Van Gogh's small congregation had only about a hundred and twenty Dutch Reformed parishioners. Apart from two years at a boarding school in nearby Zevenbergen and two years at a secondary school in Tilburg, Vincent's chief setting was the parsonage with its regimen of home-schooling, daily family prayers, Bible-readings, and weekly services and sermons in the small church beside the parsonage.

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The deep impression these parsonage days within a setting of fields and peasant cottages had on Vincent, is illuminated by his comments later in life, after his father's death and during his own illness. He wrote Theo on January 22, 1889:

During my illness I again saw each room in the house at Zundert, each path, each plant in the garden, the views round about, the fields, the neighbors, the cemetery, the church, our kitchen garden behind—right up to the magpies' nest in a tall acacia in the cemetery . . . to remember all this there's now only Mother and me.
(Letter 741)

As his words illustrate, Vincent's sensitivity to place, feeling for details of nature, and keen visual memory all become an important part of his outlook as artist.

The two themes of church and art were a family heritage. Father and grandfather were clergy and three of Pastor Van Gogh's brothers were well-off art-dealers and collectors. At age sixteen, in the summer of 1869, it was likely the influence and connections of those three uncles that dictated Vincent's placement as a junior clerk in The Hague branch of Goupil and Company with its several art galleries and business in paintings and art-prints. Vincent's first preserved letters are from his fourth year with Goupil to his younger brother Theo. When Theo was placed in the Brussels branch of Goupil in 1873, a regular correspondence between the two brothers began. Chief subjects were family, paintings, prints, and books. In 1873 Vincent was transferred to London, and his serious religious interests emerged, intensified by daily Bible reading and prayer when he was transferred to Paris in 1875. Many of his letters to Theo during this period are a confusing patchwork of Bible quotations, prayers, and church hymns. The Goupil period comes to a surprising end in 1876 when Vincent is dismissed from his position. His leaving for Christmas vacation to be with his family without Goupil's blessing may have been one of the contributing causes. Though Vincent says little about the dismissal, it was likely a shattering experience of failure, though his later ponderings of the event may indicate that he had become gradually disillusioned with the management of Goupil. In a letter to Theo on December 11, 1882, Vincent compared the deterioration of art in a favorite illustrated magazine with the policies of Obach, the manager of Goupil's London branch:

And now, everything is gone—once again the material in place of the moral. Do you know what I think of the folder I'm sending

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you? It's just like the way of talking that, for example, Obach, the manager of G@C. in London, goes in for. And that is successful . . . It's just that it makes me sad, it takes away my pleasure, it upsets me, and I no longer know what I, for my part, should or should not do. (Letter 293)

Here we get some glimpse of Vincent's idealism regarding the arts, and the continuing pain connected to his dismissal and sense of failure regarding his days with Goupil and Company.

Reduced to answering advertisements for job openings, Vincent found a position teaching at a school for boys in England, and then work assisting a Methodist minister in the London area. Though little pay was involved, Vincent's sense of fulfillment in a church vocation is obvious. A letter to Theo on November 3, 1876, contains the full text of Vincent's first sermon and these words indicating his sense of mission:

When I stood in the pulpit I felt like someone emerging from a dark, underground vault into the friendly daylight. And it's a wonderful thought that from now on, wherever I go, I'll be preaching the Gospel- to do that *well* one must have the Gospel in his heart, may He bring this about. (Letter 96)

After reading Vincent's expression of his joy and fulfillment in preaching, it may seem strange that within two months he was back in Holland working as a bookseller's clerk. It is likely that a family council met and decided that it was not proper for a Van Gogh to work for little more than room and board as a Methodist pastor's assistant. One of the wealthy uncles arranged Vincent's new employment until arrangements could be made to have him tutored for entry exams to a proper theological school. This long and arduous preparation in Greek and Latin, history and mathematics, was discouraging to Vincent, and he soon transferred to a Belgian Missionary Training School that allowed him a probationary assignment as evangelist in a village in the Belgian mining district called the Borinage. Evidence indicates Vincent struggled to imitate the life of Christ, living among the mining families, descending into the mines, and nursing workers hurt in mine disasters. His manner of living and working in poverty with the laborers shocked both his family and the Missionary Board. His appointment ended in dismissal by the Board.

Refusing to return home from the mining district, Vincent wrote perhaps his most poignant letter, admitting his failures and deep discouragement to Theo. Written from the mining village of Cuesmes about June 24,

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1880, he admitted he was now “an impossible and suspect character in the family,” a “prisoner in penury, excluded from participating in this work or that.” He described himself as a “bird at moulting time,” or a “caged bird” in need of friendship and love that might “open the prison.” He wrote that “my torment is none other than this, what could I be good for, couldn’t I serve and be useful in some way.” His deep discouragement included his experience with the church and his fellow evangelists: “There’s an old, often detestable, academic school, the abomination of desolation. . . . Their God is like the God of Shakespeare’s drunkard, Falstaff, ‘The inside of a church’” (Letter 155).

Between that letter of June, 1880 and his next letter to Theo on August 20, a transformation took place. Vincent the failure, rejected for service to the church, was now “sketching large drawings after Millet.” He declared to Theo, “If only I can go on working, I’ll recover somehow” (Letter 156). The work he had decided upon was to prepare himself as an artist to draw and paint among laborers, miners, and peasants. By September 24, a letter to Theo described how he had learned “to see with a quite different eye” in his “ordeal of poverty,” and that through picking up “my pencil” everything “has changed for me” (Letter 158).

Coming through these ordeals and failures determined to be an artist, Vincent was still far from the end of the pilgrimage leading to Arles and his ghost paintings. By 1881 he had returned to his parents’ parsonage, now in the village of Etten, to save money while learning to draw peasants at work. His falling in love with his widowed cousin, Kee Vos, who had been vacationing at the parsonage with his parents, led to another major failure and serious rupture with family. Kee Vos, in continued mourning for her husband, answered Vincent’s passionate declaration of love with a “No, Never, Never” (Letter 179). Vincent persisted against his family’s advice, and by December an argument with Pastor Van Gogh led to Vincent being ordered out of the parsonage at Christmas.

Another period of poverty and failure awaited him in The Hague, where he moved to continue his art. With only the money sent him by brother Theo and occasional gifts from his father, Vincent not only struggled to afford art supplies, but also supported in his studio an ill prostitute who had a small daughter and was pregnant with the child of another client. When family found he was living with a prostitute, and in fact proposed marrying her, he was threatened with the loss of financial support, and even with the possibility of being committed to a mental institution as

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incompetent. But Vincent's taking the seriously ill woman, Clasina Maria Hoornik (Sien) to a clinic may well have saved her life and the life of her baby boy. He describes seeing the child in its cradle in terms of one of his favorite New Testament scenes:

I can't look at the last piece of furniture without emotion, for it's a strong and powerful emotion that grips a person when one has sat beside the woman he loves with a child in the cradle near her. And even if it was a hospital where she lay and I sat with her, it's always the eternal poetry of Christmas night with the baby in the manger as the old Dutch painters conceived of it, and Millet and Breton—that light in the darkness—a brightness in the midst of a dark night. (Letter 245)

He later cited Jesus' words against his family's rejection of Sien: "and I for my part understand the words of Jesus, who said to the superficially civilized, the respectable people of His time, 'The harlots go BEFORE you'" (Letter 388). Vincent's loss of his one chance at a family, problematic as it was, seems to have haunted him for the rest of his life. The circumstances leading to Vincent's separation from Sien and her children is uncertain. It involved the realization of all involved that Vincent as artist could not support them, and their remaining together likely meant the loss of any support from the Van Gogh family. But it may also have involved Sien's decision, influenced perhaps by her mother and brother, to return to the streets. Whatever the whole story involved, Vincent's leaving for a desolate section of the Netherlands called Drenthe involved a deep sense of loss, guilt, and certainly suffering for all involved. From Drenthe, he wrote Theo that "the fate of the woman and the fate of my little boy and the other child cut my heart to shreds." He went on:

rather than separating, I would have risked one more attempt by marrying her and going to live in the country. . . . But I believed one thing, that this was the right course, even despite the temporary financial drawbacks, and that not only could it have been her salvation but would also have put an end to great inner struggle for me, which has now, unhappily doubled for me. And I would rather have seen it through to the bitter end. (Letter 390)

Lonely and discouraged, Vincent soon left Drenthe to return to the family parsonage, now in the village of Nuenen in Holland. Though Pastor Van Gogh, his wife, and family seem to have tried hard to accommodate Vincent as struggling artist, he describes his feelings of rejection, attributing

it to “a clergyman’s vanity.” He describes to Theo his belief that “Ma and Pa” think of him as a “large, shaggy dog”: “Then—the dog might perhaps bite—if he were to go mad—and the village constable would have to come round and shoot him dead” (Letter 413). In spite of strained relations within the family, as well as a crisis involving a neighbor’s daughter who apparently fell in love with Vincent and attempted suicide, the artist worked long and hard in the fields and homes of peasant farmers and weavers to improve his drawing and become a true peasant-artist like Millet.

On March 26, 1885, Pastor Van Gogh died of a heart attack upon reaching home after making pastoral calls. He was just sixty-three and appeared in good health, and so the sudden death was a shock to the family. Vincent memorialized his father’s death with a painting of the pastor’s Bible beside a snuffed out candle. That was a traditional enough *memento mori* theme, but Vincent added his own final word to disputes he had long had with his father, who rejected as immoral the new French literature Vincent favored. A bright yellow paperback book, Zola’s new novel *La Joie de vivre* (*The Joy of Living*) is pushed up against his father’s large open Bible. The subtlety of Vincent’s painting, however, has eluded most viewers. The Bible is clearly depicted as open to the prophet Isaiah, chapter 53, the Suffering Servant Songs, and the novel *La Joie de vivre* only appears to be a stark contrast to the Bible. The actual story Zola tells in his novel is of a young orphan girl who is in fact a suffering servant whose life follows the pattern of the Isaiah passage. Zola, Vincent indicates, is a prophet for our time, and perhaps the role of prophet was intended to extend to Vincent’s own aspirations in art as well.

Within a month of his father’s death, Vincent was also completing what he hoped might be a masterwork, proving his maturing as an artist, the painting we call *The Potato-Eaters*. The crudeness of the scene, which led to much criticism, was explained by Vincent:

You see, I really have wanted to make it so that people get the idea that these folk, who are eating their potatoes by the light of their little lamp, have tilled the earth themselves with these hands they are putting in the dish, and so it speaks of MANUAL LABOR, and—that they have thus honestly *earned* their food . . .

And likewise, it would be wrong, to my mind, to give a peasant painting a certain conventional smoothness. If a peasant picture smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam—fine, that’s not unhealthy—if a stable smells of manure—very well, that’s what a stable’s for—if

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a field has an odour of ripe wheat or potatoes or—of guano and manure—that's really healthy—particularly for city folk. (Letter 497)

Within a year, Vincent's mother was required to leave the Nuenen parsonage to make room for a new pastor. She moved with her daughter Wilhelmina (Wil) to Breda and then Leyden. Mother Anna would outlive her son Vincent by sixteen years, and sister Wil would spend her last decades in an asylum.

Vincent left the parsonage, his studio in Nuenen, and Holland itself forever, arriving in the Belgian city of Antwerp on November 24, 1885. City life, the port's wharfs, the museums, and drawing and painting classes in Antwerp's Academy of Fine Arts stimulated Vincent. Japanese prints he found in the city were soon hanging on the walls of his rented room. But the money Theo sent was not enough to pay for painting and eating, and so Vincent often chose to go hungry, suffered illness, and lost many of his teeth. By the end of February, 1886, he took a night train to Paris, without consulting Theo. He sent a scrap of paper to Theo's gallery asking that he come get him at the Louvre and allow him to share Theo's small apartment.

From the end of February of 1886 until his leaving for Arles in Provence on February 19, 1888, the two brothers lived together. Vincent arranged displays of Japanese prints in Paris restaurants, painted in increasingly bright colors inside and outside the city with such artists as Camille Pissarro and Emile Bernard, and introduced Theo to many of the new painters, inspiring him to champion their cause in Goupil's Montmartre Gallery. Though Vincent's stubborn arguments sometimes weighed very heavily on the exhausted Theo, a letter from Theo to sister Wil soon after Vincent left for Arles reveals how close the brothers had become over those two years. The previously unpublished letter appears in Jan Hulsker's valuable study of the brothers, *Vincent and Theo Van Gogh: A Dual Biography*. We will allow an excerpt from that letter to sum up Theo's view of their years together in Paris:

When he came here two years ago I had not expected that we would become so much attached to each other, for now that I am alone in the apartment there is a decided emptiness about me. If I can find someone I will take him in, but it is not easy to replace someone like Vincent. It is unbelievable how much he knows and what a sane view he has of the world. If he still has some years to live I am certain that he will make a name for himself. Through

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him I got to know many painters who regarded him very highly. He is one of the avant-garde for new ideas, that is to say, there is nothing new under the sun so it would be better to say: for the regeneration of the old ideas which through routine have been diluted and worn out. In addition he has such a big heart that he always tries to do something for others. It's a pity for those who cannot understand him or refuse to do so.²

Hulkser's study of the brothers also provides us a picture of Vincent's gesture of gratitude toward Theo for the work they had shared and the prints they had collected during their two years together in Paris. Reflecting on his own coming loneliness, Vincent likely wished to soften the loneliness Theo might feel in his absence. Hulkser quotes a remembrance of the artist Emile Bernard:

One evening Vincent said to me: "I am leaving tomorrow, let us arrange the studio together in such a way that my brother will think me still here." He nailed Japanese prints against the wall and put canvases on the easels, leaving others in a heap on the floor.³

Perhaps the fastidious Theo smiled at the rather chaotic scene Vincent left behind, reminded of their differences in temperament as well as of Vincent's "big heart."

2. Hulkser, *Vincent and Theo Van Gogh*, 267–68.

3. *Ibid.*, 260–61.