

**WALL TEXTS**

# **MAKING VAN GOGH A GERMAN LOVE STORY**

**23 OCTOBER 2019 TO 16 FEBRUARY 2020**

**Städel Museum, Garden Halls**

## **INTRODUCTION**

With the exhibition “*MAKING VAN GOGH: A German Love Story*”, the Städel Museum is devoting itself to one of the most well-known artists of all times and his special relationship to Germany. Particularly in this country, Vincent van Gogh’s works have been greatly appreciated since his death. Thanks to the dedication of gallerists, collectors, critics and museum directors, the Dutch artist came to be known here as one of the early twentieth century’s most important pioneers of modern painting. Numerous private collectors and museums purchased his works. By 1914, there were some 150 works by Van Gogh in German collections.

The show is an endeavour to get to the bottom of this phenomenon. How did Van Gogh manage to attain such tremendous popularity before World War I in Germany, of all places? Who promoted his art? How did German artists react to him soon after the turn of the century?

The exhibition takes a closer look at these matters in three main sections that shed light on the emergence of the legend surrounding Vincent van Gogh as a person, his influence on the German art world, and finally the exceptional painting style that held such a strong fascination for many of his followers.

## **IMPACT**

The growing presence of Van Gogh’s works in exhibitions and collections in Germany also had an impact on the artists here. Many of them reacted enthusiastically to their encounters with his paintings and drawings. They took inspiration from his motifs, his strongly contrasting colours and his dynamic painting and drawing style. For the following artist generation, Van Gogh’s personal and anti-academic mode of depicting nature represented both a liberation and a confirmation.

At the same time, German artists ‘processed’ Van Gogh in widely different manners. For some, the preoccupation with the Dutch artist was a steppingstone on their way to their own style; others were unable to emancipate themselves from his shadow.

The contemporary press took a critical view of the strong influence exerted by Van Gogh’s art. In 1910, for example, the publicist Ferdinand Avenarius of Dresden wrote the commentary “On Van Gogheling”, in which he observed: “Van Gogh is dead, but

the Van Gogh people are alive. And how alive they are! [...] It's Van Gogheling everywhere.”

## **PAINTING STYLE**

Within ten years, Van Gogh produced an oeuvre of nearly 900 paintings executed in widely differing styles. His early works were influenced by realism and exhibit primarily earthy hues. After moving to Paris in 1886, he came in contact with a wide range of avant-garde currents and his palette brightened perceptibly. These influences were quite variegated, in part even contradictory. They ranged from the art of the impressionists and pointillists to Japanese colour woodblock prints, from the pastose painting style of the artist Adolphe Monticelli of Marseille to the rigorous compartmentalisation of surfaces in the works of Paul Gauguin.

For Van Gogh, the fundamental question was whether his paintings should be planar and form-bound or lively in structure and in general dynamic. He sought his path between the two, sometimes experimenting with different styles simultaneously. He was moreover an avid reader of the scientific colour theories of his time, which inspired him to use complementary hues: in his paintings, Van Gogh juxtaposed the primary colours red, yellow and blue with the secondaries, green, purple and orange. This brought about strong contrasts that were to heighten the effect of the colours and appeal to the viewer's emotions. The reactions of German artists to Van Gogh's art reflect the heterogeneity of his oeuvre.

## **CHAPTER 1: LEGEND**

### **VAN GOGH EXHIBITIONS IN GERMANY BEFORE 1914**

Van Gogh was not very successful during his lifetime and had little opportunity to show his works in public. That changed after his death in 1890, when exhibitions of his work were organized, initially in France and Holland. In Germany, the first Van Gogh paintings went on display in Berlin in 1901. From then on, the number of monographic presentations in this country rose. The gallerist Paul Cassirer of Berlin was a driving force in this development: in collaboration with Johanna van Gogh-Bonger – the artist's sister-in-law and administratrix of his estate – he staged numerous shows. The exhibitions frequently toured Germany; in addition to Berlin they also guested in Hamburg, Dresden, Munich, Frankfurt and elsewhere. By World War I, nearly 120 presentations all over the country had featured works by Van Gogh, attracting the keen interest of the media and artists' circles and contributing immensely to the Dutch painter's wide renown. These activities culminated in the 1912 Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne, a major survey of modern art. The show devoted its entire first five (of altogether twenty-five) rooms to Van Gogh, thus consolidating the image we still have of him today – as a pioneer of modern painting.

### **THEO VAN GOGH (1857–1891)**

Van Gogh could never have produced his oeuvre without the lifelong support of his younger brother, Theo van Gogh. Theo was an art dealer and active on the Paris art market. He sent Vincent a monthly allowance and supplied him with painting materials – and received the majority of his brother's works in return. Despite his excellent connections and good reputation as a businessman, however, he was unable to establish Vincent in the art world, or to broker more than a few chance sales. Theo died just six months after Vincent. Before his death, he nonetheless managed to organise a memorial exhibition for his brother in his flat. This presentation was a prelude to the numerous exhibition projects that would follow in the years thereafter.

### **JOHANNA VAN GOGH-BONGER (1862–1925)**

After Theo's death, his widow Johanna took charge of Vincent's artistic estate. From then on, the young woman – she was a mere twenty-eight years old at the time – devoted her life to promoting and marketing her brother-in-law's works. A trained English teacher, she corresponded with art dealers and gallerists all over Europe. She made works available for exhibitions and influenced their pricing. She also began publishing the extensive correspondence between Theo and Vincent. In Germany her efforts fell on especially fertile soil. Numerous gallerists took an interest in Van Gogh's oeuvre – in addition to Paul Cassirer in Berlin they included Josef Brakl and Heinrich Thannhauser in Munich, Marie Held in Frankfurt and, in Dresden, Hermann Holst of the Kunstsalon Emil Richter and Ludwig Gutbier of the Galerie Ernst Arnold.

### **PAUL CASSIRER (1871–1926)**

### **BRUNO CASSIRER (1872–1941)**

In Germany, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger worked particularly closely with the cousins Paul and Bruno Cassirer. Paul Cassirer's Berlin gallery became one of the linchpins of the efforts to market Van Gogh in Germany. The art dealer had first presented paintings by the Dutchman in his showrooms in 1901. In the years that followed, he sought to make the artist known to a wider public. He managed the sale of numerous Van Gogh works and, by World War I, had organised some fifteen further exhibitions. In 1906, the Bruno Cassirer publishing house put out excerpts from Van Gogh's letters to his brother and his artist friend Émile Bernard. This correspondence also conveyed an impression of the Dutchman's personality. The letters virtually came to be regarded as instructions for how a modern artist should live and work. They moreover contributed substantially to the formation of the legend around Van Gogh as a person. In this context, his tragic biography played an increasingly important role.

## **MUSEUM ACQUISITIONS IN GERMANY**

The Van Gogh boom that now set in also had an impact on Germany's museums. Whereas works by the artist had initially sold above all to private persons, public collections soon began to acquire his paintings and drawings as well. The Folkwang Museum in Hagen (later Essen) – founded and privately financed by Karl Ernst Osthaus – led the way in 1902; museums in Bremen, Dresden, Frankfurt, Cologne, Magdeburg, Mannheim, Munich and Stettin followed. The prices for works by Van Gogh rose steeply, a circumstance that triggered resistance in conservative quarters. In a debate conducted with increasingly patriotic arguments, German artists denounced the supposed prevalence of foreign art in German museums. In 1911, the Worpswede landscape painter Carl Vinnen published a protest pamphlet decrying what he considered the overpriced acquisition of a Van Gogh painting for the Kunsthalle Bremen. Before the year was out, numerous artists, museum directors and critics responded with a counterpublication in which they called for the international orientation of German collections. Van Gogh thus came to represent the battle fiercely fought in Germany over modern art.

## **GEORG SWARZENSKI (1876 –1957)**

The lawyer and art historian Georg Swarzenski was appointed director of the Städel in 1906. He opened the museum for modern art and acquired a number of French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works that are still among the showpieces of the collection today. Swarzenski purchased the first Van Gogh painting, *Farmhouse in Nuenen*, in 1908; the *Portrait of Dr Gachet* followed in 1911. His aim was to present old and new art side by side in meaningful and enlightening constellations. The artists' nationalities were to be of secondary importance vis-à-vis the quality of their works. This idea was not beyond dispute in the German Empire. Nor did the Nazis approve of Swarzenski's open-minded attitude – he was forced to resign from his post on account of his Jewish heritage. In 1938 he emigrated to the U.S., where he found employment as a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

## **VAN GOGH AT THE STÄDEL**

In the context of Van Gogh's early German success story, the Städel Museum and affiliated Städtische Galerie played an important part. In 1908, with help from the Städtischer Museums-Verein (society of friends), the Städel was one of the first museums to purchase a painting by Van Gogh: *Farmhouse in Nuenen*. Painted in 1885, it dated from the artist's early period and accordingly does not yet exhibit the characteristic palette and dynamic brushstroke for which the artist is famous. Three years later, then Städel director Georg Swarzenski acquired the *Portrait of Dr Gachet*,

a late masterwork by Van Gogh that quickly became one of the Frankfurt museum's most well-known attractions. The Nazis confiscated the likeness in 1937 and it was sold on the international art market. All that remains behind in the Städel is its empty frame. The work itself passed through several hands in Holland and the U.S. before selling at auction in New York in 1990 for the largest sum ever paid for a painting until that time. Since then it has been in private holdings and inaccessible to the public.

You'd like to learn more about what's behind the empty picture frame? The podcast series FINDING VAN GOGH sets out in search of the *Portrait of Dr Gachet* and retraces its eventful history – from its execution to the Nazi era and from there to New York, London, Switzerland and the machinery of the international art market. FINDING VAN GOGH. In search of the legendary *Portrait of Dr Gachet* – available on all major podcast platforms, and at [www.findingvangogh.com](http://www.findingvangogh.com)

## **VAN GOGH COLLECTORS**

Vincent van Gogh's early popularity in Germany is mirrored in the substantial number of private collectors who were already purchasing his works around the turn of the century. Among the key figures in this context were Thea and Carl Sternheim, the sugar manufacturer Adolf Rothermundt, the banker Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, the art patron and diplomat Harry Graf Kessler and the artist couple Maria Slavona and Willy Gretor. Many dealers, such as Alfred Flechtheim and Paul Cassirer, likewise bought works by Van Gogh. In their cases, the line between private property and gallery holdings was often fluid. A large proportion of the Van Gogh collectors in Germany were members of the educated Jewish middle class – open minded, cosmopolitan individuals who helped modern art to its breakthrough in this country. The inflation of the 1920s, the Great Depression and Nazi terror brought about a drastic reduction in the Van Gogh holdings in Germany. Many collectors were dispossessed of their works or forced to sell them. Today no more than a fraction of the original number remains in German private collections.

## **FROM ARTIST TO LITERARY HERO**

More myths have presumably grown around Vincent van Gogh than around any other artist. To this day, the type he supposedly embodied – of the misunderstood artist-genius on the brink of lunacy – has continued to serve as a point of departure for films, books and exhibitions. This distorted image has little to do with reality; nevertheless, it has existed since as far back as around 1900, having taken shape to a decisive degree in Germany. Particularly the art dealer and critic Julius Meier-Graefe contributed to this development with his popular writings, which he based on texts published in France during the artist's lifetime and shortly after his death. Meier-

Graefe had first mentioned Van Gogh in an article in 1898. In 1904 he devoted an entire chapter of his *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst* (History of the Development of Modern Art) to the artist. Just a few years later, he wrote a biographical novel called *Vincent*, to which – after several editions – he added the subtitle *Novel of a God-Seeker*. In a mixture of fact and fiction, the author stylised Van Gogh as a failed genius, an art apostle who, in the footsteps of Christ, had sacrificed himself entirely for his art. Meier-Graefe profited twofold from the legend that grew up around the artist and the accompanying increase in the value of the latter's works. On the one hand, his books were great commercial successes; on the other hand, he now came into play as an appraiser of Van Gogh's works.

## FORGERIES

The tremendous rise in the prices paid for Van Gogh's works brought forgers to the scene. One of them was the young dancer Otto Wacker, who opened a gallery in Berlin in 1925 and included paintings by the artist in his sales programme. In addition to a number of originals, he put forgeries from the studio of his brother Leonhard Wacker on display in his showrooms. He also procured fake Van Goghs from that source for some of his gallerist friends. Eventually the scam was discovered, leading in 1932 to a spectacular lawsuit that also made a big splash in the media. Historical photographs show Otto Wacker in front of forgeries the authorities had seized as evidence. Not every forgery was intended as such, as is illustrated by a copy of a famous Van Gogh self-portrait (fig.). The young French painter Judith Gérard executed it in 1897. Shortly thereafter, it found its way onto the art market without her knowledge and was sold as a genuine Van Gogh. Her signature had been painted over with a floral decoration. It would be decades before Gérard was able to convince the world that she was the work's true author.

## CHAPTER 2: INFLUENCE

### THE SIMPLE LIFE

Van Gogh devoted a substantial proportion of his art to rural life. He had a special penchant for depicting peasants and fieldworkers as a way of emphasising his affinity to the simple folk. He particularly admired the French painter Jean-François Millet, whose motifs he collected in the form of black-and-white reproductions (fig.) and copied again and again. In the process, he translated his idol's compositions into his own pictorial language of dynamic brushstrokes and coloured them according to his personal sensibilities. He also searched his surroundings for themes of a down-to-earth character similar to that of Millet's rural scenes. A case in point is his famous *portrait of Augustine Roulin*. A painting he himself entitled "*La Berceuse (Rocking a Cradle)*", to him it symbolised maternal care.

Paintings like these made a lasting impression on German artists who, in view of the advancing industrialisation and wretched conditions in the cities, longed for a return to a primal way of life. They took orientation from Van Gogh – but even when they adopted certain motifs from his compositions, they worked to develop their own individual styles.

## **SELF-PORTRAITS**

### **In the Mirror of Van Gogh**

Van Gogh's numerous self-portraits prompted many German artists to depict themselves in similar manner. Their different modes of painting testify to the fact that it was not so much the Dutch artist's style as his personality that sparked their interest. Inspired by Julius Meier-Graefe's biography and excerpts from the artist's correspondence with his brother Theo, a conception of the artist had taken firm hold in the public consciousness. He was regarded as the epitome of the suffering artist who, misunderstood by society, had sacrificed himself for his painting. Subsequent generations identified with the supposedly tragic hero, who was repeatedly even compared with Christ. It was an image that held particularly strong appeal for male artists.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

### **Van Gogh in Publications and German Art Criticism**

From 1891 onwards, Van Gogh's works were printed in publications and disseminated in art portfolios with increasing frequency. The French photographer and art dealer Eugène Druet played a key role in these activities, but German publishing companies such as Piper, Hanfstaengl, and Seemann also came out with reproductions of Van Gogh works in large editions. Initially it was, for the most part, the artist's drawings that circulated in this manner; owing to their graphic structure they were particularly well suited for reproduction in black and white. As time went on, publishers also ventured colour reproductions. Today the latter provide important insights into the original colouration of Van Gogh's paintings, whose pigments have faded considerably over the years. In the early twentieth century, reproductions of works by Van Gogh were in high demand in German artist circles. Such images were often the first available source of visual material on the Dutch artist, and they inspired many of his admirers to carry out experiments of their own.

## **DRAWINGS**

All his life, Van Gogh was an impassioned draughtsman. More than 1,100 works on paper have come down to us, the majority of them executed in black chalk, pencil or

ink. In the early phase of his career, he trained himself primarily by drawing. His motifs included landscapes and country folk, but also townscapes, for example of The Hague. Over the years, his drawings came to be more closely linked to his paintings. He made them either in preparation for painted compositions or as repetitions of already finished ones. In his late phase he particularly favoured the reed pen, which enabled him to apply lines of various thicknesses as well as dots and circles to the paper. These widely varied 'figures of the pen' mirror the brushwork in his paintings. Reproductions of drawings by Van Gogh in books and magazines inspired numerous artists in Germany to study the dynamic of his strokes. The works assembled in the next room show how differently they responded to his drawings.

#### **VAN GOGHIANA:**

##### **Van Gogh's Reception by the Brücke**

In 1905, the members of the artists' group Brücke saw works by Vincent van Gogh in an exhibition in Dresden. For the young architecture students Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, the experience was a revelation and a liberation in one. Van Gogh's example animated them to apply pure colour to the canvas directly from the tube. From now on, their paintings were distinguished by strong contrasts, heaped-on layers of paint and simplified forms. They adopted these practices as a means of underscoring their direct and unambiguous access to their motifs. These artists had rejected the standards of painting as taught at the art academies. They were so fascinated with Van Gogh that their fellow Brücke member Emil Nolde teasingly suggested they call themselves "van Goghiana" instead. Yet there were also members of the group who took a closer look at the 'regular' aspects of Van Gogh's art. Max Pechstein and Cuno Amiet, for example, reacted to the well-ordered underlying structure and methodical brushstrokes in his works. Amiet even copied paintings by the Dutchman as a means of acquainting himself all the better with his approach.

#### **CHAPTER 3: PAINTING STYLE**

##### **SURFACE**

Van Gogh explored the painting of Paul Gauguin and Japanese colour woodblock prints – which were quite popular in Paris at the time – in great depth. For a while, this led him to paint in a planar mode that strictly separates the individual colour zones from one another. Known as Cloisonnism (from the French cloison, for partition wall), it was a technique that demanded a high degree of discipline from him – an artist who liked to work rapidly. He nonetheless carried out a whole series of works characterised by rigorous pictorial organisation and distinct contour lines. In Germany, this style had a formative influence primarily on those painters aspiring



towards a calmer structure coupled with a stronger emphasis on colour. Apart from Gabriele Münter, August Macke, Alexander Kanoldt and Felix Nussbaum, they also included Elsa Tischner-von Durant, an artist virtually forgotten today. In their cases, Van Gogh's example blended with such influences as the painting of Cézanne and the Fauvists as well as the folk tradition of reverse glass painting.

### **RHYTHM AND STRUCTURE**

Van Gogh's planar paintings contrast with those distinguished by lively brushwork and a pastose application of the paint. Owing to the short, unconnected strokes that cover the surfaces of the latter, the motifs seem almost to pulsate with a rhythm that follows laws of its own. The subject matter recedes increasingly into the background in favour of an emphasis on the painting process. This technique became Van Gogh's trademark and it was the attribute of his painting that would come to exert the greatest influence on the following generation of artists in Germany. There were several who imitated his regular, structured mode of painting; others emancipated themselves from his example to cultivate an everfreer application of the paint. The works on view here mirror these various approaches. The spectrum ranges from Max Beckmann and members of the Blauer Reiter to Theo von Brockhusen, who followed Van Gogh's example so closely that it earned him the nickname "von Goghhusen".

### **PAINTER OF THE SUN**

The compositions by Van Gogh depicting the sun as a blazing fixed star on the horizon captivated the German Expressionists. These images were exceptional in that, previously, painters had usually represented sunlight only indirectly. After moving to the south of France, Van Gogh took to placing the celestial body at the centre of his compositions as a brilliant yellow disc. He regarded it as a symbol of life and hope that gave him assurance in difficult times. Many exponents of German Expressionism, on the other hand, interpreted his sun motif as an apocalyptic sign of coming disaster – a perception well suited to the restless mood before World War I, but also to the fragile political situation of the 1920s. In both phases we find clear reactions to Van Gogh's "sun paintings", for example in the work of Otto Dix and Walter Ophey as well as that of Josef Scharl, Carl Lohse and Max Pechstein.