

# VAN GOGH'S PROGRESS

*Utopia, Modernity, and Late-Nineteenth-Century Art*

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# 4

SELF-PORTRAITS:

THE CONSTRUCTION OF

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

They say—and I am very willing to believe it—that it is difficult to know yourself,” Van Gogh wrote after painting his thirty-fifth self-portrait, “but it isn’t easy to paint yourself either” (L604). Whatever he thought about the problems of self-knowledge and self-representation, Van Gogh did not elaborate or explain. What, then, should we make of his thirty-eight self-portraits, twenty-eight of them produced in only two years?<sup>1</sup> Modern viewers, guided by the drama of biography and by the modern romance of “the self,” have been eager to find self-expression and alienation in his repetitions of the theme.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars, however, prefer less sentimental readings, explaining that the Paris self-portraits, at least, filled practical needs: Van Gogh’s plan to develop a portrait practice, his lack of models, his stylistic experiments.<sup>3</sup>

Practical explanations are credible enough, but they also close off further analysis of these lively and varied pictures. It is true that early on Van Gogh considered portraiture a money-making scheme. Self-images by an unknown artist would hardly be expected to sell, but some of these pictures would have been prototypes or demonstration pieces of what he could do. That Van Gogh lacked willing models seems unlikely, however, in the lively milieu of Paris. Theo reported that Vincent had given away several portraits,<sup>4</sup> and surely his brother and friends—and they were many—could have served for studies of face and character. No such studies exist, however, suggesting several things—that Van Gogh could not depict his intimates, but also that he had decided he was his own most effective model. The question really is whether any model, let alone oneself, can effectively be effaced as a person and become a neutral ground for stylistic experiment. Does any single subject, whether Cézanne’s apples or Jackson Pollock’s abstract webs, become with repetition simply an affectless vehicle of form?

For any painter surely, but especially for an artist eager to install himself in the center of modern culture, the clustered production of twenty-eight self-images—

twenty-two in 1887 alone—amounts to a special preoccupation, if not a project. They first appear in Paris, where Van Gogh felt compelled to find a context and make his professional mark; it is hardly accidental that the note announcing his arrival in February 1886 tells Theo to find him in the Salon Carré of the Louvre (L459). It is also true that the pictures are filled with experiment. The Paris self-portraits alone index current stylistic debates. From dramatic Rembrandtesque chiaroscuro, to the light color and loose brushstrokes of Impressionism, to the complementary color schemes and patterned brushwork of Neo-Impressionism, the paintings chart a metamorphosis from Dutch realist to Impressionist and beyond.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it seems to me that the pictures explore more than style. Their formats range from conventional portrait busts on size 6 canvases to tiny, carefully finished pictures, almost miniatures, that fit in the palm of the hand.<sup>6</sup> The majority are bust length and close-up, with a firm focus on the face. But costumes vary, and facial expressions are either impassive or fierce. There is something elusive or variable about person and identity here. To consider these images merely expedient painting surfaces and grounds for experiment hardly confronts their variety or the issues of identity at the heart of any self-portraiture.

When and why does an artist take up self-portraiture? It is, after all, a particular sort of representation.<sup>7</sup> At once of the painter and by the painter, the self-portrait stands for its maker in a double sense; it encompasses the painter's identity and the practice of painting itself. Studying his or her face in the mirror, the artist reassembles and represents the reversed features in paint. But making a self-portrait also splits the painter from the "self." Much as we examine our own faces in photographs, the painter looks at his or her own features as the face of an other, someone else. The process objectifies, and in so doing, dislocates. The philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe describes this disconcerting effect:

Something entirely different than "myself" would be at stake there: the experience of pain teaches, permits at the very least to glimpse, that if there is a "self" (something like a subject), it properly has but to exceed itself or to pass beyond itself. In the effacement, the vertigo where one meets and loses one's footing with a vengeance.—Unrepresentable. . . . I don't know whom I see or whom I hear—whom I neither want to see nor hear—when I see myself photographed or when I hear my voice recorded. But I can't stand myself thus "objectified."<sup>8</sup>

For Lacoue-Labarthe, such image making is riven with unanticipated terrors and a dizzying sense of loss. We could justifiably label its preoccupation with frag-

mentary dimensions of self and the unified subject a twentieth-century or even postmodern concern. But even for historical analysis, this text opens the issue of the "self" as a fictive unity, and self-portraiture as a complex and risky business. We need not look in Van Gogh's self-portraits for the instability and loss that bedevil Lacoue-Labarthe, but we can use Lacoue-Labarthe's account of his experience to consider the possibilities of "self" and self-representation in Van Gogh's time. Van Gogh may have used the self-portrait to explore a range of painting procedures, but that same exploration demanded some configuration of person or identity. In what sense do the stylistic experiments performed on himself coincide with professional experiments? What positions of painter/person do they announce? How do the pictures elucidate such shifts? In what sense are these utopian configurations, that is, how do they play into and with ideals of the profession and self? Is this "self-portrait self" the secret "inner self" so dear to psychological discourse and Van Gogh biographers, or is it another sort of masquerade?

For an unknown Dutch painter entering Paris, Rembrandt was a compelling model. The seventeenth-century artist was revered in the nineteenth century, and his portraits were considered revelations of character and soul (Fig. 78).<sup>9</sup> One of Van Gogh's earliest self-portraits, whether painted as self-assertion or as homage to his fellow countryman, seems, in its dark russet color and facial highlights, to paraphrase the seventeenth-century artist's style (Fig. 79).<sup>10</sup> In jacket and scarf, his hat tipped back, Van Gogh seems to have just arrived. But in addition to allusions of style, there is another dimension to Van Gogh's Rembrandt homage. Perry Chapman has argued that Rembrandt's many self-portraits may be seen as constructions of individual identity and a professional self;<sup>11</sup> he stages himself as burgher, gentleman, dandy, philosopher, prophet, and sage. As if licensed by Rembrandt's costumed appearances, Van Gogh too represents himself in many hats and characters; both formally and conceptually, his self-portraits try on several guises. And his identities, like Rembrandt's, proliferate: bourgeois gentleman, peasant, worker-painter, wounded man, exotic monk. Van Gogh styled these pictures as naturalist, impressionist, pointillist, symbolist—above all, modern; it seems reasonable, then, to consider how he styled himself.

Public attention to self-portraits depends, one would think, on an artist's fame; such pictures are signs of success and immortality. This was the meaning of the well-known collection of self-portraits in Florence and the gallery of artist portraits in the Louvre, a pet project of Third Republic arts administrators that was opened by the president of the republic in 1888 as a nationalistic display. Philippe



Fig. 78. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait at Easel*. Paris, Louvre.

de Chennevières, director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, hailed it as “a family gallery—every house that takes pride in itself should have its own; this is respect for ancestors . . . artists in a nation are a superior family.”<sup>12</sup> Through purchases and exchange, Vincent and Theo van Gogh established their own “superior family” of modern painters. “You will be pleased to hear,” Van Gogh wrote from Arles,

that we have an addition to the collection of portraits of artists. A self-portrait by Laval, extremely good. . . .

I think it excellent that you are taking a Luce. Has he a self-portrait by any chance? Just in case there should be nothing extraordinarily interesting, portraits are always good. [L562]<sup>13</sup>

Outside his immediate circle other images of artists were available as models and inspiration for Van Gogh. The professional status of the artist was often contested in the course of the nineteenth century, and the painter’s image repeatedly



Fig. 79. Vincent Van Gogh, *Self-Portrait* (F208a), 1886. Collection Vincent van Gogh Foundation/Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 80. Gustave Courbet, *Self-Portrait as Wounded Man*, 1844–54. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

revised. The figure of romantic genius, embodied by painters like Théodore Géricault or pictured in Courbet's many brooding self-portraits (Fig. 80), was standardized by mid-century; Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1847–49) celebrated the type with poets and painters starving in garrets, living dangerously, and courting their muse. The obverse of this raffish bohemian, who was probably more fictional than real, was the competent schooled professional, who, Emile Zola noted with some irony, "paints pictures in his studio the way others sell pepper behind their counter."<sup>14</sup>

Artists in fiction resisted such bourgeois stolidity. "Artists' lives" had been a staple of literature since Vasari, but the nineteenth-century French novelists produced a specifically modern paradigm. The best known of these tales was Zola's *L'Œuvre* (1886), the story of the painter Claude Lantier, based generally on the



Impressionists' experience.<sup>15</sup> Zola's narrative winds through the shared pleasures of an artists' milieu, the struggle for love and family, the anxieties of Salon competitions, the difficulty of finding patrons and making sales. But just as important in the professional profile are the crises of creative expression: the story ends tragically, with the artist's suicide before his unfinished masterpiece.

Van Gogh was critical of the painters described in literature. "Perhaps his books in which no painter types appear are better than this one," he wrote from The Hague in 1882, after reading Murger's *Les Buveurs de l'eau* [Water-drinkers]; "authors always seem to be unlucky with their types of painter." Even the naturalist writers Van Gogh enjoyed had this problem. "Balzac among others (his painters are rather uninteresting), Zola, though his Claude Lantier is real—there certainly are Claude Lantiers, but after all, one would like to see Zola depict a different kind of painter than Lantier. . . ."<sup>16</sup> This response probably grew out of resistance to Lantier's urbane subjects; Van Gogh preferred painters of peasants and the poor. But if he had reservations about the fictional art world, Van Gogh embraced an important dictum of Zola's art criticism that had some bearing on his own self-representation: the famous statement of 1866 that a work of art was "a corner of creation seen through a temperament."<sup>17</sup> The "corner of creation" with its biblical rhetoric ("nature" in later versions of the statement) was the constant in this formulation. With the emphasis on "temperament" Zola called attention to the maker of the work, and to the signs of the individual creator the picture revealed: "Every great artist has come to give us a new and personal translation of nature. Reality is the fixed element here, and the various temperaments are the creative elements that give a different character to their œuvres."<sup>18</sup>

Van Gogh concurred: "Zola says a beautiful thing about art in general in *Mes Haines*," he wrote Theo from Nuenen in 1885:

"dans le tableau (l'œuvre d'art) je cherche, j'aime l'homme—l'artiste."

Look here, I think this is perfectly true; I ask you what kind of man, what kind of prophet, or philosopher, observer, what kind of human character is there behind certain paintings, the technique of which is praised? [L418]

It is surely no accident that this valorization of pictures as personal signs coincided with the marketing of the artist's name or œuvre. But unlike fetishized commodities that masked the marks of labor, this sort of amalgam made the artist's person not only inseparable from the picture but the most precious part of its

content. What Zola meant was that a picture encoded, not biographical or psychological data, but rather distinctive marks of particular character or “personality.” The marks varied with the individual painter. But as a supporter of Courbet, Manet, and Impressionism, Zola tended to locate temperament in the “rudesse” and “brusqueries” of direct painting, and he valued these features as signs of power and originality.<sup>19</sup>

Zola’s use of “temperament” as the mark of value did more than signal style; it also invoked notions of the artist’s character and character types with a long pedigree. Since antiquity, human character and behavior had been systematically defined according to a model of four temperaments—sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, and melancholic. These categories were elaborated in the eighteenth century through the pseudoscience of physiognomics, the interpretation of character by analysis of the structure and expression of the head and face. The system was codified by Johann Kaspar Lavater in *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (1775–78), a rather unwieldy encyclopedia that assigned meanings to specific features in all their variety. Genius, for example, was deemed evident in the forehead, the eyes (especially the upper eyelid), and the root of the nose. As for artists, Lavater wrote: “The eye and the forehead seemed to me the most decisive physiognomic traits.”<sup>20</sup> The system was elastic, to say the least, and to the twentieth-century reader, it seems to tailor the reading of faces to preexisting moral and racial norms. But as a comprehensive vocabulary, physiognomics was pervasive in the nineteenth century. Entire populations, it was believed, could be manageably described this way. Physiognomics shaped accounts of characters in novels, the indexing of criminal and social types, and the appearance of figures in portraits, caricature, and genre painting.<sup>21</sup> The illustrations for Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–43) bear the marks of physiognomic characterization, as do Daumier’s caricatures and portrait busts. In academic instruction, physiognomics joined the drawing of “*têtes d’expression*”—heads whose facial features signified different characters, states of mind, and emotions.

Both Vincent and Theo were at home with that language. Van Gogh read extracts of Ysabeau’s *Physiognomy and Phrenology* in 1880 (L138), and he used that vocabulary three years later to insist on his and Theo’s “brotherhood”: “Some time ago you wrote me about a certain difference in our respective physiognomies. . . . And your conclusion was that I was more of a thinker,” Vincent wrote. He thought the opposite: “Certain reddish-haired people with square foreheads are neither only thinkers nor only men of action, but usually combine both

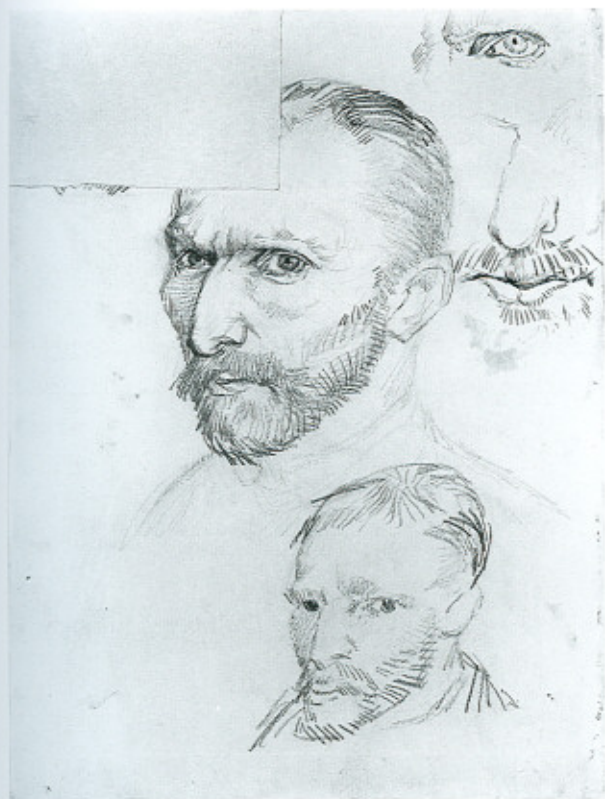


Fig. 81. Vincent van Gogh, *Two Self-Portraits; Fragments of a Third* (F1378r), pencil, ink, 1887. Collection Vincent van Gogh Foundation/Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

elements" (L338).<sup>22</sup> These are direct physiognomic interpretations, but even without such specific references, Van Gogh's habit of reading faces and listing features seems bound to that vocabulary.<sup>23</sup> In Paris in 1875 he wrote that his young colleague Harry Gladwell was "as thin as a stick, with two rows of strong teeth, full red lips, glittering eyes, a pair of large, generally red, projecting ears, close-cropped head, black hair, etc., etc." (L42). In Arles, more than ten years later, a Zouave infantryman was "a boy with a small face, a bull neck, and the eye of a tiger" (L501). And in 1888 he described Joseph Roulin to his sister: "A head somewhat like Socrates, hardly any nose at all, a high forehead, bald crown, little gray eyes, bright red chubby cheeks, a big salt-and-pepper beard, large ears" (W5).

Both the stylistic and the expressive features of Van Gogh's Paris self-portraits seem clearer in this physiognomic frame. Only two self-portrait drawings from the period exist, but one of them (Fig. 81) suggests precisely this sort of scrutiny



Fig. 82. John Russell, *Portrait of Vincent van Gogh*, 1886. Collection Vincent van Gogh Foundation/Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

and a recasting of physiognomic centers—forehead, brow, eyes, and so forth—into a modern pictorial language.<sup>24</sup> The face here appears three times: at the upper right, it is parsed into fragments emphasizing mustached mouth and eye; at the lower right, the head is sketched with a play of similar short lines; the largest face on the page combines approaches. Some features are contoured heavily—eyes, nose, mouth, beard; the open expanse of forehead is set off by the bristling beard. As Van Gogh had noted years before, the high forehead, knit brow, and penetrating eyes were physiognomic marks of activism, determination, and intelligence, and these features and his red beard appear in most of the self-portraits as a physiognomic template. With the facial syntax transposed through a language of brushstrokes and color, Van Gogh's *têtes d'expression* radiate vigorous “temperament” in both subject and style.



Fig. 83. Vincent van Gogh and Emile Bernard at Asnières, photograph, 1886. Collection Vincent van Gogh Foundation/Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

But perhaps, one might argue, Van Gogh simply looked this way—a man of fierce expression and intensity. Emile Bernard referred to “a sharp glance and a mouth incisively set as if to speak” in his description of Van Gogh.<sup>25</sup> His friend the Australian painter John Russell painted him looking sharply over his shoulder (Fig. 82), and Toulouse-Lautrec pictured him in profile, leaning over a café table, focused and intent. But intensity aside, accounts of his person and demeanor are striking in their contradictions,<sup>26</sup> and for a mythic personage like Van Gogh, the “reality” of his face and person is elusive indeed. It is a further irony—and perhaps the perfect joke of this elaborate self-construction—that the one adult photograph of the artist shows him from the rear, seated at a riverside table with Emile Bernard (Fig. 83). What is important for the painted portraits, however, is that intensity of expression was also a representational formula for an artist’s face,