



Fig. 84. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait* (F178v), 1886. The Hague, Haags Gemeentemuseum.

and a valued sign of temperament. Van Gogh, like Lavater, admired an artist's "look." "I thought it amazing," he wrote in 1889 of Charles Laval's *Self-Portrait* (see Fig. 94)—"the look of the eyes through the glasses, such a frank look" (L604). And in 1882 he wrote of Millet's self-image in a shepherd's cap: "The look out of half-closed eyes, the intense look of a painter—how beautiful it is—also that piercing gleam like in a cock's eye, if I may call it so" (L248).

Van Gogh's concentrated gaze or piercing expression recurs in his self-portraits. It appears in a relatively realistic picture (Fig. 84) of 1886, where black eyes punctuate a ruddy face and beard. Firm and resolute, chin jutting slightly, the head fills the space above the white slash of bourgeois shirt collar and dark lapels. In a portrait the following year (Fig. 85), red beard and hooded eyes command the center of a green-blue field. But by then the physiognomic force of brow,



Fig. 85. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait* (F545), oil on artist's board mounted on cradled panel, 41 x 32.5 cm., ca. 1886/87. Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1954.326. Photograph © 1994, The Art Institute of Chicago. All rights reserved.

eyes, and beard had shifted, radiating through brushmarks—confetti dots or a bristling striated weave. Eyes and brows become the center, brushmarks stream from this central “origin,” and the red-orange beard extends the head as blaze. The method is careful and deliberate. Hardly disrupting the coherence of the figure, the “rudesse,” or “brusquerie” in the brushstrokes invests the portrait with energy and marks both the painting and its subject as modern.²⁷

The face of “temperament,” however, is the only consistent feature in the Paris pictures; the person—or persona—varies. Van Gogh appears most often (seventeen times) as a middle-class city dweller, neatly barbered and nattily dressed in braid-trimmed jacket and cravat, often sporting a gray felt fedora (Fig. 86) or straw hat.²⁸ The jacket changes color from one picture to another—blue and navy sometimes, or green and rust, and in one tiny picture, a delicate harmony of mauve

gray and blue. But it is always a carefully painted part of the composition and suggests a rather dandified Van Gogh. If he seems less detached or casual than Baudelaire's elegant flaneur or "painter of modern life," the Van Gogh we see here is, nevertheless, a bourgeois gentleman dressed for the town, comparable perhaps to Delacroix, another favorite model, in his *Self-Portrait*, which Van Gogh could see in the Louvre. One picture with decoratively dotted reds and greens (see Fig. 85) may be aligned with a portrait of Alexander Reid (Fig. 87), the Scottish art dealer who worked with Theo at Boussod et Valadon.²⁹ Indeed, Van Gogh makes no effort in such pictures to distinguish himself from the proper world of bourgeois society and art commerce. The self-portraits dress him for that social space.

There is another Van Gogh mingled with this bourgeois image, however. In nine paintings he appears in a collarless shirt or smock, occasionally with a broad-brimmed straw hat (Fig. 88). The outfit is suggestive; it could be artisanal, worker, or peasant gear. The pictures are not clear on this, though color schemes of radiant yellows and blue suggest an outdoor or rural connection. The costume suited a painter like Van Gogh who pursued subjects in the *banlieue* and beyond, and it repeated outfits he had adopted in Nuenen while painting the peasant population there. It was important enough for Van Gogh to give one version of this country look (F526) to Emile Bernard, who redrew it for his 1891 memoir of Van Gogh in the *Mercure de France* and so reinforced the idea of ruralist affinities. Despite the costume changes from bourgeois to peasant styles, the face maintains its fierce expression; the same man negotiates city-country or bourgeois-worker identities, as if these were a matter of altering the palette and changing clothes. Intermingled in Van Gogh's production, their differences imply a deliberate posture, as well as shifting points of artistic self-reference that mute divisions of class. We have seen that sort of class assumption before in the Hague images, where Van Gogh claimed allegiance to working-class life but was perplexed by Sien Hoornik's refusal to slip as readily as he across class lines. The move here is less freighted with emotion, to be sure, but it too expresses a utopian desire for a fluid cultural geography that included both the city and the country, as work spaces, nearby. The self-portraits claim that sort of access, with the painter at ease in fedora or straw hat.

Surprisingly perhaps, only two of the twenty-eight Paris self-portraits show Van Gogh painting, but they mark the beginning and end of his two years there. The first is a dark picture (F181) painted shortly after his arrival. The last and the largest, *Self-Portrait as a Painter*, painted just before he left the capital in 1888

and signed prominently on the back of the pictured canvas, is a manifesto-like declaration of the artist at work (Fig. 89 and Plate 8).³⁰ The format of the artist at his easel was conventional, and the design in this case comes close to both Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait at Easel* in the Louvre (see Fig. 78) and Cézanne's *Self-Portrait with Palette* of 1885–86 (Fig. 90), where the artist stands stolid, palette in hand.³¹ Van Gogh may have seen Cézanne's picture at Père Tanguy's art supply shop, and the similarity suggests a pictorial conversation with the painter from Provence on the eve of Van Gogh's departure for the south.

Beyond the conventional format, as a statement of profession, both class identity and artistic status are central here. Van Gogh represents himself as a worker-artisan in a collarless blue jacket, standing at his easel holding the tools of his trade. His outfit is ambiguous, however. It has been called a painter's smock, but in fact, that garment was generally of a different cut—wider, more flowing—and it fastened with laced ties at a collarless neck. The shoulder seam and button here suggest a sturdier garment, perhaps a laborer's jacket; Van Gogh would describe it later as a peasant blouse. But the ambiguity is itself telling, as a suggestively plural sign of identities—artist, artisan, worker, peasant—all of them meaningful to Van Gogh.

No matter what they actually wore while working, nineteenth-century painters rarely pictured themselves in artisanal uniform. Their self-portraits were often more formal, and many studio images show painters as bourgeois men in shirt sleeves or jackets, like the group photographed in Fernand Cormon's studio (Fig. 91); Cézanne's self-image has the artist in jacket and vest. There is some truth to the proletarian allusion in the self-portrait of Van Gogh; both Lucien Pissarro and Paul Signac remembered meeting him in the street dressed in the paint-smearred clothes of a zinc worker.³² Still, this is not a realist portrait. There is no setting beyond the easel, and the blue coat worn for the picture is hardly paint stained. The costume is a deliberate choice, and it sparkles with flecks of gold, as if to celebrate a professional uniform.

Though art academies for centuries had asserted their members' status as educated professionals, the notion of the worker-artist had some currency in nineteenth-century French cultural discourse. In the 1830s and 1840s, as Maria Ivens has shown, with working people claiming a greater political voice, the status of French artists was debated through competing academic and worker identities.³³ In large measure, academic forms prevailed and dominated at least the upper levels of the profession. The worker-artist certainly did not satisfy the credentialing pro-



Fig. 89. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait as a Painter* (F522), 1888. Collection Vincent van Gogh Foundation/
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 90. Paul Cézanne, *Self-Portrait with Palette*, 1885–86. Zurich, Buhle collection.



Fig. 91. Corron's studio, photograph. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

cedures of the Ecole, Salon, and Academy.³⁴ The Impressionists, mainly middle-class men, may have moved apart from this system, but they too came through recognized ateliers; even Zola's Claude Lantier, the son of a laundress, wanted Salon success. The profession was less rigidly ordered in the mid-1880s as the state abandoned the single Salon and promoted an "official" art less bound to academic practices, but there were still rules to the game, and these hardly honored Van Gogh's self-instruction from manuals and intermittent study at academies. In 1887, writing to the British painter Horace Livens, Van Gogh described his disappointment at the available options and instruction in Cormon's studio: "I did not find that so useful as I had expected it to be. It may be my fault however, anyhow I left there too as I left Antwerp and since [then] I worked alone, and fancy that since I feel my own self more" (L459a). Van Gogh was, in some respects, an autodidact. If he remained insecure about his skills—like drawing the figure—he was also proud of his status as independent outsider.³⁵ In this self-portrait the blue costume, whether of worker or peasant, proclaims an artist untrained by the formulas of Ecole and Academy and locates professional identity outside that mainstream.

The painter was unknown, however, and given the picture's size and importance, one can only wonder—who was its intended audience or public? Van Gogh left the painting in Paris. Its date—Van Gogh painted it almost immediately after the exhibition of works by the "Impressionnistes du Petit Boulevard" that he had organized in November 1887 at the restaurant Grand Bouillon-Du Chalet—may have some bearing on its meaning and its audience. The exhibition had a dual public: working people of the *quartier* who frequented the restaurant and artists who came to see the work of a younger generation and a new style. As a manifesto, the self-portrait appeals to a similar audience, with the artist as the worker-painter of Montmartre or the *petits boulevards* to be seen by the artists and critics who visited Theo's apartment. For that group of peers and art world personnel, it would assert a new artistic position and professional identity.

That the picture carried both ambitions and anxieties is borne out in a long letter Van Gogh wrote from Arles to his sister Wil. In eight closely written pages, Van Gogh presented his ideas about modern art to a reader at some distance from that culture of modernity. He also tried to produce a "self-portrait in writing"—remarkable enough for an artist who often sketched his important pictures in his letters. This time, he based his account, or "conception," on his memory of the Paris work.

Here I give a conception of mine, which is the result of a portrait I painted in the mirror, and which is now in Theo's possession.

A pinkish gray face with green eyes, ash-colored hair, wrinkles on the forehead and around the mouth, stiff, wooden, a very red beard, considerably neglected and mournful, but the lips are full, a blue peasant's blouse of coarse linen, and a palette with citron yellow, vermilion, malachite green, cobalt blue, in short all the colors on the palette except the orange beard, but only whole colors. The figure against a grayish-white wall. [W4]

The listed features, colors, and feelings are much like a physiognomic account, with the usual telling emphases. The “neglected and mournful” beard was a habitual mark of identity, and its color, “very red” and “orange,” is also that of the signature and date.³⁶ The canvas is ignored. But two other signs of the profession are cited in the list of important details. In this account, the garment is a peasant's blouse, making Van Gogh a rural painter once again, while the palette with “all the colors” and “only whole colors” reiterates the modernity of his approach.

Van Gogh's letter also acknowledges what any glance at the picture reveals: a strange mood or awkward tension pervades this professional manifesto. The figure seems impassive, even robotic, and this time, without the face of “temperament.” The letter admits some of this: it calls the figure “stiff, wooden,” the beard “neglected and mournful.” But there are more disturbing associations: “You will say that this resembles somewhat, for instance, the face of—Death—in Van Eeden's book or some such thing—all right, but it is a figure like this—and it isn't an easy job to paint oneself—at any rate if it is to be *different* from a photograph.” Van Gogh likens his self-image as painter to the face of Death. The English translation personifies the term; the Dutch text—“het gezicht van—de dood—in de boek van v. Eden [*sic*] of zoo iets”—is less rhetorical. But the letter hesitates before the word, as if casting about for the proper symbol or term, and the hesitation frames and loads the choice (Fig. 92). Having made the comparison via Frederik van Eeden's

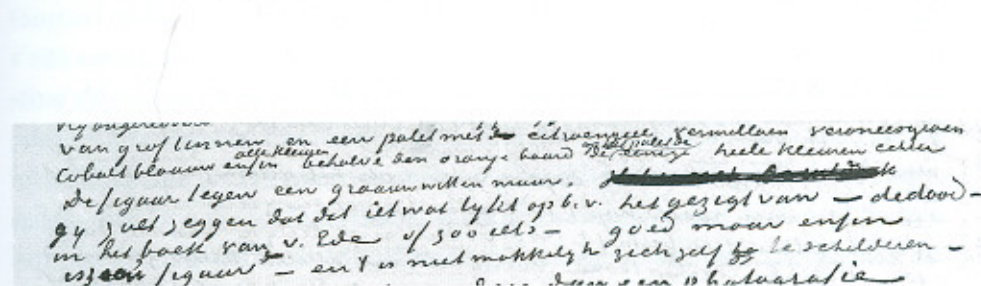


Fig. 92. Detail of letter W4, 1888. Collection Vincent van Gogh Foundation/Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

symbolist novel *Kleine Johannes* (Little John),³⁷ he brushes it aside—a little too quickly, one would think—and, turning to the opposite extreme, the superficiality of photographs, explains that meaningful self-representation is difficult.³⁸

Continuing the letter, Van Gogh immediately contrasted this conception of self with another:

However, at the present moment I look different, insofar as I am wearing neither hair nor beard, the same having been shaved off clean. Furthermore, my complexion has changed from green-grayish-pink to grayish-orange, and I am wearing a white suit instead of a blue one, and I am always very dusty, always more bristlingly loaded, like a porcupine, with sticks, painter's easel, canvases and further merchandise. Only the green eyes have remained the same, but of course another color in the portrait is the yellow straw hat, like a *hannekenmaaier's*, and a very black little pipe.

The text here emphasizes strangeness, and it does so vividly. One can hardly picture Van Gogh beardless and bald (no picture presents him this way), much less imagine such shifts in complexion—"green-grayish-pink" to "grayish-orange." Somewhere in the paragraph, the text becomes an account of another self-portrait.³⁹ This time, his odd professional appearance—he bristles "like a porcupine"—is combined insistently with the identity of seasonal laborer, or *hannekenmaaier*. All of this, in one letter, suggests some shifting ground for the professional self, a polemicized frame for the artist that was rural but also risky and strange.

But let me return to the Paris picture, and "het gezicht van—de dood." Why indeed should this figure be so lifeless and inert? Van Gogh was by then an accomplished portraitist; he had already depicted his features twenty-seven times. To paint himself large as a modern painter—a worker-peasant, unschooled, a practitioner of new color techniques—all this seemed to involve some existential extreme, some playing with Death. It is easy enough to understand the specter of Death in his face as a fear of risk and failure. The suggestion is not unlike Lacoue-Labarthe's sensation of "effacement, the vertigo where one meets and loses one's footing with a vengeance." But if we consider the picture and Van Gogh's written account as constructs, as fantasized projections of self, we may also find the opposite meaning. Much like the self-punishment dreams of successful men described by Freud, the sign of death in such an inert and frozen professional figure may project a vanquishing of arrogant ambitions; it is not so much a fear of failure as a punishment for a new and dreamed-of success.⁴⁰ Van Gogh's letter to his mother and sister sometime later acknowledged this anxiety.

As soon as I heard that my work was having some success, and read the article in question [Albert Aurier's glowing account], I feared at once that I should be punished for it; this is how things nearly always go in a painter's life: success is about the worst thing that can happen. [L629a]

Such ambivalence does not evacuate ambition; it may, in fact, confirm it. In his novel *Immortality*, Milan Kundera suggests such a grandiose fantasy when the living (in this case, François Mitterand) associate their "selves" with death: "He wanted to resemble the dead, . . . for death and immortality are an indissoluble pair of lovers, and the person whose face merges in one's mind with the faces of the dead is already immortal while still alive."⁴¹ As with any self-portrait, Van Gogh's self-representation prevents his disappearance or death; it fixes him as a painter and configures his immortality. In this sense too, Van Gogh's preoccupation while in Arles with life after death, his fantasy that one could "take death to reach a star" (L506), may not be a portent of suicide, as it is often read, but the opposite—a fantasy of supernatural power and eternal life. Rather than simply a representation of the artist exhausted by urban stress, the *Self-Portrait as a Painter* made in Paris may be seen as a more complex configuration, encompassing both a statement of desire for a particular kind of artistic identity and immortality and the anxiety associated with that wish.

Van Gogh's production of self-portraits dropped off markedly in Provence and, again in the ten self-images from Arles and Saint-Rémy, explicit references to the profession are rare.⁴² Although Van Gogh assumed the place of the artist in the series of portraits meant for the Yellow House, he redefined it exotically by painting himself as a Japanese monk, or bonze. The painter Eugène Boch also appears in the series, but he is pictured as a bourgeois dandy in a yellow jacket against a midnight blue starry sky and is symbolically designated "the poet" (L531) by Van Gogh.⁴³

The Provence self-portraits are often read as signs of mental crisis and the onset of disease, partly because Van Gogh refers to madness in his letters about them, and partly because the best of them coincide with episodes of self-mutilation and breakdown. But if it is hard to resist framing the images in terms of these traumatic events, it is equally hard to find breakdown in them, either technical or self-expressive. Certainly, there is no formal weakening; the self-portraits made at the most "extreme" moments are exceptionally accomplished paintings. The same may be said of their content. Rather than reveal or disclose madness as a sign of their