

maker's malady, the pictures incorporate madness as one of several professional issues bound up with the modern artist's identity and place in a larger community.

The key picture here is the *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Gauguin* (Fig. 93 and Plate 9). The physiognomic presentation is again a face of temperament: Van Gogh's slightly slanted eyes—presumably those of a bonze—have a penetrating gaze; the high forehead and taut skull bulge with energy.<sup>44</sup> This intensity is heightened by a red-green palette orchestrated with unusual discord—the malachite green ground encircling the figure is an acidic contrast to the orange bristles of eyebrows, skull, and beard, and the dark green-brown suit is set off with rusty highlights. The figure, slightly turned so as to accentuate the craggy head, registers fierce immediacy.

The radical “look” of the picture was disconcerting, Van Gogh knew, and he explained it at some length to Theo and Wil. In part it had to do with the exoticism of the bonze, but he also invoked another set of symbolic personae, suggesting a combination of the “mad painter” and “placid priest” in Emile Wauter's painting of Hugo van der Goes. He was neither one nor the other, he told Theo, but balanced “rather between the two” (L514, W4). In Chapter 3 I discussed the associations in this professional self-image to monastic asceticism, virile sexuality, and creative potency. Nevertheless, for an artist with such a troubled personal history, the issue of madness cannot be set aside, even though the picture predates the record of any destabilizing episode. Indeed, however unsteady Van Gogh's state of mind, the combination of art-madness-spirituality and artist-madman-priest extends beyond the issue of individual psychic balance, for the nineteenth century increasingly drew connections between the artistic and the nervous (or neurotic) temperament.<sup>45</sup> As Evert van Uiterd has shown, Van Gogh assimilated this discourse through a range of formulations—from modern novels to modern art criticism.<sup>46</sup> But by the end of the century, artistic temperament had acquired even more dramatic definition, and with much more at stake. By 1889, when the French translation of Cesare Lombroso's *L'Uomo di genio* (1888) [*L'Homme du génie*] appeared, with its proclamation that “genius is, like madness, one of the forms of mental degeneration,” genius and madness were opposite poles of the same axis and, as such, critically intertwined.<sup>47</sup> The formulation set genius apart as a special but marginal figure, but as Jean-Pierre Guillerme has suggested, it also implied a moralized, normative center from which any departure—genius, madness, or some combination of the two—could be used to discredit modern art and modernity.<sup>48</sup>



Fig. 93. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Gauguin* (F476), 1888. Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, bequest collection of Maurice Wertheim, Class of 1906.





Fig. 94. Charles Laval, *Self-Portrait*, 1888. Collection Vincent van Gogh Foundation/  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Van Gogh used this marginalized characterization to lodge responsibility for the artist's situation in society. With this sense of the artist set apart—to his mind, driven apart—from the “norm,” Van Gogh used the condition of madness to generalize about modern artists and the larger community. His letter to Theo rails against the “worm-eaten official tradition” and the place assigned to “the new painters,” who were “isolated, poor, treated like madmen, and because of this treatment actually becoming so, at least as far as their social life is concerned” (L514).

The self-image as bonze literally re-dresses these concerns. Van Gogh balanced the “mad” artist with a spiritual figure—two, in fact: the bonze and the placid priest. Thus, by assuming the identity of a religious figure, as Tsukasa Kodera has noted, Van Gogh joined his Japanist fantasy to the religious iconography favored by his friends in Pont-Aven.<sup>49</sup> In fact, though he heatedly argued against traditional religious subjects, Van Gogh maintained at least a rhetorical commit-

ment to Jesus as “a matchless artist” among men. “[Christ] lived serenely,” he wrote Bernard, “as a greater artist than all other artists, . . . working in living flesh. That is to say, this matchless artist . . . made neither statues, nor pictures nor books; he loudly proclaimed that he made . . . *living men*, immortals” (BS).<sup>50</sup> For Van Gogh, the bonze was a simple, hard-working figure, dedicated to higher things, and, like Jesus, he served as an archetype of inspired creativity in a utopian frame.

Van Gogh confirmed his portrait’s multiple associations, its personification of his self, the modern artist, and a seeker of spirituality. “I have written to Gauguin,” he told Theo, noting that “if I might be allowed to stress *my own personality* in a portrait, I had done so in trying to convey in my portrait not only *myself* but an *impressionist in general*, had conceived it as the portrait of a *bonze*, a simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha” (L545; emphasis mine). In dedicating and sending it to Gauguin, he confirmed their cultural community.

Indeed, fundamental to this insistence on layered identities is the picture’s status as a token of exchange. The self-portraits traded by Van Gogh, Gauguin, Bernard, and Charles Laval enact a pictorial conversation on the modern artist’s community, though none of them appears as a painter at work. Laval’s image (Fig. 94) sets the figure before an autumnal landscape, staring hard at the viewer.<sup>51</sup> Both Gauguin and Bernard picture themselves in company (Figs. 95, 96), but Gauguin’s prominence as *chef d’école* in these two pictures is clear. His solidly modeled head seems to leap out of a decorative field whereas Bernard appears as a delicately transparent profile. Bernard’s self-image, identical in format, is more modest in color and flatter in form. If Van Gogh was utopically a bonze, Gauguin designated himself “a bandit” and invoked Victor Hugo’s novel of the French Revolution to label himself and Bernard “Les Misérables.”

Despite these differences in self-presentation—Gauguin’s sense of radical battle, Van Gogh’s more pacific sense of mission—their self-portraits signal a more general concern. Inveighing against the decadence of Paris and the capitalist market, Gauguin adopted the medievalism that swept nineteenth-century culture to picture himself as Christ betrayed, as a monk witnessing a miraculous struggle, or as a haloed saint. And in these incarnations, Gauguin replaced the activist *misérable* of the portrait exchange with the image of the martyr betrayed by his own society.<sup>52</sup> Van Gogh readily shared the spiritual metaphor.<sup>53</sup> The bonze identity was one example, the painter-priest another, and the insistence on Christ as active creator, rather than suffering martyr, still another.<sup>54</sup> The range of dramatis





Fig. 95. Paul Gauguin, *Self-Portrait with Bernard (Les Misérables)*, 1888. Collection Vincent van Gogh Foundation/Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

personae produced some interesting pictures and a self-aggrandizing utopian ideal but also suggested a professional uncertainty and anxieties that were experienced most acutely in material terms: as the profession and market expanded, the artists grew poor. Van Gogh knew this when he summarized his and Gauguin's self-portraits and cut through their symbolic guises.

And when I put Gauguin's conception and my own side by side, mine is as grave, but less despairing. What Gauguin's portrait says to me before all things is that he must not go on like this, he must become again the richer Gauguin of the "Negresses."

I am very glad to have these two portraits, for they faithfully represent the comrades at this stage; they will not remain like that, they will come back to a more serene life.

And I see clearly that the duty laid upon me is to do everything I can to lessen our poverty. [L545]

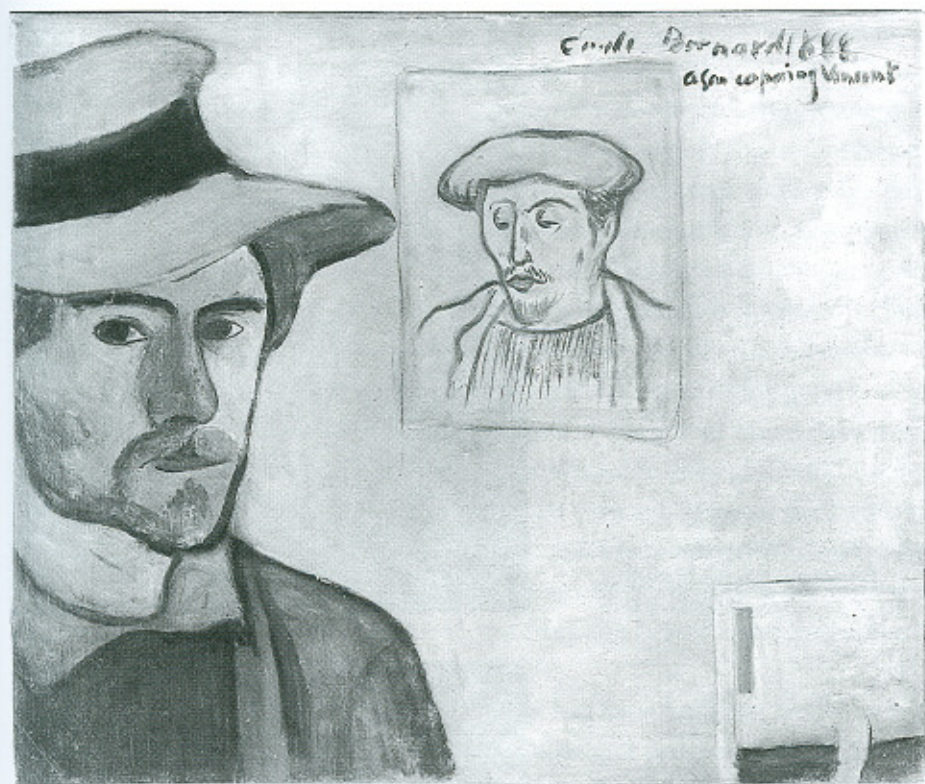


Fig. 96. Emile Bernard, *Self-Portrait with Gauguin*, 1888. Collection Vincent van Gogh Foundation/Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

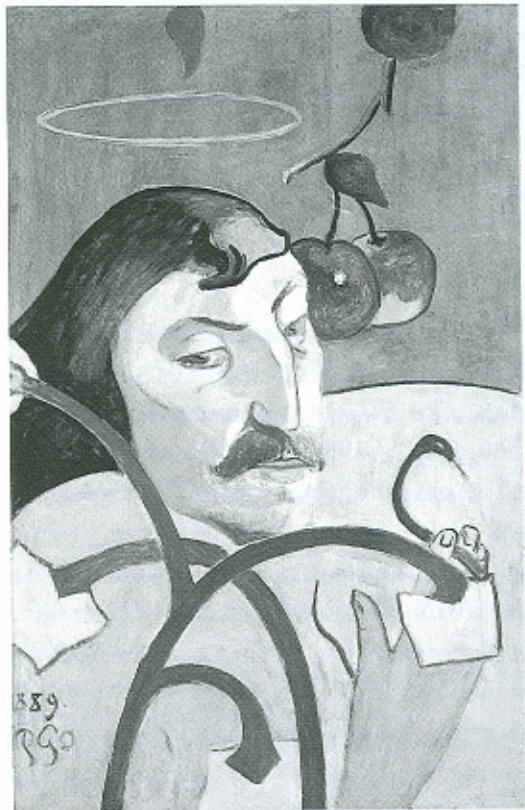
That Van Gogh should reject the topos of suffering artist is remarkable, or perhaps understandable, in light of his medical history. The *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (Fig. 97) was painted shortly after Van Gogh mutilated his left ear, and though the wound is crucial and prominent in the design, the picture appears to refute the suffering metaphor.<sup>55</sup> Whereas six months earlier Van Gogh had represented himself as priest or bonze, in this picture he resumed a more modest status. In workman's jacket and fur hat he shows little trace of madness or pain, and if he suffers, he does so stoically, smoking his pipe. But the picture is packed with tension. Blue-black tufts of fur bristle against the orange ground like marks of mental energy. The orange red background breaks across the axis of the close-set green eyes, slicing through the environment and the man. Both the strident pairing of red ground and green jacket and the bandaged sign of sickness are set



Fig. 97. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (F529), 1889. Private collection.



Fig. 98. Paul Gauguin, *Self-Portrait*, 1889. Chester Dale collection, © 1994, Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



below this line. The result is a peculiar contradiction, a sort of visual oxymoron of a thoughtful, wounded man bundled up against the heat.

Although it seems compelling as a biographical document, the picture is not only about the subject's "wound" but also about the "terribly electric" arguments (L564) between Van Gogh and Gauguin concerning the status of the artist, methods of painting, and a symbolist style. The issues become clear in a comparison with Gauguin's symbolist *Self-Portrait* of 1889 (Fig. 98). In addition to abstracted planes of color and sinuous coiling lines, Gauguin's image is loaded with familiar symbolic trappings—apples, lilies, serpent, halo—all of which establish the artist as a pensive figure, darkly hooded and haloed, set between good and evil. The picture is both radical and conventional; if the initial impression comes through decorative design, it is ultimately decipherable through traditional symbolic codes. Van Gogh's painting performs its own synthesis of the traditional and the new in its combination of symbolist color and design with naturalistic portraiture. The force and meaning of the image, however, derive not from some symbolic vocabulary of good and evil, but from the heated color and tense design framing the wounded man's stoic calm.<sup>56</sup>

The incidence of Van Gogh's breakdowns has been linked to family events—Theo's engagement and marriage, his wife Johanna's pregnancy: these presumably stir unmanageable fears of abandonment and loss.<sup>57</sup> But the breakdown in early summer 1889 may also indicate intolerable professional anxieties and envy, for it coincided with the opening of the Café Volpini show organized by Gauguin and his friends for the Paris Exposition Universelle. Though he had hoped to exhibit on that occasion, because of a decision by Theo, Van Gogh's work was absent from the scene.<sup>58</sup> In the Saint-Rémy hospital, Van Gogh produced several metaphoric self-portraits that comment on his own condition through copies after other artists' works. In his versions of Rembrandt's *Raising of Lazarus* (F677), Delacroix's *Good Samaritan* (F633) and *Pietà* (F630), and Gustave Doré's *Prison Yard* (F669), for example, Van Gogh appears as an imprisoned, exhausted, or dying figure being comforted or recalled to life. Two self-portraits from Saint-Rémy painted immediately after the six-week illness, however, are less metaphorical statements, for in them Van Gogh again took up the roles of painter and bourgeois and asserted his professional competence.

Van Gogh paired the pictures in his letters. "One I began the day I got up," he wrote Theo. "I was thin and pale as a ghost." And, about the other, "I look saner *now* than I did [in Paris]—even more so" (L604). The pale, craggy face of



the painter in the first picture (Fig. 99) flares against the blue-violet ground. In this fourth and last direct representation of himself as painter, Van Gogh wears a dark blue painter's smock, and he clutches palette and brushes as if to declare his professional practice once more.<sup>59</sup> The red-orange beard, knit brow, and clenched mouth at the center of the composition insist on a determined presence and, once again, artistic temperament. However "ghostly" he considered it, this is not the impassive specter of Death seen in the Paris self-portrait (see Fig. 89) but a fierce and forceful apparitional figure. The picture found an appropriate audience for an artist proclaiming his "return" when it was acquired by the Dutch painter and critic J. J. Isaacson, the first writer to signal Van Gogh's importance in print.<sup>60</sup>

Van Gogh considered the second image (Fig. 100) a token of his sanity.

You will see, I hope, that my face is much calmer, though it seems to me that my look is vaguer than before. I have another one which is an attempt made when I was ill, but I think this will please you more, and I have tried to make it simple. Show it to old Pissarro when you see him. [L607]

Contrary to Van Gogh's opinion, the face appears anything but calm and the expression anything but vague; firm, focused, and determined would be more accurate. The orange-haired and -bearded figure in bourgeois jacket and vest is set against a restless surface of swirling ice blue paint, and the face has the familiar temperamental glare. Van Gogh's text suggests the picture's mission of reassurance. The instruction to show it to Pissarro signaled his eagerness to leave the hospital and return to an artistic community. "After all," he wrote in the same letter, "one must not only make pictures, but one must also see people, and from time to time recover one's balance and replenish oneself with ideas through the company of others." With the picture as a sign of personal and professional renewal, Van Gogh collected it from Theo on his return north and took it with him to Auvers.

There it impressed Dr. Gachet, who requested a copy. No other version exists, but perhaps to please this patron Van Gogh used the picture's color and stylized brushwork as a point of departure for his portrait of the Auvers physician (see Fig. 77) in which, he claimed, Gachet appears worried by the "cares and sorrows of our time" (L643).<sup>61</sup> To some extent, Van Gogh identified with the red-headed doctor and would-be artist—or perhaps it was the other way around; Van

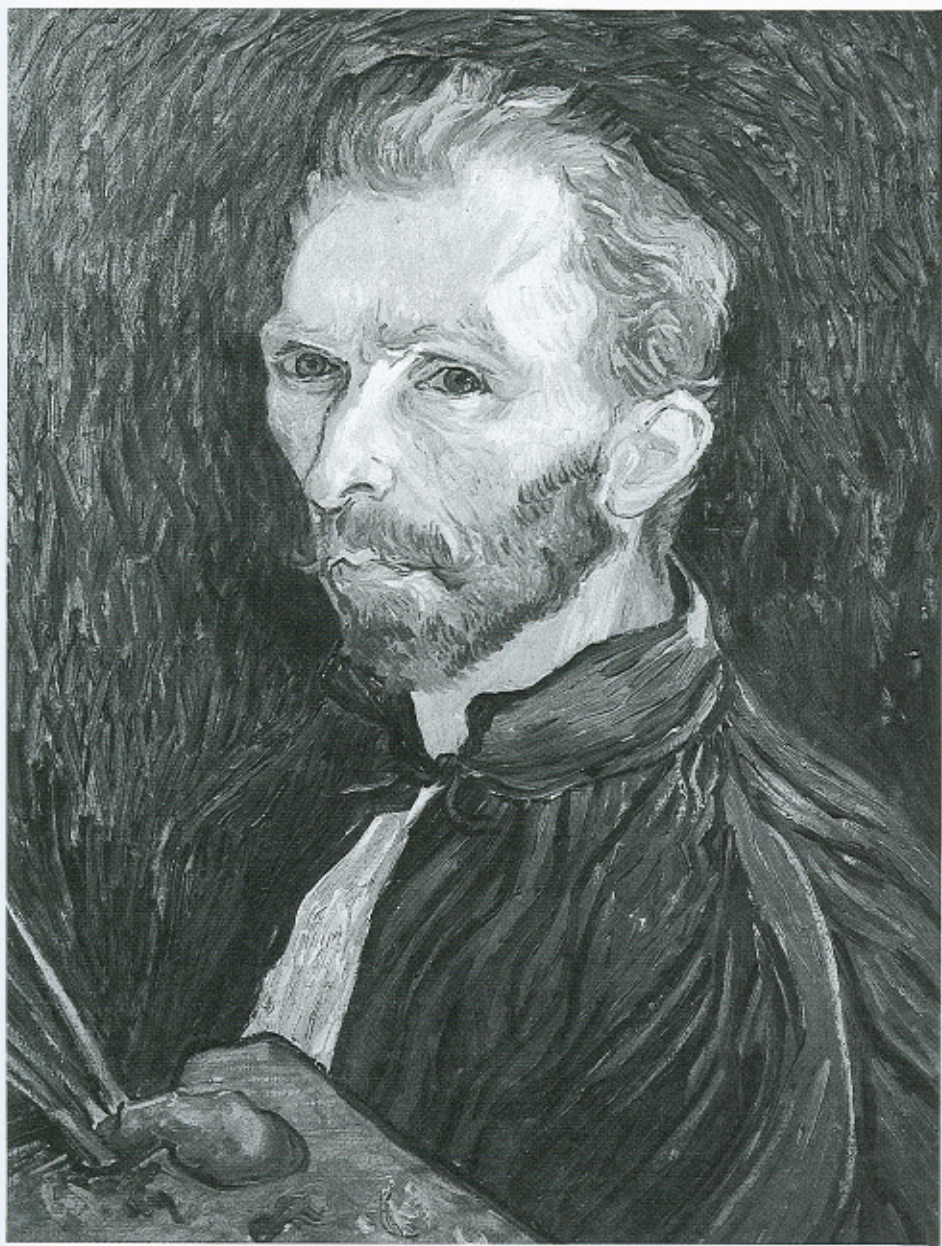


Fig. 99. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait* (F626), 1889. New York, John Hay Whitney collection.



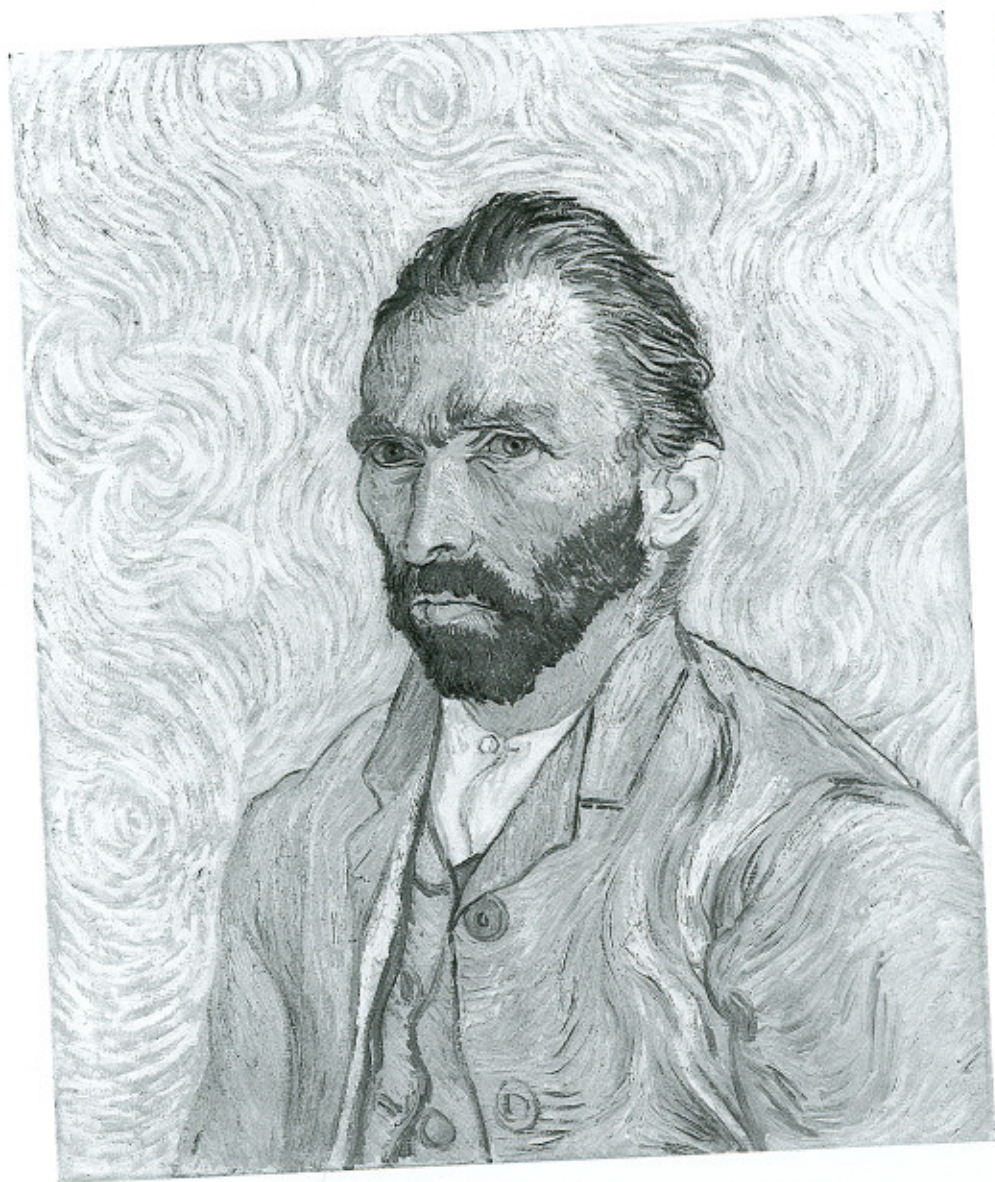


Fig. 100. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait* (F627), 1889. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

Gogh wondered how he could be helped by someone equally depressed. But to conflate the self-portrait and the Gachet portrait under the sign of mental illness in our readings of the picture obscures important differences in the images and the specific issue of self-portraiture. Cool blue tones and curling brushstrokes infuse both pictures with tension and energy, but the Gachet figure is pressed beneath the rhythm of rolling hills, while the figure of Van Gogh springs out of a matrix of rising brushstrokes and thick paint. But more than this, the expression and demeanor—the temperament—of the two men could not be more different. Where Gachet is middle-aged and world-weary, Van Gogh is younger and resolute; where Gachet is lost in introspection, Van Gogh challenges the viewer with his stare; where Gachet slumps in classic melancholy, Van Gogh is fiercely erect.

Gachet may have embodied the “cares and sorrows” of modern man, but he was not the modern artist. And fashioning an image of a modern artist, no less than a modern self, was the heart of the matter. As painter, monk, bourgeois, peasant, worker, and artisan Van Gogh, in his self-images, shows no psychic rupture even as these figures cast actively about for social ground. In their various configurations, they probe, test, and grandly assume professional, personal, and social identities. The figure represented is often fierce, at times impassive, and occasionally vulnerable but—even as Death—not despairing or melancholy. If Gachet’s was one face of modernity—and a troubled face, at that—Van Gogh’s self-portraits bear witness to something quite different: the modern artist’s temperament and ambitions, the utopian range of that professional stand.