

PATRICIA E. CONNORS  
MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY

## The Transition from Dark to Bright in the Early Art of Vincent van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh is known as a painter who used brilliant colors in the paintings he produced in his brief career from 1880 to 1890. In 1990, in honor of the hundredth anniversary of his death, his native Netherlands organized two international exhibits: one of his drawings, held in the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, and one of his paintings, held in the Museum Vincent van Gogh in Amsterdam. While a few works were borrowed from other museums, the majority of the drawings and paintings exhibited are owned by Holland's Vincent van Gogh Foundation. Many of the thousands of international visitors who viewed the exhibits saw the drawings and early paintings from the national collection for the first time.<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly, the works exhibited in these two shows - in addition to the familiar works of brilliant color - also include a large body of black and white drawings, drawings and watercolors with just a few touches of color, and dark paintings in a very different style from the familiar one. Most of these black and white drawings were produced between 1881 and 1883, although he continued until his death to make drawings as practice exercises and as studies for his paintings.

In addition to the drawings and paintings themselves, the most important source of information about his attitude toward color is his letters. Between 1873 and 1890, he wrote more than 1600 pages of letters; although he corresponded with other relatives and friends, the majority were written to his brother Theo.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the two Dutch exhibits of 1990 were organized to select drawings and paintings to which he particularly referred in his letters.

Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, Theo's widow, devoted many years - in fact, until her death in 1925 - to the difficult project of dating, editing, arranging, and publishing van Gogh's letters. Selected letters were first translated into English in 1912, with subsequent selections published in 1927, 1929, and 1937, including Irving Stone's popular one-volume collection, *Dear Theo*. From 1952 until his death in 1978, Dr. Vincent W. van Gogh, son of Johanna and Theo, supervised the project of collecting and editing the letters. With Dr. van Gogh's assistance, the New York Graphic Society published an English translation, *The Complete Letters*

of *Vincent van Gogh*, in three volumes, on the occasion of the centenary of the painter's birth in 1953. The Society published two subsequent complete editions, including reproductions of the drawings in the original letters.

*The Complete Letters* attracted diverse interest. In a preface to the 1958 edition, Dr. van Gogh expressed the reactions of many readers:

The letters of Vincent van Gogh make fine reading for everybody. For people who usually do not care about artistic matters, they form a splendid human document of great interest. For art lovers and art historians they are of great importance. Frequently one who starts reading by chance or merely out of curiosity goes on for quite a while. Of course one cannot be expected to read the whole at a stretch - there are too many pages for that. The letters at the end, however, hold the same interest as those at the beginning, and one does not get tired of them. (Introduction, *Complete Letters*. Vol. I, ix)

These letters reveal many reasons for the lack of color in van Gogh's early work. They describe the dark, misty scenes he observed in industrial London as well as on the English coast. They detail the dark lives of the miners of the Borinage, the Belgian mining district where he failed in his attempt to be an evangelist but began his first efforts at figure drawing. The letters praise the rich dark colors of the Dutch masters Rembrandt, Frans Hals, and others, whom he admired in the museums of Holland as well as in the reproductions and photographs he studied as an employee of his uncle's art dealership. The letters contain many references to the dark passages in his favorite novels, including Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, Dickens' *Hard Times*, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and the novels of Zola and Balzac. And the letters praise many illustrators of popular novels and magazines who produced black or sepia engravings, wood cuts, and lithographs.

George Eliot was one of his favorite authors. In the course of his life, he read her complete fiction. Reading her early work, he was apparently moved by the beauty of her story-telling and its melodrama. For instance, he praised her early story "Janet's Repentance," in the collection *Scenes of Clerical Life*, which features a woman alcoholic who is saved from despair by the interest of a sympathetic Church of England minister just before his death. Van Gogh described his appreciation for Eliot's ability to picture vividly the squalid town where the clergyman served the poor. He specifically mentioned the meals of "watery potatoes" which the townspeople ate, perhaps anticipating the sympathy for the poor he later depicted in "The Potato Eaters."

He was especially moved by Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede*, and one of its central characters, Dinah Morris. Dinah, a lay evangelist of the Methodist church in the late eighteenth century, is a powerful preacher who chooses to minister to the poor in a mill town rather than to live in comfort and ease in a country farmhouse. Dinah's idealistic life (which she does not sustain when she marries at the end of the novel) is just the sort of life van Gogh imagined and tried to achieve for himself when he pursued a career as an evangelist, first in England as a curate to a Methodist preacher and later for the Dutch Reformed Church in a mining town in the Borinage - the last in a series of career failures before he committed himself to becoming an artist. In addition to an inspiring central character and beautiful descriptions of pastoral landscapes, to which he often refers, *Adam Bede* includes a scene in which an unwed mother murders her new-born child, a dramatic horseback rescue of the mother from hanging, and other scenes of death, loss, and sorrow.

These dark models and dark scenes form the background for van Gogh's initial lack of use of color. However, in his letters he makes clear the two most important reasons for the lack of color in his realistic early landscapes and figure drawings. One was money. He was poor, and paints were too expensive for frequent use. He believed he could develop his skill as an artist much more cheaply using the carpenter's pencil, the lithographic crayon, charcoal, chalk, and ink than he could using many tubes of paints.<sup>5</sup> Since he was literally without a paying job from 1879 until his death in 1890 and had to rely on his brother Theo for all of his expenses, he was constantly concerned with being as frugal as possible. His letters contain many references to his concern with the cost of his materials. In August 1882, he wrote to Theo: "For two weeks I have painted from early morning until late at night, so to speak; if I continued this way, it would be too expensive as long as

I do not sell" (*Letters*, Vol. I, 443). Many letters begin with an opening similar to that of letter 233: "At the moment I write you, I have almost spent my last guilder" (I, 459, September 1882). A few weeks later, he wrote: "When I told you in my last letter that I sometimes feel as if I were in some kind of prison, I meant only that I cannot do many things which I should like to do - which would be possible if I had the money" (I, 512, December 1882). In early 1883, another typical theme appears at the end of a letter to Theo: "... I will try to work twice as hard to make progress, so that the burden may become somewhat lighter for you. But the difficulty is that hard work costs more money because of the greater outlay" (I, 527, January 1883).

A second and more important reason for his early work in black and white is frequently mentioned in the letters written between 1880, the date of his definite decision to become an artist, and 1886, the date of his permanent move to France: the need to master drawing. He was firmly convinced that an aspiring artist must spend a very important and lengthy apprenticeship learning to draw well and mastering perspective, figure drawings, and drawing from models.

After a series of career failures as an art dealer, teacher, evangelist, and theology student between 1873 and 1879, when he decided to be an artist, he set himself a very rigorous program of preparation for his work. Although he had been a close observer of art as well as nature from his youth (and had drawn occasional sketches and maps), he was very conscious of his lack of training as an artist. He decided to spend several years studying perspective, copying his favorite artists/illustrators, especially Millet, and learning to draw the human figure from models before he began painting. Otherwise, he felt he would simply waste a lot of expensive paint, a waste he could not afford.

In February 1882, he wrote to Theo: "Drawing is the principal thing, whatever they may say, and it is the most difficult" (I, 315). And in March of the same year: "I have been working very hard lately, and am busy from morning till night... I must go on drawing for a year or at least a few months more until my hand has become quite firm, and my eye steady ... I cannot go quicker than that, for I should produce bad work, and that isn't necessary: with a little patience my work can be good" (I, 330).

In many letters, he explained that he was deliberately postponing his work in color until he was ready: "... the main reason for my not being able to make water colors is that I must draw even more seriously, paying greater attention to proportions and perspective" (I, 321, March

1882). Despite the years of poverty, he stressed the importance of patience in his artistic development: "All this is essentially drawing - once having fairly mastered this, one sees the way out; and I personally go quietly along this way, knowing that if only I persist, before long I shall overtake a few of those who think they can skip such things" (I, 339, Spring 1882). He did not consider the touches of color he added to his drawings essential. In July 1882, he wrote to Theo: "Now when you come, brother, I shall have a few water colors for you... Those I have done are simply to show you that my studying drawing, correct perspective and proportions, helps me to make progress in water colors... I shall have to work harder on that fundamental drawing which everything depends on" (I, 418, July 1882).

And so van Gogh drew the miners of the Borinage, he drew the "Brabant types" - the peasants of Etten, and the weavers of Nuenen, the men and women of the soup kitchens and almshouses of The Hague, and he drew the landscapes and the seacoast of Holland. His materials were pencil, black crayon, and ink; occasionally watercolors filled out his drawings. The studies of figures - his portraits or character sketches - have titles such as "A Sower (after Millet)" (Early 1881), "Worn Out" (a seated elderly man, Summer 1881), "Woman Sewing" (late 1881), "Old Woman Walking with Stick and Shawl" (early 1882), "Almshouse Man with Top Hat, Head" (late 1882), and "Woman at the Spinning Wheel" (Spring 1884). His early landscape drawings include "Road with Pollard Willows" (Autumn 1881), "Fish Drying Barn at Scheveningen" (Summer 1882), "Tree Roots in Sandy Soil" (April 1882) and "Town View of The Hague with Nieuwe Kerk" (1882-83).

In fact, he planned at first to try to earn his living as a draftsman or an illustrator, having admired English, Dutch, and French illustrations for a decade. He often expressed his belief that effectiveness in water color and oil paint depended on skill in drawing. Acquaintances at The Hague (where he worked from 1881 to 1883), having watched him work on his drawings for over a year without producing any paintings, began to make fun of his slowness in turning to the serious business of color. One impatient long-time acquaintance attacked him in these words: "(Drawing) is a kind of narcotic which you take in order not to feel the pain that not being able to make water colors causes you" (quoted in I, 320-21, March 1882). Van Gogh himself offered the opposite criticism in a letter to Theo: "When I see how several painters I know here have so much trouble with their water colors and pictures, so that they cannot pull it off, I often think, Friend, the fault is in your drawing. I do not regret for a single moment that I did not go on with water color and oil painting in the beginning. I am sure

I shall make up for that if I only work hard, so that my hand does not falter in drawing and in the perspective... But those gentlemen go on asking me, not without a certain solicitous air, 'if I am not painting yet?'" (I, 427, July 1882).

Gradually, he felt he had sufficiently mastered the skills of drawing to turn to painting. He saw natural light - its seasonal changes as well as its availability - as closely connected to color. When he began painting, he felt the need to improve the light in his studio so that he could represent color better. One of his early series of studies and drawings, "The Fish Drying Barn" (Summer 1882), was done during this transitional period. In July 1882 he wrote: "When I returned to the fish drying barn, a wonderfully bright fresh green of turnips or rapes had sprouted in those baskets full of sand in the foreground which serve to prevent the sand from drifting off the dunes. Two months ago everything was bare except the grass in the little garden, and now this rough, wild, luxuriant growth forms a very pretty effect in contrast to the bareness of the rest" (I, 425, July 1882).

He developed his original approach to color through a similar slow process of study and careful experimentation, a fact which is evident even when he was still concentrating on drawing. In December 1881 he wrote: "Theo, what a great thing tone and color are. And whoever does not learn to have a feeling for them stands so far from real life" (I, 282, December 1881). In August 1882, after two years of drawing, he reported that he had bought a stock of water and oil paints in the "essential, simple colors": "ochre (red - yellow - brown), cobalt and Prussian blue, Naples yellow, sienna, black and white, completed with some smaller tubes of carmine, sepia, vermilion, ultramarine, gamboge" (I, 429, August 1882). He had refrained, as he wrote, from "choosing 'nice' colors which one ought to mix oneself. I believe this is a practical palette with healthy colors. Ultramarine, carmine, or the like are added when strictly necessary" (I, 430, August 1882).

Van Gogh began to paint seriously in the fall of 1882, inspired by autumn colors. In September 1882, he wrote: "The wood is becoming quite autumnal - there are effects of color which I very rarely find painted in Dutch pictures" (I, 447, September 1882). This letter continues with a detailed description of the autumn scene and its colors, including the ground in "light and dark reddish brown," "young beech trees which catch light on one side and are brilliant green," and a sky which is "very delicate, bluish-gray, warm, hardly blue, all aglow" (I, 447, September 1882). He sent Theo a sketch of the scene, which he criticized in the same letter: "I describe nature to you; how far I rendered the

effect in my sketch, I do not know myself; but I do know that I was struck by the harmony of green, red, black, yellow, blue, brown, gray" (I, 447, September 1882). He follows this description with a personal declaration: "You see I am absorbed in painting with all my strength; I am absorbed in color - until now I have restrained myself, and I am not sorry for it. If I had not drawn so much, I should not have been able to catch the feeling of and get hold of a figure that looks like an unfinished terracotta. But now I feel myself on the open sea - the painting must be continued with all the strength I can give it. When I paint on panel or canvas, the expenses increase again. Everything is so expensive, the colors are also expensive and are so soon gone. Well, all painters have those difficulties. We must see what can be done. I know for sure that I have an instinct for color, and that it will come to me more and more, that painting is in the very marrow of my bones. Doubly and twice doubly I appreciate your helping me so faithfully and substantially" (I, 448-49, September 1882).

He accurately predicted that his approach to color would change from the beginning studies. In autumn 1882, he wrote to Theo: "... the marine I recently brought home is quite different in color from the first or second I did. So you should not yet judge my palette from what I might send you now. And if I myself would rather wait until it has become riper before I send you anything, it is because I believe that my color will change a great deal, and the composition, too" (I, 460, September 1882). These prophetic comments are dramatically illustrated by comparing the colors in van Gogh's earliest paintings to a few of his famous late works. Those done between 1882 and 1885 - with titles such as "Girl in a Wood" (August 1882), "Weaver" (April-May 1884), "Peasant Woman" (March 1885), "The Potato Eaters" (April 1885), "The Cottage" (May 1885), "Autumn Landscape with Four Trees" (November 1885) and "Avenue of Poplars" (November 1885) - are romantic and democratic in subject matter but feature the dark, rich colors we might expect from Rembrandt. About 1886, as he had predicted, his colors began to change dramatically.

Living with Theo in Paris in 1886-1887, he became acquainted with the French Impressionists as well as with Japanese prints. From his reading he learned about color theory and complementary colors, and he studied the painter Delacroix whose knowledge of color theory informed the whole Impressionist movement. In the last five years of his painting career (1886-1890) - spent in Paris, Arles, St. Rémy, and Auvers - he painted in a unique style which incorporated the lighter, brighter palette of the Impressionists. Having moved to Arles in 1887, Vincent wrote to Theo in 1888 on the topic of "the

study of color": "I am always in hope of making a discovery there, to express the love of two lovers by a wedding of two complementary colors, their mingling and their opposition, by the radiance of a light tone against a sombre background" (III, 26, September 1888). As he studied color theory, he explained why Arles, near the Mediterranean - rather than Paris - was an ideal place to develop his use of color: "Why did the greatest colorist of all, Eugene Delacroix, think it essential to go South and right to Africa? Obviously, because not only in Africa but from Arles onward you are bound to find beautiful contrasts of red and green, of blue and orange, of sulphur and lilac" (III, 39, September 1888).

Applying his mastery of drawing to paintings, he also had the advantage of access to brighter and better quality paints in the last years through the generous support of Theo, paints which aided him in producing the bright, bold canvases that sell for millions of dollars today.

In Vincent van Gogh's short but brilliant career as a painter, he looked ever more deeply into his first and last loves in art and literature: scenes in nature and studies of the human figure. Having mastered the ability to paint people and places with technical skill and deep emotion, van Gogh succeeded in clothing them in the bright colors and the powerful emotions of his imagination.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The two exhibition catalogues contain color plates of all the drawings and paintings exhibited as well as introductions and essays about the works: Johannes van der Wolk, Ronald Pickvance, and E.B.F. Pey. *Drawings: Vincent van Gogh*. Catalogue of the Van Gogh 1990 exhibit. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, the Netherlands, and Amsterdam: Arnolde Mondadori Arte, 1990, and: Evert van Uitert, Louis van Tilborgh, and Sjaar van Heugten. *Paintings: Vincent van Gogh*. Catalogue of the Van Gogh 1990 exhibit. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and Amsterdam: Arnolde Mondadori Arte, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> All references to the letters are taken from: Vincent van Gogh. *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*. 3 vols. 2nd ed. Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1959. Third printing, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the materials van Gogh used in his drawings, see: Johannes van der Wolk, Ronald Pickvance, and E.B.F. Pey. *Drawings: Vincent van Gogh*. 28-39.



*Sien Sewing and Girl*

Early 1883

Charcoal, ink and watercolour on wove paper,

555 x 299 mm

Signed l.l.: Vincent

F1072 JH 341

Vincent van Gogh Foundation/van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



*Girl with Shawl, Half Figure*

Winter 1882-83

Pencil and lithographic chalk on watercolour paper,  
508 x 313 mm

Watermark: Hallines 1877

Signed l.l.: Vincent

F 1008 JH 301

Vincent van Gogh Foundation/van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam