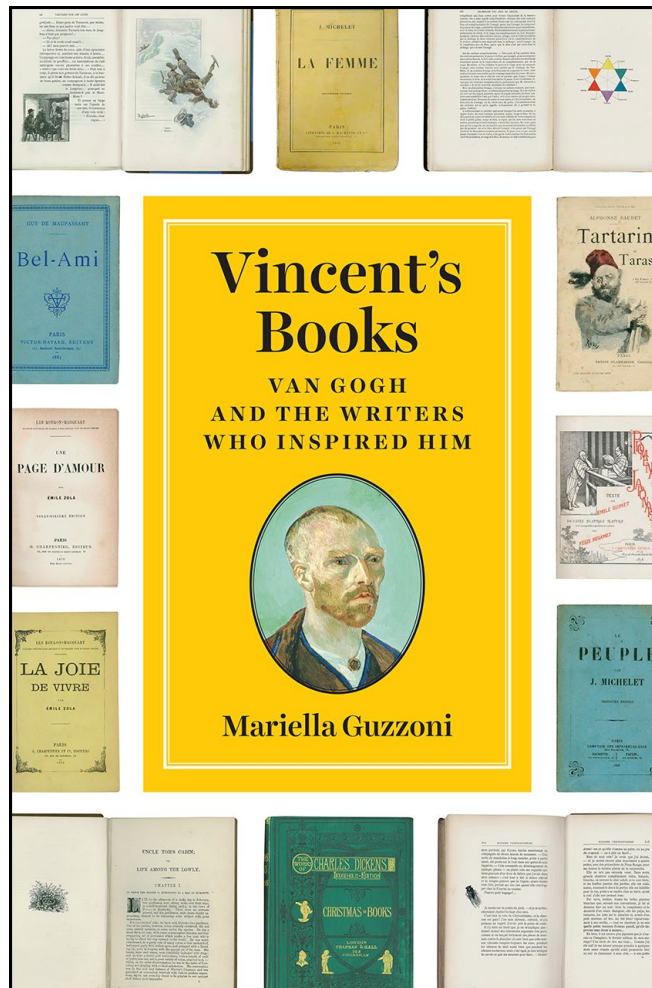


Review
Mariella Guzzoni:
Vincent's books: Van Gogh and the writers
who inspired him

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 232p.
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Reviewed by Cliff Edwards



The author of this beautiful volume is an independent scholar and art curator living in Bergamo, Italy. In a previous publication, *Van Gogh: L'Infinito specchio*, Guzzoni (2014) focused on Van Gogh's self-portraits and signatures. She has curated library exhibits on Van Gogh and books and has made a personal collection of editions of books read by the artist.

The current volume should appeal to readers and viewers on many levels. Its chronological biography of Van Gogh's reading includes well over a hundred beautifully presented images, many in colour. These images include Van Gogh paintings related to books and readers, prints collected by Van Gogh, and illustrations and cover art of the book editions Van Gogh viewed and read.

It becomes obvious that the entire volume profits greatly from the author's ability to work closely with scholars and artists of many backgrounds. She has worked particularly closely with scholars connected to the Van Gogh Museum and Library in Amsterdam and the book benefits from these associations as well as from her own wide reading.

Seven chapters take the reader-viewer chronologically through Van Gogh's early work as teacher and evangelist, his development as painter of the countryside and peasants, his work as artist in Paris, Provence, and Auvers, to thematic chapters on "Vincent and the readers," and his favorite books and their contribution to his thought and art. Beyond those seven chapters there is a twenty-page "Selective chronology" of Van Gogh's "Life among books," a page of "Illustration credits," and a six-page "Index." Interesting themes explored by Guzzoni include the "modern reader" and the turn toward silent, private, subjective reading, the occasional use of "literary code" by Vincent when writing his brother Theo, his focused re-reading (repetition) of favorite works, and his growing interest in the classics of world literature toward the end of his life.

In view of Guzzoni's several contributions in this volume, it might seem excessive to find faults and ask for more depth on certain subjects, but Van Gogh's serious search for both breadth and depth through his reading encourage a closer, critical look at Guzzoni's work.

First, a peculiar error should be noted. The author refers to the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Galatians as "Apocrypha" (33) rather than as Canon. This may simply be one of those inexplicable mistakes that creep into manuscripts and get overlooked in editing. But more subtle and significant, I believe, is the author's apparent sense that the Bible is essentially viewed as a single "book" by Van Gogh rather than as a very diverse library of books with significant differences in meaning and value. She never notes, for example, that the artist writes his friend Émile Bernard that while much in the Bible "arouses our despair and our indignation," at its center is the figure of Christ, "a greater artist than all other artists" (Van Gogh 1888, letter 632), who speaks in amazing parables as presented

in the Gospels. And even within the Gospel books, Van Gogh can single out the Gospel of Luke with its lowly manger scene as surprising home of the Infinite among the poor and dispossessed, placing that Gospel along with the letters of Paul at the apex of art and philosophy. Van Gogh's close reading of the letters of Paul finds special meaning in Paul's realization of the paradoxical unity of apparent opposites, as in his several quotations from Second Corinthians regarding the nature of the Christian life: "sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing all things" (2 Cor. 6: 10). Also, I would guess that a lifetime of reading Paul's letters had a significant effect on the purpose, form, and language of Van Gogh's own letters, a topic not explored in Guzzoni.

I will close with one illustration of the significance of the above understanding of Van Gogh's preference for certain books of the Bible to a deeper understanding of his reading other literature and its influence on his art. Guzzoni shows us Van Gogh's famous painting *Still Life with Bible* (with a yellow paperback of Zola's *La joie de vivre*) on page 87. On the previous page she writes, "Its title is misleading, for it is not a joyous story; on the contrary, it is one of Zola's most pessimistic works" (86). Though there are interpreters who agree with her, I suggest that a deeper understanding of Van Gogh's close reading gives us quite a different message that relates his painting, the Isaiah passage to which the Bible is opened, and Zola's novel. The Bible is clearly marked as open to the Suffering Servant Songs, Isaiah chapter 53, describing the mysterious Servant as "despised and rejected" (Isa. 53:3), "led to the slaughter" (Isa. 53:7), yet we are told that "by his bruises we are healed" (Isa. 53:5), and "out of his anguish he shall see light" (Isa. 53:11). By Isaiah chapter 54 we are invited to sing and by chapter 60 those songs announce that we will "arise and shine" (Isa. 60:1) for the wounded servant has brought us a gospel of joyous song and feasting.

The above-mentioned paradox of suffering bringing joy seems clearly presented, whether the servant is a messiah, prophet, or other figure. The Zola novel beside the ponderous Bible tells the story of an orphan girl, Pauline Quenu, put under the care of a selfish bourgeois family that robs her of her inheritance and treats her miserably as their servant. Despite her suffering, she becomes an angel of charity in their poor fishing village, healing the sick and caring for the neglected. Rather than presenting us with a dark and pessimistic ending, as asserted by Guzzoni, Zola concludes the story of the servant girl with the same celebratory note as the Isaiah passage. She would remain unmarried in order to work for the universal deliverance. And she was, indeed, the incarnation of renunciation, for love for others and kindly charity for erring humanity: "She had stripped herself of everything, but her happiness rang out in her clear laugh" (Zola [1884] 1915, 317). Van Gogh, I believe, finds the same message of healing and joy

of living in Isaiah and Zola. In fact, he may well be equating the great writer/artists of his time with the great prophets of biblical days and suggesting his understanding of his own role.

A close reading of certain biblical books, Van Gogh's letters, and Zola's novels brings together a philosophy of paradox, where suffering and healing, sorrow and joy, darkness and light find their unity. Further, we might extend this paradox to Van Gogh's completing of his own life in the arts by giving up his painting and sacrificing himself for the welfare of brother Theo, Theo's wife Johanna, and their child, Vincent's godchild.

In concluding this review of Guzzoni's book, I point to the review's opening with its description of the volume's contributions, the thoughtful blending of words with relevant images relating to Van Gogh's reading and focus on readers. My critique is simply intended to offer a reminder of the depth and breadth of Van Gogh's search for meaning, the need for further emphasis on his many years of living with his critical choices among the books of the Bible, and the need for careful attention to the philosophical and artistic development of his search for meaning.

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About the reviewer

Cliff Edwards served as Powell-Edwards Distinguished Professor of Religion and the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia (U.S.), until his retirement in 2020. He earned degrees from Drew University (Madison, New Jersey), Garrett Theological Seminary (Evanston, Illinois), and the Ph.D. from Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois). He studied at the University of Strasbourg in France, the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland, Oxford University in England, the Hebrew Union College Biblical and Archaeological School in Jerusalem, and Daitokuji Zen Monastery in Kyoto, Japan. As a Coolidge Fellow he spent two terms doing research at Columbia University's art libraries. Among his books are *Christian being and doing: A study-commentary on James and I Peter* (Board of Missions' Joint Commission on Education and Cultivation, 1966), *Everything under heaven: The life and words of a nature mystic, Issa of Japan* (Virginia Commonwealth University, 1980), *Van Gogh and God: A creative spiritual*

quest (Loyola Press, 1989), *The shoes of Van Gogh: A spiritual and artistic journey to the ordinary* (Crossroad, 2004), *Mystery of The Night Café: Hidden key to the spirituality of Vincent van Gogh* (SUNY Press, 2009), *Van Gogh's ghost painting: Art and spirit in Gethsemane* (Wipf and Stock, 2015), and *Van Gogh's second gift: A spiritual path to deeper creativity* (Broadleaf Books, 2020). Dr. Edwards lives in Gainesville, Florida.

