

## Taking and Denying

Challenging Canons in Arts and Philosophy

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# The Example of Vincent van Gogh Denying Forms, Systems and Academicism in Art and Religion

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**Abstract** The Dutch post-impressionist artist Vincent Willem van Gogh (1853-90) affected the art movements and artists of the 20th century. His artistic thought, symbolic language and perspective on reality was far from that of the painters of his time and so they could not understand him or appreciate his work. Van Gogh did not consider himself to be an academic artist, or his work to be of academic standard. He knew that they were not technically perfect. In van Gogh's works, art is governed by spirituality. Van Gogh rejected academicism in both art and religion.

**Keywords** Canon. Academicism. Religion. Systems. Symbols.

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## 1 Introduction

What is the *canon* in Art History? According to the glossary of the National Gallery of Art (London), 'canon' is:

the conventional timeline of artists who are sometimes considered as 'Old Masters' or 'Great Artists'. Today's art history attempts to question these



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rules of 'greatness', considering issues of gender, race, class, and geography among others.<sup>1</sup>

It is a consensus about what is worth keeping and what is not worth keeping in art's journey through time, the standards that change forms and create problems in understanding during an objective interpretation (Carrier 1993). These changes might be described simply as taking and denying in art. But to what degree can these canons be objective? Who defines what has aesthetic value or not? Would art history be the same if great artists did not deny following the canons of their time? What would art history be without those who denied canons and followed their artistic way?

Many elements and factors define canons, such as policy, religion, ideas in philosophy and the social background, and this is why a canon in the art can not be objective. Art experts just develop the approaches in defining these canons yet they know that those might change in the future. What is the role of religion in the art debate now? And why should religion be related to art and culture? In Paul Tillich's thought, all religious acts and not only those which are articulated according to the norms of the specific religion, but every intimate movement of the soul, are culturally formed (Tillich, Kimball 1964). Therefore, relationship between culture and religion is very close. In fact, culture is the form of religion (Tillich, Kimball 1964), it can be an attempt of interpretation of religion. In which circumstances can religion produce art? One might say it happens when religion is, like a jar that is slightly open, ready to enter into dialogue outside the close limits of the its systems (Apostolos-Capadona 1995). How many pieces of art have a religious character? How strong may the impact of large devotional paintings can be? And finally, how many symbols that refer to religious themes and the sacred do they hide?

## 2 The Example of Vincent van Gogh and His Religious Background

A very notable example that links all these aspects in one artistic path is that of Vincent Willem van Gogh (1853-90) whose life, art, and personality were characterised by a strong religious background. The Dutch post-impressionist artist influenced many art movements and artists of the twentieth century. Van Gogh came in touch with different artistic environments in different countries, and he was also connected to many artists of his time. Van Gogh did not consider

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/canon-of-art-history>.

himself as an academic artist. The same is valid for his paintings. He knew that they were not perfect in terms of technique. But he moved forward through his mistakes and imperfections, always remaining hopeful. In van Gogh's works art is governed by spirituality. Van Gogh rejected academicism in both art and religion (Masheck 1996).

Van Gogh had a strong religious background. His father Theodorus van Gogh was a pastor, as his grandfather too. His family belonged not to the strict Calvinists but to the Dutch Reformed Church. Later as an artist, van Gogh distanced himself from Orthodox Calvinism of the Dutch Reformed Church and leaned more towards Groningen's theology, which paved the way for more liberal artistic and religious pursuits. Before he became a painter, he tried to study theology and become a pastor three times in different schools (Ramsgate, Amsterdam, Laken) but with no success. He also moved to Laken (Brussels) for a three-month trial period training to become an evangelist. He was finally rejected by the theology school of Belgium. After that, he moved to Borinage for six months to work as an evangelist. There he decided to become an illustrator.

### 3 Rejected by Theological Schools and by His Parents

Van Gogh was disappointed by the religious system and the theology schools too. His letters were full of biblical passages, and his writings in general were spiritual during those years.

I cannot tell you how much I sometimes yearn for the Bible. I do read something out of it every day, but I'd so much like to know it by heart and to see life in the light of that word of which it is said: Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.<sup>2</sup> (LT108)

Van Gogh came from a family with generations of preachers, which is why he felt a strong sense of debt to his family to continue this tradition. His father, Theodorus van Gogh, had doubts about Vincent's success in passing the exams at the theology schools. Vincent's mother, Anna Cornelia van Gogh-Carbentus, also had doubts about his ability to preach (note 1, LT148). The fact of being rejected from all theology schools provoked in him a negative attitude towards religious systems, clergymen, and academicism. Moreover, he disowns his father. Vincent accuses him of his academic view of the Bible claiming his parents' ideas "about God, people, morality, virtue, [being] almost complete nonsense" (LT193).

<sup>2</sup> Ps. 119:105. LT stands for letter and the number of the letter as it is indexed in the academic website of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam (<http://vangoghletters.org/vg>).

#### 4 Clergymen in van Gogh's Thought

Van Gogh detested clergymen. He disapproved their ideas about love and sin:

Clergymen call us sinners, conceived and born in sin. Bah! I think that damned nonsense. Is it a sin to love, to need love, not to be able to do without love? I consider a life without love a sinful condition and an immoral condition. If there's anything I regret, it's that for a time I let mystical and theological profundities seduce me into withdrawing too much inside myself. I've gradually stopped doing that. If you wake up in the morning and you're not alone and you see in the twilight a fellow human being, it makes the world so much more agreeable. Much more agreeable than the edifying journals and whitewashed church walls the clergymen are in love with. (LT193)

And another point of the same letter that reveals his perception of them:

Can professors fall in love? Do clergymen know what love is? (LT193)

Van Gogh wrote all these to his brother Theo when he told him that he had a moment of love with a prostitute. He totally disagrees with clergymen who condemn women like her:

Every woman, at every age, if she loves and if she is kind, can give a man not the infinite of the moment but the moment of the infinite. (LT193)

Vincent distanced himself from the closed religious systems despite the fact that he believed that

[o]ne of the things that will not pass is something on high and belief in God, even if the forms change, a change as necessary as the renewal of greenery in the spring. (LT294)

#### 5 Rejecting Religious Academicism

Another system van Gogh rejected was Theology Faculty and its academicism. He turned against theologians who "place one of those burdens grievous to be borne around people's necks and do not touch with one of their fingers" (LT188).<sup>3</sup> He also regarded "the whole Uni-

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 11:46: "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them".

versity (or at least the Theology Faculty) as an unspeakable mess, a breeding-ground for Pharisees” (LT388). Van Gogh was disappointed by their confrontation. He was obviously discouraged by the inconsistency between their words and actions. Furthermore, he faced numerous and often difficult subjects he had to learn to take exams (Latin, Greek, algebra and geometry, history, geography, and Dutch). Van Gogh reveals his feelings one more time when he says that he did not really know anything about the schools he wanted to study in. That means that their in-depth essence and their true face doubtlessly did not meet any of his expectations:

The fact that I made a mistake was an error in point of view, understandable, perhaps, because I didn't know then how things were regarding teaching or evangelism - knew nothing about them - and had ideals about them. (LT400)

But after all these disappointments he will find hope in art:

Whatever else the art world may be, it isn't rotten. (LT400)

Van Gogh also criticised theologians and Christianity of his time. He is intensely critical about all those who think that woman is evil and share the wrong vision of love which they see as a sin (LT464).

## 6 Van Gogh's Relationship with Anton Mauve and Their Quarrel

When van Gogh was 28 years old, he showed his work to the Dutch artist Anton Mauve. Mauve urged van Gogh to paint (LT171). Mauve seemed interested in van Gogh's drawings. Vincent was very excited at the beginning of their relationship because Mauve seemed to help him with his advice and technique. Van Gogh admired Mauve and followed his methods until he was disappointed by him.

Afterwards, Vincent described in a letter to his brother Theo how Mauve changed his behaviour towards him. According to van Gogh's point of view, Mauve changed his behaviour because of Tersteeg, an art dealer at the Goupil Gallery in The Hague. Moreover, Vincent wrote that Mauve was demanding strict loyalty and made him use only specific materials van Gogh did not want (LT219). Another fact was that Mauve told Vincent that he had “a vicious character” (LT224). Vincent suspected that this accusation had to do with his relationship with Clasina (Sien) Maria Hoornik, a pregnant woman abandoned by the man whose child she was carrying, whom he protected and lived with. Van Gogh's life choices and lifestyle might have made Mauve stay away from him. However mad van Gogh might have been, he con-

tinued to respect Mauve as an artist. After Mauve's death (5 February 1888), Van Gogh painted *Pink Peach Trees* and decided to give it to Mauve's widow around 30 March 1888 (LT590).

## 7 Anthon van Rappard. Another Breakdown

Anthon Gerard Alexander van Rappard (1858-92) was a Dutch artist and friend of Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh had a friendly relationship with Rappard and they corresponded for four years (1881-5). Van Gogh shared his first steps in art with him, his artistic thoughts, his opinion and his modern ideas. In his letters, Vincent shares his experiences in the art world, every detail from his everyday struggle to become a painter. He also shared his bad moments and his hard times through his writings. Rappard was one of the few friends he had.

The breakdown in their relationship came when Rappard criticised *The Potato Eaters* [fig. 1] with very negative comments about it:

Why not study the movements? Now they're posing. That coquetish little hand of that woman at the back, how untrue! And what connection is there between the coffeepot, the table and the hand lying on top of the handle? What's that pot doing, for that matter; it isn't standing, it isn't being held, but what then? And why may that man on the right not have a knee or a belly or lungs? Or are they in his back? And why must his arm be a metre too short? And why must he lack half of his nose? And why must the woman on the left have a sort of little pipe stem with a cube on it for a nose?

And with such a manner of working you dare to invoke the names of Millet and Breton? Come on! Art is too important, it seems to me, to be treated so cavalierly. (LT503)

The whole criticism was about the technique. Rappard was really strict with van Gogh. For Rappard, it was outrageous that he drew something so nonacademic. On the other hand, van Gogh was very excited about *The Potato Eaters* (LT497) so he became upset with Rappard's letter. At the same time he had lost his father. His first reaction was to send back Rappard's letter. Vincent was also annoyed by Rappard's printed notice for condolences. He felt insulted by Rappard's letter and found his negative criticism unfair. His response was:

For my part - I go my own way - you see - but I don't seek a quarrel with anyone - not with you now either. I'd also let you say anything that you wanted - if you had any more such expressions - and it would just be like water off a duck's back. So much for the present, though. That I don't care about the form of the figure, which you've said before - it's beneath me to take any no-



**Figure 1** Vincent van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*. 1885. Oil on canvas, cm 82 × 114. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), source: [www.vangoghmuseum.nl](http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl)

tice of it and – old chap – it’s beneath you to say something so unfounded. You’ve known me for years now – have you ever seen me do anything other than work from the model and resign myself to the sometimes great expense of it, even though I’m poor enough as it is? (LT514)

Van Gogh spent all the money he had to paint and pay his models to pose, and Rappard should have known that. Regarding his technique van Gogh answered:

What I replied to you then and reply once more is – the conventional meaning that people increasingly give to the word technique, and the actual meaning, knowledge. Well then. Meissonier himself says: “the knowledge – nobody has it”. (LT514)

And he continued:

My assertion is simply this – that drawing a figure academically correctly – that an even, reasoned brushstroke has little – at least less than is generally thought – to do with the needs – the urgent needs – of the present day in the field of painting. (LT514)

Van Gogh claimed that a painter does not need to paint academically correctly if he wants to meet the artistic needs of his time. And this

is why he did not intend to follow that way anymore. But why was this artwork so important for Van Gogh? What was so special about it? *The Potato Eaters* was a painting with social meaning about manual labour and honestly earned food.<sup>4</sup> He wanted to emphasise the difference between the civilised people and labourers. Apparently, what mattered to the Dutch artist in his work were not the imperfections and incorrect anatomies but the message he could express through it.

## 8 Christ in the Garden of Olives. Between Different Perceptions

'Primitives' Bernard and Gauguin drew *Christ in the Garden of Olives*. According to van Gogh, they should have drawn something different. This biblical theme was made extraordinary by Rembrandt and Delacroix. Van Gogh would have chosen a more contemporary subject with olive picking but with the exact same meaning of *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (LT820). Van Gogh stated that he did not admire Gauguin's sketch for the painting. He also wrote that his friend Bernard must not have ever seen a real olive tree.

Van Gogh's artistic choice was to synthesise something totally different. A painting with olive trees and a big yellow sun in the middle (LT829). A painting with olive trees and the strongest blue colours that symbolise Christ (LT685). Moreover, a painting with olive picking as it was in real life (LT820) [fig. 2]. All paintings with the exact same meaning. Vincent wanted to speak through allegories and symbols with his art. He experimented with colours and different brushstroke effects.

## 9 Van Gogh's 'Non-Technique'

Van Gogh's artistic journey started with his decision to become an illustrator (LT164). In his early beginning, he wanted to study drawing, anatomy and make progress in technique. Next to Mauve he learned some techniques to reject them later. He wanted to experiment with colours and materials. He chose the hard way of originality and not the way of imitation. He also wanted to study nude but not in an academic way. The restrictions in art made van Gogh think of it as "an offen-

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<sup>4</sup> "You see, I really have wanted to make it so that people get the idea that these folk, who are eating their potatoes by the light of their little lamp, have tilled the earth themselves with these hands they are putting in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labour and - that they have thus honestly earned their food. I wanted it to give the idea of a wholly different way of life from ours - civilised people. So, I certainly don't want everyone just to admire it or approve of it without knowing why" (LT497).





**Figure 2** Vincent van Gogh, *Women Picking Olives*. 1889. Oil on canvas. in 285/8 × 36 (cm 72.7 × 91.4 cm). The Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg Collection, Gift of Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg, 1995, Bequest of Walter H. Annenberg, 2002. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, source: [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)

sive, a military campaign, a battle or war” (LT212). Vincent underlined how wrong it was to make a painter change his method of painting or even worse to make him change his ideas. He referred to Tersteeg, an art dealer who was rude in Van Gogh’s thought (LT213). All these facts were forms of non-freedom. He felt finally free by the time he cut off his relations with Mauve.<sup>5</sup> The painter also tried to take some lessons in ‘Classical Statues’ drawing at the Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten but he realised that the way he used the colours was different from the other painters (LT555), as he used many colours in contrast to other painters, who were using just the same colour.

The painter wanted to move people with his works (LT249). He did not consider himself as an Impressionist (LT666) although he called whatever that movement did artistically sacrosanct (LT657). He was proud of being almost<sup>6</sup> self-taught and compromised with his imper-

**5** “He did indeed have nothing to do with me for those two months, but in that time I wasn’t sitting still, though I can assure you I wasn’t drawing from plaster casts and, I must say, worked with more spirit and passion once I was free” (LT219).

**6** Although van Gogh did not study academically drawing, he practiced his technique about a year next to Anton Mauve under his guidance.

fections and errors in technique because it let him free to create in his personal style without restrictions.<sup>7</sup> Art and life were closely connected in the painter's mind (LT307). He hoped that people would find a spiritual dimension in his paintings deviating from traditional technique (LT439). He also wrote:

my great desire is to learn to make such inaccuracies, such variations, reworkings, alterations of the reality, that it might become, very well - lies if you will - but - truer than the literal truth. (LT515)

This idea could find similarities in Orthodox theology in the notion that the holiness and sin can meet. This does not mean that holy is not pure but that there is a margin to sin and regret.

The Dutch painter made many works that were dedicated to the simple people (diggers, miners, sowers, reapers, labourers, weavers). He wanted to make social criticism of underpaid and manual work.<sup>8</sup> Van Gogh's other artistic target was

to draw not a hand but the GESTURE, not a mathematically correct head but the overall expression. The sniffing of the wind when a digger looks up, say, or speaking. Life, in short. (LT502)

Van Gogh absolutely wanted to give life in his paintings through colours (LT201). He used very thick impasto to give the liveliness effect to his works. Vincent often referred to the terms liveliness, vitality, something with soul in it, energetic movement, action.

Later the painter would start painting landscapes. He would also find poetry in nature (LT657). He admired Japanese art and adopted many elements from it. It was like a return to nature, a new religion that would make human much happier and more cheerful (LT686). He liked the simplicity Japanese art had. Through the Japanese mo-

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<sup>7</sup> "I'm glad that I've never learned how to paint. Probably then I would have learned to ignore effects like this. Now I say, no, that's exactly what I want - if it's not possible then it's not possible - I want to try it even though I don't know how it's supposed to be done. I don't know myself how I paint. I sit with a whiteboard before the spot that strikes me - I look at what's before my eyes - I say to myself, this whiteboard must become something - I come back, dissatisfied - I put it aside, and after I've rested a little, feeling a kind of fear, I take a look at it - then I'm still dissatisfied - because I have that marvellous nature too much in mind for me to be satisfied - but still, I see in my work an echo of what struck me, I see that nature has told me something, has spoken to me and that I've written it down in shorthand. In my shorthand there may be indecipherable words - errors or gaps - yet something remains of what the wood or the beach or the figure said - and it isn't a tame or conventional language which doesn't stem from nature itself but a studied manner or a system" (LT260).

<sup>8</sup> See LT479.

tifs of flowers, for example, van Gogh wanted to give consolation. His whole art was, to some extent, consolatory (LT739).

## 10 Conclusion

Many researchers call Vincent van Gogh a pilgrim. He also referred that our life is a pilgrim's progress (LT96). He did a long and hard way to find peace in his life through many difficulties and disappointments. His artwork became his shelter, but he needed acceptance from people of his time. Van Gogh exhibited at Tanguy's shop who was a seller of art supplies. He also exhibited some works at the salon of the Impressionists in Brussels, and he had positive feedback. French writer and artist Aurier wrote a very positive critique about van Gogh's sunflowers. He called them "glorious heliomythic allegory" (LT850, footnote 6). Nevertheless, Van Gogh sold nothing but *The Red Vineyard* in 1890 (LT855).

After all, these efforts and hard times van Gogh got through for religion and art proved his own way to meet God. Vincent was disappointed by all the closed systems he coped with. For van Gogh, official art and religion would not last,<sup>9</sup> he hoped for something better, purer and more authentic. He tried to create a different world, full of colours, full of life, without any academic limit. Van Gogh crossed the lines in academicism, and he rejected the canons that restrained him. He wanted his freedom, a different way to find God through his art, a personal pilgrimage, remaining devoted to the idea that, as he said, painting was a faith (LT490).

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<sup>9</sup> "Well art - official art - and its education, management, organisation, is as stultified and moldering as the religion we see falling - and it won't last, however many exhibitions, studios, schools & c. there may be, won't last any more than tulip mania" (LT626).

## Abbreviations

LT	Letter
Ps	Psalm

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