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**The  
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## Van Gogh's gushing letter to art critic goes on show in Amsterdam

**In letter artist describes review, one of the first of his paintings, as ‘a work of art in itself’**

**Daniel Boffey** *in Brussels*

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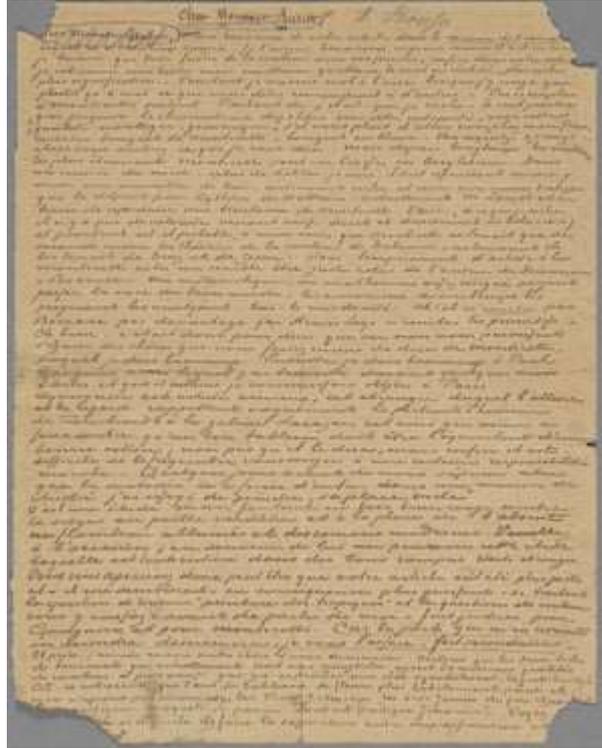


Detail from Van Gogh's Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear (1889). Photograph: The Courtauld Gallery/PA

It was written by Vincent van Gogh a few months before his death aged 37, during his time as a patient at a small asylum on the outskirts of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence where he painted some of his most vivid and celebrated works.

In rapture at one of the first reviews of his paintings, Van Gogh described the critic's writing as “a work of art in itself” in a tightly packed two-page letter to its author,

Albert Aurier. “I rediscover my canvases in your article, but better than they really are – richer, more significant,” Van Gogh wrote.

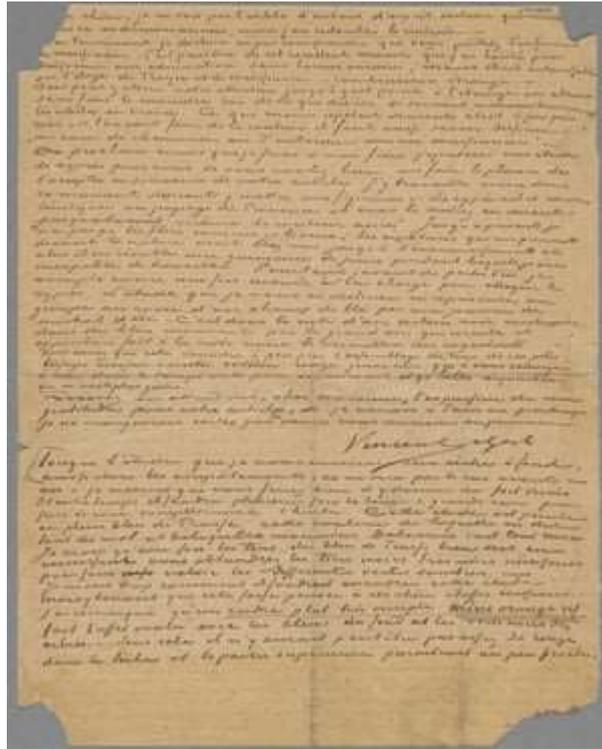


The first page of the letter. Photograph: Heleen van Driel

Containing many references to those who had inspired the artist and littered with indications of his tortured soul, the letter, written on 9 or 10 February 1890, had long been at the top of the Van Gogh Museum’s list of correspondence it wished to recover.

On Thursday, after securing it at auction last month, receiving a donation to cover the full €107,900 sale price from the Hong Kong tycoon Cheung Chung-kiu and his wife, Cecilia, the museum in Amsterdam was finally able to put the letter on public display for what is believed to be the first time.

Having passed through the hands of private collectors around the world, the letter had been purchased in 2007 by the murky Aristophil investment scheme, the world’s biggest buyer of historical manuscripts, before an auction where the Van Gogh Museum had hoped to secure it.



The second page. Photograph: Heleen van Driel

It was only after Aristophil's bankruptcy, and the arrest of those who ran it on charges of fraud, including Gérard Lhéritier, known as the man who turned paper into gold, that the coveted letter finally emerged back on the market in Paris.

“The great thing about it is that as far as we know it has hardly been shown in public. So this is the first time, we expect,” said the museum’s curator of prints and drawings, Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho.

“It was on top of our list because it is such an important letter. Most of the letters on our wish list have sketches on them. This one has not, but the content of it is so moving and rich that we thought we should pursue it.”

Aurier, who was also a poet, had seen two Van Gogh exhibitions before writing in the January 1890 edition of the *Mercure de France* magazine a piece entitled *Les Isolés* in which he claimed that what characterised the artist’s work was “excess, excess in strength, excess in nervousness, violence in expression”.

“In his letter Van Gogh is trying to level with Aurier in the use of his language,” De Carvalho said. “He is very happy to have this review and he writes to his brother Theo, at the same time, that it is like getting a golden medal at the *Salon* if he were more a more traditionalist artist. He asked his brother to share the review with all his friends and artistic colleagues.”

But De Carvalho said the essence of Van Gogh’s letter, written less than two years after he had cut off his ear following a passionate row with his fellow artist Paul Gauguin, was that Van Gogh did not feel worthy of the praise.

She said: “He feels like it is too much attention for him individually and he is so indebted to other painters such as Gauguin and more obscure ones such as [Adolphe] Monticelli, and he wants to stress that it is not an individual achievement but that he is standing on the shoulders of others.”

The letter explains some of Van Gogh’s working methods, and the emotions he felt when painting. “He is thinking of giving Aurier a painting as a gift and he says: ‘You have to wait for the study to dry for a year.’ It makes you think: how thick is the paint?”

Having lived and worked in Britain as an art dealer, Van Gogh also writes in his letter that “the most astonishing Monticellis have been in Scotland and England”, and implores the art critic to view them.

De Carvalho said: “It is a misconception that he wasn’t valued during his lifetime because at the end he was getting quite well known in certain artistic circles but he found that somehow hard to deal with. So there is a lot of mixed emotion. He is proud but also feeling that he is not there yet, not yet deserving of the praise.”

Van Gogh died five months later from a shot to the stomach in an apparent suicide.

## Full transcript of the letter

Dear Mr Aurier,

Thank you very much for your article in the *Mercure de France*, which greatly surprised me. I like it very much as a work of art in itself, I feel that you create colours with your words; anyway I rediscover my canvases in your article, but better than they really are – richer, more significant. However, I feel ill at ease when I reflect that what you say should be applied to others rather than to me. For example, to Monticelli above all. Speaking of “he is – as far as I know – the only painter who perceives the coloration of things with such intensity, with such a metallic, gem-like quality” – if you will please go and see a particular bouquet by Monticelli at my brother’s place – bouquet in white, forget-me-not blue and orange – then you will feel what I mean. But for a long time the best, the most astonishing Monticellis, have been in Scotland, in England. In a museum in the north however – the one in Lille I think, there must still be a marvel by him, far richer and certainly no less French than Watteau’s *Departure for Cythera*. At present Mr Lauzet is in the process of reproducing around thirty Monticellis. Here you have it, as far as I know there is no colourist who comes so straight and directly from Delacroix; and yet it is likely, in my opinion, that Monticelli only had Delacroix’s colour theories at second hand; in particular he had them from Diaz and Ziem. It seems to me that his, Monticelli’s, artistic temperament is exactly that of the author of the *Decameron* – Boccaccio – a melancholy man, an unhappy, rather resigned man, seeing high society’s party pass by, the lovers of his day, painting them, analysing them, he – the outcast. Oh! He does not *imitate* Boccaccio any more than Henri Leys imitated the primitives. Well, this was to say that things seem to have strayed onto my name that you would do better to say of Monticelli, to whom I owe a great deal. Next I owe a great deal to Paul Gauguin, with whom I worked for a few months in Arles, and whom, besides, I already knew in Paris.

Gauguin, that curious artist, that stranger whose bearing and gaze vaguely recall Rembrandt’s portrait of a man in the La Caze gallery, that friend who likes to

make one feel that a good painting should be the equivalent of a good deed, not that he says so, but anyway it is difficult to spend time with him without thinking of a certain moral responsibility. A few days before we parted, when illness forced me to enter an asylum, I tried to paint "his empty place".

It is a study of his armchair of dark, red-brown wood, the seat of greenish straw, and in the absent person's place a lighted candlestick and some modern novels. If you have the opportunity, as a memento of him, please go and look a little at this study again, which is entirely in broken tones of green and red. You may perhaps then realise that your article would have been more accurate and – it would seem to me – thus more powerful – if in dealing with the question of the future "painting of the tropics" and the question of colour, you had done justice to [Gauguin](#) and [Monticelli](#) before talking about me. For the share that falls or will fall to me will remain, I assure you, very secondary.

And then, I would also have something else to ask of you. Supposing that the two canvases of sunflowers that are presently at the Vingtistes have certain qualities of colour, and then also that they express an idea symbolising "gratitude". Is this any different from so many paintings of flowers that are more skilfully painted and which people do not yet sufficiently appreciate, *père Quost's* Hollyhocks, Yellow Irises? The magnificent bouquets of peonies which [Jeannin](#) produces in abundance? You see, it seems to me so difficult to separate Impressionism from other things, I cannot see the point of so much sectarian thinking as we have seen these last few years, but I fear its absurdity.

And, in closing, I declare that I do not understand that *you* spoke of [Meissonier's](#) infamies. It is perhaps from that excellent fellow [Mauve](#) that I have inherited a boundless admiration for Meissonier; Mauve was endless in his praise for [Troyon](#) and Meissonier – a strange combination.

This is to draw your attention to how much people abroad admire, without attaching the slightest importance to what unfortunately so often divides artists in France. What [Mauve](#) often repeated was something like this, "if you want to do colour you must also know how to draw a fireside or an interior like [Meissonier](#)".

I shall add a study of cypresses for you to the next consignment I send to my brother, if you will do me the pleasure of accepting it as a memento of your article. I am still working on it at the moment, wanting to put in a small figure. The cypress is so characteristic of the landscape of Provence, and you sensed it when saying: 'even the colour black'. Until now I have not been able to do them as I feel it; in my case the emotions that take hold of me in the face of nature go as far as fainting, and then the result is a fortnight during which I am incapable of working. However, before leaving here, I am planning to return to the fray to attack the cypresses. The study I have intended for you depicts a group of them in the corner of a wheat field on a summer's day when the mistral is blowing. It is therefore the note of a certain blackness enveloped in blue moving in great circulating currents of air, and the vermilion of the poppies contrasts with the black note.

You will see that this constitutes more or less the combination of tones of those pretty Scottish checked cloths: green, blue, red, yellow, black, which once appeared so charming to you as they did to me, and which alas one scarcely sees any more these days.

In the meantime, dear sir, please accept my grateful thanks for your article. If I were to come to Paris in the spring I shall certainly not fail to come and thank you in person.

Vincent van Gogh

[PS:] When the study I send you is dry right through, also in the impasto, which will not be the case for a year – I should think you would do well to give it a good coat of varnish. And between times it should be washed several times with plenty of water to get out the oil completely. This study is painted in full Prussian blue, that colour about which people say so many bad things and which nevertheless Delacroix used so much. I think that once the Prussian blue tones are really dry, by varnishing you will obtain the dark, the very dark tones needed to bring out the different dark greens. I do not quite know how this study should be framed, but as I really want it to make one think of those dear Scottish fabrics, I have noticed that a very simple flat frame, *bright orange lead*, creates the desired effect with the blues of the background and the dark greens of the trees. Without this there would perhaps not be enough red in the canvas, and the upper part would appear a little cold.

