Van Gogh: A New Impression
Van's The Man

If you think you know Van Gogh, think again, says Charles Saumarez Smith. As the latest exhibition at the Royal Academy shows, his work displays far more than a wild genius gone mad

After an autumn during which the Royal Academy was full of the works of Anish Kapoor, it is now the turn of Van Gogh. The queues are lining up in the courtyard, fortified by mobile cups of coffee, for an opportunity to see and study Van Gogh as an artist with a much greater focus and concentration than, in my experience, has ever previously been possible – certainly in Britain, where we have not had a major Van Gogh exhibition for 40 years.

The exhibition is an astonishing opportunity to consider Van Gogh in depth. Some people were sceptical that it was a good idea to exhibit works of art alongside letters – in truth, it is a very old-fashioned idea, long ago dropped by the National Portrait Gallery, that the hand of the artist would somehow lend authenticity to the works. But it is what is special about this exhibition. Instead of being looked at just as an art exhibition, it has become an exploration of his state of mind through the writing of the letters to his brother, Theo, and, even for those who do not actually read the letters *in situ* (and I am confident that most of the visitors do not read Dutch), it lends a different aura of concentration to the way people are looking at the exhibition: they are not just looking at the works of art as aesthetic objects; they are studying them biographically as evidence of his long search for an appropriate way of expressing himself artistically. The letters are surprisingly intense documents in their own right, including sketches of what he was working on at the time and descriptions of what he has seen, as when he writes of the view out of his window in The Hague:

So you must imagine me sitting at my attic window as early as 4 o'clock, studying the meadows and the carpenter's yard with my perspective frame – as the fires are lit in the court to make coffee, and the first worker ambles into the yard. Over the red tiled roofs comes a flock of white pigeons flying between the black smoking chimneys. But behind this is an infinity of delicate, gentle green, miles and miles of flat meadow, and a grey sky as still, as peaceful as Corot and Van Goyen.

This is a very characteristic description: at once intense of the precision of its observational powers, but also simultaneously making reference to the works of art he had been studying.

The second aspect of the exhibition that is special is that most people associate Van Gogh with the 14 months he spent in Arles right at the end of his life, when he went mad, was confined to a hospital in Saint-Rémy, and painted hot, intense, slightly wild views of the surrounding fields and mountains. But there are at least three rooms that show his apprenticeship, emerging as an artist, trying out different styles. This work is much more unfamiliar and fascinating in showing him as a visual

autodidact. In fact, one of my favourite works in the exhibition is a very early drawing, which has been borrowed from the National Gallery of Art in Ottawa and consists of little of tiny flicks of the pen over the paper describing a flat but atmospheric marshscape in southern Brabant. There is also a whole room full of drawings of heavy peasants working the fields in clogs – work that is obviously inspired by the work of Jean-François Millet. Even when Van Gogh moves to Paris in February 1886, his touch on the canvas is curiously uncertain, sometimes applied in dabs and sometimes in much lighter, almost pointillist strokes. It would be hard to guess that his view of the *Terrace in the Luxembourg Gardens* and the immediately adjacent *Vase of Cornflowers, Daisies, Poppies and Carnations* are the work of a low-grade Impressionist.

So, it was only in the hot sunshine of Provence that Van Gogh emerges as an artist with his own strong and highly individual artistic personality, painting a portrait of Joseph Roulin, the local postman, and an intense self-portrait, looking, as he described the portrait in a letter to his sister, "quite unkempt and sad". But then he adds a reflective comment about the difference between painting and photography: "And you see – this is what Impressionism has – to my mind – over the rest, it isn't banal, and one seeks a deeper likeness than that of the photographer."

Van Gogh emerges as an altogether much more interesting artist – and person – than the mad, untutored genius of cinematic legend. In fact, he appears as something of an artistic chameleon, as opposed to always having his own authentic, and totally original, artistic style. He is more thoughtful than one would expect; highly literate; a student of English literature, including the works of Dickens; and capable of extremely beautiful descriptions of what he has seen and is doing. One walks round the exhibition as if in the company of Van Gogh himself, guided by how he was choosing to describe his state of mind.

The Real Van Gogh: The Artist and His Letters *runs until 18 April 2010 at the Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1 (020-7300 8000; www.royalacademy.org.uk).*

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