



Born 165 years ago today, the troubled artist continues to captivate gallery-goers around the world

Today marks the 165th anniversary of the birth of [Vincent van Gogh](#) (1853-90), one of the world's most popular and distinctive painters.

The Dutchman's style is instantly recognisable and his most famous works *Sunflowers* (1887), *Cafe Terrace at Night* (1888) and *The Starry Night* (1889) are among the most revered in the world, attracting crowds to galleries for more than 100 years and appealing as readily to connoisseurs as they do to the merely curious.

Van Gogh himself lived a turbulent and itinerant life, roaming the [Low Countries](#) and the meadows of southern

[France](#)

with an easel strapped to his back and that ever-present pipe clamped between his peeling, sunburnt lips and loose teeth, a red-headed stranger on a mission to document the manmade hardships and God-given splendour of rural existence.

Taking inspiration from Jean-François Millet and the novels of Emile Zola, his first works capture the toil, dejection and consolations of the miners, weavers, reapers, tillers, peat-cutters, labourers and farmhands he encountered.

They reveal a huge compassion for their subjects, the period exemplified by the ruddy vitality of *The Potato Eaters* (1885) dining together by lamplight.

A living embodiment of the tortured artist archetype, Van Gogh was known for his irascible temper and restlessness and famously severed a sliver of his own ear with a cutthroat razor in the midst of a manic depressive episode in Arles, Provence. His subsequent self-portrait, complete with bandage, today hangs in London's Courtauld Gallery.

He spent time in a number of psychiatric institutions, notably at Saint-Remy where he painted his fellow inmates, before finally losing faith in the hope that he might ever be cured of the madness and despair that hounded him and taking his own life.

Despite being just 37 when he fatally shot himself in the chest in a wheat field outside of Auvers-sur-Oise, northwest of Paris, Van Gogh left behind more than 1,900 paintings and sketches – an astounding body of work – and remains a figure of enormous fascination.

Perhaps the greatest clue to his peculiar character is revealed through the letters he sent to his devoted younger brother Theo (1857-91), who supported Vincent financially and emotionally throughout his life and steered him towards painting following false starts in England and as a Protestant missionary to the coalminers of Borinage in [Belgium](#).

It was Theo, a successful art dealer, who first brought his erratic sibling to Paris in 1886 and

introduced him to the leading lights of the Post-Impressionist movement in Montmartre, men like Paul Gauguin, Camille Pissarro and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, whose taste for Japanese prints and vibrant use of colour emboldened Vincent to follow suit and free himself from the murk and shadows inherited from his countryman Rembrandt.

Vincent wrote 663 letters to his brother over the course of his life, with 39 of Theo's replies surviving. The latter's widow, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, spent many years compiling them after both men had passed away and finally published a collection in 1914. Her work was instrumental in securing Vincent's legacy.



The letters between them, written with “wry, stormlit eloquence” as critic Julian Bell observes, almost always find Vincent either appealing to Theo for money or thanking him for the gift of a 50 franc note.

Vincent, four years older, had shaped Theo's tastes in art and literature during their childhood growing up as parson's sons in Zundert and he continued to offer friendly advice in adult life: “I must recommend that you start smoking a pipe. It does you a lot of good when you're out of spirits, as I quite often am nowadays.”

The correspondence is always affectionate and often earthily humorous as Vincent reflects on the world as he finds it.

“The love between two brothers is a great support in life. That's an age-old truth. Let the fire of love between us not be extinguished but let instead the experience of life make that bond even stronger. Let us remain upright and candid with each other. Let there be no secrets, as things stand today,” Vincent writes.

Joking about their sister Wilhemina, he says: “She has neither drunk nor led a wild life, and yet we know a photograph of her in which she has the look of a madwoman.”

On being fired from his first job with Goupil & Cie – the same firm where Theo himself would forge his career – having alarmed one customer too many with his intensity and zeal, Vincent laughs off the disappointment with a shrug: “When an apple is ripe, all it takes is a gentle breeze to make it fall from the tree.”

The letters are lined with descriptive passages that reveal the extraordinary eye for detail Vincent would later bring to the canvas: “The ground and the piles of timber in the yard were drenched, and the sky reflected in the puddles was completely golden due to the rising sun, and at five o'clock one saw all those hundreds of workers looking like little black figures fanning out on all sides.”

They also commonly feature shaded pencil sketches of his latest project, with Vincent explaining to Theo his intentions for the piece then underway.

He tells him the dank palette of *The Potato Eaters* is designed to evoke, “the colour of a good dusty potato, unpeeled of course.”

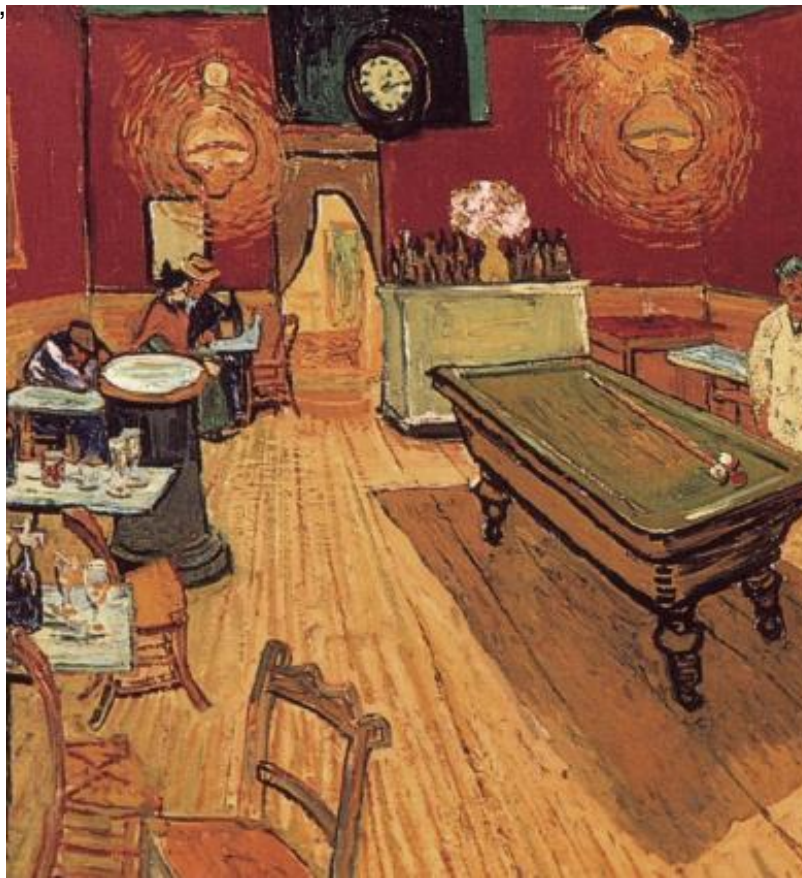
Of *The Night Cafe* (1888) and the harlots and absinthe it houses, he writes: “I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green.”

Vincent's frankness about self-doubt and the creative process is sometimes staggering: “You don't know how paralysing it is, that stare from a blank canvas that says to the painter you can't do anything. The canvas has an idiotic stare, and mesmerises some painters so that they turn into idiots themselves. But however meaningless and vain, however dead life appears, the man

of faith, of energy, of warmth, and who knows something, doesn't let himself be fobbed off like that. He steps in and does something, and hangs onto that, in short, breaks, 'violates' - they say."

"I want people to say of my work, 'That man feels deeply, that man feels subtly', despite my so-called coarseness or perhaps precisely because of it," he writes.

Taken together, the letters illuminate Van Gogh's



s working life, motivations and personality to a degree no biography could hope to approach. They also reveal this brittle, brilliant man's dependence on his brother, whose unwavering support speaks of a deeply felt fraternal love as well as a profound fear for Vincent's future, an almost unbearably moving subtext to their exchanges.

Vincent's own terror at his increasingly fragile grasp on reality is perhaps betrayed by the compulsive way he went about recording the world around him, setting out into the countryside every morning beneath a beating sun in pursuit of the essence of being.

For all the striking chrome yellows and cobalt blues, the sunshine and warmth that backlight his compositions, darkness is rarely far away.

The Starry Night depicts the view from his hospital room, a cold fact that jars with the fantastic, dreamlike vision he conjures.

In *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890), often presumed to be his final painting, the birds hover over the crops as pests, persistent stabbing intrusions of thick black, manifestations of the artist's own torment.

Even the *Sunflowers* series contains a sad story. They were painted to decorate Gauguin's room when he came to stay with Van Gogh at Arles, emblems of his excitement at this "high poet's" arrival before their relationship soured so badly.

When Vincent could live with himself no longer and reached for his revolver on 27 July 1890 – perhaps having come to feel he was a burden to Theo, now supporting a young family – he did not die immediately and staggered home, bleeding profusely, to the Auberge Ravoux inn where he was attended by two doctors who fought gallantly to save his life.

Theo was sent for and arrived from Paris to find Vincent smoking peacefully in bed awaiting the end. His final words, whispered to his brother through a cloud of tobacco, are simply devastating: "The sadness will last forever."

Vincent's funeral took place at Auvers-sur-Oise on 30 July.



<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/vincent-van-gogh-the-church-at-auvers-sur-oise>