

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Petra ten-Doesschate Chu

book review of

Vincent van Gogh, The Letters: the Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010)

Citation: Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, book review of *Vincent van Gogh, The Letters: the Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition* edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn10/vincent-van-gogh-the-letters>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters. The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*.

Edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker

New York: Thames and Hudson, 2009.

Paper edition; 6 vols., and a CD-ROM

Web edition at www.vangoghletters.org

ISBN-10: 0500238650; ISBN-13: 978-0500238653

\$976.98

In April 1889, soon after Theo van Gogh's new bride Johanna ("Jo") Bonger had moved into his apartment in the Cité Pigalle in Paris, she discovered, in the bottom drawer of a small bureau, hundreds of yellow envelopes holding letters from her husband's brother Vincent. The contents of the drawer grew as new letters arrived on a nearly weekly basis. After Vincent's death, in July of the following year, Theo spoke with Jo, as well as with others, such as the critic Albert Aurier, about the publication of the letters, but his own sickness and death, only six months later, put an end to these discussions.

Left a widow at age twenty-eight, Jo devoted her life to raising her son Vincent Willem, born a year before Theo's death, and to advancing the legacy of her husband and brother-in-law. She organized exhibitions of van Gogh's work, both in Holland (where she resided after Theo's death) and abroad.^[1] She also transcribed, sorted, and edited Vincent's letters to Theo and eventually published them in 1914.^[2] The three-volume edition was dedicated to the "memory of Vincent and Theo," and inscribed with a verse from the Second Book of Samuel, "and in their death they were not divided" (fig. 1).^[3] In her introduction to the letters, Johanna wrote that she had delayed the publication of the letters because it would have been "unfair towards the deceased [Vincent] to create an interest in his *persona*, before his *work*, to which he gave his life, was recognized and valued in the way it deserved."^[4] Clearly, she anticipated the mythmaking that the letters would inevitably set in motion.



Fig. 1, Dedication page of Vincent van Gogh, *Letters to Theo* (1914), vol. 1. [\[larger image\]](#)

Even before Johanna van Gogh-Bonger published Vincent's letters to Theo, excerpts of those letters had appeared in periodicals in Holland, France and Germany.^[5] In addition, van Gogh's letters to the Dutch painter Anthon van Rappard had appeared in the Dutch journal *Kritiek van*

beeldende kunsten en kunstnijverheid in 1905, while his letters to Emile Bernard, edited by the recipient, had appeared in 1911 in a deluxe edition that was underwritten by the French dealer Ambroise Vollard (fig. 2). Thus, less than twenty-five years after Vincent's death, the vast majority of his letters had been published.[6]

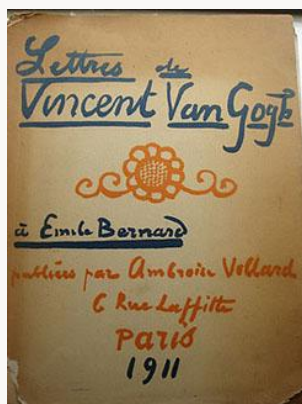


Fig. 2, Cover of *Lettres de Vincent van Gogh à Emile Bernard* (1911). [\[larger image\]](#)

The early editions of van Gogh's letters presented them in their original languages, *i.e.*, Dutch, for most of the letters written before 1886, and French for the majority of the letters after that. [7] Translations and translated anthologies of the letters began to appear in the 1920s, first in Germany, then in England and the United States.[8] Small groups of letters to correspondents other than Theo van Gogh, Bernard, and van Rappard were also published in various journals. In 1952-1954, all the letters known at the time were published in a single four-volume edition by Vincent's nephew Vincent Willem van Gogh. This edition, again, was translated in many languages and spawned numerous popular anthologies.[9]

In spite of the multitude of anthologies and editions of the letters, however, the need for a truly scholarly, properly annotated edition of the letters was felt by many van Gogh scholars. [10] In the early 1990s, in the wake of the centennial of van Gogh's death, the Van Gogh Museum, which owns approximately 90% of the letters, decided to undertake the project of creating such an edition, in which all letters would be re-transcribed, re-dated if necessary, completely annotated, and translated into French, English, and German. To accomplish this task, the museum sought the help of the Huygens Institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Science, which is known as a center of excellence for textual research, and already had experience with the editing of an artist's correspondence.[11] A committee was formed to establish editorial principles and in 1993 two researchers, Leo Jansen and Hans Luijten, began the work of editing and annotating the letters. They were joined several years later by Nienke Bakker. The entire project took fifteen years. While initially a print edition was projected, the rapid expansion of the internet and the realization of its publication possibilities led to a change of plan. It was decided that the integral scholarly edition would appear on the web. At the same time, a print edition was to feature only the translated texts (in Dutch, English, French, and German, depending on the country of distribution) and a more modest scholarly apparatus, in addition to facsimile reproductions of the sketches in the letters and small-size reproductions of works, by van Gogh and other artists, discussed in the letters. Both editions

appeared in 2009. The web edition may be found at vangoghletters.org, a site maintained by the Van Gogh Museum; the print edition, a boxed set of six volumes, is distributed in the United States by Thames and Hudson (fig. 3).^[12] To celebrate the publication, the Van Gogh Museum organized a special exhibition, *Van Gogh's Letters. The Artist Speaks*, which was reviewed in the spring 2010 issue of this journal.^[13]



Fig. 3, Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters* (2009). [\[larger image\]](#)

In this review, I intend to focus on the web edition of the letters, which can serve as a model for all who are interested in publishing a scholarly artist's correspondence (or, for that matter, any correspondence) online. It is noteworthy that the van Gogh letters are not the first artist's letters to be published on the web. The University of Glasgow published the letters of James Abbott McNeill Whistler on line in 2003-2004 (see www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence). Also in 2003, the Willem Witsen Foundation in the Netherlands began the [web edition of that artist's letters](#), which was launched in 2007 on the site of the Digital Library of the Netherlands (dbnl.org) as well as [Het Geheugen van Nederland \(Netherlands' Memory\)](#), a national initiative for the digitization of the Dutch cultural heritage. The web edition of the van Gogh letters is more ambitious than those earlier projects, both with respect to the editing and annotation of the letters and to its scholarly apparatus.

In the web edition of van Gogh's letters, the page view of each letter is arranged in three columns. The center column contains all the information about the letter. The columns on the left and right each allow the reader to bring up a facsimile view of the letter, as well as its transcription in two formats (line-by-line and continuous), and its English translation. In addition, one can bring up the notes and reproductions of pictures that are contained in the letters. The two columns allow the reader to compare two views, for example, facsimile and line-by-line transcription, continuous transcription and translation, translation and notes, etc. Each letter is carefully annotated. Works that are mentioned in the letters, if known, are for the most part illustrated. A click on an icon in the footnotes leads directly to a high-quality illustration. One can also bring up the illustrations in each letter by going to the "artworks" view in one of the columns. Names of people and titles of works that are mentioned in a letter are hot-linked to other letters that contain references to the same people or works.

The letters can be sorted by period, correspondent, and place, and one can single out all letters that have drawings in them. As for searching, one can do a simple keyword search or an advanced search by person, work of literature, bible reference, periodical, and work of art by van Gogh—the latter by using a title or a number, either in the Baart de la Faille or the Hulsker catalogues raisonnés.^[14]

The scholarly apparatus for the edition is formidable. An extensive year-by-year chronology lists not only major events in van Gogh's life, but also books he read; works he painted; museums he visited; and works he sold and gave on consignment. The chronology contains hot links to key letters and is marked with marginal symbols that refer to "museums and exhibitions," "books read and print collecting," and "consignments to Theo and others." A section on correspondents contains biographical information about van Gogh's major correspondents and the artist's relation to them. Another one, entitled "Biographical and Historical Context," contains extensive information about the van Gogh family, the financial backgrounds of Vincent and Theo, and the culture of letter writing in van Gogh's time, particularly in his family's social circle. Numerous lists refer to, among others, works of art mentioned in the letters, literature cited by van Gogh, and people mentioned in the correspondence. All are hot-linked to the letters or notes in which they appear. To give an example, the literature list shows that van Gogh referred in his letters to nine fairy tales by Hans Christian Anderson. A single click on the title of the fairytale brings the reader to the letter(s) that refer(s) to it.

An original feature of the edition is the section "maps and plans," which contains detailed maps of every place where Vincent lived with symbols that mark where he resided and where he visited. A map of Arles shows, for example, that Vincent's yellow house was outside the walls of the old town, near the railroad station. It was next to the Café de la Gare (depicted in Van Gogh's famous *Night Café*) and the Restaurant Vénissac, where he took his meals; and it was not far from the house of the postman Roulin, who also lived in the new part of town. In addition to all the remarkable features listed above, the scholarly apparatus also contains the ones one would expect: an extensive bibliography, a concordance with other editions, a list of archives where van Gogh's letters are found, lists of abbreviations, a glossary of artistic terms used by van Gogh, etc.

It seems small-minded to criticize anything in this wonderfully rich and intelligently conceived edition of the letters, but if the reader turns to the introduction, after having perused the letters and the scholarly apparatus, s/he may feel a tinge of disappointment. One would expect the introduction to address new findings and ideas that the extensive research into the letters has produced or, perhaps, to reflect on the impact the letters have had on the appreciation of van Gogh's work over the past hundred years. Instead, the introduction offers little that is new. It focuses mostly on the voice, the tone, the language, and the rhetoric of the letters, subjects that are interesting and relevant, but at times rather self-evident. No one will be surprised to hear that van Gogh did not use, in letters to his mother, the same tone that he used in letters to friends like Bernard and Paul Gauguin; nor is it unexpected that to different correspondents he wrote about different subjects. It is also rather natural that his letters became more thoughtful and personal as the artist matured. In the section on "Strategies and rhetoric," a sub-section covers van Gogh's use of metaphor in the letters, but the examples given are all similes and not metaphors. Again, it sounds rather pedantic to remark on this, but

if van Gogh's use of rhetoric is highlighted in the introduction, one would expect it to be done in a more serious manner. Two subsections under the heading, "The letters: from conventional to personal," deal specifically with van Gogh's allusions to art and literature. Much of this material has been covered extensively in the van Gogh literature, though little or no mention of that literature is made in the notes, which refer almost exclusively to the letters.^[15]

Some of the misgivings this reviewer has with the introduction may be due to its unsatisfactory translation and lack of proper editing. Sentences such as "The priceless data in the letters on all kinds of subjects form a network within which the significance of a letter or passage cannot be seen in isolation from the whole, while one has to oversee the whole in order to weigh the detail" don't make for easy reading. Indeed, a careful editing job that would address the organization of the introductory essay as well as language mechanicals (grammar, punctuation, use of tenses, etc.) and footnotes (or the lack thereof) would go a long way to render this introduction on a par with the high quality of the edition as a whole. Fortunately, a web edition allows for changes; perhaps this is something the editors may consider for the future.

In conclusion, the new web edition of the van Gogh letters exemplifies the enormous advantages of on-line publishing of art historical or, for that matter, literary or historical source material. The search capability alone makes this form of publishing extremely valuable, but other features, discussed above, such as the presentation of multiple views and the possibility of limitless cross-referencing through hot links, also make this form of publishing more useful than paper publishing. An added feature of this particular edition is the cross-referencing to on-line reproductions of works discussed in the text. As the Van Gogh Museum owns many of the letters and paintings by van Gogh to which the references are made, this was perhaps easier to do in this edition than it might be in the editions of letters of some other artists: the cost of the licensing agreements to reproduce the works could make such a richly illustrated web edition prohibitively expensive.^[16] The Van Gogh Museum might have gone even further by hot-linking the letters to works of literature that are available on line, on such sites as Project Gutenberg, Het Geheugen van Nederland, or the French site Gallica. Of course, this may still be done in the future.

And this brings me to another major advantage of on-line publishing, the possibility to constantly update the site. New letters and new information may be added and corrections may be made as necessary. This dynamic potential of on-line publishing is one that has not yet been fully exploited in academic circles, but is widely utilized on such sites as Wikipedia and other popular sites.

The final and perhaps most important advantage of on-line publishing is the global availability to readers at no cost. This means, of course, that some institution or institutions must underwrite them. But large scale publishing projects, such as a scholarly edition of an artist's letters or a catalogue raisonné of an artist's work, almost *always* need to be underwritten, even if they are published in the traditional manner. Generally (and here the paper edition of the van Gogh letters may be an exception), the small number of books that are sold do not produce nearly enough income to pay for research and production expenses. It is this reviewer's hope that the web edition of the van Gogh letters will inspire both scholars and funders to choose the on-line publishing route, which seems to benefit both the quality of the

scholarly product and the accessibility by users. The Van Gogh Museum must be congratulated for setting an excellent and path-breaking example!

Petra ten-Doesschate Chu
Professor, Seton Hall University
petra.chu[at]shu.edu

Notes

- [1] Following common usage, the name "van Gogh", used by itself in this essay, refers to Vincent van Gogh.
- [2] Vincent van Gogh, *Brieven aan zijn broeder*. Uitgegeven en toegelicht door zijn schoonzuster J. van Gogh-Bonger (Amsterdam: Maatschappij voor goede and goedkoope lectuur, 1914). The "Maatschappij voor goede and goedkoope lectuur" (Society for Good and Inexpensive Literature) was a progressive publishing company founded by the Dutch writer Stijn Streuvels in 1905.
- [3] The dedication is written on the title page. The verse is from 2 Samuel 1:23.
- [4] See volume 1, Voorwoord (Preface): "Het zou een onbillijkheid zijn geweest jegens den doode, belangstelling te wekken voor zijn *person*, eer het *werk* waaraan hij zijn leven gaf, erkend werd en gewaardeerd zooals het verdiende."
- [5] For a detailed history of the publication of the letters, see the section "Publication history on the Van Gogh Letters website (http://vangoghletters.org/vg/publications_2.html_intro.IV.2.1).
- [6] Theo van Gogh, Van Rappard, and Bernard were van Gogh's major correspondents. Of the currently known 819 extant letters of van Gogh, 659 were addressed to Theo, 58 to Van Rappard, and 22 to Bernard, making a total of 739. See <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/overview.html>.
- [7] A few early letters are written in French and some even in English.
- [8] Most popular in this country was the 1937 anthology of the letters by Irving and Jean Stone, published under the title *Dear Theo*, which was published in numerous inexpensive paperback editions and is still in print.
- [9] Such as the much used edition by Mark W. Roskill, *Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, reprint edition (New York: Simon and Schuster- Touchstone, 2008).
- [10] Scholars like Jan Hulsker and Ronald Pickvance had long argued that the letters needed re-dating, while others like Artemis Karagheusian had alerted van Gogh scholars to the differences that existed between the manuscripts and printed versions of van Gogh's French letters. See Ronald Pickvance, *Van Gogh in Arles*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984), 260-263; Jan Hulsker, *Van Gogh door van Gogh. De Brieven als commentaar op zijn werk* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1973); and A. Karagheusian, *Vincent van Gogh's Letters Written in French: Differences Between the Printed Versions and the Manuscripts* (New York: Styl-O-Graph Letter Shop, 1984).
- [11] It was a partner in the project of the complete web edition of the letters of the Dutch artist Willem Witsen, together with Willem Witsen Foundation, the [Digital Library of Dutch Literature](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/wits009brie01_01), and several major Dutch libraries. See http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/wits009brie01_01.
- [12] Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters, The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, eds. 6 vols. and CD-ROM (London/New York: Thames and Hudson, 2009).
- [13] See <http://19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring10/van-goghs-letters>.
- [14] J. Baart de la Faille, *The works of Vincent van Gogh. His paintings and drawings*, revised edition (New York: Reynal & Company in association with William Morrow & Co, 1970), and Jan Hulsker, *The Complete van Gogh: Paintings, Drawings, Sketches* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980).
- [15] It is impossible to cite all the literature on these two topics, but suffice it to say that there have been books and exhibition catalogues on van Gogh and Millet, van Gogh and Rembrandt; van Gogh and British art; van Gogh and Japanese art, etc.; likewise, in the field of literature, scholars have written about such topics as van Gogh and the Bible; van Gogh and naturalist literature; van Gogh and Michelet; van Gogh and Zola.
- [16] It is to be hoped that museums eventually will do away with these licensing agreements and will lend both paper and on-line publishers free reproduction rights of works that are in the

public domain. There is the beginning of a trend in this direction, but it has not gone far enough.

Illustrations

All photographs by Petra Chu.



Fig. 1, Dedication page of Vincent van Gogh, *Letters to Theo* (1914), vol. 1. [\[return to text\]](#)

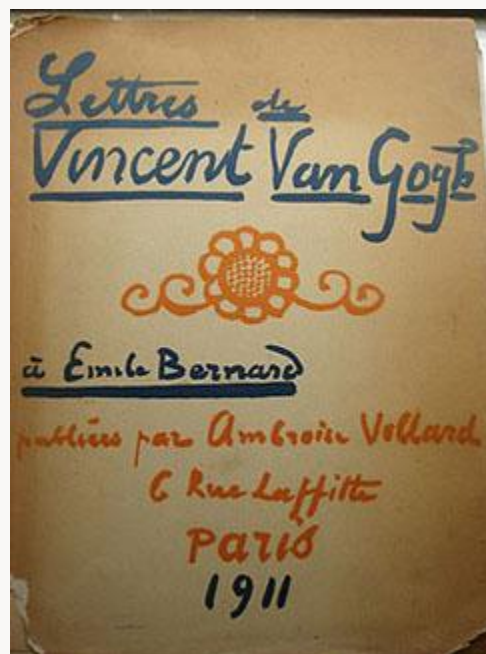


Fig. 2, Cover of *Lettres de Vincent van Gogh à Emile Bernard* (1911). [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters* (2009). [\[return to text\]](#)