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Rachel Esner

book review of

Vincent van Gogh. Die Gemälde, 1886-1890. Händler, Sammler, Ausstellungen. Frühe Provenienzen by Walter Feilchenfeldt; *Erinnerungen an Vincent van Gogh, En face – Texte von Augenzeugen* edited by Malte Lohmann

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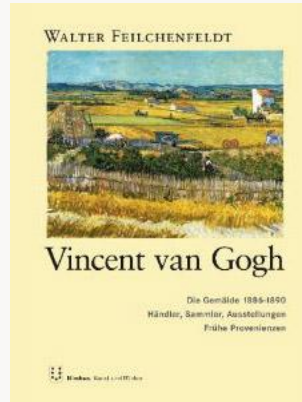
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Walter Feilchenfeldt,
Vincent van Gogh. Die Gemälde, 1886-1890. Händler, Sammler, Ausstellungen. Frühe Provenienzen.
2nd revised ed.
Zurich: Nimbus, Kunst und Bücher, 2009.
355 pp.; 500 color illustrations; bibliography.
€ 75
ISBN 978-3-907142-38-7



Erinnerungen an Vincent van Gogh, En face – Texte von Augenzeugen.
Edited by Malte Lohmann.
Vol. 1.
Zurich: Nimbus, Kunst und Bücher, 2009.
320 pp.; illustrated in color and b/w; bibliography, indexed.
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The years 2009-10 saw a bumper crop of books on the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh. The most important of these, and the most eagerly anticipated, was of course the publication of the new edition of the artist's letters, the product of more than fifteen years of work by a group of

scholars at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.[1] An exhibition at the museum accompanied the publication, shown in a somewhat different form at London's Royal Academy with its own catalogue.[2] Further volumes on the artist include books by Wouter van der Veen on the artist as author and on the period in Auvers, and an important exhibition catalogue on the landscapes, entitled *Vincent van Gogh: Zwischen Himmel und Erde*. [3] Turning to the fate of the artist's work after his death—in other words from the oeuvre to its reception—one might mention Henk Tromp on Van Gogh forgeries, and Esner and Schavemaker's edited volume of essays *Vincent Everywhere. Van Gogh's (Inter)National Identities*. [4] To the category of groundbreaking volumes in this area, one ought also to have been able to add Walter Feilchenfeldt's compendium on the early dealers, collectors and exhibitions of the painter's French period, were it not for the fact that the book falls far short of scholarly usefulness.

In a world filled with books on Van Gogh ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous, but notoriously lacking in publications of a more fundamental nature (the more or less official catalogue raisonné of the artist's work was published in 1928 and the Van Gogh Museum has so far been able to produce only one volume on the paintings in its own collection [5]), Feilchenfeldt's book should have made a major contribution to the history of Van Gogh's art in the period immediately following his death in 1890. All the more as the author must be ranked as one of only a handful of truly informed Van Gogh scholars. His previous publications, *Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cassirer, Berlin: The Reception of Van Gogh in Germany from 1901–1914* (1988) and *By Appointment Only. Cézanne, Van Gogh and Some Secrets of Art Dealing* (2006), his cooperation with numerous museums on exhibitions and catalogues, and of course, his unprecedented access to some of the most important source material for this sort of foundational research ought to have been a guarantee for the reliability of this most recent work. What we now have in hand, however, is not the academic tome one would expect, but instead a volume full of (undoubtedly correct?) information that, despite its many lists and indices, fails to fulfill its purpose by failing in its duty of providing corroborative evidence in an accessible fashion.

But let us begin at the beginning. Naturally, all art historians are interested to a greater or lesser degree in questions of provenance, although issues of pedigree are probably most important to those working in museums. The history of collectors and collecting has garnered much attention in the last twenty years, as have exhibitions, with a very large number of publications attempting to both reconstruct private collections and historical shows, and to understand the motivations behind them. More recently, histories have begun to be written not only on the phenomenon of art dealing in general, but also on individual dealers—a formidable task, as the documentation is either incredibly scarce or nearly impossibly abundant. Seeking to combine all these histories in one volume is indeed ambitious, but the threat of not doing justice to any of them looms large. In fact, despite the title of the book, the most important aspect for Feilchenfeldt seems to have been the issue of provenance. The reconstruction of the history of the ownership of the French works was the primary aim of the research—the dealers, collectors and exhibitions are discussed only in so far as they contribute to this end. Although there is nothing wrong with this approach, the title is thus somewhat misleading, as is the author's use of the word "Rezeptionsgeschichte", which implies an analysis of the material and not a simple compiling of lists (although of course there is nothing "simple" about it). Anyone expecting a critical rather than empirical investigation is bound to be disappointed—a missed opportunity in the mind of this reviewer.

The book has a straightforward structure, beginning with an introduction chronicling the vicissitudes of the publication and explaining the methods used, which works the author chose to trace, and which documents were consulted. Here already one begins to suspect a not entirely objective approach: a number of Van Gogh's flower still lifes, for example, are not included in the catalogue, as Feilchenfeldt's believes these are inauthentic; no argument or proof for this assessment is offered, however.[6] As far as the documentation is concerned, the author seems to have left no stone unturned, researching not only in his own considerable archive, but also in the Van Gogh Museum and elsewhere in the Netherlands, as well as in London and Paris, among others. The very serious question arises, however, as to why it was not possible to wait with the publication of the book until after the appearance of the complete edition of the letters (due in the same year!), which might have provided new information or shed a different light on what is already known.

The same sort of blanket and often un-footnoted statements found in the introduction also characterize the main discursive section of the book, a chronological description of the fate of Van Gogh's French pictures from 1886 to 1928—the exhibitions in which they were included and who dealt and owned them. The reader can only assume that this information is correct, as citations—whether to the secondary literature or to the sources—are sparse and inconsistent. The reader's curiosity is piqued: mention is made of works the artist gave away (13); of the possibility that more than one picture was sold during Van Gogh's lifetime (13, 16); that Ambrose Vollard owned more paintings than has previously been assumed (19), and so on, but nothing tells us where this knowledge comes from. Some of it surely came from Jo van Gogh-Bonger's account book[7] or perhaps from the lists published here—but as there are no cross-references to other parts of the book, the reader has no way of knowing. Elsewhere, correspondence between Jo and the French dealer Julien Leclerq (22) or Druet's photographs of a Van Gogh exhibition in 1905 (23) are brought in as evidence, but where these documents are kept is not noted. Perhaps these are instances of the author's inability (after so many years of work?) to remember where some of his information originally came from—a failing he admits to in the introduction (10). But of course, such a failing is entirely inadmissible in a project such as this, if the book to be of any use to anyone other than the author himself.

This section is followed by a catalogue of Van Gogh's French works, illustrated in fairly good quality, and their owners, where once again—with the exception of the information gleaned from the lists and exhibition catalogues reprinted as appendices—we are left guessing as to how precisely these came to be known. Six pages of notes at the end provide some interesting insights, but not the sought-for references. The rest of the publication consists, first, of the reprinting of a number (only, according to the author, those that had proven "most important", 283) of the aforementioned lists and catalogues. These are of course extremely useful, as not everyone interested in the subject will be able to make a trip to Zurich or Amsterdam to consult them in the original; again, though, one wonders about the choices made and what might have been left out. This is followed by a chronology of the "reception" of the works—that is, their movement, when they were exhibited, and when they changed hands; and a list of collectors and the works they owned. Both of these might indeed be very valuable, but their reliability depends entirely on the reliability of the information previously provided. And for this, as we have seen, there is no guarantee. Finally, there is a bibliography of primary and secondary sources (the former arranged by year) and a concordance, listing the work numbers in Jacob-Baart de la Faille's catalogue raisonné, Jan Hulsker,[8] and the present publication.

Let it be understood that I am not questioning the author's integrity in any way. I am absolutely prepared to believe that the information provided is correct, especially given the thoroughness with which it appears to have been researched (although there are still undoubtedly mistakes). The lack of academic rigor, however, makes the book entirely useless to serious scholars. Perhaps the most important question we need to ask ourselves, then, is why *publish* such a book at all. Given the fundamentally ongoing nature of this sort of research—the author himself readily admits that the provenance hunter's work is never done (6)—would it not have been more reasonable, following the example of the Van Gogh letters project, to have created an online edition instead? This would have solved the book's most fundamental problem, namely that of providing sourced evidence and cross-references. In addition, it would have made corrections and additions easier and faster, and prevented confusion about citations in the first and second editions, which are considerably different (the second edition being of course much improved). Aside from interpretation of the data—an absolute must for the future—a reworking of the publication to make it more transparent would certainly be in order.

The second Van Gogh-related volume published by Nimbus in 2009 is less ambitious in scope, but in fact, far more useful, at least for those interested in Van Gogh who can read German. It is the first volume in a new series of source-text reprints and translations entitled *En face*, edited by the Nimbus publisher Janika Gelinek, the aim of which is unfortunately nowhere described in either the book itself nor on the publisher's website. Again, this is not standard academic procedure, but the compiler, Malte Lohmann, makes up for this to some extent in the (extremely short) introduction, where he demonstrates a perfect awareness of the ways in which these texts, while having the pretention to be eye-witness accounts, were both influenced by, and also contributed to, the formation of the "Van Gogh legend" (5).

The book can best be compared to Susan Stein's *Van Gogh. A Retrospective*[9] or Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov's *Van Gogh in Perspective*,[10] the latter part of Prentice-Hall's wonderful *Artists in Perspective* series, undoubtedly one of the first to understand the value of contemporary art criticism for art historical practice. Lohmann's volume, however, is somewhat broader in scope and contains some material that has become available since the 1980s. Following Emile Bernard's famous obituary in *Les hommes d'aujourd'hui* in 1891, the texts are arranged in groups in chronological order, starting with Van Gogh's sister's memory of the siblings' youth in Zundert, and ending, perhaps a little oddly, not with Theo van Gogh's very moving letter to his wife following his brother's funeral, but rather with a *memoire* of the event by the daughter of the owner of the Auberge Ravoux, where Van Gogh had lived during his last months. The groupings are obvious and sensible (e.g., Borinage, Nuenen, Paris, Arles, etc.) although the arrangement of the texts within each group is somewhat unclear, and no justification is given for the order chosen. As is usual with volumes such as this, some of the texts have been considerably shortened; information on the authors is also rather limited, but full references to the original sources of the material are supplied. This latter also makes the volume useful for non-German (speaking) researchers: it is extremely handy to have these citations all in one place. A descriptive index of persons, the authors as well as those mentioned in the texts, is also included.

Many of the accounts included will be well known to Van Gogh scholars, although some of them are appearing here for the first time in German translation. The compiler has limited

himself to those authors who were in direct contact with the artist, even if some of them wrote down their memories at a (much) later date. Although we undoubtedly need to approach much of their commentary with the necessary skepticism, the picture of the artist provided is nonetheless remarkably forthright. Lohmann's aim with the book was in some sense to nuance the Van Gogh myth and to provide the reader with a multi-dimensional representation of the artist. According to him, the picture presented here is that of "another' Van Gogh: not the standoffish outcast, but rather the hearty and humorous friend, the enthusiastic teacher and networker, who toiled at his own oeuvre in a disciplined fashion, who reflected on the art world of his time, and who was respected, even indeed admired, by his colleagues" (5). Whether or not this publication will change the opinion of those not already convinced of the fundamental veracity of this "other" image—particularly following the release of the new edition of the letters and its accompanying exhibition—is of course debatable. Nonetheless, it is a commendable effort and the book provides not only good reading, but also a new source for the up and coming generation of German Van Gogh scholars.

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Notes

- [1] Hans Luijten, Leo Jansen and Nienke Bakker (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh – The Letters. The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009). For the electronic edition see www.vangoghletters.org.
- [2] *Van Gogh's Letters. The Artist Speaks*, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, October 9, 2009 – January 3, 2010; and *The Real Van Gogh. The Artist and His Letters*, Royal Academy, London, January 23 – April 18, 2010. See also Nienke Bakker and Leo Jansen, *The Real Van Gogh. The Artist and His Letters* (London, Royal Academy of Arts, 2010).
- [3] Wouter van der Veen, "Van Gogh: A Literary Mind. Literature in the Correspondence of Vincent van Gogh," *Van Gogh Studies* 2 (Zwolle and Amsterdam, 2009); and *Van Gogh in Auvers: His Last Days* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2010); Carel Blotkamp et al., *Vincent van Gogh: Zwischen Himmel und Erde. Die Landschaften* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009).
- [4] Henk Tromp, *A Real Van Gogh. How the Art World Struggles with Truth*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010); Rachel Esner and Margriet Schavemaker, eds., *Vincent Everywhere. Van Gogh's (Inter)National Identities* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
- [5] Jacob-Baart de la Faille, *L'oeuvre de Vincent van Gogh. Catalogue raisonné*, 4 vols. (Paris and Brussels: Van Oest, 1928); Louis van Tilborgh and Marije Vellekoop, *Vincent van Gogh – Paintings. Volume I: Dutch Period, 1881–1885* (Blaricum: V+K Publishing/Inmerc, 1999).
- [6] A thorough listing of the other unfounded de-attributions in which the publication is rich is provided in Stephan Kolderhoff's review published in *Die Welt*, June 21, 2010.
- [7] Chris Stolwijk and Han Veenbos (eds.), *The Account Book of Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum and Leiden: Primavera Press, 2002).
- [8] Jan Hulsker, *The New Complete Van Gogh. Paintings, Drawings, Sketches*, (Amsterdam: J.M. Meulenhoff and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1996).
- [9] Susan A. Stein, *Van Gogh. A Retrospective* (New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, Inc., 1986).
- [10] Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Van Gogh in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974).