Van Gogh: A Life in Art and Letters

Course Content

‘How I’d like to talk to you about art again, but now we can only write to each other about it often; find things beautiful as much as you can, most people find too little beautiful’

Vincent to Theo January 1874 (letter 17)

Vincent van Gogh died in 1890 but the acclaim for his work came posthumously, since the early 20th Century, and continues to grow. However, alongside the countless scholarly books and articles there is also the mythology which persistently surrounds his life and work and with which the majority of people today are familiar. To discover something of the real van Gogh, this course takes as its reader the Penguin Classics ‘The Letters of Vincent van Gogh’, selected and edited by Ronald de Leeuw (1996), then, since 1986, Director of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

Van Gogh’s letters were regarded as remarkable from their first publication in 1914 and although they were very much part of his everyday life they are also seen by many as significant literature. In them the reader has frequent glimpses of the real man and comes to appreciate the close relationship of the writing to the drawings and paintings.

The course will follow a similar arrangement taken by the 2010 Royal Academy exhibition, ‘The Real Van Gogh; the Artist and his Letters’, beginning with some of the landscapes of his native Holland. To supplement the letters in the class text students are advised to familiarize themselves with The Letters website www.vangoghletters.org. Your tutor will indicate additional letters to read which illuminate particular works focused on in class.

.....’I’m writing you this letter bit by bit in intervals when I’m tired of painting. Work is going quite well – I’m struggling with a canvas begun a few days before my indisposition. A reaper, the study is all yellow, terribly thickly impasted, but the subject was beautiful and simple. I then saw in this reaper – a vague figure struggling like a devil in the full heat of the day to reach the end of his toil – I then saw the image of death in it, in this sense that humanity would
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be the wheat being reaped. So if you like it’s the oppo-
site of that Sower I tried before. But in this death nothing
sad, it takes place in broad daylight with a sun that floods
everything with a light of fine gold.’

Intended Learning Outcomes

On completing the course, students should:

▪ be able to recognise Van Gogh’s changes in style, tech-
nique and use of colour during the ten year period of his
life as a painter.
▪ be aware from reading his letters how he communicated
ideas regarding his paintings.
▪ know of artists who influenced him, past and present,
and those painters he himself influenced.