

Vincent van Gogh's Drawings
An Analysis of their Production and Uses
(*on-line version*)

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Abstract

In this thesis I examine the entire corpus of drawings by Vincent van Gogh in terms of their production and their artistic and public uses.

The work is presented in two parts which are complementary. The first part consists of a detailed description and analysis of the artist's drawing activities, the genesis of the drawings and their uses in the working process. I try to establish the various relationships between drawings, and between drawings and works in other media. Where possible, I determine the functions of the drawings such as, for instance, letter sketches, preparatory studies, stock, presentation, gift or commission drawings, or copies after a painting.

The drawings are discussed per place of origin. In my approach to the material I have chosen to remain as close as possible to the artist's letters, presenting his practice as a draughtsman in the terms in which he himself viewed it.

Because of the artist's systematic use of drawing materials, I have been able to assign many drawings to their original place in the artistic oeuvre. Many on the basis of their physical qualities 63 drawings have been re-dated to a different place of origin.

In part two, I explore the artist's ideas and actions with regard to the uses of his drawings after completion: whether they were kept in the studio, exchanged, offered as presents, exhibited or sold. This analysis reveals the artist's ambivalent attitude towards exhibiting and selling his work.

Since this study is the first to deal systematically with the drawn oeuvre, it is necessarily explanatory in nature. I am aware of the fact that several re-datings raise difficult problems that could, perhaps, only be solved by a more theoretical approach. Every theory, however, also in the history of art must be based on fact. It is my intention that the present study will provide the facts that will facilitate further research.

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This thesis is dedicated to Menno Lievers.

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INTRODUCTION

During the ten years of his artistic career, Vincent van Gogh (1853-90) produced an extensive oeuvre. Although many works are lost, almost nine hundred paintings and over nine hundred drawings are known to us.¹ Hitherto, his entire drawn oeuvre has never been studied seriously. A study of his drawings is justifiable in itself for the wealth of undisclosed material. It also sheds much light on his working methods as a painter.

Intrigued by the variety of finish, style and drawing materials of the drawings at the centenary exhibition at the Kröller-Müller museum in Otterlo in 1990, I decided to study their production and uses. In view of the limited research done on Vincent's drawings in general, it was necessary to start with giving each drawing its place in the oeuvre.² Before specific questions about the artistic and public use of a drawing can be addressed, a study of the drawings and the artist's practice of drawings in general had to be carried out. Therefore I turned to the correspondence and the drawings themselves as my primary sources of information.

This preliminary research grew into an extensive, detailed overview in which every drawing is mentioned and grouped. It has not been possible within the scope of this research project to discuss and analyse in detail every single drawing, but every type or group of drawings is discussed.

The overview of the drawings per period of execution constitutes the first part of the thesis. It serves as reference guide and gives an understanding of the production of the drawings. I describe the genesis of the drawings, and I try to establish the place of every drawing in the oeuvre and its use in the artistic process.

As the objects of my attention I have taken all the currently known drawings made during the course of Vincent's artistic career, that is, from August 1880, when he decided to become an artist, until his untimely death in Auvers in 1890. The so-called 'youth drawings' have been omitted as I do not consider these to belong to the output of Vincent as a professional artist. The term 'drawings' is employed to describe all works on paper, excluding oil-paintings on paper and prints.³ In this I follow Vincent's own use of the word.

Drawings belonging to the seven sketchbooks discussed in WOLK (1987) are largely omitted from the present study. When giving numbers of drawings per period I have not included the sketches in these seven sketchbooks. I realize that the picture of Vincent's drawings may seem somewhat distorted without discussing these sketches while including the many loose sketches which seem to have derived from sketchbooks used in for example Saint-Rémy. I have done so, firstly because the seven sketchbook drawings have already been dealt with; their use has been broadly established. Secondly, despite being put under headings such as "(Antwerp and) Paris", their datings still pose serious problems and require more research. It appears that the so-called "(Antwerp and) Paris" SB5 comprises sketches done in Nuenen and Eindhoven. The "Antwerp" SB3 also contains earlier work. In due course of my

¹ When giving numbers of drawings I refer to the number of sheets, counting a double-sided drawing as one. The total number of drawings discussed in this study is 919. This figure does not include the sketches belonging to the seven sketchbooks discussed in Wolk (1987). If one considers each side of a page containing one or more sketches as one, without including the inscriptions or off-settings from other sketches, there seven sketchbooks contain 227 sketches.

² In this study I call the artist 'Vincent' rather than 'Van Gogh'. This is no more than an expedient to prevent confusion between Theo and Vincent van Gogh.

³ Prints are only briefly discussed because they are dealt with in Heugten (1995).

research I tentatively re-date only eleven of those sketchbook pages. They are not included in the total number of 63 drawings for which I propose a different date.

In a study which deals with relationships between works, it is difficult to state anything with absolute certainty. Limitations are placed on our knowledge of the drawings by the loss of hundreds of drawings.¹ The interpretation of the use of a work completely changes with the discovery of a related work. In order to establish the precise relationship between a drawing and a painting, they should both survive.

It is not my aim at present to assign a label to every single drawing. Besides, a strict differentiation between the various functions is not always possible. Categorizing the drawings with respect to their use in the artistic process may appear not to pay due credit to the spontaneity and the creative freedom of the artist. However, Vincent's working methods were exceptionally pre-planned. His artistic motivations were clearly present in his mind and expressed with remarkable clarity and insight. His actions as an artist were articulate and reasoned.

As Vincent himself wrote, his ideas about his work were well ordered and definite.² He worked quickly on the basis of a pre-designed idea:

“The period of discussing and thinking must precede the decisive action. There is little room for reflection or argument in the **action** itself.” Letter 225 [197] [12 or 13 May 1882].

The fact that Vincent's working methods were so consistent facilitates grouping the drawings and understanding the artist's intentions with them. Vincent generally produced his drawings in groups or series. He wanted his artistic output to form a coherent unity. In order to achieve this he often linked his works to one another. In a group the same subjects could be depicted in various ways or from different perspectives, with variations on the same theme or motif. Alternatively, drawings with corresponding functions could be made in similar techniques on the same type and size of paper.

The correspondence, mainly between the artist and his brother Theo, gives an account of almost every painting and of many drawings. This facilitates establishing the relationship between the works. A close reading of the letters, combined with the technical and stylistic data given by the works of art themselves, enables us to define their place within the artistic process. Small so-called ‘croquis’ scribbled in between the lines of a letter or enclosed separately in the envelope can provide additional clues for the interpretation of a work of art. If no reference is found in the correspondence, one has to turn to the works of art as a source of information. In the past, scholars have predominantly relied on biographical accounts of his life and used quotes of his letters freely rather than examining the actual drawings and paintings. Often drawings have been dated without having examined the sheets themselves.

In contrast I based my research on material aspects of the drawings and a close factual reading of the letters. In trying to establish the various functions of drawings, such as for example letter sketch, preparatory study, stock, gift or commission drawing, or copy after a painting, I found that this does not only involve looking at the image represented, its degree of finish, its style and provenance. Equally useful information is provided by the material aspects of a drawing such as the type, size and quality of the paper, the edges of the sheet, the watermark and the drawing media

¹ Compared to other contemporary artists, a substantial proportion of Vincent's works on paper has survived. This reflects the artist's careful attitude toward his work, and Theo's historic awareness.

² Letter 380 [315] [20 or 21 August 1883].

used. Therefore I studied in particular these purely material qualities. Especially in cases where a work is not referred to in the letters, a correct interpretation of the physical factors can be decisive for establishing the circumstances under which it was made, the purpose for which it was produced, and the place it had within the artistic process.

During the past six years I have examined as many drawings as possible in public and private collections in Europe and the United States. So far, I have personally examined about 90 % of the surviving drawings. The process of tracking down the remaining drawings still continues. Those collections that could not be visited in person, received a questionnaire.¹

The next step consisted of grouping together drawings which corresponded in style, finish, drawing media, signature/no signature, type, size and colour of paper and watermarks. I disregarded the data provided by the two major catalogues by DE LA FAILLE and HULSKER where possible. Only when no first-hand data were available, I relied on the material data quoted in these catalogues. Unfortunately they are not always reliable with respect to measurements, techniques (and dates).

The material data were subsequently combined with relevant quotations from the artist's letters which were put in a database. It appeared that a considerable number of drawings needs to be re-dated.² The examination of the material qualities of a drawing often provides a reliable tool to assess its place within the artistic process and adds extra criteria for establishing the functions of drawings. These data do not always provide conclusive evidence. There are still drawings that are difficult to date for reasons such as the absence of a watermark, or a changed appearance of the paper and the drawing media due to conservation treatment. From the early years of Vincent's career in The Borinage and Brussels only a very small number of drawings have survived. An examination of the papers used in those years does not give an indication of the time of execution because of a lack of comparative material. In the case of sketchbook drawings, or in the case of the few loose unused sheets that the artist took with him from one place to another, one has to rely on conventional art historical methods.

In my approach to the subject I have tried first and foremost to get the information about the production, the use and the date of the drawings from their material qualities in combination with the letters. If neither of these sources provided sufficient evidence, then I used conventional methods.

The grouping of the drawings on the basis of material evidence showed that 63 drawings were attributed by DE LA FAILLE and HULSKER to the wrong period. Some had to be re-dated by only a couple of months, others by one to as much as four years. Quite a number of Etten, The Hague and Drenthe drawings are placed in the wrong period, and many sketches from Nuenen, Antwerp and Paris should also be re-allocated. More spectacularly perhaps, a 'Paris' sketch appears to have been executed as late as Auvers, and some 'Nuenen' studies belong to Saint-Rémy. In Appendix II all re-distributed drawings are listed. Several drawings need to be withdrawn from the oeuvre altogether since, in my opinion, they do not appear to have been made by

¹ Because the questionnaires were completed by paper conservators, curators, assistant registrars or private collectors, the reliability of the information can vary. Appendix I shows the second, final, more detailed version of the questionnaire that I have sent out.

² Despite the fact that the most recent edition of the letters is already being revised, I have used the dates as proposed by Crimpen & Berends-Albert. A reliance on the letters is only tricky in so far as their chronology is still not yet fully established.

Vincent.¹ These are also listed in Appendix II, as well as the newly discovered drawings.

Although I closely examined the majority of the drawings and have based my findings on their material qualities, I refrain from mentioning the material data of each drawing, such as the precise position of the binding holes, whether the drawing has pin holes or not, the colour and thickness of the paper, whether the ink has been applied with a pen or a brush, etcetera. The groupings of drawings proposed in the text are generally based on such data. I always describe the drawing media and the paper for each group or series.

In analysing the production and uses of the drawings I deliberately remain very close to the artist's letters, trying to remain as close as possible to the perspective of the artist. This approach from within the artist's work seems the only way of acquiring the reliable basis necessary for further research. Without a close reading of the letters in conjunction with data on the physical evidence of the drawings and topographical research one cannot get a correct chronology and context for the drawings. Only in cases where Vincent wrote to Theo about his plans of using his drawings commercially we must take into consideration that, in a way, the letters are those of an artist to his dealer. He had to make sure that Theo still believed in him. Clearly, other types of investigation would have demanded a greater critical distance from the material. However, this seems inappropriate for the type of research carried out in the first part of the thesis.

Despite the valuable work of DE LA FAILLE in particular, and also of HULSKER and PICKVANCE, more in-depth work needs to be done on the correct dating of the drawings before one can interpret them. The lack of a correct chronology and of a close factual reading of the letters has led to misinterpretations of many drawings. Only empirical research which is firmly rooted in the physical qualities of the work enables us to determine and comprehend the artist's working methods, his ideas about his drawings and their function within the artistic process. It is my conviction that this type of research can be a powerful tool in dispelling some of the persistent misconceptions about the artist and his work.

An analysis of the material qualities of the drawings forms the basis of the research. The presentation of the findings, however, can vary per period of production. Depending on the number and type of drawings and the artist's working methods, I have opted for the chronological approach, or for a presentation in terms of subjects or types of paper.

In the second, shorter part, I focus on the public uses and outlets of the drawings. This complements the part on the artistic use of the drawings. I describe the artist's intentions with his drawings, once they had fulfilled their function within the artistic process. I also describe his plans and actions with regard to selling, exhibiting, exchanging, and offering his drawings as presents or promotion material. Again, I discuss these issues per period.

For someone who wanted to earn his living as an artist, Vincent was particularly well-connected. Three out of four uncles from his father's side were or had been involved in art-dealing. The influential Hague School painter Anton Mauve,

¹ We have a fairly clear picture of the body of authentic drawings by Vincent. Apart from some forgeries, there is no major attribution problem to solve. Vincent had one pupil in The Hague, three in Nuenen, and one in Arles. There are only a few cases in Nuenen where there is some doubt about the attribution of some watercolours to Vincent or to one of his pupils. For a possible project of collaboration with regard to drawings, see Tellegen (1968).

co-founder of the **Hollandsche Teeken-Maatschappij** and one of the directors of the artist society **Pulchri**, was a member of the Van Gogh family through his marriage to a niece of Vincent. Most importantly, Theo, one of his younger brothers, was in charge of the gallery of Goupil & Cie on the Boulevard Montmartre in Paris since 1878.

Before he embarked on his artistic career Vincent worked at three of Goupil's European branches for seven years. Through this experience he was well acquainted with the mechanisms of the art market and the people involved. Although Vincent's dismissal from Goupil & Cie in 1876 did not facilitate his reputation in the commercial art world, it did not have a significantly negative influence on his career prospects and possibilities.

Vincent was financially fairly secure by receiving monthly from Theo 100 and later 150 francs. Theo agreed to Vincent's proposal that he could consider every work Vincent made as his own property in return for the monthly allowance, starting in April 1884. Technically, such a situation can be compared with a contract between an artist and a dealer whereby the artist hands over everything he produces in return for a guaranteed income, paid monthly. The arrangement was fairly secure, apart from the moral pressure, and the artistic pressure inasmuch that Theo demanded saleable work during the years in Holland.

Despite all his connections and the financial backing of Theo, it seems surprising that Vincent managed to sell only a few paintings, one watercolour and two series of drawings. This leaves us with the question about the artist's intentions with regard to marketing his work. It appears that Theo's role as the art dealer who always backed his brother with money and good advice has been overrated. It is clear from the letters that he started to help Vincent from about Arles, possibly from Paris on, but not before.

Only after having fully explored what public function Vincent intended his work to fulfil, can one address questions about possible reasons for not selling or for not having been successful. A study of the artist's public uses of his work is complete when both drawings and paintings are considered. However, in this section I shall only investigate the public uses of the drawings as this complements the section on the artistic function of the drawings.

The significant characteristic of this research project is a heavy emphasis on the material qualities of the drawings which are used as a basis and as a precondition for any possible interpretation and dating of Vincent's work. These empirical facts are complemented with a close factual reading of the letters in order to avoid a speculative ideologically motivated view on Vincent's drawings that easily leads to a distortion of the historical reality.

PHYSICAL EXAMINATION OF THE SHEET

I describe briefly the information one can get by looking closely at the sheet of paper. For a survey of drawing media see OTTERLO (1990), pp. 28-40.

Paper

The sheet of paper is of interest for its texture, quality, colour, watermark and possible stains.

Vincent was careful in his use of papers. It is one of those fables that, being so short of money, he scribbled on any paper that he could possibly find. Especially in the early stages of learning the craft, he was constantly searching for suitable material. Paper, one of the draughtsman's most important materials, is extensively discussed in the letters written from Etten and The Hague. One frequently finds passages on types of paper such as Bristol, Harding and Whatman, including the preferred thickness, colour and dimensions and their suitability for a certain technique. It was not always the intrinsic quality of paper which justified his choice; it could also be a combination of appropriateness for a medium, and the price. The artist ensured that Theo knew his preferences so that he could supply him with the right type, quality and colour of paper, if it was locally available. His preferences for paper changed in tune with the techniques employed at the time. Typical of The Hague is a heavy-quality, roughly textured wove paper with watermark 'Dambricourt Freres Hallines 1877'. Its strength and thickness were necessary because Vincent had a tendency to exert too much force on the carpenter's pencil and because he experimented with techniques such as lithographic ink and chalk, watercolour and oil-paint which included rubbing, sponging and wiping.

The examination of the paper can provide us with a relative date and can also give an indication of the importance the artist attached to a drawing. There was a close relationship between the size and quality of a sheet and its importance for Vincent, but there are no hard and fast rules because these relationships changed from period to period. One factor never changed, which is related to Vincent's permanent shortage of money: he would never use a good quality, expensive paper for a preliminary study.

Where the appearance of paper has changed due to treatment or age, a watermark can be a useful tool for identifying drawings made on a similar support and thereby giving them a relative date. On the basis of watermarks and types of paper I have made some of my most significant discoveries.¹ Although watermarks and types of paper often convey valuable information, they cannot be relied upon blindly. It is reasonable to assume that the artist did not entirely finish one batch of sheets before using another. Apart from his sketchbooks, however, there seem to have been relatively few unused loose sheets that Vincent took with him from place to place. During the ten years of his artistic career Vincent lived at eleven different places. This constant travelling meant that he did not work in one single studio where he would have had unused or partly used batches of paper at his disposal. In constant need of money, he would finish all of his canvas and paper before the arrival of long-awaited new supplies and his monthly allowance from Theo. Theo was not asked to send any paper of a local shop sold paper of his liking. In those cases that he worked on paper sent by Theo it is usually mentioned in the letters. With some exceptions,

¹ I would have liked to give an overview of all papers that I have found. Due to the inaccessibility of one of the main public collections this has not been possible.

every place where Vincent lived is characterised by the use of specific papers. Some papers were used in one place only. Some papers, however, such as the laid paper with the 'ED&Cie PL BAS' watermark, were used in several different places. In case where the same type of paper was used, the drawing media and the size of the paper can give an indication in which place the drawing was made. See Appendix III for the watermarks in the papers per period. If the material qualities of the letters do not give any evidence for the dating of a drawing, then it is a question of dating the drawing with conventional art historical methods.

It is interesting to compare the supports of his quick studies in paint with his quick drawn studies. There is a parallel between his drawings and his paintings in his use of supports. He often used a cheap quality paper or sketchbook for an 'unimportant' sketch, and paper mounted on pasteboard, or pasteboard on multiplex and pasteboard for his less important, quickly painted studies.

Edges

The edges of a sheet enable us to establish whether a drawing formerly belonged to a sketchbook. They can show traces of pigment (usually red or gold), binding-holes, round corners, they can be torn or deckle-edged, cut, greased or folded.

Apart from seven ready-made, pocket-sized sketchbooks in the Van Gogh Museum, many others have been dismantled over the years. Vincent made an extensive use of sketchbooks in Saint-Rémy and Auvers. Whoever dismantled the sketchbooks, it was not done carefully by loosening the binding-threads or staples; the pages are usually torn.

Comparison of the type and size of paper plus the placement of binding-holes, shows whether sheets are pages of the same sketchbook, or at least pages of a similar type of sketchbook. Impressions on neighbouring pages may even enable us to reconstruct the exact place of the page within the sketchbook.

If the torn side is trimmed, one has to rely on other features such as round corners, traces of pigment on the edge (only if we are dealing with ready-made sketchbooks), and grease on the other edges.

It is important to know whether a sheet is a sketchbook page because it tells us about the artist's drawing practises and about the status of the drawing. Apart from some individual pages Vincent took out, folded and despatched to family, friends and art-dealers, he generally was not concerned with matters of orientation or finish. The sketchbooks were intended for the artist's eyes only and were filled at random. A page was rarely used for independent works of art in their own right.

When paper has been torn into smaller sheets, the original edge allows us to re-construct whole sheets of paper. At times the artist folded and tore entire sheets into smaller parts. When the edges are trimmed, tears of two parts once belonging to the same folio may no longer correspond.

Original edges can be of interest for three other reasons. In conjunction with the position of a watermark they allow us to determine the original size of the sheet.¹ A drawn frame may be found near the edge. In pen and ink drawings from Nuenen this usually signifies that the artist thought they were finished and saleable. These pen and ink frames are also found around what I call 'gift-drawings'. A frame gave them a more finished, more significant appearance.

Pin- or tack holes on the corners of drawings are useful in telling fakes from genuine drawings by Vincent. A fake sometimes gives itself away by the placement

¹ P. Bower, *Turner's Papers*, London 1990-91, p.64.

of the binding holes. Vincent was reasonably consistent in the way he pinned down a drawing to his drawing board, which is something forgers often have overlooked. The perforations are usually found at each corner.

A total lack of pinholes usually indicates that the drawing in question is a page from a sketchbook. The evidence of many pinholes has disappeared by the trimming of the sheets.

Folds

Vincent kept people informed of his artistic development by sending letters which often contained small *croquis* or thumbnails-jottings. They might be integrated in the text itself or executed on a loose sheet included separately in the envelope.

Over the years the loose sketches were separated from the letters and envelopes they were sent with. They were placed in mounts as if they were finished drawings in their own right.

There are two ways of finding out if a small sketch is a letter sketch: first, by searching for a reference in the letter describing the sketch, secondly by looking for folds in the sketch because letter sketches were often larger than the envelopes in which they were sent. Although the sketches may have been kept in mounts for a long time, the folds should still be visible. Comparing the place of the folds in the sketch preferably with the envelope, if still in existence, or with the letter, it is possible to identify the corresponding letter, thereby dating the sketch.

NOTES TO THE READER

- H-numbers refer to the numbers as given by HULSKER.
- F-numbers refer to the numbers as given by DE LA FAILLE. For the sake of convenience I also refer to 'SD' numbers in DE LA FAILLE as F-numbers.
- VGM-numbers refer to numbers as given by UITERT (1987). They are only used when there is no H or F number.
- The '&' in for instance H95;F946v & H158;F946 means that they are made on one single sheet. I count them as one drawing.
- I used an '&' in the title of a drawing where there are unrelated studies on a single sheet.
- Letter x [y] [date]: 'x' refers to the most recent sequence of the letters as given by CRIMPEN & BERENDS-ALBERT, 'y' refers to the numbering of the 1958 edition of the letters. The date refers to the date of the letter as suggested by CRIMPEN & BERENDS-ALBERT.

For the letters originally written in Dutch and English I quoted **The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh**, (3 vols) Boston (1958) 1988. I have corrected the text where necessary.

For the letters originally written in French I used GOGH-BONGER.

- RKD stands for **Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie** in The Hague.
- In the text and notes I have used an abbreviated form of reference for publications listed in the bibliography. With the exception of DE LA FAILLE and OP DE COUL I have omitted the 'De', 'Van' and 'Van der' prefixes from surnames in the abbreviated forms.

Where necessary, I have changed the titles of works or made them more precise. This is often based on a new interpretation of the work.

Most of the drawings that I have dated, and a few that do not appear in HULSKER, are reproduced here. In addition, I have reproduced some drawings and photographic material where this seemed relevant to the argument in the text.

For reasons of length I refer to relevant letters rather than give extensive quotations. This inevitably has made the text rather dry. I recommend that the reader uses HULSKER and the collected letters at his or her side.