

***Inside Consumption:  
Frontiers of Research on Consumer Motives, Goals, and Desires  
(Routledge, 2005)***



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**Star Gazing:  
The Mythology and Commodification of Vincent van Gogh**

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**Acknowledgements:**

The development of this study has benefited from presentations made to the marketing departments at the University of Utah, California State University Northridge, and the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. My thanks to Guliz Ger, Annamma Joy, and Jonathan Schroeder for their friendly and insightful reviews, and to Russ Belk Jaap Boter,, and David Mick and for their thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. I am grateful to Janeen Costa, who has helped me throughout my exploration and thinking about Vincent, his work, and the nature of art, beauty, and love

## **Star Gazing: The Mythology and Commodification of Vincent van Gogh**

*“People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive”*  
(Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*)

### **Introduction**

Van Gogh exemplifies personalization of artistic greatness. His work was made into an enigma; his life into a legend; his relative poverty, misery, self mutilation, and suicide into a scandal. The places he went and the objects he touched have become relics; his paintings have sold at record prices in auction and are exhibited in the global spotlight (Heinich 1993). During the twentieth century he has been cast as a misunderstood genius, *peintre maudit*, paradigm of the modern artist, saint, martyr, hero, an enduring and evolving icon of popular culture, an artist who sold only one painting during his lifetime, and the painter whose work by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fetched the highest prices ever paid for art. Admirers travel the world to see authentic works of van Gogh; pilgrims pay homage at his gravesite, and visitors go to the van Gogh museum to say they’ve “been there,” signaling their arrival and passage in the form of mailed postcards. Some come to the museum for 30 minutes, while others stay the entire day.

While there is nothing incongruous about calling van Gogh a genius, calling him a saint, a hero, or a powerful icon of popular culture is hardly self-evident. Campbell describes myths<sup>1</sup> as “the stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and to understand our story...we need for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to

understand the mysterious, to find out who we are” (1998, pg.5). Similar to the processes described by Holt in this volume as to how societies come to produce and consume the mythical qualities related to highly desirable brands, the life and work of van Gogh has undergone a process of recounting, reinterpretation, and blending of fact and lore by a diverse group of story tellers. This chapter explores these heterogeneous systems of myth-building, contextualizing the many acts of consumption that we create, sustain, experience, buy, and buy into, and in doing so, perpetuate and celebrate the myths of Vincent’s life.

Why does Vincent van Gogh serve as such a powerful conduit, satisfying our needs for both believing and consuming myths? There are clear examples of contemporary artists, such as Andy Warhol and Pablo Picasso, who have made very effective use of public relations and mass media in order to shape and frame their image and fame as artists and celebrities. Public recognition for an artist in van Gogh’s time was much more likely to come from third parties—art critics publishing in influential magazines and newspapers, or from the sale of an artist’s work in commercial auction often organized by an art dealer. As an artist, Warhol consciously chose celebrity subject—from Campbell’s soup and Coca-Cola to Marilyn Monroe—to represent his pop cultured “comments on America”. As a person and celebrity, Warhol was a masterful *producer* of cultural discourse (see Schroeder, 1997). In stark contrast, van Gogh’s paintings *became* the objects of pop cultural discourses, and his life *became* the subject matter of both scholarly and (pop) cultural discourses. Vincent van Gogh is a myth of substance, and it will be argued in this chapter that the myth is just as important to consumers as are his paintings.

### **The systems of producing Vincent’s myths**

Vincent’s suicide in France on July 29, 1890, was followed six months later by the death of his brother, agent, and life-long supporter, Theo, in a mental asylum in Holland. Theo’s death

left the task of introducing van Gogh's *oeuvre* to Theo's widow, Johanna. But others—painters, critics, song writers, novelists, film directors, actors, forgers, art historians, psychiatrists, collectors, patrons, pilgrims, curators and art dealers—have been instrumental in creating the myths surrounding Van Gogh. These various discourses not only *create* knowledge about Vincent's life and works, they also become the *reality* they appear to describe. Even when scholars correct “errors” in Vincent's biography, they are often just challenging an outmoded myth, only to create a new one in its place. This chapter shows how the mythical images of Vincent van Gogh have developed over time. Developing a critical assessment of the various discourses of his life helps to highlight the ongoing myth making process, and the ways in which these discourses convey meaning to the consumer and to the consumed (Costa 1998; Hulsker 1985).

Heinich (1996) traces the chronological developments and intellectual discourses of van Gogh as a hero and mythical figure, highlighting what they are made of in contrast to “average men,” and describing the nature and content of the average man's admiration for the hero. Herein lies the starting point for tracing and understanding the development of Van Gogh's reputation as an artist, as well as his eventual multiple personae of genius, saint, madman, pop icon, and co-opted endorser for products, services, and *kitsch*.

#### ***Art reviews of van Gogh's style, and the establishment of new critical criteria***

Critical reviews regarding van Gogh's work primarily began *after* his suicide, although “Vincent” received his public patronym, in the first favorable article published *during* his lifetime—a review of select paintings shown in an exhibition during the final year of his life (Aurier 1890). In letters subsequent to the exhibit and review, Vincent wrote to his brother Theo, and to the author, Aurier, describing his great unease with the review, and his desire not to be

spoken of or written about (*Letters of Vincent van Gogh to His Brother Theo*, 629, 20 April, 1890 III). Seizing on this, later art critics, scholars, and biographers interpreted Vincent's response as a personal objection to the perceived false values associated with fame and renown. With this, the making of the myth of the man and painter was well underway by the late 1890s.

Ironically, Aurier's favorable review of van Gogh was of more immediate benefit to Aurier's own career as an art critic than to Van Gogh's as a painter. First, Aurier chose an artist characterized by the unique and innovative qualities of his work, rather than by respect for the common values of the academy that were most accessible to non-specialists. Second, Aurier focused less on the subject or referent of the paintings, and more on the signifier, illustrated by comments such as "investigations of a most curious order, sometimes, but not always great style." Aurier's review thereby broke from the standard criteria of criticism and established him as Paris' leading writer of aesthetic avant-gardism (Heinich 1996, p. 13). Others followed suit throughout the 1890s, describing Vincent as an "instinctive, rare genius, tormented spirit, gifted with a power of expression that is extraordinary, one who 'glimpses objects within nature but only really sees them within himself' ... a harmonious strangeness in which line and color unite" (Leclerq 1890); having "magnificent sincerity, colorist's temperament to render the excesses of nature" (Retté 1894). Importantly, publication of a work of aesthetics in which van Gogh's name appears for the first time next to those of established artists, such as Moreau, Redon, Gauguin, and Cézanne also occurs (Mellerio 1896).

Throughout the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reviews by art critics, as well as memoirs by other artists (notably Émile Bernard 1893; Paul Gauguin 1894) began to establish the theme of van Gogh as a genius. During this period, his brilliance as a painter is closely linked to his presumed madness as a person. This is important, in that during this period in Europe, madness

allows for an affirmation of deviance; instead of branding van Gogh with the stigma of incoherence, his deviance, in his paintings and his life, causes him to be celebrated as an exceptional figure. Art critics began using new criteria and adjectives to assess van Gogh—excess, personality, subjectivity, originality, madness, mystery and marginality—and to distinguish him from generally accepted criteria of what it was to be an artist and painter at that time. Interestingly, several of these images/dimensions of madness, excessiveness and marginality regarding van Gogh re-appear as pop cultural objects (post cards, posters) in the post-modern market place of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The construction and subsequent glorification of van Gogh as an artist and as a unique man of great frailty *and* strength establishes his singularity, and crowns this decade of commentaries among French critics (Heinich 1996; Zemel 1980). This discourse among art critics and fellow artists opens a hermeneutic space, a universe of systems of interpretation within which van Gogh's name has been taken up in such diverse disciplines as psychology, psychiatry, aesthetics, history and medicine. With such a broad array of contributing scholars, the myths grew exponentially, and eventually spread from a small circle of experts to the larger public.

***Scholars: between truth and myth***

The sheer amount of academic literature written about van Gogh the painter, and Vincent the man, confirms his uniqueness.<sup>3</sup> Trails of theoretical and empirical work from a wide range of disciplines have represented, misrepresented, and mythologized Vincent since the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, psychiatrists, psychologists and anthropologists have been concerned with both Vincent's deviance and singularity; scholars of religious history have used metaphors to describe his sacrifices and rise to greatness; and sociologists of religion have developed accounts regarding the creation of Van Gogh relics, and have drawn parallels between pilgrimages to van Gogh sites and journeys that trace the paths of Jesus' life. Art historians and

theorists have examined the dynamics of auctions and the continuously rising prices of van Gogh's paintings, debating and occasionally lamenting the value *of* his work, relative to the value *attributed to* the work. Critical theorists in economic and sociology have also examined the prices paid and argue that the ceilings are imposed by the buyer's financial resources rather than the presumed value of the art. Thus, successfully outbidding rival bidders on a live, televised auction demonstrates both an interest in van Gogh's work and the financial superiority of the winner, competing on a global stage among the super-rich. Van Gogh's poignant *Irises*, which sold in auction for \$53.9 million in 1987 serves not only as a representation of the lonely artist, but as an icon of how much people are willing to pay for his paintings.

Invariably, with so much written about van Gogh, inaccuracies will occur. Subjective accounts, rumors, speculation and simple misunderstandings have acquired the authority of fact in the academic literature on the painter. Once in the public domain, even incorrect information provides a basis for myth. In these cases, myths are woven not from established facts, but from information that seems reasonably probable, or at least not improbable. By the same token, newly discovered facts may be rejected if they prove to be incompatible with the prevailing images, or if they do not appeal to the public at a given time. In this way, the body of "knowledge" about van Gogh may be likened to Foucault's (1970) "discourse" or perhaps Kuhn's (1962) "paradigm."

As one example, van Gogh's sister-in-law, Elisabeth du Quesne van-Gogh, published her (German language) *Personal Recollections of van Gogh* in 1910. In this book, she argued that the beginning of Vincent's road to insanity began in his late teens, when Ursula Loyer, daughter of van Gogh's landlady during his brief employment in London, rejected Vincent's expression of love. Numerous French scholars picked up this anecdotal story some years later; the debate

centered around the nuances of various French words and expressions attributed to Vincent in letters to his family describing the rebuff. Throughout 40 years of scholarly debate regarding Vincent's adolescent love crisis as the starting point of his psychosis, no one seems to have acknowledged the likelihood of translation errors. French scholars debated meanings based on fourth generation translations from Dutch to German to English and finally to French. Notably, Van Gogh did not speak or write French during his early life (Hulsker 1993).

In a different instance also stemming from du Quesne's biography, myths about van Gogh arose among the Japanese, depicting him as a virtuous man who disdained commerce and business. De Quesne indicated that Vincent was dismissed from his position as an apprentice to an art dealer in The Hague for declaring in public that commerce was the pursuit of gain and thus ultimately tantamount to theft. This anecdote was repeated in a series of subsequent academic publications. Eventually, the story was embellished, and Vincent was quoted as saying "organized theft," then "business is greed, and greed is incessant theft (Shūji 1993, pg. 156). Shūji goes on to say that as a result, he was dismissed from his position. These misquoted elaborations struck a deep chord with the *Shirakaba* group, Japan's intelligentsia of the early 1900s. In spite of the fact that van Gogh was desperate to sell his paintings during his own life time, the myth of van Gogh as a suffering artist who had contempt for commerce and business was well established in Japan. Japanese were among the first pilgrims to make the long journey to van Gogh's burial place in France, and Japanese art collectors later propelled van Gogh into the international spotlight as a result of record auction prices paid for his paintings.

While both of these scholarly examples are relatively minor misrepresentations, they point to ways in which enduring myths of Vincent—aspects of his madness, his suffering artist persona, and a disdain for commercial enterprise—are generated. The scholarly work of

authoritative “experts” continues to influence both the number and content of myths that arise from the popular press, and from film and other mass media. When conjecture, fallacy, and fabrication are perpetuated often enough by successive authors, they eventually acquire a ring of truth.

*As a hero of biography and fiction*

In September of 1891, the painter Emile Bernard offered the first genuine biographical account of van Gogh’s career and life (Bernard 1891). In this brief article, and in a longer subsequent article (1893), Bernard brings his friend van Gogh back to life with physical (“red-headed...an eagle look and an incisive mouth”), as well as spiritual (“excessive in everything, vehement”) descriptions. These two biographies served to introduce van Gogh’s personal history to a general audience. Including a copy of one of Vincent’s self-portraits, Bernard’s 1883 publication served to ensure that Vincent’s face, his works, and his personality were no longer recognized by just a small circle of art connoisseurs, but became known to a broader public. A memoir by the artist Paul Gauguin (1894), who was at the center of the incident in which Vincent severed his ear, also provided a first-person biographical accounting of Vincent’s life. While some notable and critically regarded biographers of van Gogh did not know Vincent personally (see the collective works of Jan Hulsker), it is nevertheless easily argued that legends and myths about van Gogh have spread in part through numerous and conjectural biographies. Pabst and Nagahiro (1993) compiled a bibliography of literature inspired by van Gogh, and developed categories of poetry, biographical novels, short stories, drama, fiction, literary reviews and essays. More than 440 entries include literature in every major language in the world, as well as dozens of minor languages. Irving Stone’s (1934) *Lust for Life*, a highly fictionalized novel on van Gogh’s life and work, has sold millions of copies, in 39 different languages.<sup>4</sup> However,

many other authors have tried to correct the modern misconceptions and myths about van Gogh. For example, as director of the van Gogh Museum, John Leighton fielded many questions pertaining to which painting van Gogh was working on at the time he committed suicide. Eventually, Leighton (1999) wrote a book to correct the popular misconception that it was *Wheatfield with Crows, 1890*.

### ***Illness and madness***

Although some authors have been influenced by and have accurately represented material in van Gogh's letters, many more have produced fictionalized biographies, using poetic license in their interpretation of information, for the purpose of filling in gaps. One influential study, and the origin of many of the views perpetuated by later biographers regarding van Gogh's character came from Doiteau and Leroy's (1928) book, *La Folie de Van Gogh (Van Gogh's Insanity)*. Both authors were medical doctors (Leroy was the director of the asylum in St. Rémy, but long after the time when van Gogh voluntarily had himself committed there), and their book was based on articles which each had published earlier in medical journals. The book seems unfortunately titled, given that their conclusion is that Gogh was actually sane. Their final diagnosis, most commonly accepted in medical circles today, was that van Gogh suffered from a latent epileptic form of psychosis. While the authors proclaimed that van Gogh was not insane, and was in fact witty and lucid, they also went on to indicate:

The most conspicuous aspect of Vincent van Gogh's personality, a trait obvious even to a layman, is his irascibility, which is unquestionably pathological; he is never content with himself or his work, nor with anyone else... Vincent is also irritable, unsociable, and unstable. He has never been able to accept criticism, to agree with an opinion different from his own, or to take advice. Nor has he ever remained in one place for any length of time... Vincent is distrustful and suspicious." (Doiteau and Leroy, 1928, pp. 103,111, 125).

No direct evidence is offered for this assessment, and the authors' tone and writing style suggests they had known van Gogh personally, although neither had ever met him.

While temporal lobe epilepsy is the most accepted diagnosis (Lubin 1996), physicians, psychiatrists, historians, and others have strongly fueled myths about Vincent by speculating on other possible illnesses, primarily based on examination not of Van Gogh himself, but of his letters and paintings, and medical records from the asylum in St. Rémy. Van Dooren (1982) provides a thorough review of the various posthumous diagnoses: Schizophrenia, manic depression, a wide variety of other psychogenic illnesses, neurosis, character aberrations, epilepsy, tumors, alcohol poisoning/addiction (absinthe), digitalis, turpentine, or paint (lead) poisoning, eye diseases, and Menière's disease (a rare affliction of the ear).<sup>5</sup>

The diagnosis of Menière's disease is a particularly striking example of modern myth building. In the centenary year of van Gogh's death, 1990, a team of American specialists announced they had discovered the actual cause of van Gogh's physical and mental problems, and possibly his suicide. Claiming to have examined 796 letters written between 1884 and Vincent's suicide in 1890, the authors titled the article, published in the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association*, "Van Gogh had Menière's disease, and not epilepsy" (Kaufman, et.al. 1990). This diagnosis is all the more amazing, given that there are only 300 known letters by or about van Gogh during the period 1884-1890, while the total of all his known letters at the time of the *JAMA* publication was 652.<sup>6</sup> It was the *JAMA* authors' addition of the word *nausea* to the original letter written by Dr. Peyron, van Gogh's asylum physician in 1889, which allowed them to make their diagnosis (Hulsker 1993; Peyron, 604F in deLeeuw 1996).

From scholars to biographers to doctors, the myths of van Gogh originated, multiplied, and metamorphosed into new versions of familiar themes. Based on Vincent's work and letters, his personality, his marginalized life as a painter, the severing of his ear, and his time in an asylum, Vincent's posthumous biography slowly transformed to hagiography, the system of learning that examines saints and their worship.

### *Pilgrimages and saintliness*

Among the first group of pilgrims to pay homage to van Gogh the painter and Vincent the man was the *Shirakaba* group of Japan, starting around 1910. These Japanese intellectuals' enthusiasm for van Gogh was fired by their strong pro-European feeling and their cult of "self." The *Shirakaba* understanding of van Gogh was more about the man, and considerably less about his paintings. Based primarily on their reading of the first German biography of van Gogh, these Japanese saw Vincent as "a new type in the artistic poverty of our time: the artist who not only does not sell, but convinced of the futility of the effort, gives up any attempt and gains from this insight not bitterness, but on the contrary, pure joy" (J. Meier-Graefe, quoted in Zemel 1980, p. 116). This is an interesting conclusion, given the abundant evidence in Vincent's letters to his brother Theo that Vincent was genuinely desperate to sell his paintings and to become less dependent on Theo's financial support.

Early on, these Japanese intellectuals were able to pay personal visits to Dr. Gachet, van Gogh's somewhat eccentric physician in Auvers, and to JoAnna Bongers, Theo's widow and Vincent's sister-in-law. Dr. Gachet tended to "hold court" for his visitors and acquired 26 of van Gogh's paintings in the 70 days that Vincent was in his care. Later, Gachet's son, Paul Gachet Jr., styled himself as an expert on the final months of van Gogh's life, hosting many Japanese and European guests despite limited and sketchy contact with van Gogh; van Gogh committed

suicide when Gachet Jr. was only eight years old. Gachet Jr. made his living primarily from exhibiting, selling, and ultimately donating many of the paintings his father had acquired.

Clearly, Gachet Jr. enjoyed a life as a professional van Gogh myth-maker.

Nagahiro describes the motivations of early Japanese pilgrims to van Gogh's grave, focusing on the Japanese desire to see the "authentic:"

Japanese artists earnestly aspired to absorb and internalize the human qualities of van Gogh. Yet they felt slightly inadequate, knowing that they had only seen Van Gogh's works in reproduction. This clash between pride and self doubt stemming from the knowledge that their convictions were based solely on reproductions, fostered a longing for "the real thing," which pervades the pilgrimages that the Japanese made through the world of van Gogh....In short, it was the quest of the "real Vincent van Gogh" that the Japanese pilgrims made their journeys. The climax was invariably a visit to van Gogh's grave.... The act of visiting a grave in order to commune with the spirit buried there is essentially analogous to trying to understand an artist's inner being by studying reproductions of his work. The mind that has gained intimacy through reproductions tries to consolidate that mental act by paying respects at the grave...To this day, it is not so much a desire to understand his paintings as the hope of penetrating his very essence as a human being that defines the way the Japanese regard Vincent van Gogh (Nagahiro, K., 1993, pg. 398).

While Nagahiro's descriptions of Japanese pilgrims capture the motivations of early Japanese visitors and provide a more general cultural sense of what it means to visit Auvers-sur-Oise, Nagahiro does not focus on the more recent role of the Japanese in van Gogh's auction prices, nor on the influences of pop culture on van Gogh's modern image in Japan. In the summer of 2001, I interviewed a number of Japanese and Asian visitors to Vincent's gravesite, generating a more current mix of the meaning of van Gogh to young Japanese consumers:

I: *What brings you to Auvers-sur-Oise?*

R<sub>jf</sub>: We are here for a few days, away from our tour group in Paris. We wanted to come and see the place of Mr. van Gogh.

I: *Why is that?*

- R<sub>jf</sub>: We have learned about Mr. van Gogh in school, and admire his painting, especially his studies of Japanese prints. Uh, we know about him because of the high prices that have been paid for his paintings in our country. He is very well known to Japanese people for his expensive prices.
- I: *I'm sure you have noticed that there are no paintings of van Gogh here in Auvers. There are many of his paintings in the museums in Paris.*
- R<sub>jf</sub>: Yes. We have seen those the other day. We are here to visit his grave, and to see this places [sic] where he walked and lived. Also, my boy friend [gestures to partner] has the same birthday.
- R<sub>jm</sub>: Yes. Eric Clapton.
- I: *Eric Clapton?*
- R<sub>jf</sub>: Yes. Eric Clapton, Vincent van Gogh, and he [gestures again to partner] are all born on the same day, March 30.

The cemetery in Auvers is simple, unpretentious, well-kept, wears well the patina of time, and is small enough that no signage is necessary for tourists to find Vincent and Theo's joint grave. During the tourist season, tourists and pilgrims form a small but steady flow. The tourists themselves provide the "signage" to point the way to the gravesite; their cameras and dress serve to distinguish them from the locals who also visit and care for graves. The Town Council of Auvers has made a conscious effort to erect signs within the small town center to guide the visitor along a pleasant route, up village stairs<sup>7</sup> made famous by a van Gogh painting. From there, tourists pass to the Auvers church, where another sign makes it clear that this is precisely the spot from which Vincent painted his masterpiece of the building. Down a dirt road another 100 meters, through well-manicured wheat fields, lies the cemetery. The beautiful wheat fields are no coincidence; they provide a planned "atmosphere-accessory" managed by the Town Council, offering reference and context to van Gogh's most famous paintings from his time in Auvers. Of all the offerings left on Vincent's grave by visitors, a shaft of wheat from the nearby field is by far the most common. These wheat sheaves contribute to the lore of the painting, and

sustain the legend and myth of van Gogh. However, there are also more substantial offerings made as a way to pay homage to Van Gogh and his life:

One evening at the restaurant I joined a Japanese gentleman who was finishing his meal. He spoke good English. And he seemed very tired. He just arrived in France in the same afternoon, from Japan. We spoke about the many tourists who come to Auvers, including Japanese tourists. He was pleased to hear that many Japanese come to my restaurant, and visit Vincent's room [which is upstairs from the dining area]. I noticed that he had a large urn on the floor, next to the chair where he was eating. I asked what it was, and he said it is the ashes of his friend; that his friend was cremated this past winter [2001], and that he had left this man money in his will to pay for his trip to Auvers. To carry out the wishes in the will, the man's task was to scatter his friend's ashes on van Gogh's grave, and in the wheat fields. I've seen many offerings of locks of hair, jewelry, tea sets, and pottery from the Japanese who come here, but these offerings are taken by the locals rather quickly. This is the first time I've seen ashes. I remember thinking that I hoped the Town Council did not see him doing this!  
(personal interview, D.C. Janssens, owner of Auberge Ravoux June 2001).

Auver's *Mémoire des Lieux* society is dedicated to identifying the motifs in Auvers painted by van Gogh, and to placing reproductions of his paintings in those places. Not only the objects that van Gogh touched and used (his pallets, letters, paint boxes, pencils, and possessions), but also the objects represented in his painting have become "relics." Both the *Yellow House* in Arles, as well as the *Auberge Ravoux* in Auvers, have been rebuilt or remodeled as replicas of the original buildings, thereby providing the visitor with the feeling of walking in a painting, or in history itself. These physical replicas and advisory signs indicating where he stood, and offering his exact perspective of the objects that he painted, are part of creating the cult of an idol, not unlike Christianity's Stations of the Cross. The town councils of Arles and Auvers, and entrepreneurs like Mr. Janssens (a Proctor and Gamble marketing vice-president prior to his passionate "van Gogh career") serve to create and organize van Gogh shrines, providing consumers with opportunities to eat where Vincent ate, stand where Vincent stood, see

the objects that Vincent saw, pay respects to the artist by visiting the very room in which he died in the arms of his brother Theo, and walk the funeral route to Vincent's and Theo's grave.

Thus, Auvers provides a locale where one can celebrate the actual life and the constructed myths of van Gogh. However, perhaps the most powerful impact on the modern myth making of van Gogh comes from the films that portray his life. In Kurosawa's (1990) film *Dreams*, a man walks through an Arles landscape composed of oversized images of van Gogh's paintings. "What better expression of a painter's power than the creation of a fictional world that can later serve as a model for reality" (Heinich pg. 125)? I turn now to a discussion of this powerful mythmaker, the film.

### ***Film as mythmaker***

While the previous sections have set out van Gogh as the ultimate signifier of discourses on artistic temperament and suffering, creativity, alienation, and postmortem glorification, perhaps the greatest impact on mythmaking of van Gogh comes from popular films. In the period from 1948 to 1990, 85 films and documentaries about van Gogh were produced, coinciding with the substantial and direct visual impact that stemmed from the growing popularity of cinema and television. The prominent list of cast members and directors, particularly from the Hollywood genre of van Gogh films, is impressive: Directors Robert Altman (*Vincent and Theo* 1990), Kurosawa Akira (*Dreams* 1990), and Vincent Minnelli (*Lust for Life* 1956); actors Kirk Douglas as Vincent, and Anthony Quinn's supporting actor academy award winning role as Gauguin, and Martin Scorsese as Vincent in Kurosawa's fifth *Dream* sequence. *Lust for Life* is perhaps the most influential Hollywood film on van Gogh, and presents the major components of the legend and myths of Vincent as a suffering genius and mad artist, using powerful visual images and dramatic characters.

Van Gogh shot himself with a small pistol on Sunday, July 27, 1890. He apparently aimed for his heart and missed, and died two days later from blood loss and untreated infection (which raised doubts about Dr. Gachet's medical skills, and led to further mythmaking regarding van Gogh's suffering). Many films, and Minnelli's *Lust for Life* in particular, represent the artist as shooting himself while painting *Wheatfield with Crows*. The painting portrays an ominous black sky, with two paths that diverge, ending pointlessly in the fields of wheat. Crows seem to harass the scene, and the artist. Psychiatrists have aggressively analyzed the symbolism of this setting, and have speculated that it represents the choice of life or death, van Gogh's delusions, or even schizophrenia.

While youth tend to garner their supply of van Gogh images and myths from many different sources, the impact of films is particularly important in understanding the ways in which van Gogh is appreciated and consumed, particularly among tourists and patrons who are middle aged. This interview with an American woman visiting the van Gogh museum in 1997 is illustrative:

I: *What is it that makes you interested in van Gogh, and brings you to the museum?*

R<sub>af</sub>: Well, I remember seeing this wonderful film, "Lust for Life" starring Kirk Douglas. What a fascinating man! My husband is here [Amsterdam] for some work, so I've come to see the paintings of van Gogh. Did you see the movie?

I: Yes. Kirk Douglas, and directed by Vincent Minnelli.

R<sub>af</sub>: Didn't you just love all the colors? And at the end of the film, I remember seeing the credits, where a lot of well known Hollywood actors had donated their original van Gogh's for use in the movie.

This short transcript is indicative of the larger role of Hollywood films and televised images that motivate consumers to visit places, view objects, and connect to their visually mediated experiences. In several interviews at the van Gogh museum, (primarily American)

respondents discussed their impressions of the museum while simultaneously describing visits to the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Big Ben in London, or the leaning tower of Pisa. Bamossy, Hogg, and Askegaard (1999) found that these visual destinations in Europe have their American counterparts, including, for example, the sign spelling out “Hollywood” resting in the hills overlooking the famous community, or the dramatic rock formations of Monument Valley, famous from Western films, particularly those directed by John Ford, and often depicted as the ideal backdrop to persuade Europeans to buy a 4X4 SUV. Films create emotional connections with places and objects, and many visitors to the van Gogh museum come there to connect with the places and objects they’ve seen in movies concerning van Gogh’s life and work.

***The commercial, the kitsch, and the postmodern: Van Gogh, unincorporated***

In the summer of 1990, the circus came to Amsterdam—not the two-week visit by *Circus Rens*, Europe’s version of Ringling Bros./Barnum & Bailey Circus, but the Van Gogh Centenary Exhibition, commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> year of Vincent van Gogh’s death on July 28, 1890. At Center Ring was the venerable van Gogh Museum, which houses the largest permanent collection of van Gogh’s works and, for this celebration, had assembled many of the masterpieces that had been scattered around the world since his death. The centenary exhibit not only marked the passing of van Gogh, it also provided a perfect marketing opportunity for the museum, and for the city of Amsterdam. Museums may be viewed as societies’ institutions for preserving and glorifying high art, but they are also organizations that stage block-buster shows in an effort to develop and sustain financial resources (see Joy and Sherry, 2003 for a provocative essay on the relationship between the art market and the art world).

The centennial drew over 1.3 million visitors, more attendance during the four months of summer than during an entire “normal” year. The exhibition was so successful that the museum’s

management required visitors to buy a ticket for a specific time slot as a method of crowd control. While the exhibit itself was clearly a celebration of Vincent's life and works, the festivities were not limited to art and objects produced by the museums and exhibited inside their walls displaying van Gogh's oeuvre. The exhibit's carnivalesque atmosphere spilled into the large and beautiful museum square (and its highly commercial "van Gogh Village"), into the city, and east across the country to the sleepy town of Otterloo, which houses the world's second largest collection of van Gogh's works.

A sacred institution such as a museum may represent "high culture," continuity, and the housing of cultural treasures, yet the van Gogh exhibit produced a cultural scene that could also be described in more postmodern terms as "one giant hyperreal amalgam which continually effaces modernist distinctions between fiction, fact, image, simulations, and the 'real'" (Thompson 2000, pg. 123). The museum exhibit became a clear example of "a cultural (dis)order of fragmented, superficial signs and images whose only coherent linkage lies in their hyperstimulating ephemerality" (Thompson 2000, pg. 123.). Consider the following sideshows, which emerged and evolved over the course of the 1990 celebration:

- ✚ An explosion of van Gogh images on literally hundreds of (sometimes improbable) product and service offerings touted during the time frame of the exhibit. These images ranged from accurate representations of van Gogh's works linked to a product or retail outlet, to a variety of post-modern representations relating the persona of van Gogh as an object to his paintings or his life, also sometimes linked to a product or service.
- ✚ The intriguing atmosphere of black market and street auctioneering of (sometimes forged) tickets for a time slot to enter the museum, particularly during the busy summer months. This market often took place in the same Museum Square (*het museumplein*) where street performers (jugglers, fire-eaters, musicians, magicians, unicyclists/acrobats) plied their trade for the entertainment of tourists.
- ✚ The non-commercial celebrations surrounding the centenary exhibit: Youth primarily from Europe and North America who designate the Museum Square as the "hip" place to meet; spontaneous musical performances (not for spare change), in particular the singing of Don McLean's "Vincent" ("Starry, Starry Night"); smoking of hash and marijuana in

preparation for using one's "time-slot" ticket or as part of sharing personal experiences following (or *instead of*) the museum visit; showing/trading van Gogh postcards.

- ✚ A daily stream of frantic and ticketless tourists, pleading with the ticket takers at the museum entrance to allow them access to the museum gift shop so they could purchase gifts and postcards. When told by the ticket takers that one could purchase postcards and van Gogh souvenirs from literally hundreds of kiosks and shops near the museum and throughout the city, a typical response was "But I want to say that I purchased them (cards) from the van Gogh museum."

The centenary exhibit provided a highly focused venue and a set of time constraints for the celebration of van Gogh, yet the creation and sustaining of the many images and myths concerning Vincent is hardly ephemeral. In the following section, consumer data will be presented which describes and explores consumer stories and lore about Vincent and his works. In doing so, the data illuminate the ways in which the myths circulate, how consumers use myths to anchor their experiences, and how art influences our processes of desire, and inspires our imagination and behaviors.

Data collection reported in this study began in 1989, becoming more systematic and focused in 1990, and continuing through the present, and involved extensive participant observation, personal interviews, and the gathering and observation of writings, words, images, and behaviors relating to van Gogh. Interviewees since 1990 include museum patrons and visitors, art scholars, research librarians at the van Gogh library, museum managers, curators, commercial retail managers/owners (including the owner of the *auberge* in Auvers-sur-Oise, France, where van Gogh died), members of the van Gogh Foundation Board of Directors (including a great niece of van Gogh, Costa and Bamossy 1995), and pilgrims from countries around the world who have paid their respects at Vincent's grave. In general, the interviews have been ongoing, and were conducted at various times throughout the year, each year since 1990.

In addition to the personal interviews and observations, I have had my own scholarly and personal journey of discovery of Vincent, and of van Gogh. This includes visits to most of the places he lived, as well as a pilgrimage to his final resting place in Auvers-sur-Oise in 2001. With the exception of a few masterpieces privately housed in Japan, I have been to most major repositories of van Gogh's works numerous times since 1990, including Dutch museums (Amsterdam, Otterlo), American museums (New York, Malibu, Chicago), and French museums (Paris). I own a small library of books on van Gogh (written in Dutch or English) and several oil or print reproductions of his masterpieces, which hang in my home or office. I have specialized literature on van Gogh's writings, have viewed several documentaries and films on his life, and have reviewed original documents in the archive section of the van Gogh Foundation Library.

My own personal and scholarly investment in van Gogh has raised my level of sensitivity to doing research on this man and his works. I am keenly aware that by inducing subjects (admirers, museum visitors, pilgrims by the graveside) to provide an account of their experience, I am forcing them temporarily out of their participatory stance, often putting them into a position of justification. In interviewing subjects (as opposed to "experts" or "professionals"), I am displacing both the position of the object observed, and the position of the observer. I have learned throughout the research experience that often one cannot avoid an emotional engagement. So it goes with admiration. The mere fact of distancing oneself by taking an interest in the characteristics of admiration, rather than in the admired object, implies withdrawal, detachment, or disengagement. From the point of view of the interviewed subject, such an attitude tends to be perceived as a refusal to admire and, directly or indirectly, as a critique of admiration itself. There is no "neutral position," as every neutralization *per se* means taking a stand. The notion of "axiological neutrality" assigned to the scholar runs the risk of

disappointing the expectations of the artist's admirers, and this cannot be avoided (see Heinich 1996).

For the industries of advertising, branding, mass producers of countless souvenirs, fashion accessories and interior design services, van Gogh is "gold." The van Gogh family copyright on his works expired 50 years after his death, and the van Gogh Foundation has never registered the artist's name as a trademark. As a result, common forms of artist commercialism such as printed reproductions in books, calendars, posters, and postcards have expanded into other product arenas. Vincent's image, his paintings, and the subjects and objects of his art can be found on products and services as diverse as Italian sugar packages, Dutch gin and vodka, branded potatoes, pre-paid French telephone cards, American house paint, refrigerator magnets, and computer mouse pads. The Amsterdam entrepreneur and multi-millionaire Jaap Dekker has registered the name of "Vincent van Gogh," and of his company, Van Gogh International, and collects royalties from manufacturers of perfumes, cosmetics, clothing and textiles, watches, fashion accessories, pens, t-shirts, scarves and neckties in 60 countries. Over 30 years ago, Hammacher (1970) observed that the popular interest in van Gogh had developed into "a kind of van Gogh semiology, a socio-aesthetic van Gogh language, people beginning to live according to Van Gogh symbols. These trends manifest themselves in the lucrative industry producing books, booklets, calendars, illustrations of all shapes and sizes, films and plays" (p.32).

Postmodernists would argue that parodies and (mis)appropriations of images result naturally and necessarily through the breaking away from the canons of normal representation. Van Gogh represents the *sine qua non* of this break for artists and their works, and for historical figures generally. The thousands of "low art" and "kitsch" reproductions of Vincent,<sup>8</sup> and of his paintings provide many consumers with crude and transient images of who he was, and what he

created. It may be that these post-modern representations of van Gogh and his work, provided by the advertising industry and delivered via mass media, help lead the way to a shift in some consumers' contemporary needs for myth, and ultimately, to their understanding of the man and his works. One of the recurring themes in the interview data, among both American and European youth, is that there is something intimate occurring—that visiting the museum for the purpose of seeing van Gogh's paintings, or visiting for the purpose of “being there” in the social scene provided by the museum, is a way to come closer to greatness, to approach and observe the line between insanity and genius, and to visit the unknowable nature of a great artist. Interviews conducted over several years at the van Gogh Museum suggest that youth find it gratifying to see genius and productivity coming from an individual who was marginalized and who suffered. This gratification seems related to and amplified by a perceived “connection” between Vincent and other popular icons and with manifestations of “rebellious” behavior in their own experiences:

I: *It's a beautiful day today. What brings you to the museum?*

R<sub>am1</sub>: Well, we've just got a whole day sort of planned...spent some time at the Bulldog, [A touristy Amsterdam coffee shop, where you can sit and smoke marijuana and/or hash] now we're here. Later we're going for Indonesian food, and then back to another coffee shop. We're only here for two days.

I: *Have you been hitting lots of museums on your trip around Europe?*

R<sub>am1</sub>: [Laughing] No...not really. This is the first one.

I: *How come this one?*

R<sub>am1</sub>: Well, he's a trip. The whole ear thing; not well received during his life; poor. And we've got some girls back home who told us to go. We're getting them some stuff at the gift shop.

I: *So what do you know about van Gogh? Did you do any special preparation before coming here?*

R<sub>am1</sub>: Yeah. We went to the Bulldog! [more laughing].

I: *Yeah, I noticed. How come?*

R<sub>am1</sub>: Well, he's a trip. Lots of colors, and we've been seeing some great postcards of him around town. Just thought it would be a good way to come.

I: *Postcards around town?*

R<sub>am2</sub>: Yeah. You know. Sunflowers and weed, or van Gogh wearing a walkman and doing a joint, with a bandage on his ear. Pretty funny shit.

I: *Does van Gogh remind you of anyone in particular from your life?*

R<sub>am1</sub>: What'd you mean?

I: *Whatever...another artist? Or someone who is a public figure?*

R<sub>am1</sub>: [Pause...] Maybe Kurt Cobain. Or Jimi Hendrix. You know, on the edge and suicide.

R<sub>am2</sub>: Or Che Guevara.

I: *Che Guevara?*

R<sub>am2</sub>: You know. Sort of a revolutionary type. Also has an image like van Gogh's.

I: *How's that?*

R<sub>am2</sub>: They both have that same thing in their photographs. You know that shot of Che? [We establish that he is referring to the 1960 photo of Che taken by Alberto Korda, although the respondent did not recognize the name of the photographer]. Van Gogh has that same sort of image.

Like Vincent, Che's image is ubiquitous—his figure staring out at us from coffee mugs, posters, key rings, t-shirts, and various props at rock concerts. This apotheosis of Che's image has been accompanied by a parallel disappearance of the real man, who, like Vincent, has been swallowed by the myth. Remarkably, when pressed to discuss the similarities of Vincent with Che, Cobain, or Hendrix, the connections are most often superficially elaborated--premature death (suicide for van Gogh and Cobain, execution for Che, accidental drug overdose for Hendrix), a rebel/romantic image--but little is offered in the way of substance. This erasure of complexity seems to be the normal fate of many icons. In a (youth) culture that consumes imagery incessantly, modifying those images becomes inevitable. What familiarity breeds is not contempt, but recycling. Over a period of time, these commercial, postmodern images of Vincent and his works sustain the myths, contextualize the myths by linking them with others, and provide consumers with a simplified handle on which to hang their perceptions.

## **Some final observations on the “Why” of consuming van Gogh**

This chapter provides an overview and analysis of the scholarly discourses, biographies, and hagiographies that frame the early and current myths of van Gogh. Early myths generated a discussion of (1) the nature and motivations of van Gogh pilgrimages, (2) the influences of film, (3) pop culture, and (4) the kitsch and the commercial that create, sustain, and produce more recent myths that are a large part of the cult of Vincent van Gogh. However, any promise to provide insights into the “why” of consuming van Gogh must first acknowledge van Gogh’s *oeuvre*. The primary and secondary data presented in this paper offer insights into the celebrity and cult of Vincent, as well as the multidisciplinary interpretations of his paintings as they relate to mythmaking. Many of the interviews I conducted over the past 14 years provided personal insights into van Gogh’s art, and artistic style.<sup>9</sup> I believe, however, that what simply stands alone, with no need for explanation as to why people spend their time and money to view van Gogh’s paintings, is the magnificent uniqueness of the work itself. Distinct from the work of virtually any other artist prior to or since his time, van Gogh’s art is instantly recognizable and presents an aesthetic window on a reality all its own (see Holbrook and Hirschman 1982 for a discussion on hedonic and aesthetic consumption; see also Joy and Sherry, 2003).

The experience is emotional. My personal encounters with van Gogh have led to moments of epiphany, revelation, and radiance. Our use of words always involves qualifications and limitations, and when I speak of the emotion that van Gogh can evoke, it is not just of the beautiful, but of the sublime. Some visitors are moved to tears, leaving the museum feeling as if their life has been changed and enriched. Others come on a lark, or as part of a day of cultural grazing which includes getting stoned, buying souvenirs, and eating Indonesian food. Herein lies an additional insight regarding the “why” of consuming van Gogh -- he is accessible at so many

different levels, and offers a variety of meanings, embodied in his person, his myths, and his works.

Consumers often have complex motives for visiting the van Gogh museum, searching for or constructing an experience that meets a wide variety of their emotional needs. In the Fall of 1996 I interviewed an Italian male in his late 20s, who I had noticed throughout the course of the afternoon in the museum was spending all of his time in front of van Gogh's *Wheatfield with*

*Crows*:

I: [after briefly establishing some rapport] *...I notice that you have been spending much of your time here, in front of Wheatfield with Crows. Is there something special about this painting for you?*

R<sub>It1</sub>: Yes, I do like it very much. But I am also staying here because I believe that should someone else find this painting particularly attractive, then there is a good chance that we will be very emotionally compatible.

I: *How so? Can you help me understand?*

R<sub>It1</sub>: Well, this painting is not only beautiful, but it is dark [I establish that he means "emotionally dark", and not in terms of the colors, which are very bright] and powerful. It speaks of death and separation, and passion.

I: *So, what do you believe the connection might be with someone who also enjoys this painting?*

R<sub>It1</sub>: (Laughing)...well, honestly, I am hoping to find a young woman who sees the beauty and passion of this painting, and that I will be able to talk with her, and perhaps spend some more time with her after the museum.

I: *Oh! Has this approach been successful for you?*

R<sub>It1</sub>: Not as yet, today. [I establish that he has been here twice before, and always in front of this painting]. But the other day was quite good.

I: *Good?*

R<sub>It1</sub>: Yes. An American girl from Boston.

I: *And what happens if you are not successful in arranging some time with someone? Do you feel disappointed that you have spent all your time in front of this one specific painting?*

R<sub>It1</sub>: No. Even if there is no promise of further engagement after, I find it very interesting to talk with anyone, women or not, about the feelings of this painting.

- I: *OK, so apart from the particular painting, is there any particular reason you choose the van Gogh museum? There are many museums in Amsterdam, and many masterpieces.*
- R<sub>It1</sub>: The other museum [Rijksmuseum] is too impersonal, and too serious. I like the sort of woman who comes to this museum.

When the entrepreneur Jaap Dekker was considering potential “returns” on the investment necessary to register “Vincent van Gogh” as a trademark, he carried out a number of studies. While to the European mind van Gogh’s name was associated with Impressionism, rich colors, and flowers, Dekker’s research indicated that Americans associate the artist’s name with exclusive, luxury items such as yachts, caviar and champagne (Kasumi 1993). The Americans associations are perplexing; Van Gogh never painted any of those objects, and his lifestyle was a far cry from luxury. Perhaps the high prices of his auctioned paintings or the celebrity status van Gogh acquired as the focus of films directed by and starring Hollywood’s best, provide the most likely explanation.

Just as many associations about van Gogh seem superficial, van Gogh’s art itself is accessible at the novice level. Elementary school children introduced to “high” art are often presented with van Gogh’s paintings; experience has taught art teachers that young children can relate easily to his work (Dubelaar and Bruijn 1990). At a young age, having a positive affective response sets the stage for deeper levels of learning and appreciation (Bamossey 1982). Similarly, many adults who know very little about van Gogh exhibit positive attitudes about van Gogh and his art. With respect to van Gogh, the adage of “I don’t know art, but I know what I like” has rarely been more true. For consumers who feel that “high art” is neither their preference nor priority, as in the case of some tourist youth in this study, then using drugs and consuming the post modern parodies of van Gogh is also a way to connect to the man, the pop icon, and his art. For the young Italian male visitor who had multiple agendas for spending his time at the van

Gogh museum, the connection was clearly to a specific painting, while the painting itself potentially (hopefully?) served as an emotional connection which was beyond the art itself.

For more serious admirers, pilgrims and patrons, van Gogh offers richness well beyond the price of a museum admission ticket, or the travel expenses necessary to trace his footsteps. Regardless of whether their understanding of van Gogh is based on fact or myth, or some personal and unique combination of both, contemplating his works while musing over who he was, and what may have led him to create as he did, provides a deeply meaningful experience. Campbell (1988) describes the value of myths in many ways. Myths bring us to a level of consciousness that is spiritual. Myths show us how to deal with great human problems and achievements, and how to respond to crises of disappointment or delight, failure or success. For all these reasons, myths of Vincent the man, and van Gogh the artist, surround and support multiple consumption forms, meanings, and experiences. Both Vincent and Van Gogh's art will continue to be contemporary myths of substance.

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<sup>1</sup> "Myths" are generally meant to explain the origins of the world, and the experiences of the supernatural. Legends focus on heroes, both historical and non-historical, while lore has to do with the anecdotal information or stories of a more restricted nature.

<sup>2</sup> For several levels of analysis offered in the chapter, the visual data would be useful to the reader. Go to: <http://c3.business.utah.edu/Vincent> for access to these images. Additionally, this site offers a power point file on *The Mythology and Commodification of Vincent van Gogh* which the reader may find useful for a lecture/class discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Reading about van Gogh, and then writing about him, involves making distinctions between the artist and the cult of the man. The biographical treatments of Vincent (the man) borrow several motifs from the heroic tradition, and the use of the name "Vincent" (his signature on both letters and painting) designates the man. References to van Gogh tend to allude to his individual works and *oeuvre*. The use of "Vincent" in this manuscript follows the tradition of speaking about the particularized person, while the use of "van Gogh" signifies reference to his works.

<sup>4</sup> A search during Spring, 2004 for "van Gogh" on Google's Search Engine returned over 1.7 million links to his name.

<sup>5</sup> Published academic/medical literature on van Gogh's illness shows an interesting pattern both chronologically and geographically, starting with the Germans, who took the lead in psychiatric analyses. In addition, many art historians and physicians offer examples of van Gogh's innovative representations of the sun, and starts as evidence of hallucinations induced by poisoning from alcohol, lead paint, or other eye diseases. Further details of the

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literature streams, and examples of van Gogh's painting which are offered as speculative evidence of his ailments can be found in the power point presentation at: <http://c3.business.utah.edu/Vincent> .

<sup>6</sup> As of Spring 2004, there are 874 known letters. See <http://www.vangoghgallery.com/> for an inventory of all letters. This is the most complete, authoritative website on Vincent van Gogh.

<sup>7</sup> The village stairs were destroyed following van Gogh's death, but the Town Council reconstructed them, faithfully following the "look and feel" of the stairs as represented in his painting. Local admirers have placed a reproduction of the painting near the stairs, so that visitors can admire the replica's faithful representation of the painting. Life occasionally does imitate art.

<sup>8</sup> A diverse set of examples of these postmodern images of Vincent, and the use of his image, or the subjects and objects represented in his paintings as parody, advertising, or branding can be found in the power point presentation at: <http://c3.business.utah.edu/Vincent>

<sup>9</sup> As a general trend over the 14 years of interview data, I would conclude that European visitors and patrons to the museum are more likely to relate van Gogh to other artists, and particularly artists from the respondent's home country. American interview data is more likely to link van Gogh to film, popular culture, or myths about the man. These are defensible characterizations to make on the data as a whole, but of course, Europeans also place van Gogh in the context of pop culture, just as some American respondents had thoughtful comments on van Gogh as an artist.

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