

THE INSANE ARTIST OR GENIUS AT HIS BEST

Vincent van Gogh, a Case in Point ?

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The association of artistic geniality and infirmity of the mind that was widespread and well accepted during the 19th century can be traced back to a change of meaning in the concepts of genius and madness in previous centuries.

The idea of genius goes back to antiquity, but it received various connotations during subsequent ages. The term had always been defined as an attribute given to man by birth or divine intervention. Only during the 18th century it began to be identified with man himself, in particular with a poet's or artist's personality.¹ At that time 'genius' was no longer merely an umbrella term for qualities like 'invention'² or 'great talent', but it stood for an individual with artistic originality and creative inspiration. Initially much of the new ideas about genius were developed by 18th century writers, but soon found appreciation among representatives of the visual arts as well. The definition of the genius varied, and different authors did not necessarily coincide in their ideas of what characterized a genius; all, however, agreed on the point that he had to be free from rules and that his creative powers emerged out of himself.

This concept developed as a reaction to the academies which had been founded during the 17th and 18th centuries. Their educational programs were a result of the attempts of Rationalism to explain the world and its phenomena through reason. This attitude brought about a great emphasis on a teachable system of norms in the arts, and academic institutions stifled original thinking and creativity through their rigid system of education and art evaluation.

The call for the originality and creative inspiration of a genius was the answer of dissatisfied authors and artists to this influential establishment. All over Europe innovative thinkers argued that a genius was inspired through the divine powers within him and did not, even should not have to rely on the man-made rules of the external world, as they were taught by the academy. An artist's geniality was therefore defined by elements that could

¹ For a detailed analysis see for example E. Zilsel, *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes* (Tübingen 1926).

² The term 'invention' is used here in its traditional, academic sense where it did not indicate something completely new, but an idea or combination of elements based on accepted, well known models.

not be grasped by reason. It was believed that his creativity emerged from his emotional sensibility and irrational inspiration.

In addition to the development of the concept of genius also the definition of madness changed considerably within the artistic context. Again the idea can be traced back to Antiquity. In his dialogue *Ion* Plato proposed that the poet had to be filled with divine enthusiasm and that he could only work in a state of poetic madness inspired by the Muses. Callistratus, a Greek rhetorician of the late third century, applied this theory also to the artist, specifically the sculptor Scopas:

'It is not the art of poets and writers of prose alone that is inspired when divine power from the gods falls on their tongues, nay, the hands of sculptors also, when they are seized by the gift of a more divine inspiration, give utterance to creations that are possessed and full of madness. So Scopas, moved as it were by some inspiration, imparted to the production of his statue the divine frenzy within him.'³

During the Renaissance this idea was taken up again. In his *De gl'eroici furori* of 1585, Giordano Bruno defined artistic creativity by elements like divine enthusiasm, irrationality, and superhuman, exceptional abilities.

If creative enthusiasm was not believed to be of divine nature, it was explained through extreme emotions that were necessary for an artist's inspiration. In the 18th century Diderot wrote that a genius had to develop great passions in order to become active.⁴

Diderot also believed that the intensity of passions could lead to an instability of the mind, even bring about mental disorder. He did not go so far as to establish a direct causal relationship between genius and insanity; instead he was more interested in contrasting the behavior and working methods of a genius to the normal human being. In his dialogue *Le Neveu de Rameau*, written between 1761 and 1774, Diderot argued polemically that a genius could be non-conforming to social rules and even behave offensively due to the fact that he was standing far above any common man. His abnormality was excused on the basis of his extraordinary gifts. At this point the inner faculties of a genius were combined with his social position. The madness of geniality was no longer limited to the theoretical concept, but it was transferred to the actual behavior of an artist, a bizarre, strange or 'mad' way of life was a sign of genius as well. Especially since the later 18th century creative frenzy or abnormal behavior became a hallmark of artistic genius. The artist's state of mind could even be shaken to the point of insanity without limiting his creative powers.

There is still another aspect to artistic madness which again has its origins in Antiquity. In his concept of the four temperaments Aristotle assigned the melancholic humor to the artist and believed that in extreme cases this mental constitution could lead to illness. Aristotle also discussed the relationship between genius and melancholy in this context. In the Renaissance the

3 Philostratus *Imagines*, Callistratus *Descriptions*, translated by A. Fairbanks (Loeb Classical Library 1931) 381.

4 See for example the second conversation of *Dorval et moi* in *Oeuvres Complètes de Diderot*, publiées par J. Assézat et M. Tourneux (Paris 1875-1877) VII 102-3. For a detailed discussion see H. Dieckmann, 'Diderot's Conception of Genius' in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (1941) 151-182.

concept was taken up by Ficino who also mentioned the dangers of mental instability. He fused the melancholic temperament with the Platonic theory of divine enthusiasm.⁵ This combination remained valid and the idea received renewed attention in the late 18th century.

All aspects of madness mentioned here -divine enthusiasm, great passions, eccentric behaviour and melancholy- existed primarily in their close connection with the creative abilities of a genius. Towards the end of the 18th century they were fused in the causal relationship established between madness and geniality, and there were numerous artists who argued that this combination was necessary for the creation of good art.

When the painter-poet William Blake, for example, wrote at the end of the 18th century 'All Pictures that's Pted [painted] with Sense & with Thought Are Painted by Madmen as sure as a Groat', he polemically argued that a well-educated individual guided by rules and reason was not capable of creating a good work of art. He touched upon two of the above described aspects of madness: Blake believed that the artist was different from the normal, 'reasonable man' and that an irrational working process was necessary for the creation of art. For Blake who was a fervent enemy of the academic system, especially the non-conformity of the artist was an important issue. His harsh annotations in the *Discourses* of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the president of the Royal Academy in London, show how much he was opposed to the guidelines and rules of academic training.⁶ However, Blake did not only reject traditional values and working methods, but he seems to have created his art based on visions that appeared before him. This extremely personal way of making art classified him as an unusual individual with a strange, 'mad' mind.

The interest in the inexplicable, the unusual, or irrational increased towards the end of the 18th century, and especially in romantic thought it became an important aspect of poetry and painting. There was a fascination with the dream, and the unreal, those activities of the mind that could not be grasped by reason. Not only Blake's visions are interesting in this context, also the Spaniard Francisco Goya (1746-1826) made prints representing dreams and monsters towards the end of his life. Striking examples are his *Caprichos*, specifically the frontispiece to a set of *Dreams* (fig.1). He used these series mainly to comment on the moral and social problems of society; in the context of our topic, however, it is significant that he turned to the irrational world of dreams as source for his compositions.

The interest in strange appearances is also visible in Théodore Géricault's paintings of insane men and women (fig.2). Apart from a scientific interest (they were painted in association with Dr. E. Georget, a pioneer in the field of psychiatry), Géricault must have been fascinated by the dramatic effect of these figures. He took up this bizarre, socially not accepted issue and made it a theme of his work. One can observe the tendency to evoke interest in the abnormal aspects of human nature.

⁵ Compare M. Barasch, *Theories of Art. From Plato to Winkelman* (New York/London 1985) 184.

⁶ Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, R. Wark ed. (New Haven/London 1975) Appendix I: Blake's Annotations to the *Discourses*.



fig.1. F. Goya: *De slaap der rede creeërt monsters*, 1797.

During Romanticism the idea of the intense sensibility of an artist and the irrational aspect of artistic creation gained great importance and the link between geniality and madness was widely accepted. As it was also part of the romantic concept that the work of art was to be understood as a reflection of the artist's soul and emotions, it became common practice to read the artwork as an expression of the maker's personality. A poet's or painter's oeuvre was interpreted through the knowledge of his life and character. As his life was not supposed to be governed by reason but by feeling, emotional instability was considered a part of his state of mind. In this context the elements of suffering and tragedy became a significant characteristic of a genius. Therefore the mental illness of Hölderlin, or the dramatic suicide of

Kleist were seen as the logical consequence of their geniality. The extreme results of their sensibility characterized them as typical representatives of an era that was dominated by emotions instead of reason. Also the insanity of the lesser known 19th century German artist Alfred Rethel or the self-inflicted death of the English painter B.R. Haydon could be viewed as part of this concept.

The causal relationship between geniality and mental instability remained part of artistic theory throughout the 19th century. When Baudelaire, for example, discussed the work and personality of the painter Constantin Guys (1802-92) he stated:

'I am prepared to ... assert that inspiration has something in common with a convulsion, and that every sublime thought is accompanied by a more or less violent nervous shock which has its repercussion in the very core of the brain.'

Baudelaire did not only see a connection between artistic creativity and infirmity of the mind, he even argued that any artistic endeavor evoked a mental disturbance. Therefore he more or less required a certain instability of the artist's mind as a proof of his geniality.

In his long praise of Delacroix written shortly after the painter's death in 1863, Baudelaire again stressed the signs of genius visible in the man and his work.⁸ He discussed Delacroix' artistic oeuvre as a result of his personality, and even if he did not go so far as to propose a mental imbalance, he described the painter as a genius full of burning passions. Baudelaire saw in Delacroix a very special individual standing far above everyone else.

The romantic concept continued to be influential throughout the 19th century and was especially taken up by the literary Symbolists who were greatly interested in its inexplicable, irrational aspects. Rimbaud, for example, believed that the artist's work was conditioned by great emotional and mental strain. He was convinced that a certain derangement of the senses was necessary for the creation of art:

'The poet makes himself a seer by a long, immense, and calculated disordering of all his senses. All the forms of love, of suffering, of madness; he himself experiments, he exhausts within himself every poison, in order to retain only its quintessence.'

These examples indicate that the concept of a causal relationship between artistic creativity and mental disturbance was well accepted. Not only was it used by influential thinkers of the 19th century in their writings on art, but the idea was also generally accepted. The mental illness of an artist was taken into account when his work was discussed.

⁷ Ch. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* transl. and ed. J. Mayne (London 1964) 8.

⁸ Ch. Baudelaire, 'The Life and Work of Eugène Delacroix', originally published in *Opinion Nationale*, 2 September, 14 and 22 November 1863.

⁹ A. Rimbaud, letters to Georges Izambard, 13 May 1871, and to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871, *Oeuvres Complètes*, p.268, 270-71, transl. in M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York 1971) 417.



fig.2. J. Géricault: *Monomanie du commandement militaire*, 1822.

The Italian painter Antonio Mancini who also worked for H.W. Mesdag, presents a good example in this context. In a letter of 1893 to Mesdag, the painter Jacobson described the lifestyle, personality and working method of Mancini with whom he was living for some months. He gave several examples

of the man's strangeness and indicated that the intensity of the creative act disturbed the stability of the painter's mind.

'Hij zoekt naar niets anders dan toon. En die zoekt hij met heel zijn ziel - hij brengt de kleuren en toonen hortende en stootende op t doek en wanneer hij naar zijn doek loopt om zijn verf ... zachtjes neer te leggen dan steunt en kreunt hij alsof al die toonen die hij geboren doet worden van hem worden afgescheurd. ... ieder vierkantje dat hij schildert is een stukje verstand minder -heel lang zal't niet meer duren of zijn voorraad zal uitgeput zijn. Ik hoop ik mij hierin vergis- maar... *de groote geleerdheid die tot razernij brengt woelt en werkt aldoor in zijn hoofd....*' (my emphasis)¹⁰

The idea to relate geniality and madness was not only accepted in artistic circles, but such a link was also attempted on a pseudo-scientific basis. Already in 1819 T.M. Stuart published '*An Essay on Genius and its Diseases*'.¹¹ In 1859 the French psychiatrist Moreau published a first extensive report on the issue, soon followed by his colleague Cesare Lombroso in Italy who reached a wide public, as his writings were translated into several languages soon after their publication.¹² Lombroso argued that a psychosis was favorable for the creativity of an artist, as it limited the influence of reason and released the phantasy. He was also one of the first to make extensive case studies in which he tried to prove that many men of genius were psychopaths.¹³

The interest in pathography became rather prominent in the 19th century. The life histories of famous men were taken as cases for medical, psychological or psychiatric research, and their medical history was analyzed in the context of their work. It was firmly believed that men of genius were more easily tormented by mental disturbances than normal people, and a relationship between the greatness of the mind and its abnormality was argued also in this sector. A famous object for pathographical research was Dostojevskys whose epilepsy was seen as a typical illness of genius.

The attempt to analyze an artist's life and work as an indication of his illness was deeply rooted in, but not limited to the 19th century. In the case of Vincent van Gogh this interest can be illustrated with great clarity, as he seems to have been an irresistible object for pathographical research. A well-known example of this fascination is K. Jaspers' study of Strindberg and Van Gogh of the early 1920s, in which the author analyzed Van Gogh's personality and oeuvre to prove his diagnosis of schizophrenia. Despite his limited knowledge of the painter's oeuvre and medical history he tried to prove the development of Van Gogh's illness by interpreting the various stages of his art.¹⁴

¹⁰ Letter from Jacoson to Mesdag, Rome 4 Jan. 1893, in exhib. cat. Hanna Pennock, *Antonio Mancini en Nederland* (Haarlem 1987) 69.

¹¹ *London Medical and Physical Journal* 42 (1819) 265.

¹² For an extensive enumeration of the literature see W. Lange-Eichbaum, *Genie - Irrsinn und Ruhm* (München 1935).

¹³ Later in the century Sigmund Freud developed his psycho-analysis which was also based on a thorough knowledge of events in a person's life. His theories were influential for the interpretation of an artist's oeuvre especially in the twentieth century.

¹⁴ K. Jaspers, *Strindberg und Van Gogh. Versuche einer pathographischen Analyse unter vergleichender Heranziehung von Swedenborg und Hölderlin* (Leipzig 1922).

In contrast to Jaspers' theory of schizophrenia, in the 1950s J. Minkowska supported the more widely accepted view that Van Gogh suffered from epilepsy. But she, too, tried to trace the symptoms of his illness in his artistic oeuvre.¹⁵

Van Gogh was not only interesting from a psychiatric point of view, but he also fit extremely well into the romantic concept of a close connection between genius and madness. From the beginning Van Gogh was a perfect example of the artist who had to suffer for his geniality. This characterization did not take into account that Van Gogh's work included numerous aspects of traditional working methods as well.

He was an autodidact, but he studied according to academic rules. He used the books prescribed by the official institutions to train himself, copied, for example, from the *Cours de dessin* by C. Bargue, and read the publications of Charles Blanc, influential president of the French Academy. Van Gogh also attended the academy in Antwerp to study drawing from casts and from life, and when he arrived in Paris in early 1886, he entered the studio of Cormon to continue his training.

These aspects have hardly been taken into consideration in the writings on Vincent van Gogh, specifically not in texts dealing with the tragic genius. These issues indicate the far-reaching influence of the romantic concept and its impact on the analysis and interpretation of an artist's work. Of course, there is much in Van Gogh's letters that show his appreciation of romantic thought as well. He himself valued many aspects of the romantic concept as well and made them part of his life. He believed, for example, that an artist might have to give his life for his art. He also admitted that he periodically suffered from melancholy, even though he did not identify it directly with the type of disease that Aristotle had associated with artists.¹⁶ When he met Dr. Gachet in Auvers in 1890 he compared his own melancholic temperament to that of the doctor and painted the man's portrait in the traditional pose of the melancholic with the head leaning on one hand. The foxglove on the table in front of Gachet is a plant that was believed to cure melancholy (fig.3).

The case of Van Gogh demonstrates how the established belief of a relationship between genius and madness could influence the reception of an artist's work. As has been pointed out convincingly by Evert van Uitert,¹⁷ Van Gogh's fame is closely related to the myth of the dedicated but desolate genius. His oeuvre has hardly been discussed outside of the context of his development as an individual and Van Gogh's supposed madness has always played a crucial part in the reception of his oeuvre. The close connection between the painter's life and work was also nurtured by his many letters which offer an enormous amount of detailed information about himself. It is absolutely without question that Van Gogh's illness together with the tragic end of his life have made him a perfect model for the image of the mad

15 F. Minkowska, *Van Gogh, sa vie, sa maladie et son oeuvre* (Paris 1963). Compare also G. Pollock, 'Artists mythologies and media genius, madness and art history' *Screen* 21 (1980) 57-96.

16 See for example Van Gogh's letter to his sister Wil, W4 in *The complete letters of Vincent van Gogh* (New York and London 1958).

17 See E. van Uitert, 'An immortal name' in *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh* (Amsterdam 1988) 19-29; and 'De legende vorming te bevorderen' in exhib.cat. *Rond de roem van Vincent van Gogh* (Amsterdam 1977).

genius that was propagated since Romanticism. His life, productivity and ailment have been researched and documented in a large amount of publications.

Already Albert Aurier, the symbolist art critic who wrote the first major article on Vincent van Gogh in the *Mercure de France* in 1890, characterized him as a tormented genius who created fascinating works of art:

'Furthermore, as can be divined from the almost orgiastic extravagances of everything he painted, he is a fanatic, an enemy of the bourgeois sobriety and minutiae, a sort of drunken giant, more suited to disrupting mountains than to handling bric-a-brac on whatnots, a brain at its boiling point irresistibly pouring down its lava into all of the ravines of art, a terrible and demented genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque, always at the brink of the pathological. Finally, and above all, he is a hyper-aesthetic, with clearly shown symptoms, who perceives with abnormal, perhaps even painful, intensities the imperceptible and secret characters of line and form, but still more the colors, the lights, the nuances invisible to healthy eyes, the magic iridescence of shadow.'¹⁸

Aurier described Van Gogh as a powerful, gigantic creator who stood far above normal life. He applied the same judgement to Van Gogh which Baudelaire had used before him when writing on Delacroix, an artist whom Van Gogh admired deeply. Like Rimbaud, Aurier believed that the artist had to transcend reason to arrive at the insights necessary for his art. Aurier even argued that Van Gogh's illness had contributed to his creative abilities.

In his letter of thanks to Aurier the painter tried to correct some of the critic's comments on the influence and importance of other artists, but he did not refer to the analysis of his personality. It might be possible that Van Gogh did not dispute this characterization of himself because in general he agreed with the romantic notion of the artistic personality.¹⁹ Also for Van Gogh the life and work of an artist had to be considered together and his letters show his great interest in the experiences and emotions of painters like Delacroix, Millet and Michelet. As has been pointed out in the recently published exhibition catalogue of the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, this idea was very much alive in the second half of the 19th century, and Van Gogh was familiar with Zola's writings who had argued that an artist's oeuvre should be an expression of his temperament.²⁰

The tone of Aurier's article can be traced in several publications of the time. This was due to the critic's influence as well as to the fact that his judgement fit well into the concept writers had of avant-garde artists. Art critics who reviewed Van Gogh's paintings on display in exhibitions took his 'madness' into account. His deranged mind was certainly no hindrance for his work, but more a prerequisite. It was understood as an interesting and necessary aspect of his artistic geniality. Julien Leclercq, for example, wrote in 1890:

18 A. Aurier, 'Les isolés; Vincent van Gogh', transl. in S.A. Stein, *Van Gogh, a retrospective* (New York 1986) 191.

19 Compare E. van Uitert, 'De Van Gogh-mythe ontleed' in *Openbaar Kunstbezit* 3 (1977) 137.

20 Exhib.cat., E. van Uitert, L. van Tilborgh, S. van Heugten, *Vincent van Gogh* (Amsterdam 1990) 16.

'But what a great artist!... Like Salvator Rosa, he is a tormented spirit. His power of expression is extraordinary, and everything in his oeuvre derives its life from his own life. It is painting that cannot be analyzed; he did not fall sway to the search for technique. His was an impassioned temperament, through which nature appears as it does in dreams - or rather, in nightmares. At the Salon of the Indépendants there are ten paintings by Van Gogh that bear witness to a rare genius.'²¹

Leclercq's comments are interesting because they reiterate exactly those issues that contributed to the romantic ideal of the mad genius. According to the writer Van Gogh did not obey to rules of composition and technique, and therefore he had freed himself from academic principles. He created his work out of personal experiences channeled through his temperament and tormented emotions. Leclercq assigned him a historical position through the comparison with Salvator Rosa, but he did not attempt to interpret Van Gogh's paintings. He viewed them exclusively in their relation to the artist's personality. The supposed interaction between the painter's work and his personal life made it possible to connect his creative abilities with his insanity.

Reference has been made above to the growing medical literature that dealt with this relationship. In 1888 Cesare Lombroso, one of the most influential writers on this issue, had published *The Man of Genius* which was translated from the Italian into several languages in 1890. This publication was not only received by medical circles, but reached a wider public, as can be seen in a letter from A. Bongers, brother-in-law of Theo van Gogh, to Johan de Meester in which he reacted to an article the latter had published in the *Algemeen Handelsblad* on 31 December 1890. In it he mentioned that 'the Italians (Lombroso, e.g.) consider genius and madness to be brother and sister.'²² This comment indicates once more to which extent the issue was present in the general attitude towards art. While Bongers did not explicitly contradict this statement, he rejected De Meester's comparison of Vincent van Gogh with the painter Claude Lantier in Emile Zola's novel *L'Oeuvre* of 1886. De Meester had written:

'Vincent van Gogh appears to have been someone of a constitution similar to that of Claude in *L'Oeuvre*, a spirit powerful of deeds, but powerless, and facing a too-highly placed aspiration, a true child of his nervous time and an important subject for the passionate pathologists, who in contrast venture so little in the analysis of genius! ... His love of art was a religion, a fanatical worship, and a self-sacrifice.'²³

Zola's artist Claude Lantier had committed suicide in front of his masterpiece when realizing that he could not achieve his ideal of feminine beauty. De Meester's comparison implied that also Vincent van Gogh had despaired in his artistic abilities and therefore had killed himself, a view criticized not only by Bongers, but also by his sister, the wife of Theo van Gogh. It seems to me that Bongers rejected only the notion that Vincent killed himself because he

²¹ J. Leclercq, 'Fine arts at the Indépendants' in *Mercure de France*, May 1890, transl. in S.A. Stein, op.cit., 246.

²² Letter from A. Bongers to J. de Meester, 31 December 1890, transl. in S.A. Stein, op.cit., 257-8.

²³ Johan de Meester, 'Vincent van Gogh', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 31 December 1890, transl. in S.A. Stein, op.cit., 246.



fig.3. Vincent van Gogh, *Portret van Dr. Gachet*, 1890.

realized his failure. He did however not deny the relationship between genius and madness that was evoked in De Meester's article as well.

For others Van Gogh's suicide coincided perfectly with the romantic concept of a relation between geniality and final disaster which was further elaborated by symbolist writers in the latter part of the 19th century. Emile

Bernard's letter to Aurier informing him about Vincent's death illustrates this clearly: 'Our dear friend Vincent died four days ago. I imagine that *you have already guessed* that he killed himself' (my emphasis).²⁴

The attitude described in these examples forms the basis to the fame of Vincent van Gogh that was to rise in the 20th century. Much of the myth that is still surrounding the painter's work can be traced back to the supposed interaction of genius and madness.

A book that was very influential in establishing the fame of Van Gogh in the early 20th century was J. Meier-Graefe's biography in which he stated explicitly that his aim was to nurture the formation of a legend.²⁵ Van Gogh's illness and suicide fit perfectly into the romantic image of the struggling artist who, in a life filled with emotional and physical hardship, suffered because he dedicated his whole life to his art. In his introduction Meier-Graefe also related Van Gogh's situation to that of the already famous Dostojevsky who had suffered from the same illness. Like Leclercq before him the German writer tried to place Van Gogh in a historical context, but he also established him among those geniuses who suffered from the disease of their 'species'.

The case of Vincent van Gogh shows an attitude that is valid for the ideas about many artists of the 19th century, regardless if they were philosophers, poets or painters. The oeuvre of men like Nietzsche, Swedenborg, Strindberg or Dostojevsky was closely related to their personality, a phenomenon that was not limited to the 19th, but continued in the 20th century. There is an enormous amount of literature dealing with the abnormality of the great. Such an idea which is still alive today, would never have evolved without the concept of genius as it was formulated during Romanticism.

²⁴ Letter from E. Bernard to G.-A. Aurier, 1 August 1890, transl. in S.A. Stein op.cit., 219.

²⁵ J. Meier-Graefe, *Vincent van Gogh, Der Roman eines Gottsuchers* (Berlin, Wien, Leipzig 1932) 360. This author had already written in this vein in the 1910s and 1920s.