

The New Edition of the Letters of Vincent van Gogh on the Web

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Abstract

The New Edition of the Letters of Vincent Van Gogh on the Web is a review of the web edition of the complete authorial correspondence of the 19th century Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh published by the Van Gogh Museum and the Huygens Institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2009. While the print version, published by Thames & Hudson in the same year, received ample attention in the specialized and generalist press, the web edition enjoyed less publicity; this review considers the added value of the web version.

Introduction

The digital edition of the life correspondence of the 19th century Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), published in 2009, is the result of a collaborative project between the Van Gogh Museum — the main holder of Van Gogh's correspondence — and the Huygens Institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.

1

Although the sources in question — a corpus of 902 letters — date back to a relatively recent past, this scholarly edition is the tail of a long chain of cultural reading and re-reading of Van Gogh's letters, extracts of which were already being published in the 1890s, immediately after the artist's death, with the first print edition appearing in 1914. Of all the preceding publications, what makes this scholarly enterprise particularly interesting for the readers of *DHQ* is that it is the first complete edition of Van Gogh's correspondence to have been published in digital form and made available on the web.

2

Hence in the present review we ask, What does digital form mean in this case of hybrid (print/web) production? How was the whole edition produced? Does the web incarnation make a difference? What added value, if any, does it bring about?

3

Books with a Digital Backbone

It is noteworthy that the digital edition — intended here in the wide sense of the full set of software, programs, scripts, electronic marked-up texts, digital images — represents the backbone not only of the web edition, but also of a refined printed edition; indeed, quoting the editors, the print edition would not exist in its present form without its electronic matrix, which is much more than just the counterpart of its paper version:

4

By 2004 changes in the world of publishing and the rapidly growing potential offered by electronic media had caused the steering committee to reconsider, and it was decided to publish the large, all-encompassing edition digitally. This does greater justice to the immense volume of material and the complex of interrelated layers of information, and gives visitors to the site more options and more ways to use the edition. For the very significant numbers of people we believe would prefer to study or enjoy the letters by reading them in the "traditional" manner, there is an accessible, fully illustrated print version, with brief notes; *the content derives directly from the scholarly web edition* [my emphasis]. This five-volume edition appears — at the same time as the present web edition — in three languages: English, Dutch and French.

This new complete print edition of Vincent van Gogh's letters was distributed worldwide as British edition (slipcased with a CD-ROM of the letters in their original languages, mainly Dutch) by [Thames & Hudson 2009] in 2009. It encompasses more than two thousand pages in six heavy volumes of translucent paper, the first five of which include the corpus of translated letters where each main text section is beautifully laid out in one or two columns and accompanied by editorial side notes, relevant small illustrations (art works in the form of paintings and etchings that Van Gogh mentions in his correspondence or that the editors imply are referred to by the Dutch author), and some facsimiles of the letters in full page (generally only when a sketch by the artist occurs). The letters, each of which is preceded by some introductory material, are grouped into chronological sections marking certain segments of Van Gogh's life.

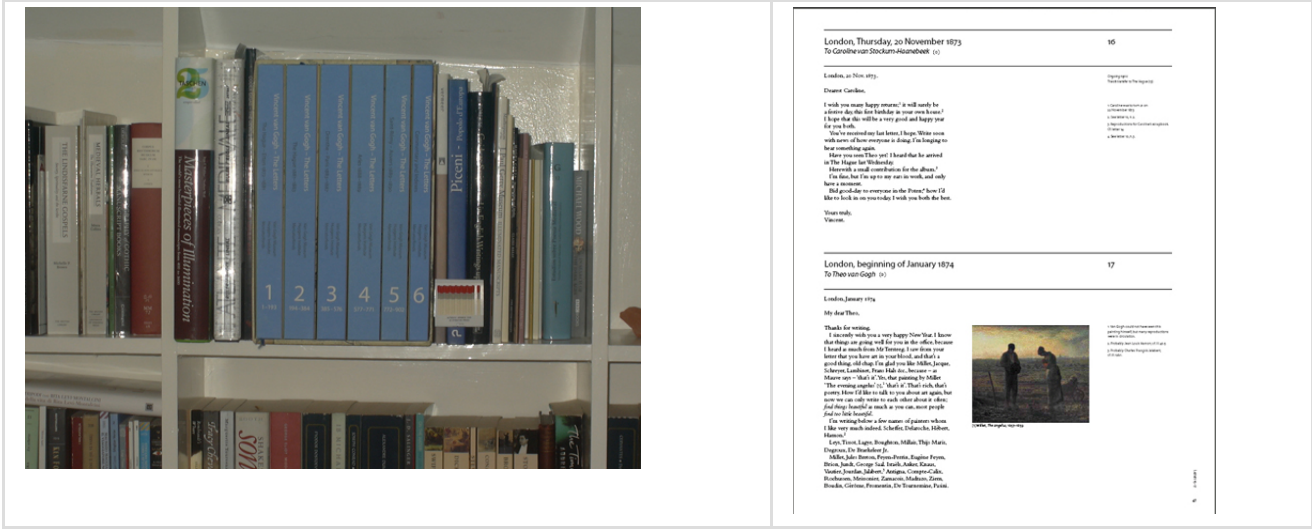


Table 1. On the left the 6 blue volumes next to a box of matches. On the right, an example of a typical page layout taken from volume 1. On the top between the two black lines: location, date, addressee and letter identification number. On one column: content of the letter translated into English. In the centre: illustration of an artwork mentioned in this letter by Van Gogh captioned by corresponding name of artist and title. On the right hand side: editorial notes.

In addition, the whole sixth and last volume collects rich contextual information featuring, among other elements, editorial commentary, genealogies, maps and plans, and a technical glossary. This acts as a sort of access resource to the other volumes by including a comprehensive and detailed set of indices: an index of authorial works, divided into an index by title and indices ordered by the work's classification number organised by type (paintings, x-rays and photographs of paintings, works on paper and sketches); index of other artists' works, and a separate index of sketches in the case of Gauguin's; index of photographs, documents, periodicals and literary works; index of biblical quotations (subdivided into relevant books and sections); index of people, in general and by correspondent (the majority of the letters are addressed to Van Gogh's brother, Theo); and index of places. The latter includes subdivisions of cities into relevant locations by type (e.g. cathedral or tower); interestingly, art exhibitions are also marked as distinct references within locations.

London (GB)

1: 21, 25, 26, 29–31, 40, 42, 46, 50, 61, 65, 66,
79, 95–97, 99, 101, 103, 104, 109, 110, 113, 115,
117, 120–122, 131, 133, 138, 141, 151, 154, 155,
162, 166, 172, 175, 179, 180, 183, 191, 198, 201,
219, 264, 299

2: 30, 59–61, 81, 88, 90, 160, 182, 194, 218,
220, 232, 241, 254, 255, 311, 339, 343, 361, 366,
374, 391, 404, 406, 408, 409

3: 30, 31, 50, 55, 65, 153, 160, 161, 163, 254, 270

4: 16, 31, 34, 190, 191, 336, 361

5: 56, 58, 77, 122, 189, 212, 305

1873, International Exhibition

1: 37

1873, Royal Academy Summer Exhibition

2: 201

1874, Royal Academy Summer Exhibition

1: 45

1874, Royal Academy Winter Exhibition

1: 53

1875, Exhibition of high-class continental
pictures

1: 53

1876, Royal Academy Summer Exhibition

1: 101

1884, International and Universal
Exhibition

3: 153

Bedford Street

1: 53

Booksellers' Row

1: 201

British Museum

1: 194, 195

Brixton Road (Lambeth)

1: 133

Chancery Lane

1: 133

The City

1: 121

Clapham

1: 133

Crystal Palace

1: 35, 57

Goupil & Co., art gallery

1: 21, 25, 26, 29, 30, 37, 40, 45, 51, 53, 54, 65,
99, 101, 117, 121, 197, 213


2: 255, 322

Figure 1. Snippet from volume 6: first part of the list of references to London in the index of places.

Therefore, the indices in the print edition are available only in the final volume, where occurrences are expressed by volume number followed by page number/s. 7

All the components that make up the six-volume publication are also available on the web edition. Their inclusion in the web edition — possibly with the exception of the index of locations, which is less granular on the web — is always comprehensive, rather than selective as in the print version, and is enriched by further interconnected material. Indeed, starting from the text view, the web edition includes the following additional components: the texts in original language (mainly Dutch, in few cases French and English),^[1] the diplomatic edition and, not only some, but all the facsimiles. 8

It also seems that at places the web edition contains some diversified or entirely new material: for example, in letter 282, the illustration of the artwork *Sorrow* by Vincent van Gogh is available only as black and white reproduction of the relevant lithograph in the printed edition volume 2, while on the web, its coloured impression is also reproduced: *F 929 / JH 129* (click on the “artworks” tab at <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let282/letter.html>). Another example is the drawing entitled “Reader” by the artist and Van Gogh’s friend Anthon Gerard Alexander van Rappard; in the books, the relevant illustration is reproduced rather small only along the text of letter 178, while on the web, we find it under the artworks tab of both letters the notes of which mention it: 168 and 178. 9



Search results

2 letters found

Term(s):

Dated between:
29 September 1872 and 31 July 1890

Work of art:
Anthon Gerard Alexander van Rappard - Reader

Sorted by:
date

2 letters found

168 To Theo van Gogh. Etten, end of June 1881.

178 To Anthon van Rappard. Etten, Wednesday, 2 November 1881.

in note 12:

...wing, made by Van Rappard during his stay in Etten, is Reader (Utrecht, Centraal Museum). ill. 1902.

Table 2. The drawing entitled “Reader” by the artist and Van Gogh’s friend Anthon Gerard Alexander van Rappard – held at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht and classified as Illustration 1902 in this edition — can be traced on the web in the notes of two different letters (168 and 178) as shown in the search results above. Both letters on the web include the relevant illustration (reproduced here on the left), while in the books, it is included only once (in letter 178) possibly for space or aesthetic reasons.

A more systematic case of selective rendering in the books that was integrated on the web by additional information is the content of the captions of artworks (many institutions and private individuals made image material available to the project): on the web the institution holding the relevant work is always presented when known; in addition, the artistic technique of composition is mentioned, as well as the real dimension of the work in question, while in the volumes such information is entirely missing.

10



Table 3. The same painting by Van Gogh as reproduced in print (left) and on the web (right). The caption on the web is more complete; in addition to title and identification number, it includes the institution holding the relevant work at the bottom, and the artistic technique of composition together with real dimension at the top.

The Editorial Model behind the Web Edition

A more detailed analysis of the components that make up the web edition reveals how its features support a fruition process that is rather distinctive from the reading process facilitated by its print form. Those mechanisms offered by the web, such as pointers to a textual note in the books functioning as active links on the web, are obviously exploited in the web resource in question. However, the functionalities associated with the objects making up the edition are amplified in its digital form in a manner that goes far beyond the emerging conventions of academic web publishing. Indeed, the richness of an easy-to-read interface in the web edition derives from the ability of its designers both to understand and render the integrity of the editorial model behind it. It is precisely the full appreciation of this model that lays the added value of the web edition where, possibly, the intertextual dimension of the man Van Gogh as writer, reader and artist all in one stands out even further than it does in the book form (or in a physical exhibition; see Figure 10.) To the attentive reader the evidence of the underlying structure of such editorial model is easily revealed.

11

To start from the reading panels, the editorial model is manipulated so as to create a sophisticated interplay across all components of the edition which results in a flexible choreography compared to the fixed layout of the books: the balance lays much less in favour of the translated text as core of the edition.

12

While reading one of the letters, for instance, the viewing panel on the left can be set to display any of the selected components of the edition – i.e. original text, diplomatic edition (truthful to the level of line endings), facsimile, notes, and artworks — and be vertically aligned with one or more — depending on the screen size — panels of the same kind on the right.

13

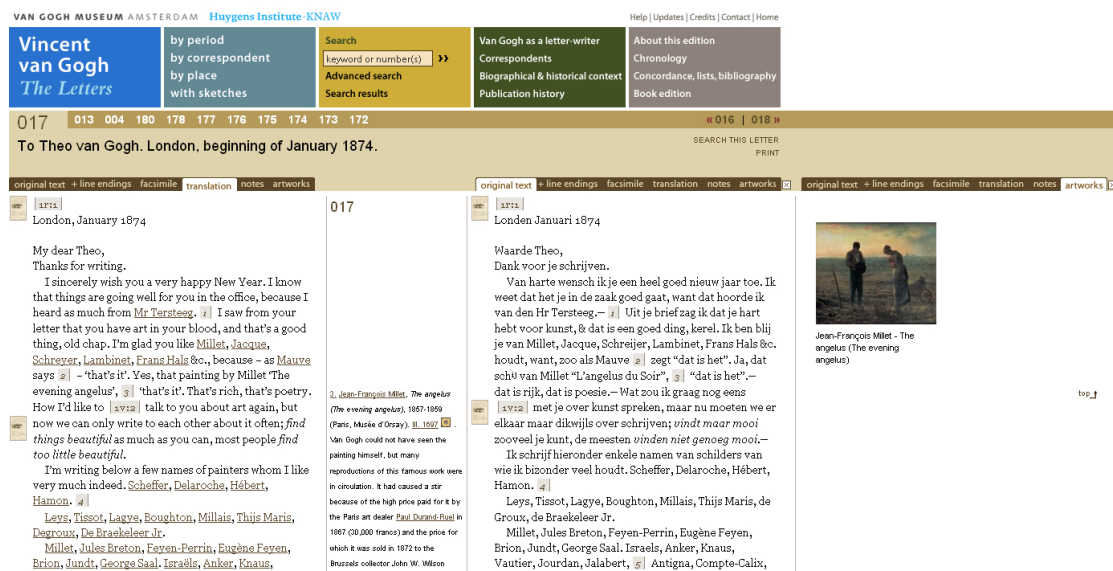


Figure 2. Example of a three-panel view with English text at the far left (panel 1), column containing the editorial notes, original text in Dutch (panel 2) and artworks panel at the far right (panel 3). Note also the navigation between previous and next letter at the far right end of the first light brown bar, the possibility to search this letter only or print it, and the list of recently visited letters (possibly the only element aiming at tracking the user's navigation in this web edition).

The facsimiles of the letters can be kept at the level of the other viewing panels or be enlarged, panned, or zoomed in and out in a separate window.

14

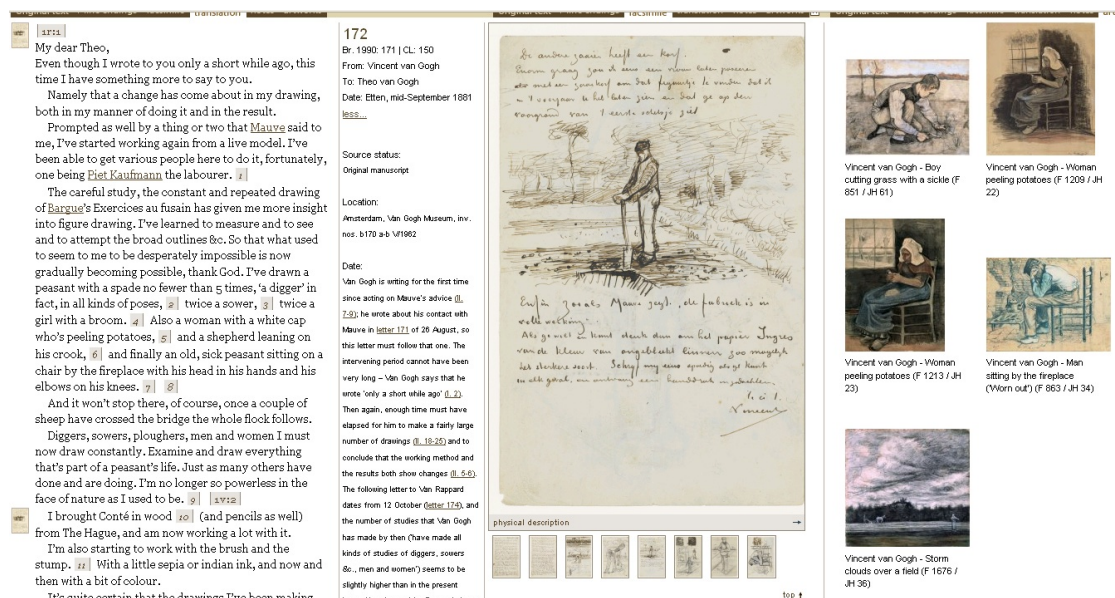


Figure 3. Example of a three-panel view with again English text at the far left (panel 1), column containing the letter metadata, facsimile (panel 2) and artworks panel at the far right (panel 3).

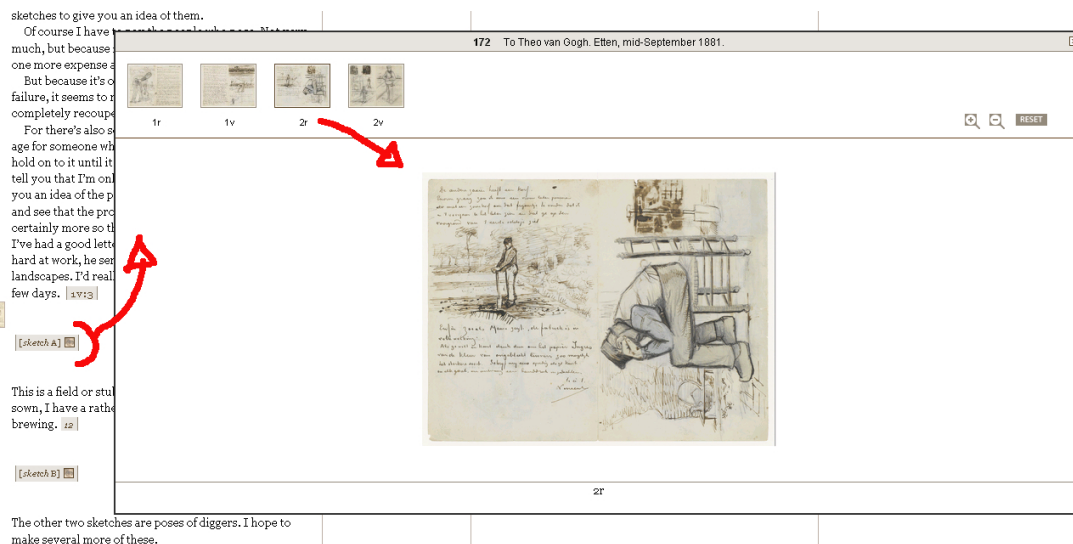


Figure 4. A grey label and icon signals the presence of a sketch at the relevant point in the text. By clicking on it, a separate window containing the facsimile opens up exactly on the corresponding folio. Note the numbering of multiple sketches (A, B etc.) in the text, and the metadata section on the grey label together with the guiding sequence of verso/recto in the facsimile window.

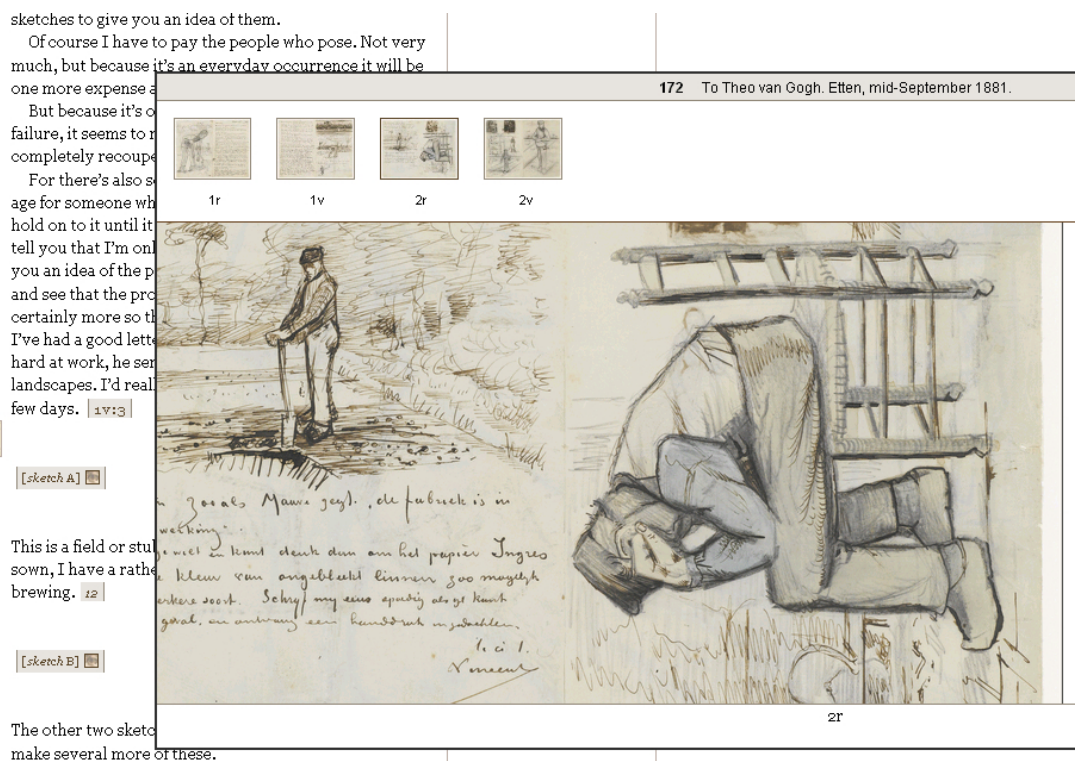


Figure 5. Example of zoomed up sketch.

Once at play with all these textual and graphic objects, one regrets, for instance, that the sketches cannot be rotated on the fly when desirable.

15

Moving now to the more granular level of the text and notes, each element of the editorial model that the editors believed to play a certain semantic function — namely names, references to artworks and literature — is visibly linked to the relevant index of other letters where the same element is mentioned or discussed.

16

RDAM Huygens Institute-KNAW Help | Updates | Credits | Contact | Home

by period
by correspondent
by place
with sketches

Search
keyword or number(s) >>
Advanced search
Search results

Van Gogh as a letter-writer
Correspondents
Biographical & historical context
Publication history

About this edition
Chronology
Concordance, lists, bibliography
Book edition

3. Jean-François Millet, *The angelus* (The evening angelus), 1857-1859 (Paris, Musée d'Orsay). III, 1697 .

Van Gogh could not have seen the painting himself, but many reproductions of this famous work were in circulation. It had caused a stir because of the high price paid for it by the Paris art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel in 1867 (30,000 francs) and the price for which it was sold in 1872 to the Brussels collector John W. Wilson (38,000 francs). Cf. exhib. cat. Paris 1975, pp. 103-106, cat. no. 86; Sillevius 1989, p. 44, and Jensen 1994, pp. 61-62.

Search results

179 letters found

Term(s):

Dated between:
29 September 1872 and 31 July 1890

Person:
Jean-François Millet (1814-1875)
French artist

Sorted by:
date

179 letters found

- 013 To Theo van Gogh. London, Saturday, 13 September 1873.
- 017 To Theo van Gogh. London, beginning of January 1874.
- 036 To Theo van Gogh. Paris, Tuesday, 29 June 1875.
- 037 To Theo van Gogh. Paris, Tuesday, 6 July 1875.
- 055 To Theo van Gogh. Paris, Monday, 11 October 1875.
- 073 To Theo van Gogh. Paris, Tuesday, 28 March 1876.
- 113 To Theo van Gogh. Dordrecht, Monday, 30 April 1877.
- 114 To Theo van Gogh. Amsterdam, Saturday, 19 May 1877.
- 133 To Theo van Gogh. Amsterdam, Tuesday, 30 October 1877.
- 137 To Theo van Gogh. Amsterdam, Sunday, 9 December 1877.
- 139 To Theo van Gogh. Amsterdam, Wednesday, 9 and Thursday, 10 January 1878.
- 141 To Theo van Gogh. Amsterdam, Monday, 18 and Tuesday, 19 February 1878.
- 142 To Theo van Gogh. Amsterdam, Sunday, 3 March 1878.

Figure 6. The artworks by Jean-François Millet were very much appreciated, copied and loved by Vincent van Gogh. Evidence of this is that fact that the artist is mentioned in 179 of his letters. As shown above, from a note in one of the letter we can reach the index of these references with only one click.

This is the case not only for explicit and recognisable proper names but also for general referencing strings. The reader can mouse over such strings to get a concise but precise sort of “identification label.” In letter 241, for instance, “the carpenter” mentioned in line 88 and “the owner” mentioned in line 92^[2] are identified as “Willem Kiesenberg (1814-1904) acquaintance of Van Gogh in The Hague” and “Pieter Willem de Zwart (1826-1905) landlord in The Hague, father of Michiel Antonie de Zwart,” respectively.

17

The editorial strategy adopted to interpret, classify and filter the thick contextual and textual information encompassed by Van Gogh’s letters emerges even further while using the advanced search form and while examining its structure. As for the print indices briefly described above, each search field reveals the complexity of a thoroughly-planned editorial enterprise. For example, this edition distinguishes references to the Bible from general references to other kind of literature, the correspondence with numbering sequences of previous editions (namely, De la Faille and Hulsker’s) was recorded, one can identify authors by forename or surname, and their work by title. The corpus of letters is divided into sixteen chronological periods.

18

As an engaging puzzle, the auto-completion of the search fields clarifies all this and tells more about what the editors decided to do or what the web publication was supposed to privilege or focus on.

19

Help

Search help
You can indicate which types of text you want to include in your search by checking or unchecking the applicable boxes to limit your search to, say, the translation of the letters.
(By clicking on the "Search for", "Select letters" or "Sort by" options, you can access more specific searches (for works of art for example), limit the letters that will be searched (by correspondent or by period, say), and indicate whether you want the result to be sorted by (computed) relevance, correspondent or date.
Click "Clear" to clear the search form.

Full text search

Original text ☒
Translation ☒
Annotations ☒
Bibliography ☒
Full text

Search for

Person
Literature
Work of art
Bible reference
Van Gogh work F no.
Periodical

Select letters

From Vincent van Gogh ☒
To Vincent van Gogh ☒
Sketches only ☐
Number (range)
Date between and
Or period
Correspondent
Place

Sort by

Relevance ☐
Correspondent ☐
Date ☒

Work of art

Jean-François Millet - Emile Louis Verrier - The angelus (1857-1859)
Jean-François Millet - Martinez - The angelus (1857-1859)
Jean-François Millet - The angelus (The evening angelus)
Vincent van Gogh - The angelus (after Jean-François Millet) (F 834 / JH Jun. 14)

Figure 7. Example of the use of the advanced search form. By typing “angelus” in the “work of art” field, the auto-completion menu on the right hand side comes up with some suggestions. The fourth is the one we were looking for. By clicking on the search tab, we get to the search results shown below.

Search results
2 letters found

Terms:

Dated between:
29 September 1872 and 31 July 1890

Work of art:
Vincent van Gogh - The angelus (after Jean-François Millet) (F 834 / JH Jun. 14)

Sorted by:
date

2 letters found

157 To Theo van Gogh. Coesmes, Tuesday, 7 September 1880.
160 To Theo van Gogh. in note 5:
... evening prayer, one of which is known (F 834 / JH Jun. 14), though this is probably not the one ref...

Figure 8. An action of mouse over the relevant reference to a letter in the search results will bring up the corresponding snippet in the text where the searched element in question is mentioned. This facilitates the filtering across search results by speeding up the discovery of the relevant letter and by avoiding useless steps of direct consultations.



Figure 9. Here is the final step of the search process outlined above: the visualisation of the artwork in question, a copy of the *Angelus* of Millet made by Van Gogh. The windows containing illustrations of artworks open up by clicking on the relevant thumbnail on the artworks panel or by following any references to artworks in the notes. The latter are signalled with a distinctive round orange and brown icon which makes them easy to spot while screening the text.

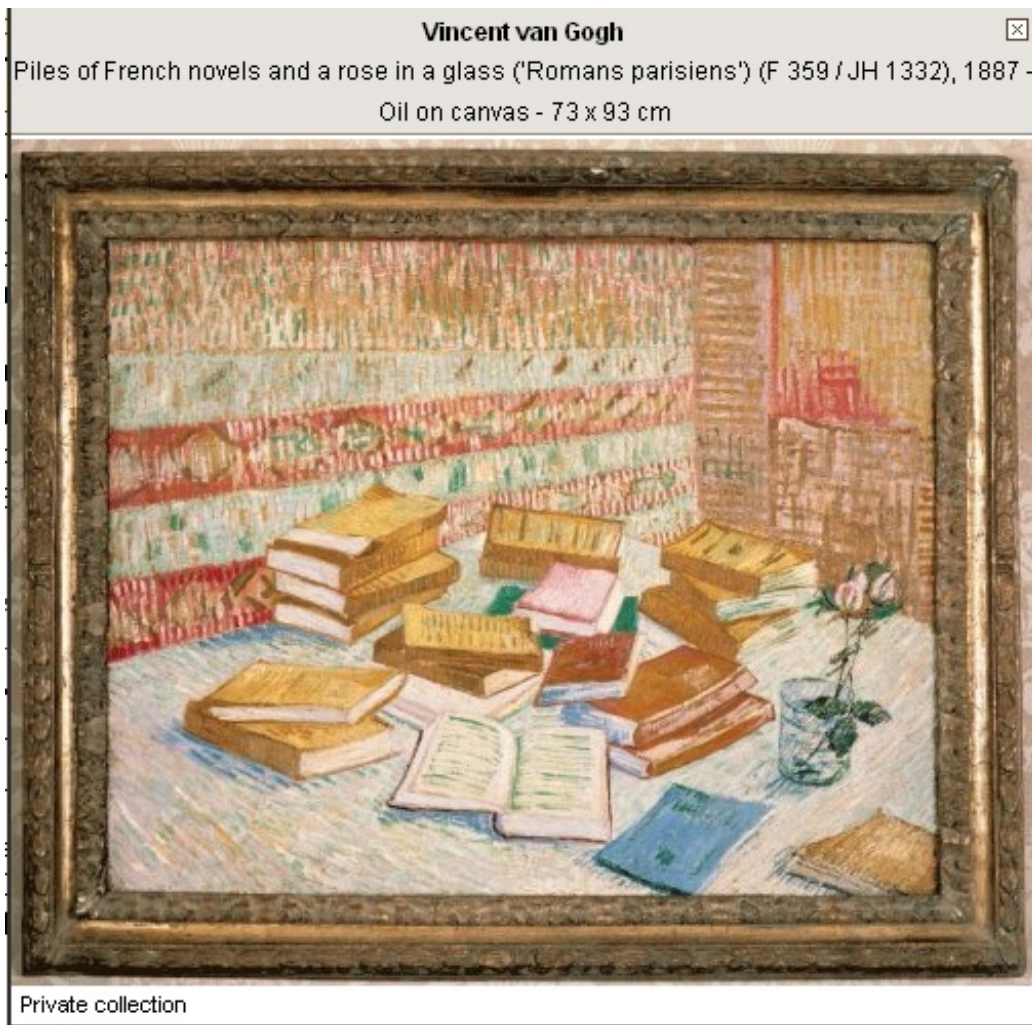


Figure 10. This painting (*Piles of French novels and a rose in a glass* — “Romans parisiens”) by Van Gogh was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London at the *The Real Van Gogh: The Artist and His Letters* exhibition (23 January — 18 April 2010) where over 35 original letters, other around 65 paintings and 30 drawings were put on display in the same rooms. Although the physical vicinity of these objects allows the visitor to grasp the intimate connection between the content of the letters, the life of the painter, its readings and artistic production, it still deals with a sort of demonstration, a very enjoyable but somehow restricted narrative thread compared to the ones one can expand, reconstruct, deconstruct and re-invent browsing the web edition.

Collaborative Nature, Best Practices and Open Source

The collaborative project behind the publication of the current edition started officially in 1994. During its lifecycle, the project engaged other national and international initiatives relevant to Van Gogh studies by opening up its development to an interdisciplinary framework, establishing cooperative efforts of various kinds (between individuals and, more importantly across institutions at the international level, from museums, galleries and auction houses to libraries and archives), and using lessons learned through past endeavours. The open and collaborative nature of the work is evident when we examine the web form of the edition where the production choices include the adoption of scholarly standards in text encoding and the full endorsement of open source software.

Starting from the text, once edited within a word processor in the first place, each letter was automatically converted into an XML document by adopting the community-based Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) guidelines. Furthermore, the dedicated TEI schema developed for the edition was enriched with some of the solutions conceived and made public by another project also aiming at structuring and editing correspondence: the Digital Archive of Letters in Flanders.

Based, therefore, on an extensive use of best practices in text encoding, the Van Gogh TEI XML letters include a defined set of metadata for each letter (e.g. number, date), its full transcription in the original language, its translation

into English, relevant notes (including textual notes), and the connection between text and manuscript images — in brief, the full electronic backbone which is then rendered both in print form as content of the books and in digital form on the web.

Furthermore, as hinted at above, the web edition is complemented with a series of interconnected data sources. Indeed, the editors compiled various databases containing the physical descriptions of the letters, data about the illustrations, and information about the people mentioned by the Dutch painter in his correspondence. The integration between the TEI document compiled for each letter and such complementary material is obtained by recurring to two programmes developed in Ruby, an open source programming language.

23

Besides the XHTML rendition, such integration between the document level and the contextual databases becomes evident, as seen above, while using the indices or the search facility as well as while encountering some para-textual information accompanying the letters. For example, the captions of the illustrations or the textual notes with references to artworks could not link back to the relevant *index locorum* without such integration. Indeed, two Ruby programmes were developed to generate an index from the TEI XML files as well as from the relevant database sources, and to perform dynamic searches prompted by the user on the resulting index. The search index itself is built by recurring, yet again, to another open source software: Apache Lucene.

24

Moving to the digitisation process itself, the 902 surviving letters under study have undergone a process of physical conservation against decay (e.g. deacidification, repairs, controlled storage) and digitisation within the Netherland national Metamorfoze programme, a collaborative effort supported by the National Library and the National Archives of the Netherlands.

25

The image processing and zooming facility on the web edition is also based on an open source programme known as GSV image viewer, a javascript driven user interface, coupled with the ImageMagick suite, also a free and GNU GPL compatible software to manipulate images. The result is an image interface for the letters facsimile which behaves very similarly to the Google Map interface: indeed, high-resolution images much larger than the screen can be panned and zoomed by fetching tiled sections on demand, while minimising the loading effect on the network, since only portions of the facsimile are effectively visualised at any given time. It has to be noted that three servers are behind the architecture which supports the visualisation of the facsimiles.

26

To conclude, thanks to a rather strategic institutional collaboration spearheaded by the Van Gogh Museum and the Huygens Institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences — renowned institutions in the field of scholarly publishing of literary and historical texts — this new edition is the example of a successful marriage between thorough editing processes and responsible professional production of a rich electronic resource, which in fact is attractive to a wide audience. It fulfils the highest scholarly standards while at the same time being open to anyone with a web connection and some curiosity towards the genial mind that was Vincent van Gogh's. Such openness could have possibly gone further by envisaging the possibility of users interacting with this resource. At present, the web page section entitled "Updates" is empty and does not contain any feedback mechanism, but instead promises that this hybrid edition will record changes in both the web and print edition. It is possibly too much to aim for, but that now that Van Gogh's correspondence is all skilfully edited, searchable, and beautifully integrated with all sorts of contextual material and free to read online, one would think that the next step could be to make it free to write and comment on. The Van Gogh Museum is not insensitive to the issue and, though separate from the scholarly edition, has already set up a blog: <http://www.vangoghsblog.com/>.

27

Could have he known, Van Gogh, that after more than a hundred years his passion would have become true heritage of his beloved ordinary women and men?

28

Notes

[1] Despite the fact that the letters are available in all original languages, it does not seem to be possible to search letters by language in the search form.

[2] Understandably, line numbers are available only in the diplomatic edition (only published on the web). Pointers to editorial notes are available in all three versions of the text (original, diplomatic and translated text). However, links to indices and the possibility to identify referencing strings are only active in the translated text. This could either mean that the relevant mark up has been applied to the translated text only – and that in addition there is no one to one correspondence between, for instance, referring strings in the original text and referring strings in the translated texts – or simply that an editorial decision was made to leave the original text and diplomatic edition cleaner to facilitate reading.

Works Cited

Thames & Hudson 2009 Jansen, Leo, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker, eds. *Vincent van Gogh — The Letters. The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*. Thames: Hudson, 2009.



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