

## Van Gogh's Last Supper Transforming "the guise of observable reality"

Although little has been written about *Café Teras* (Fig. 1), it has enraptured the imagination of the general public, becoming one of the world's most reproduced paintings (Reynolds 2010). Perhaps the accepted, superficial interpretations of this seemingly casual street scene: that it is "something like" the opening description of "*drinkers in the harsh, bright lights of their illuminated facades*" from Guy de Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* (Jansen et al. 2009, [l. 678, n. 15](#)) or homage to Louis Anquetin's *Avenue de Clichy: 5 o'clock in the Evening* (Welsh-Ovcharov 1981); coupled by the relatively scant description in van Gogh's existing letters and 20<sup>th</sup> century art critic Dr. Meyer Schapiro's slight that it may be "less concentrated than the best of van Gogh" (1980 p. 80), have undermined a more thorough investigation of this luminous subject.



(Fig. 1 *Café Teras*)



(Fig. 2 *Café Teras*, Sketch)

Nevertheless, this lack of inquiry seems peculiar for a number of reasons. 1) *Café Teras* was conceived over several months during his self-imposed isolation in Arles, a time when Vincent, feeling marginalized and alienated, ceaselessly schemed to reconnect with his *copains* Émile Bernard, Paul Gauguin and others, hoping to found a kind of Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood of twelve "artist-apostles" who, communally, would forge the new Renaissance. 2) It is Vincent's original "starry night," composed "on the spot," painstakingly crafted over several nights while he reported feeling a "terrible need for religion" (Jansen et al. 2009, [l. 691](#)). 3) It bears striking differences from the original sketch (Fig. 2). 4) And principally, it was conceived and executed during the nascent phase of his "search for sacred art" (Silverman 2000) – a time when Vincent would discover his full and robust identity as an artist – the promethean expressionist whose

primordial penetration into “sacred realism” would eventually transcend culture, class and time, for today, his singular, all-encompassing passion to console humanity, is realized.

Here, we will discover the deeper meaning within *Café Teras* by explicating the evolution of thought regarding his *Symbolist Art*; providing contextual and circumstantial evidence through careful attention to his summer letters and works, and finally, closely examining the painting.

## SYMBOLIST ART

Eugène Delacroix wrote,

“There is an emotion peculiar to painting [...] what one might call *the music of the painting*. Before you even know what the painting represents [...] when you are too far away from it [...] you are conquered by this magical accord” (Dorra 1995, p. 3).

Ideals which influenced Charles Baudelaire and the genesis of the Symbolist movement – based in the theory of Correspondences – which simply put, is a “complex play of associations” or, a “multiplicity of metaphors.” Dr. Henri Dorra explained,

“...that romantic poetic vision was characterized not so much by the mere use of metaphor (a characteristic of all relatively mature poetry) as by the richness and multiplicity of its metaphors, which, when released by a well-stocked memory and governed by an intuitive imagination, could bring forth a complex play of associations” (1995, p. 4).

Interestingly, a similar tradition existed in 19<sup>th</sup> century Holland. Dr. Tsukasa Kodera spent the entirety of his first chapter explicating “Dominocratie,” the dominant role exacted by the Dutch clergy in their culture’s literature, in part by illustrating “Bijtschriften-poëzie,” a combination of image and poem wherein a theologian would take an image and caption it with poetical notes; a form Vincent practiced often (Kodera 1990).

For example, in the margins of this lithograph (Fig. 3), Vincent marginalized verses from Mark, Luke and John, also a Dutch hymn and a Longfellow poem. The point being, each passage was evoked within Vincent when he viewed this final procession.



(Fig. 3 *Funeral procession in the wheat field* lithograph (with inscriptions by van Gogh))

If we consider “Bijschriften-poëzie” the Dutch “correspondences,” we will gain an insight into Vincent’s creative process; key to appreciating how his art has connected on a global level. Dr. Koderá described Vincent as a “preacher-artist,” concluding chapter one,

“In the following chapters, we will see how van Gogh preserved the preacher-like character and how he transformed ‘Christianity’ in his life and works” (p. 26).

Incidentally, Vincent gave this lithograph to his tutor Mendes da Costa, who later recalled,

“...we made rapid progress [...] soon I was able to let him translate an easy Latin author. Needless to say, fanatic that he was at that time, he immediately started applying that little knowledge [...] to reading Thomas a Kempis in the original.

“But [...] the Greek verbs [...] became too much for him. [...]

“‘Mendes, do you really think such horrors are necessary for someone who wants what I want: to give poor creatures a peacefulness in their existence on earth? [...] Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* is of much more use to me, as is Thomas a Kempis and a translation of the Bible; more than that I don’t need.’

“I no longer know how many times he said that to me. [But each time] it was decided [...] Vincent should give it another try. But before long it was the same old song, and then he would arrive in the morning with the all-too-familiar announcement: ‘Mendes, last night I used the cudgel again.’ ... this was some sort of self-chastisement [...] which I suspect was a form of [...] masochism...” (Stein 1986, p. 44).

In his younger years, Vincent was an exceptionally devout, if misguided, imitator of Jesus Christ.



MORÉAS, AURIER & KODERA

To separate Symbolists from Decadents, Jean Moréas stated in his *Symbolist Manifesto*,

“In this art, scenes from nature, human activities, and all other real world phenomena will not be described for their own sake; here, they are perceptible surfaces created to represent their esoteric affinities with the *primordial Ideals*” (1886).

So within any deftly produced “complex play of associations” or “multiplicity of metaphors” where symbols number as trees through a forest, beneath it all lies a single idea, a *primordial idea*, an *idée fixe*, like a hieroglyph of God.

In the first article to publicly praise Vincent’s art, Albert Aurier wrote,

“In almost all his canvasses, beneath this morphic exterior [...] there lies, for the spirit that knows how to find it, a thought, an Idea, and this Idea, the essential substratum of the work, is, at the same time, its efficient and final cause [...] how could we explain that obsessive passion for the solar disk that he loves [...] which he repeats, tirelessly, monomaniacally if we refuse to accept his persistent preoccupation with some vague and glorious heliomythic allegory?” (1890)

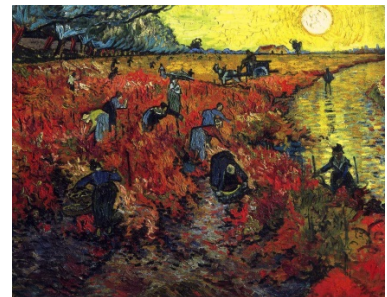
Here Aurier, who had read Vincent’s correspondence with Bernard (Jansen et al., 2007, p. 19), put forth that the *primordial ideal* from much of this era’s work, including *The Sower* (Fig. 4), *Pollard Willows with Setting Sun* (Fig. 5), *The Red Vineyard* (Fig. 6) and others is a “heliomythic allegory.” The sun god, known to every culture by many names: Apollo, Ra, Sol, Surya, etc... In chapter two, “*The Church versus the sun*,” Dr. Kodera repeatedly demonstrated how Vincent replaced church motifs with sun motifs to illustrate his “naturalization of religion” (1990, p. 31).



(Fig. 4 *The Sower*)



(Fig. 5 *Pollard Willows with Setting Sun*)



(Fig. 6 *The Red Vineyard*)

For example, in *Grain Harvest* (Fig. 7), Vincent placed a church steeple in the background. This would all but disappear when he moved to Arles, replaced by the sun in *The Reaper* (Fig. 8), illustrating one of his favorite adages, “religions pass, God remains” (Jansen et al. 2009, [1. 294, n. 6](#) and [1. 507, n. 2](#)). By 1888, Vincent celebrated the divinity of nature, free from the irrefutable dogma of the clergymen’s God whom he for years had found “dead as doornail” (193).



(Fig. 7 Grain Harvest)



(Fig. 8 The Reaper)

### SACRED REALISM

Dr. Debora Silverman delineated Vincent from the primary canon of Symbolists: Maurice Denis, Odilon Redon and Paul Gauguin, who sought to “dematerialize nature in a flight into metaphysical mystery” (2000, p. 50). Quite the opposite, “Van Gogh’s art had evolved by 1888 into a symbolist project that can be called ‘sacred realism,’ a project of divinity made concrete and discovering the infinite in weighted tangibility” (2000, p. 117).

In this letter to Theo (Fig. 9), Vincent explained, “You must realize that if you arrange them this way, say the *Woman rocking a cradle* in the middle and the two canvases of sunflowers to the right and left, it makes a sort of triptych.” (776) His *Madonna and Child* (Figs. 10, 11 and 12).

(Fig. 9 Triptych with *La Berceuse* and two versions of *Sunflowers in a vase* 776)



(Fig. 10 *Sunflowers*)(Fig. 11 *La Berceuse*)(Fig. 12 *Sunflowers*)

Dr. Evert van Uitert expounded,

“The image created is that of an altarpiece in which Madame Roulin takes on the role of the Virgin Mary as *Stella Maris* and [...] the sunflowers can be associated with Christ.”

He further explained,

“By employing the triptych form Vincent intensifies the religious aspect, but it remains no more than one facet of the work; one of the possible interpretations of this realistic image. Vincent wants to retain the guise of observable reality even when he transforms this reality in his paintings” (1980, pp. 85-86).

Dr. Silverman, however, advanced the argument that Vincent “devised the *Berceuse* as a type of Protestant counter-imagery to the dynamic supernaturalism he encountered in Provencal Catholic culture” (2000, p. 312) by offering new insights to its composition. Briefly, the floral wallpaper, red and green color fields and “lullaby” title are all highly evocative of Flemish Renaissance *Madonnas* (Figs. 13 and 14). Further, it was crafted during the spectacle of an expansive two-month Arles’ Nativity festival and finally, bears reminiscences of the Andrieskerk *Maris Stella* in Antwerp (Fig. 15) which he applauded as “superb” and “very, very curious” (551).



(Fig. 13 by Hans Memling)



(Fig. 14 by Jan van Eyck)

(Fig. 15 *Maris Stella*)

She concluded,

“His *Berceuse* culminated his art of sacred realism, shorn of miraculous rescues and visionary ruminations but nonetheless vested with spiritual force and the consoling function associated with religious art” (2000, p. [369](#)).

Several months prior his “consoling” experiments included innovating a *Last Supper*.

SUMMER, 1888

Next, we will consider pertinent artistic influences Vincent was parsing: his search, with Bernard, for a new Renaissance, colorizing Millet’s pious genre scenes with Delacroix’s luminous palette, the naturalization of divinity through Japonism and Cloisonism and his attempts to found an idyllic artists’ colony.

The letters to Bernard offer unparalleled insight into Vincent’s mind (Jansen et al. 2007, p. 7). That summer, Bernard began studying the Bible. Vincent encouraged him, exalting...

“an artist greater than all artists – disdaining marble and clay and paint – working in LIVING FLESH. I.e. this extraordinary artist, hardly conceivable with the obtuse instrument of our nervous and stupefied modern brains [...] he states it loud and clear.. he made.. living men, immortals. That’s serious [...] especially because it’s the truth” ([632](#))

...and their conversations about Christianity unfurled.

On several occasions Vincent invoked St. Luke’s symbol, the ox,

“The symbol of Saint Luke, the patron of painters, is, as you know, an *ox*; we must therefore be as patient as an ox if we wish to labor in the artistic field” ([628](#)).

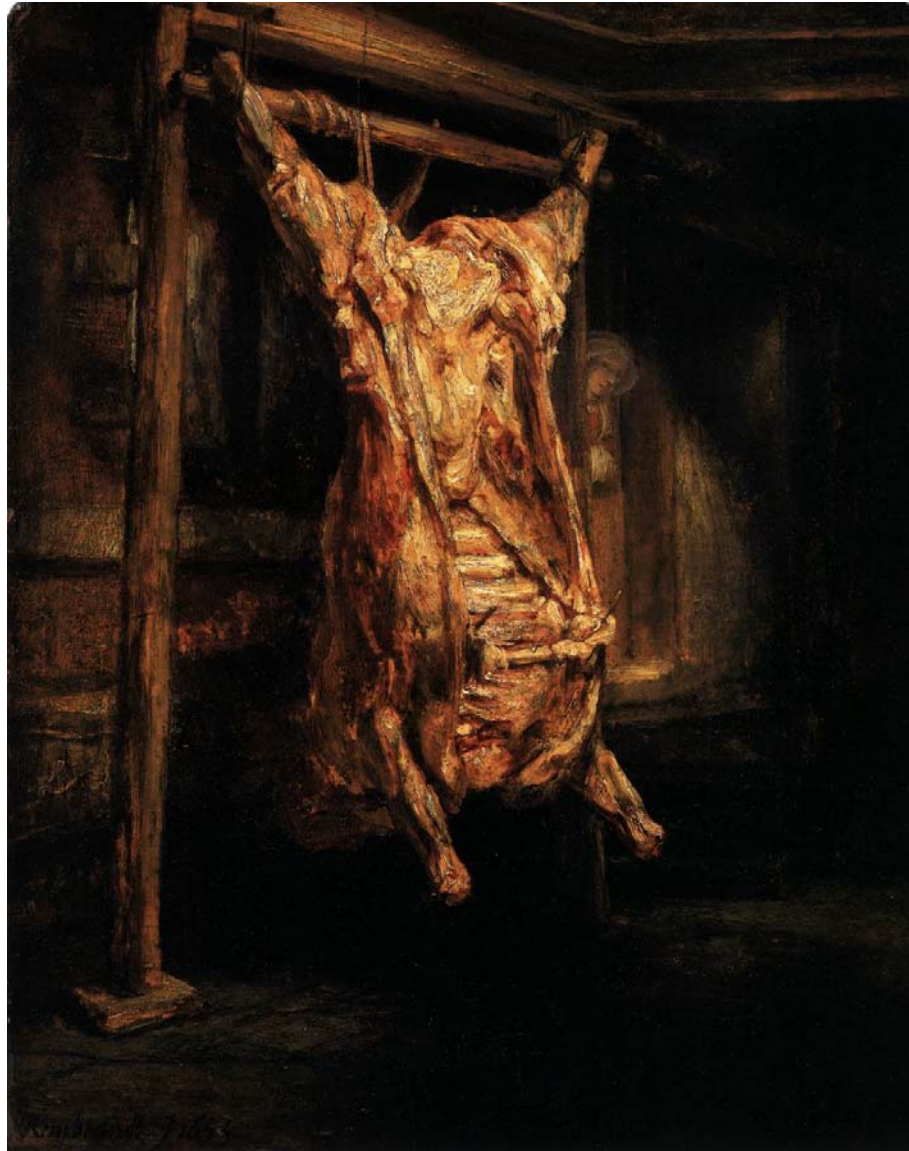
And,

“patron of painters — physician, painter, evangelist — having for his symbol — alas — nothing but the ox is there to give us hope” ([632](#)).

When Bernard praised a Baudelaire poem about Rembrandt, Vincent caustically replied,

“... all admiration for Baudelaire aside — I venture to assume, especially on the basis of those verses.... that he knew more or less nothing about Rembrandt. [...] have you ever looked *closely* at ‘the ox’ [...] in the Louvre? You haven’t looked closely [...] and Baudelaire infinitely less so” ([649](#)) (Fig. 16).

Vincent believed “looking closely” led to the apotheosis of artistic appreciation, comparing it to coitus ([649](#)), admonishing Bernard, “So to you, I can only reply, come on, just look a little more closely than that; really, it’s worth the effort a thousand times over” the very next day ([651](#)).



(Fig. 16 *The Slaughtered Ox*)

It is not within the scope of this work to argue this painting represented Vincent's *primordial Ideal* of the artist and his destiny: labor, suffering, castration and ultimately, crucifixion, because of far more importance, was his spirited response to Bernard's ten scenes of a brothel he had just received. Vincent gratefully began this same caustic letter,

“A thousand thanks for sending your drawings. I very much like [...] the one washing herself, a grey effect embellished with black, white, yellow, brown. It's charming” (649).

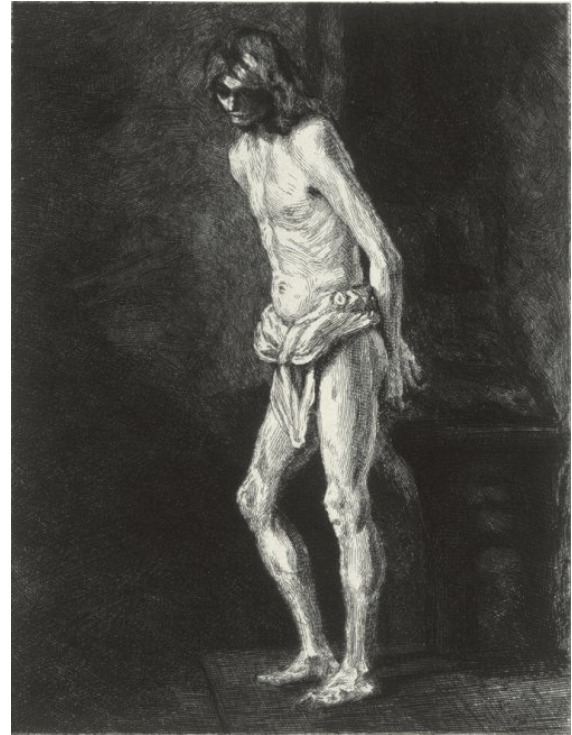
Quite charming (Fig. 17); the same day he described it to Theo as, “very Rembrandtesque” (650).

And what is so “Rembrandtesque” about it?





(Fig. 17 *A Woman Washing Herself*)



(Fig. 18 *Christ at the Column*)

It is the first example of either artist crafting a subject within window mullions that form a cross as though bearing a crucifix.

Now, directly after exclaiming Baudelaire knew nothing about Rembrandt, Vincent wrote,

“I’ve just found and bought here a little etching after Rembrandt, a study of a nude man... realistic and simple; he’s standing, leaning against a door or column in a dark interior. A ray of light from above skims his down-turned face and the bushy red hair” ([649, n. 7](#)) (Fig. 18).

Vincent carefully tucked these images away in his “well stocked memory.” Soon, we will discover how they were governed by his “intuitive imagination.”

### JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET

At the outset of their Biblical discourse, Vincent wrote Bernard that Barbizon School pioneer, Jean-François Millet had painted “Christ’s doctrine” ([632](#)) and his obsession with the sower was rekindled (Fig. 19), evidenced by his immediate return to and reworking of *The Sower with Setting Sun* ([634, n. 4](#)) (Fig. 20).

(Fig. 19 *The Sower*)(Fig. 20 *The Sower with Setting Sun*)

Dr. Silverman devoted chapter two “*Van Gogh’s Sower*” to highlighting the intricacies of this first symbolist project, about which Vincent, himself wrote, “Later on, when I’ve taken those experiments further, the sower will still be the first attempt in that genre” (676). These summer conversations with Bernard had inspired Vincent to innovate traditionally “Christian” subjects as Silverman stated, “by naturalizing divinity, in the service of what he called a ‘perfection’ that ‘renders the infinite tangible to us’” (2000, p. 50). I would offer this genre was also parabolic, thus highlighting his emerging evolution as a “preacher-artist.” He explained to Theo,

“I’m beginning more and more to look for a simple technique that perhaps isn’t Impressionist. I’d like to paint in such a way that if it comes to it, everyone who has eyes could understand it” (666).

Thus invoking the parable of the sower, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

## EUGÈNE DELACROIX

Vincent loved Delacroix (Fig. 21) in five summer letters (Jansen et al. 2009). He wrote Bernard,

“Delacroix paints a Christ using an unexpected light lemon note, this colorful and luminous note in the painting being what the ineffable strangeness and charm of a star is in a corner of the firmament.” (649)

He wrote Theo, the “little lemon yellow for the halo, the aureole — speaks a symbolic language through color itself.” (634)





(Fig. 21 *Christ asleep during the tempest*)

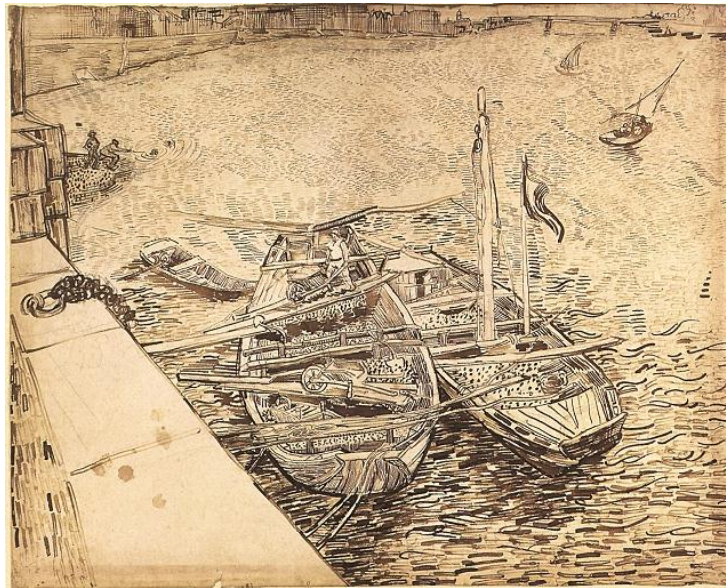
We will return to this Delacroix in a moment, after offering this painting Vincent executed that summer, later dedicating to Bernard, *Quay with Sand Barges* (Fig. 22) is a *Symbolist*, or “sacred realism,” if you prefer, rendering of the Delacroix.



(Fig. 22 *Quay with Sand Barges*, Folkwang Museum)

When we consider Vincent has replicated not only the color of the sea and the likeness of the boat, but also, as evidenced in this earlier sketch (Fig. 23), he has transformed Arles' cityscape into a mountain, there is little doubt the Delacroix heavily inspired this composition, especially when we read this admonition to Bernard, “If the study I’m sending you in exchange doesn’t suit you, just look at it a little longer” (698) repeating this sentiment again in the next paragraph.





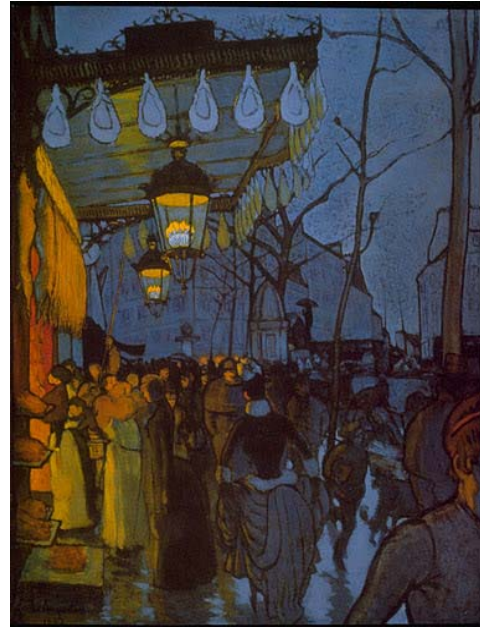
(Fig. 23 *Quay with Sand Barges*, Sketch)

#### JAPONISM & CLOISONNISM

Vincent recalled discovering the Japanese prints at Bing's Gallery with both Bernard and Louis Anquetin while living in Paris ([642, n. 5](#)), perhaps even this Hiroshige (Fig. 24). Vincent owned this print and Dr. Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov argued that since it “displays not only a night scene but also a funnel-like perspective and dominant blue-yellow tonality” (1981, p. 133) it likely inspired both *Café Teras* and Anquetin's *Avenue de Clichy* (Fig. 25), which was hailed as “the first appearance of a rather new and special manner” by art critic Edouard Dujardin, who subsequently defined the style as Cloisonnism ([620, n. 12](#)).



(Fig. 24 Night View of Saruwakacho)



(Fig. 25 Avenue de Clichy: 5 o'clock in the Evening)

Almost a knee-jerk reaction to Seurat's Pointillism, which Bernard and Anquetin considered a "reduction of pictorial intensity, resulting in static, wooden figures," they developed this form, taking a cue from the Japanese prints, by outlining bold, flat color fields with dark contours, giving their work a stained glass window effect (Jansen et al. 2007, p. 10).

Dr. Kodera argued Vincent's Japonism was "an expression of his utopian ideals" (1984) and we have already witnessed that his *Berceuse*, painted in a Cloisonist style, held deep religious meaning to him. And while these styles influenced Vincent's "search for sacred art," he was incorporating them with his *plein air* and impasto techniques, developing an identity all his own.

### "GEMEINSCHAFTSIDEAL"

Vincent rented the Yellow House (Fig. 26) in May of 1888. Over the summer, however, he used it solely as a studio while renovations and upgrades were completed (602, n. 3). Preoccupied with establishing it as a home for a brotherhood of "artist-apostles," he anointed Theo the "first apostle-dealer" and Gauguin the "father superior" (694) as he tirelessly schemed for the latter to join him (Naifeh & Smith, p. 588).

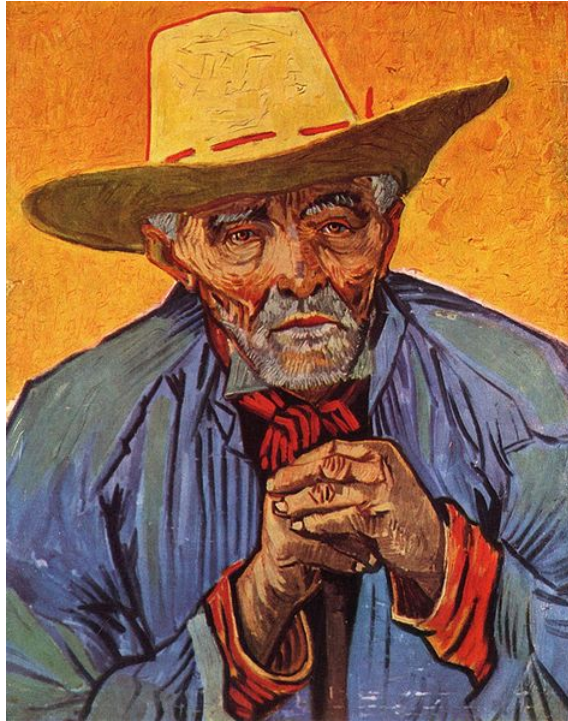
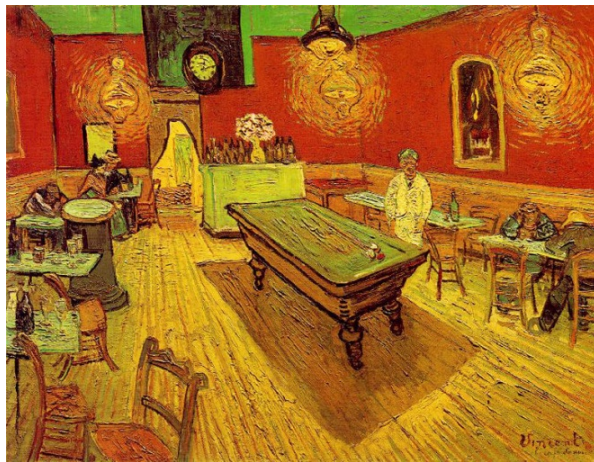
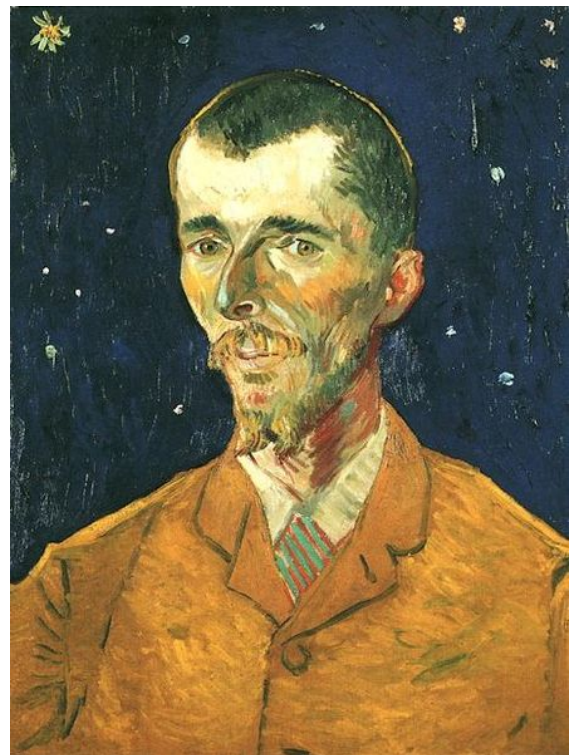


(Fig. 26 *The Yellow House*)

When Vincent received an additional 300 francs from Theo on Saturday, September 8<sup>th</sup>, he reported immediately going out to buy two beds (one for himself, the other, hopefully for Gauguin), a mirror (for painting self-portraits) and twelve chairs (perhaps, no better evidence of his obsession with his *Gemeinschaftsideal*) to furnish his “artists’ house” (677).

It is important here, to try to recreate Vincent’s mindset. He was elated. Dr. Welsh-Ovcharov described his mood as “a special moment of optimism, even gaiety” (p. 134) and with good reason: not only was Gauguin about to join him, artistically, he had never been better, his inspiration ignited by the creation of his many decorations for his “studio of the south,” including *The peasant* (Fig. 27), *The Night Café* (Fig. 28), *The Poet’s Garden* (Fig. 29) and *The Poet* (Fig. 30), his portrait of Eugène Boch, featuring “the ineffable strangeness and charm of a star [...] in a corner of the firmament.” Weeks later, Vincent wrote Boch that he had painted, “a view of the café on place du Forum, where we used to go, *painted at night*” (emphasis Vincent’s, 693).



(Fig. 27 *The Peasant*)(Fig. 29 *The Poet's Garden*)(Fig. 28 *The Night Café*)(Fig. 30 *The Poet*)

Vincent hoped Boch would be one of the twelve (677, n. 4) “artist-apostles” of his “ideal community” (Naifeh & Smith 2011, p. 637). While it is not within the scope of this work to delve into their relationship, I would offer, on a very visceral level, that Vincent shaved his head as Boch wore his (Fig. 31), in a show of brotherhood and solidarity.





(Fig. 31 Self-Portrait)



(Fig 32. Map of Vincent's Arles)

Finally, it should be noted that Vincent, Yellow House finally furnished, was too anxious to sleep there alone for an entire week (682), preferring to lug his easel and gear 20 minutes each way to the center of Arles (Fig. 32) where he would craft the consoling masterpiece of his twelve *copains* to keep him company, his first starry night.

### MYSTICAL LAST SUPPERS

Our analysis begins four years earlier, in 1884, when Vincent earned a commission from a retired goldsmith to help him paint, of all things, a *Last Supper*. We will examine a couple of studies Vincent was tinkering with in late August, 1888, compare and contrast the original sketch, and finally, consider the symbolic elements within the painting.

While Vincent's lack of success as a living artist is well-known, he was paid in paints, supplies and maybe more to help Antoon Hermans decorate his dining room (Naifeh & Smith, pp. 399-400). Vincent rebuked the retiree's plan to paint a *Last Supper*, as he explained in a letter to Anthon van Rappard,

"Then I said to him that in my view — since it's a dining room — it would do considerably more to whet the appetites of those who would have to sit at table there if scenes from the peasant life of the region were to be painted on the walls rather than mystical last suppers. The good fellow didn't contradict me" (454).

Instead of Gothic saints, Vincent did a *Sower* (Fig. 33), *Ploughman* (Fig. 34), *Wheat Harvest* (which has not survived), *Planting Potatoes* (Fig. 35), *Shepherd* (also, has not survived) and *Ox Cart in the Snow* (Fig. 36).



(Fig. 33 *The Sower*)



(Fig. 35 *Planting Potatoes*)



(Fig. 34 *Ploughman*)



(Fig. 36 *Ox Cart in the Snow*)

So, is it ridiculous to think Vincent would ever paint a *Last Supper*? Maybe not when we consider that within a few months began ruminations for his first, months-long, career-defining study, *The Potato Eaters* (Fig. 37).



(Fig. 37 *The Potato Eaters*)

The religious overtones inspired, as elucidated by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith,

“through a kaleidoscope of other images. From the monumental laborers of Millet to the idealized rustics of Breton to the bathetic simplefolk of Israels... He had also absorbed



scores of images of families at table, sharing both food and prayer [... and] Vincent ardently admired Charles de Groux's *The Benediction*, a solemn, *Last Supper*-like panorama of a peasant family giving thanks" (pp. 424-425).

Also known as *Saying Grace* (Fig. 38), Vincent wrote Theo in the first postscript of his September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1888 letter, "[Boch] said that at home they have a Degroux the sketch for *Saying grace* in the Brussels museum" (673) and it was thus very much on his mind again.



(Fig. 38 *Saying Grace*)

Perhaps the biggest reason some do not consider Vincent's work 'religious,' stems from this passage to Theo, "Of course there's no question of me doing anything from the Bible" (823).

Vincent had criticized Bernard's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Fig. 39) and *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (Fig. 40), deriding them as "something artificial — something affected," expounding,

"Because I adore the true, the possible, were I ever capable of spiritual fervor; so I bow before that study, so powerful that it makes you tremble, by *père* Millet — peasants carrying to the farmhouse a calf born in the fields. Now, my friend — people have felt that from France to America. After that, would you go back to renewing medieval tapestries for us?" (822) (Fig. 41)



(Fig. 39 *Adoration of the Shepherds*)



(Fig. 40 *Christ in the Garden of Olives*)



(Fig. 41 *Peasants bringing home a calf born in the fields*)

It is important to underline a concept Vincent held steadfastly to: “Aemulatio,” explicated by Dr. van Uiter,

“... as it was formulated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ‘doing something different’ from one’s predecessors [...] was elevated into a cast-iron law as the idea [...] that ‘one must be of one’s own time’” (1977, p. 150).

We have already seen that Vincent found the divine in nature and the sacred in everyday people from peasants and sand barge workers to matronly cradle rockers. His form of innovation was simply extracting these “common, every day” scenes from reality and imbuing them, through his

vast knowledge of history's artwork, with touches from previous masters. The implication is that within the ordinary is the sacred; maybe even bourgeois drinkers on an outdoor terrace at night.  
*"LOOK A LITTLE MORE CLOSELY"*

Accurately dating *Interior of a Restaurant in Arles* (Fig. 42) has been difficult. Pierre Leprohon placed it in late August, 1888, due in part to the blossoming sunflowers (1964, p 415) and this has been generally accepted (Hulsker 1996, p. 354). It is one of two studies Vincent created of this restaurant, the second, we will examine in a moment. Long supposed to be a view from inside the Hotel Carrel, Dr. Hulsker argued they were, "undoubtedly the *Restaurant Vénissat* at 28, Place Lamartine, where Vincent now went for dinner every day" (1996, p. 354).



(Fig. 42 *Interior of a Restaurant in Arles*)

I would offer this is Vincent's first attempt at creating a "sacred realism" *Last Supper*.

Let's consider some similarities between this painting and a few Renaissance *Last Suppers*. In the center is a serving figure. Most of the diners are stretched along the far side of the table. Three wine carafes feature prominently in the foreground. Admittedly, not much, but it is a start.

While Dr. Hulsker argued determining if this or its sister painting came first would be speculation, if you'll give me a moment, I believe we'll put this problem to rest.

So, what is required in a *Last Supper*? A figure of Christ, typically in the center, twelve diners, one of whom is a Judas, haloes are quite prevalent, though not necessary, the same can be said of bread and wine, and finally, an adroitly depicted moment from the gospel.



Here (Fig. 43), Tintoretto has all that, plus a few angels, and the extra figures of those attending to the suppers. The moment from the Bible is the Eucharist, Christ offering the bread as his body.



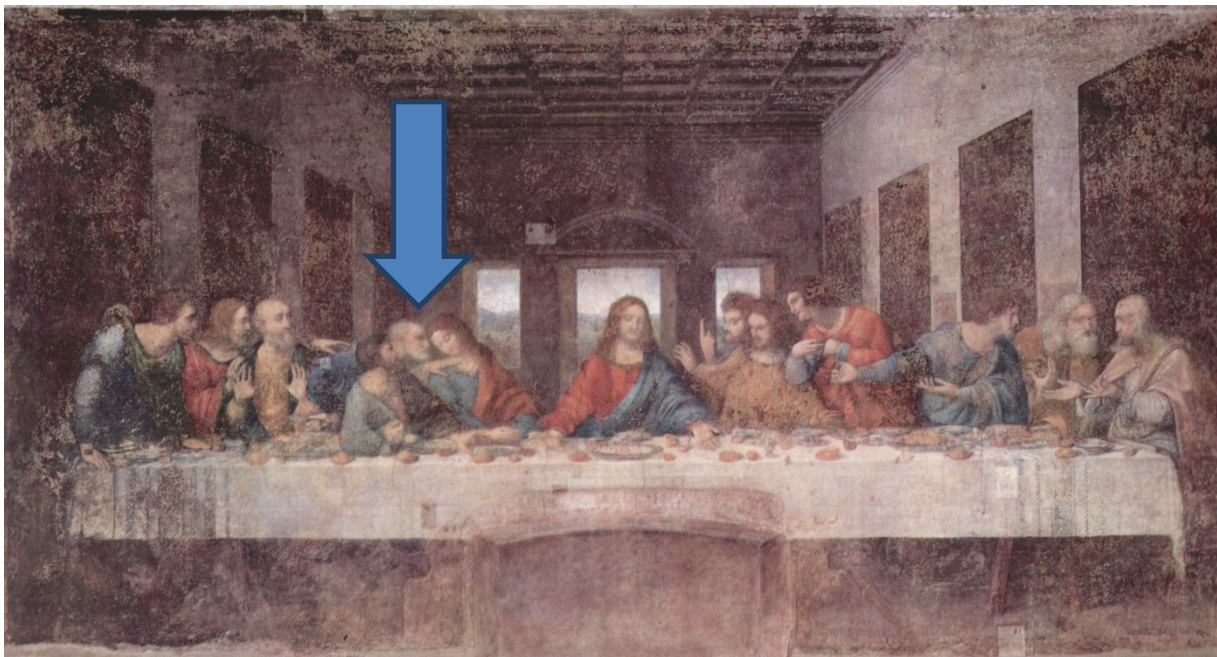
(Fig. 43 by Tintoretto)



(Fig. 44 by Rubens)

Rubens featured the same moment. Here (Fig. 44), only the figure of Christ is crowned with a halo, while Judas, in the foreground, appears very unsettled.

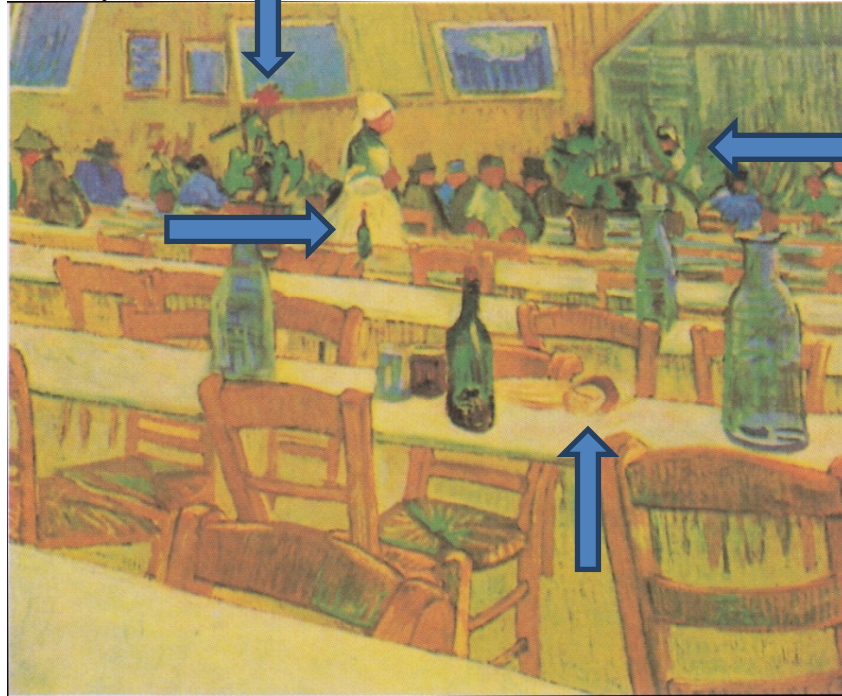
Leonardo da Vinci painted no mystical haloes and this is very much a work of realism (Fig. 45).



(Fig. 45 by Leonardo da Vinci)

Arguably the quintessential example in vanishing point perspective, everything leads the eye to the center, to the form of Jesus. Depicted is the moment Christ announced one of them would betray him and the apostles' reactions, including the shadowed figure of Judas, Simon Peter holding a knife and this curious figure of the apostle John, the beloved disciple.

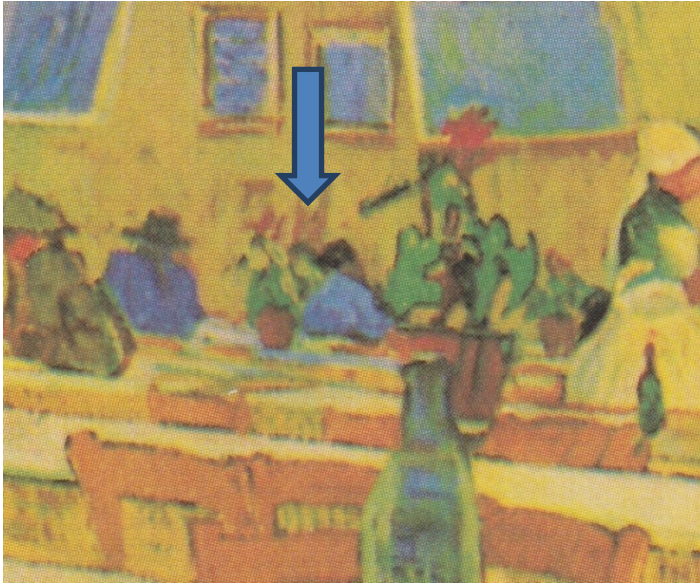
Which brings us back around to Vincent and, what will be revealed, I believe obvious, his second study of a “sacred realism” *Last Supper* (Fig. 46). This version is much cleaner, due in part, to its Cloisonist style.



(Fig. 46 *Interior of the Restaurant Carrel in Arles*)

He has added bread (up arrow) and placed a new wine bottle here (arrow pointing right); adding emphasis upon the central serving figure. He has added a couple of diners, including this figure hiding behind, what was once a vase of flowers, now appears to be a palm frond (arrow pointing left). And here's where it gets really interesting. This flower arrangement (down arrow) now resembles the top of a pollaxe and is at about the same position where Simon Peter wields a blade in Leonardo's version. But the “smoking gun” sits right next to it where Vincent has unquestionably replicated Leonardo's leaning image of the apostle John.





(Fig. 47 *Interior of the Restaurant Carrel in Arles, cropped, and Leonardo da Vinci's figure of John*)

Vincent, who often felt alienated from these Arlesians, sitting several tables away, no doubt dining (and drinking) on his own, witnessed a scene much like this and was inspired by the thought that these devout Catholic townsfolk were sitting down to supper together, much like Christ and his followers had so many years prior. In light of this new evidence, there is little doubt Fig. 42 was the first version, quickly roughed out while the scene unfolded, the second, thought about and tinkered with a bit more but finally, and undeniably, finding a way to innovate a *Last Supper* while retaining the “guise of observable reality,” was very much on his mind.

Two things strike me about these studies. First, he has enframed a female serving figure with vases of flowers, a motif he would return to months later with his *Berceuse* triptych. And second, all the empty chairs. They should be immediately recognizable from *Vincent's Chair* (Fig. 48), also his bedroom in Arles (Fig. 49), and you may recall, he'd just bought twelve to furnish the Yellow House literally hours before beginning *Café Teras* (677, n. 2).



(Fig. 48 *Vincent's Chair*)

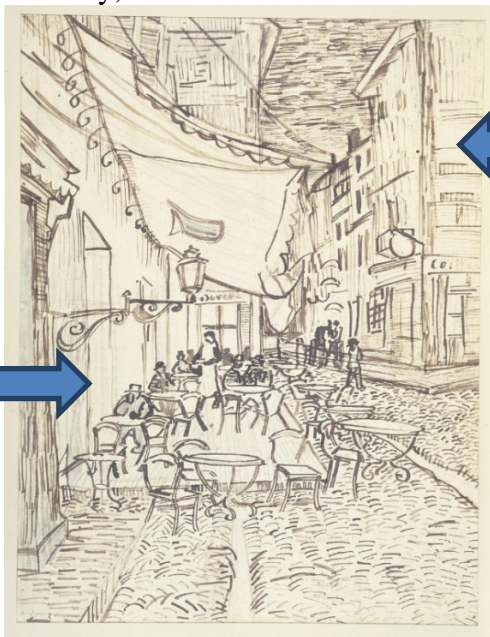


(Fig. 49 *The Bedroom*)

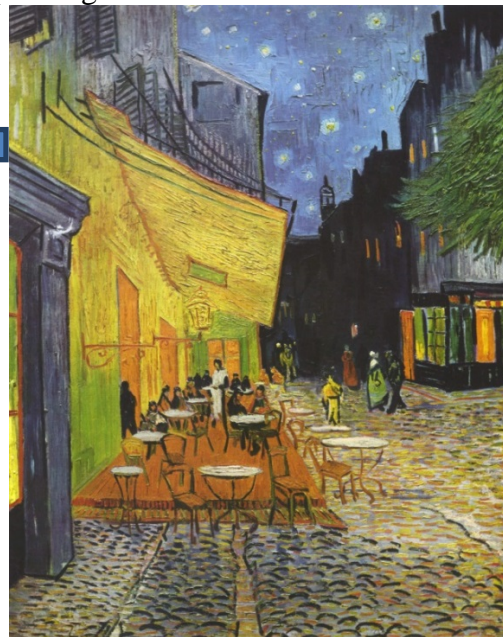
## CAFÉ TERAS

That the sketch (Fig. 50) came first has been argued by nearly everyone from Dr. Hulsker to Dr. Joachim Pissarro (2008). Dr. Welsh-Ovcharov's dissenting, though couched opinion that it, "might well have recorded rather than preceded Vincent's oil version" (p. 134) stems from her attempt to reconcile Vincent's report to his sister that it was created "on the spot." A better solution is that he colorized "on the spot" after this original, lined composition.

Sketched during the day, a number of differences from the final *tableau* are apparent: fewer pedestrians and diners, most notably, the shadowed figure exiting or entering the café (arrow pointing left). More space has been created for the starry sky and he has added the triangular boughs of an evergreen tree in the foreground, the Christian symbol of life everlasting (arrow pointing right). The vanishing point remains the same and next to it stands a serving figure, framed in the lower-left quadrant by a cross or crucifix as though he were bearing it. Vincent, no doubt, borrowed this "Rembrandtesque" image from Bernard's *A Woman Washing Herself*. Incidentally, it's one of at least three crucifixes in the painting. We'll discover two in a moment.



(Fig. 50 *Café Teras*, Sketch)



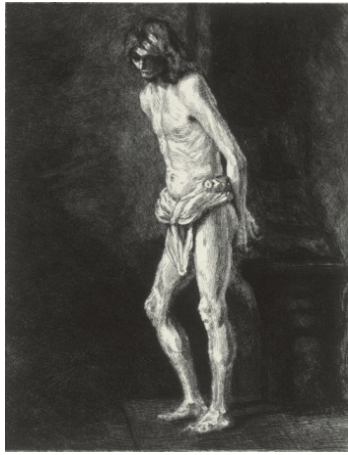
(Fig. 51 *Café Teras*)

The final composition (Fig. 51) is unique in Vincent's oeuvre. It's the only painting with lines of composition that, as in da Vinci's, draw the viewer's eye to the center. This was accomplished, in part, by adding the foreground evergreen tree and making the lines of the lintel, awning and roof parallel, a trick of perspective that doesn't exist in the real world (Schapiro, p. 80).

That summer, Vincent had attempted to create two separate renditions of *Christ in the Garden of Olives*, but had to scrape off the canvasses for lack of a model and quote, "because here I see real olive trees" (685, n. 11). I would offer he found a solution to creating a likeness by combining *Christ at the Column* (Fig. 52) with the similar likeness and colorization of *Christ Asleep during*



*the Tempest* (Fig. 53), creating a countenance, without, as he put it, “heading straight for the Garden of Gethsemane” (Fig. 54) (822), and all-the-while, after artists whom he wrote, “[...] Christ has been painted — as I feel it — only by Delacroix and by Rembrandt” (632).



(Fig. 52 *Christ at the Column*)



(Fig. 53 *Christ Asleep during the Tempest*, cropped)



(Fig. 54 *The Server*)

A closer look at the terrace reveals Vincent has purposely omitted a second gas lamp (Fig. 55).



(Fig. 55 *One Lantern*)



(Fig. 56 *Crucifix above the Cab-horse*)

While there are two scrolled, iron prickets, there's only one, enormous lantern burning above the central serving figure. It creates a halo-like effect with the exact luminous yellow note that “speaks a symbolic language through color itself” or, as Dr. Joan Greer explained,

“[...] van Gogh's view of what constituted successful religious art. In particular, the device of light pouring onto a domestic scene as the only signification of religious meaning held strong resonance for him” (Stolwijk et al. 2003, pp. 67-68).

As to the other crucifixes, he's placed one above the cab-horse (Fig. 56), which Vincent considered a symbol of suffering, writing Theo during early ruminations for his “artists' house,”

“For many reasons I'd like to be able to create a pied-à-terre which, when people were exhausted, could be used to provide a rest in the country for poor Paris cab-horses like yourself and several of our friends, the poor Impressionists” (585).

The third crucifix is emblazoned on the chest of the server (Fig 57). Next, we must answer that all-important question, “Who’s with him?” (Fig. 58)



(Fig. 57 3<sup>rd</sup> crucifix and eclipsed diner)



(Fig. 58 Head Count)

Where’s the 12<sup>th</sup> diner?

The server eclipses all but the hand of the 12<sup>th</sup> diner (Fig. 57). Additionally, two diners sit near the very center of the painting – seated on the road and rendered in auras of gold and orange – less realized than even the other figures, perhaps they’re intended to be angels.

Vincent reported re-reading Thomas Carlyle often, who wrote, in conjunction with describing Voltaire, another Enlightenment author whom Vincent adored, “People of quality disguise themselves as tavern-waiters.” (Carlyle) and Vincent seems to have taken this to the extreme.

Finally, when we consider where this hand is pointing – to the shadowed figure in the doorway – I would offer we have discovered the final piece of the puzzle: the gospel moment depicted. John 13:30, “As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was *night*” (emphasis mine).



“That doesn’t stop me having a terrible need for, dare I say the word – for religion – so I go outside at night to paint the stars, and I always dream a painting like that with a group of living figures of the pals.”  
(691)



“And in a painting I’d like to say something consoling, like a piece of music. I’d like to paint men or women with that *je ne sais quoi* of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we try to achieve through the radiance itself, through the vibrancy of our colorations.”  
(673)

(Fig. 59 *Café Teras*, cropped, depicting pointing direction of the “disembodied hand”)

I would like to finish with two thoughts. First, Vincent’s humble sentiment,

“Try to understand the last word of what the great artists, the serious masters, say in their masterpieces; there will be God in it. Someone has written or said it in a book, someone in a painting” (155).

And lastly, Vincent’s legacy – the archetypal tortured artist – was wrought by a longing to forge his own path; a course that thrust him through a liminal alienation but liberated his discovery of his unique creative process and true identity, that of “preacher-artist.” His long-enduring allure is not that he painted imaginary or mystical scenes that reside outside of the human experience. Quite the opposite, his paintings provide a connectedness for everyone with eyes who can see, that through his imagination, being human, is itself, a mystical experience.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1, *Café Teras* (*Café Terrace on the Place du Forum, Arles, at Night*), early September, 1888 (F 467 / JH 1580) Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, oil on canvas, 81.0 x 65.5 cm.

Fig. 2, *Café Teras*, Sketch, early September, 1888 (F 1519 / JH 1579) Dallas Museum of Art, reed pen, 62.0 x 47.0 cm.

Fig. 3, *Funeral procession in the wheat field*, J.J. van der Maaten, University Library, Amsterdam, lithograph (with inscriptions by van Gogh), ??

Fig. 4, *The Sower*, late November, 1888 (F451 / JH 1629), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, oil on canvas, 32.0 x 40.0 cm.

Fig. 5, *Pollard Willows with Setting Sun*, early March, 1888 (F 572 / JH 1597), Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, oil on canvas on cardboard, 31.6 x 34.3 cm.

Fig. 6, *The Red Vineyard*, early November, 1888 (F 495 / JH 1626), Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, oil on canvas, 75.0 x 93.0 cm.

Fig. 7, *Grain Harvest*, late August, 1885 (F 1301r / JH 917) Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, black chalk, grey wash, traces of fixative, on wove paper, 27.0 x 38.5 cm.

Fig. 8, *The Reaper*, early September, 1889 (F 618 / JH 1773) Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, oil on canvas, 74.0 x 92.0 cm.

Fig. 9, Triptych with *La Berceuse* and two versions of *Sunflowers in a vase*, late May, 1889 (Letter 776) Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, letter sketch 7761r.

Fig. 10, *Sunflowers in a Vase*, late August, 1888 (F 454 / JH 1562) The National Gallery, London, oil on canvas, 93.0 x 73.0 cm.

Fig. 11, *La Berceuse*, late January, 1889 (F 504 / JH 1655) Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, oil on canvas, 91.0 x 72.0 cm.

Fig. 12, *Sunflowers in a Vase*, late August, 1888 (F 456 / JH 1561) Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich, oil on canvas, 91.0 x 72.0 cm.

Fig. 13, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Two Angels*, 1480, Hans Memling, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, oil on wood panel, 57.0 x 42.0 cm.

Fig. 14, *The Lucca Madonna*, 1436, Jan van Eyck, Stedelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt, oil on wood panel.

Fig. 15, *The Maris Stella Window*, Andrieskerk, Antwerp, 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Fig. 16, *The Slaughtered Ox*, 1657, Rembrandt van Rijn, Musée du Louvre, Paris, oil on board, 51.7 x 73.3 cm.

Fig. 17, *A Woman Washing Herself*, 1888, Émile Bernard, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Fig. 18, *Christ at the Column*, 1881, Eugène Gauguin after Rembrandt van Rijn, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 19, *The Sower*, 1850, Jean-François Millet, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, oil on canvas, 82.6 x 101.6 cm.

Fig. 20, *The Sower with Setting Sun*, mid-June, 1888 (F 422 / JH 1470), Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, oil on canvas, 64.2 x 80.3 cm.

Fig. 21, *Christ Asleep during the Tempest*, c. 1853, Eugène Delacroix, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 50.8 x 61.0 cm.

Fig. 22, *Quay with Sand Barges*, early August, 1888 (F 449 / JH 1558) Museum Folkwang, Essen, oil on canvas 55.0 x 66.0 cm.

Fig. 23, *Quay with Sand Barges*, Sketch, late July, 1888 (F 1442 / JH 1556) Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, New York, pen, reed pen, 48.0 x 62.5 cm.

Fig. 24, *Night View of Saruwakacho*, 1856, Hiroshige, color print from “One Hundred Views of Edo,” Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Fig. 25, *Avenue de Clichy: Five o'clock in the Evening*, 1887, Louis Anquetin, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, oil on canvas, 69.2 x 53.0 cm.

Fig. 26, *The Yellow House* (*'The Street'*), late September, 1888 (F 464 / JH 1589) Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, oil on canvas, 72.0 x 91.5 cm.

Fig. 27, *Patience Escalier* (*'The peasant'*), late August, 1888 (F 444 / JH 1563) private collection, oil on canvas, 69.0 x 56.0 cm.

Fig. 28, *The Night Café*, early September, 1888 (F 463 / JH 1575) Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, oil on canvas, 70.0 x 89.0 cm.

Fig. 29, *The Poet's Garden*, early September, 1888 (F 468 / JH 1578) Art Institute of Chicago, oil on canvas, 73.0 x 92.0 cm.

Fig. 30, *Eugène Boch* (*'The Poet'*), early September, 1888 (F 462 / JH 1574) Musée du Louvre, Paris, oil on canvas, 60.0 x 45.0 cm.

Fig. 31, *Self-Portrait*, early September, 1888 (F 476 / JH 1581) Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, oil on canvas, 62.0 x 52.0 cm.

Fig. 32, *Map of Vincent's Arles*,

Fig. 33, *The Sower*, Sketch, late August, 1884 (F 1143 / JH 509) private collection, pen, 5.5 x 14.0 cm.

Fig. 34, *Ploughman*, Sketch, late August, 1884 (F 1142 / JH 512) private collection, pen, 5.5 x 15.0 cm.

Fig. 35, *Planting Potatoes*, Sketch, late August, 1884 (F 1141 / JH 510) private collection, pen, 5.0 x 13.0 cm.

Fig. 36, *Ox Cart in the Snow*, Sketch, late August, 1884 (F 1144 / JH 511) private collection, pen, 5.0 x 13.5 cm.

Fig. 37, *The Potato Eaters*, late April, 1885 (F 82 / JH 764) Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, oil on canvas, 82.0 x 114.0 cm.

Fig. 38, *Saying Grace*, c. 1861, Charles Degroux, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels, oil on canvas, 80.0 x 154.0 cm.

Fig. 39, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1889, Émile Bernard, private collection.

Fig. 40, *Christ in the Garden of Olives*, 1889, Émile Bernard, present whereabouts unknown.

Fig. 41, *Peasants bringing home a calf born in the fields*, c. 1864, Jean-François Millet, Art Institute of Chicago, oil on canvas, 81.1 x 100.3 cm.

Fig. 42, *Interior of a Restaurant in Arles*, late August, 1888 (F 549a / JH 1573) private collection, oil on canvas, 65.5 x 81.0cm.

Fig. 43, *The Last Supper*, 1592-1594, Tintoretto, San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, oil on canvas, 365.0 x 568.0 cm.

Fig. 44, *The Last Supper*, 1632, Peter Paul Rubens, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, oil on canvas, 304.0 cm x 250.0 cm.

Fig. 45, *The Last Supper*, 1495-1498, Leonardo da Vinci, Santa Maria della Grazie, Milan, oil, tempera on canvas, 910.0 x 420.0 cm.

Fig. 46, *Interior of the Restaurant Carrel in Arles*, late August, 1888 (F 549 / JH 1572) private collection, oil on canvas, 54.0 x 64.5 cm.

Fig. 47, *Interior of the Restaurant Carrel in Arles*, cropped, late August, 1888 (F 549 / JH 1572) private collection, oil on canvas, 54.0 x 64.5 cm.

Fig. 48, *Vincent's Chair*, late November, 1888 (F 498 / JH 1635) The National Gallery, London, oil on canvas, 93.0 x 73.5 cm.

Fig. 49, *The Bedroom*, mid-October, 1888 (F 482 / JH 1608) Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, oil on canvas, 72.0 x 90.0 cm.

Fig. 50, *Café Teras*, Sketch, early September, 1888 (F 1519 / JH 1579) Dallas Museum of Art, reed pen, 62.0 x 47.0 cm.



Fig. 51, *Café Teras*, early September, 1888 (F 467 / JH 1580) Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, oil on canvas, 81.0 x 65.5 cm.

Fig. 52, *Christ at the Column*, 1881, Eugène Gaujean after Rembrandt van Rijn, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Fig. 53, *Christ Asleep during the Tempest*, cropped, c. 1853, Eugène Delacroix, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 50.8 x 61.0 cm.

Fig. 54, *Café Teras*, cropped to “*The Server*,” early September, 1888 (F 467 / JH 1580) Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, oil on canvas, 81.0 x 65.5 cm.

Fig. 55, *Café Teras*, cropped to “*One Lantern*,” early September, 1888 (F 467 / JH 1580) Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, oil on canvas, 81.0 x 65.5 cm.

Fig. 56, *Café Teras*, cropped to “*Crucifix above the Cab-horse*,” early September, 1888 (F 467 / JH 1580) Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, oil on canvas, 81.0 x 65.5 cm.

Fig. 57, *Café Teras*, cropped to “*3<sup>rd</sup> crucifix and eclipsed diner*,” early September, 1888 (F 467 / JH 1580) Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, oil on canvas, 81.0 x 65.5 cm.

Fig. 58, *Café Teras*, cropped to “*Head Count*,” early September, 1888 (F 467 / JH 1580) Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, oil on canvas, 81.0 x 65.5 cm.

Fig. 59, *Café Teras*, cropped to “*depicting pointing direction of the ‘disembodied hand,’*” early September, 1888 (F 467 / JH 1580) Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, oil on canvas, 81.0 x 65.5 cm.

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