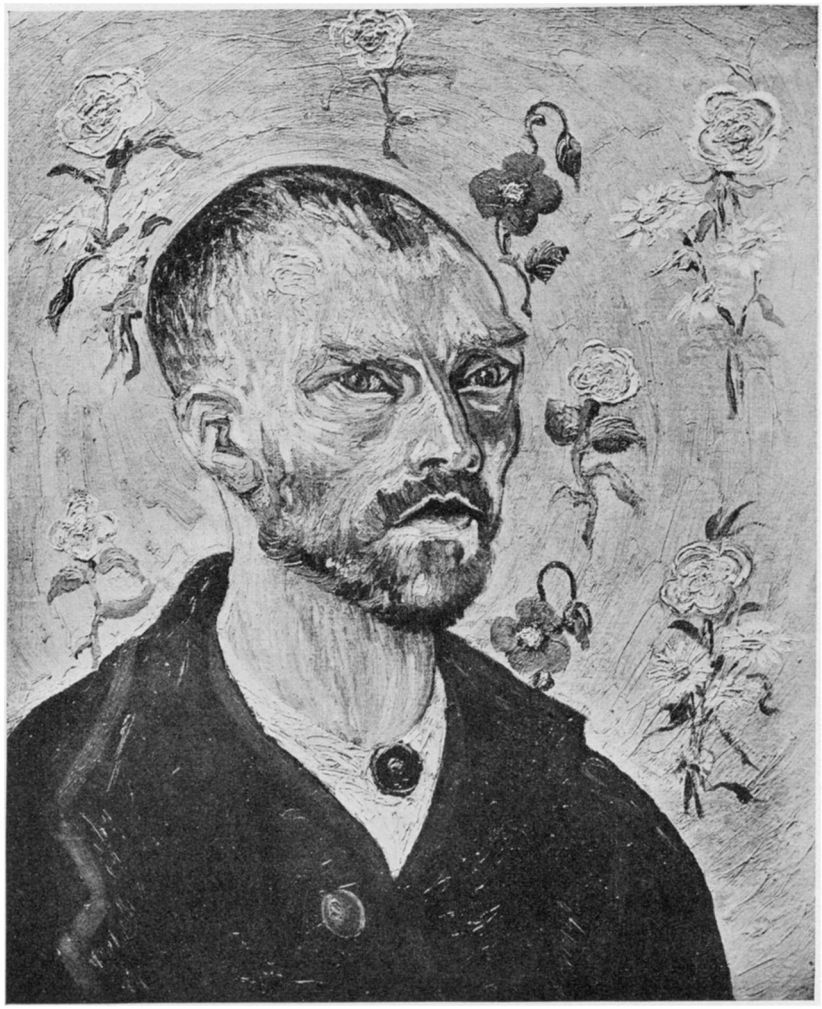
GENIUS AND MADNESS

By HANS PRINZHORN



SELF PORTRAIT BY VAN GOGH

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Some months ago, when I was visiting southern France as guest on the estate of an English friend, it occurred to me that not far from the place where I was staying was an insane asylum of sorrowful memories. The asylum to which I refer is that of Saint Paul, in the environs of the little town of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, where that most distinguished forerunner of modern art, Vincent Van Gogh, passed almost all of the last year of his life, 1889-1890. The preceding winter, the physician in charge of the asylum, Dr. Edgar Leroy, with the aid of his colleague, V. Doiteau, had collected the medical and artistic documents of the period of Van Gogh's residence there, and published them with discreet commentary in a serious, splendid book, "La Folie de Vincent Van Gogh," with a dedication "à la memoire du Docteur P. F. Gachet—1828-1909," Paris, 1928. Since I had always felt the keenest interest in Vincent Van Gogh, both as a strong artistic personality and as an unusually ambiguous suffering man, I set out one day to visit the place where he had lived and worked as he approached the end of his tortured life.

Saint-Rémy is an old town with a few thousand inhabitants, and lies at the foot of the "Alpilles," a high, rocky ridge which runs westward towards the Rhone and has somewhat the effect of an Alpine range in miniature springing suddenly out of the plain. At the summit of the Alpilles lies Les Beaux, the ruined crag fortress, once a courtly place, and now the romantic excursion center for all travelers who visit Avignon. Along the road that runs from Saint-Rémy toward Les Beaux, opposite the old Mausoleum, one stumbles upon the mediaeval convent, half

concealed by chestnut trees, dating from the twelfth century. It was the section for men in which Vincent Van Gogh formerly was housed, but this is no longer in use. The nuns, who are now the proprietors of the institution, have only kept up the women's section. The spacious yard, almost a park, is full of motives which Vincent drew and painted. One discovers at once the chestnuts, the pines, and the well which served as motives for his pictures. A long corridor runs through the low, well proportioned building. One comes upon the fireplace, where Vincent found the old folks sitting who motivated some of his strongest pictures. One comes upon the two small rooms which were placed at his disposal. The view out one of the low windows is most astonishing, for there lies the wide field surrounded by an old stone wall, against which projects a rough profile line of some mountain crag. How often he painted this bit, especially in the brilliant light of summer when the golden wheat was being cut and the whole landscape seemed inflamed by the sun!

The two rooms which constituted the former residence of Vincent Van Gogh have been brought back to life again as a sort of Van Gogh museum. Dr. Leroy and others interested in the artist have succeeded in selecting good reproductions of all the works which Van Gogh created during the year he was in Saint Paul. For the most part, they are large photographs, but a few excellent prints in color, and of the original size, animate the whole. Only very few of the works show any signs of his illness. The history of his illness, however, makes it possible to see in some cases that certain works were done on days when he felt very badly; but, in general, the madman painted a series of pictures of a grandness unparalleled in contemporary art. The artist's portrait of himself in the Boston Museum is sufficient evidence of their merit. The history of this last year of the life of Vincent Van Gogh belongs to those very strange things which one cannot explain with ordinary logic. After a period of very strenuous work at Arles, when he was sitting one evening, as usual, with his friend Gauguin, smoking and drinking wine and chatting, he suddenly picked up his glass and threw it at his friend's head. Then he got up and left the room, went home, cut off one of his ears, and brought it, wrapped up festively in paper, to a brothel, where he expressly left it for a certain girl as a gift. For a short time he was kept in a hospital at Arles, and then later transferred to the asylum because he had still further vagaries that made it necessary to put him into an institution. But this violent patient had no ordinary case of insanity, for after a few weeks, he went to work again, and he wrote his brother letters full of the most considered thinking, in which he discussed his situation and his mental condition with a detachment and accuracy that is very remarkable. It is no wonder that psychiatrists have never entirely agreed as to what diagnosis they should give to the illness of this unusually productive man. There is still a division of opinion as to whether he was suffering from a highly developed case of schizophrenia (Dementia praecox), or whether it was a case of episodic confusion of types, perhaps based on epilepsy. More important than this technical problem is the general and very interesting puzzle as to how it was possible that at a time when the artist was certainly in a condition of psychosis, his creative powers were only occasionally hindered, and, in general, were rather increased.

The case of Vincent Van Gogh forces us to revise our traditional ideas about the old problem of genius and madness. Moreover there is another rich source from which we can get new information, and thereby approach a more just opinion; namely, the works spontaneously produced in insane asylums by many inmates who are not artists, and are often even without any training in drawing and painting. Since these unfortunates, as I showed in my book published some eight years ago, produce not only interesting absurdities, but a large number of works that can be compared with the works of normal artists, and can even be enjoyed, we are led to a conclusion analogous to that suggested by the above described case of Van Gogh. This conclusion is that it is one thing to look at these works and enjoy them from an esthetic standpoint, and a fundamentally different thing to look at them from the standpoint of a psychopathologist. The two ways of looking at such pictorial ma-

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CALENDAR OF CURRENT EXHIBITIONS IN NEW YORK

Ackerman Galleries, 50 East 57 St.—Exhibition of marine and English paintings, through January; Exhibition of etchings by John Taylor Arms, Warren Davis, Levon West and contemporary American etchers.

Thomas Agnew & Sons, 125 East 57 St.—Pictures by old masters. Drawings and engravings.

Ainslie Galleries, 677 Fifth Ave.—Landscapes and figure paintings by Glen C. Henshaw, through January.

American Art Association-Anderson Galleries, Inc., 30 East 57 St.—Landscapes, watercolors and etchings by John Dix, through January 25. Portraits by John de Costa, through January 25. Landscapes by Julius Franke, January 27 to February 8.

"An American Place," 509 Madison Ave.—Exhibition of fifty new watercolors by John Marin, through January. Paintings by O'Keefe through February.

Arden Gallery, 460 Park Ave.—Loan exhibition of portraits for the benefit of The Boys Club of New York, under the asupices of Mr. E. Rohland Harriman, January 15 to February 15.

Art Center, 65 East 56 St.—Exhibition of Paintings by the New Society of Artists, January 6 to 26. Beginning February 1: Paintings by Rutledge Bates, wood-blocks by Antoinette I. Scudder, City Gardens Exhibition.

Babcock Galleries, 5 East 57 St.—Watercolors by Dodge McKnight, through January. Paintings by Charles Hawthorne, through February 15.

Balzac Galleries, 102 East 57 St.—Sculpture and drawings by Rodin, through January.

Barbizon Branch Gallery of the Art Center, 140 East 63 St.—Batiks, and paintings by contemporary Indian artists, to January 26. Paintings by members of the Cyason Artists of the Bronx, February 1-28.

Belmont Galleries, 576 Madison Ave.—Permanent exhibition of old masters.

Boehler & Steinmeyer, Inc., Ritz Carlton Hotel, Suite 729—Paintings by old masters.

Paul Bottenweiser, Ambassador Hotel, Suite 504-6—Paintings by old masters.

Bourgeois Galleries, 536 Madison Ave.—Permanent exhibition of old and modern masters.

Brooklyn Museum, Eastern Parkway and Washington Ave., Brooklyn—Exhibition by Brooklyn Society of Etchers, through January 31. Exhibition of Belgian painting and graphic arts, beginning January 23. Exhibition of watercolor drawings by American Indians of the southwest.

Brummer Gallery, 27 East 57 St.—Exhibition of paintings by Othon Friesz, through January. Paintings by Max Jacob, February 1-28.

Chambrun Galleries, 556 Madison Ave.—Paintings by Helene Perdriat, through January.

Daniel Gallery, 600 Madison Ave.—Paintings by Peter Blume, January 20-February 8. Paintings by Kuniyoshi, February 8-28.

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LOIS

By EUGENE SPEICHER

Recently acquired by the Brooklyn Museum from the Rehn Galleries

Genius and Madness

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terial and of considering the abnormal men who produced it, have nothing in common. There is no intersection point, but they are two parallels that never meet. Normality does not offer the artist the slightest guarantee that he will produce pictures of value. Abnormality, no matter what the sort, offers no sufficient reason why an artist may not create some valuable work. Whether he is successful or not depends rather on other factors, especially on the kind and strength of his talent, and still more on the place which this productive force of his occupies in his total personality. The serious investigation of this very complicated problem promises rich and alluring tasks for modern psychologists.