

DON QUIXOTE AMONG THE ARTISTS

By Pierson Underwood

“THIS is the story of a man who lived from the year 1853 to the year 1890. The events of his life, his actions and words are not imaginary but real. His name was Vincent Van Gogh, and he was what you call an artist, a description that may mean anything. In this case it means a drama, a queer eventful history, full of strange happenings. The action here related came to an end only a generation ago, although it seems as remote as the legend of Saint George and the Dragon.”

These are the opening words of Meier-Graefe's study of Vincent Van Gogh, a book of curious charm, as idiosyncratic as the unhappy peasant Quixote who stumbles, lonely and awkward, through its pages. It is not the usual "artistic brochure", in spite of its appearance (superbly printed, illustrated, bound, in the Medici Society manner). It is much more akin to the novel or romance, or even to ballads and old tales. More than any recent book which the writer can call to mind (except certain of Willa Cather's) it has the quality of Hamsum's "Growth of the Soil". There is the same heightening of intensity by which things as well as people attain a curious reality — houses, trees, potatoes, stars. (There is this quality in Van Gogh's own work.) And, in each case, there is the central, heroic figure laboring incredibly in the midst of an immense solitude. For Isak, Hamsum's hero, this was simply the solitude of the Norwegian forests. But for Van Gogh it was the enforced solitude (among crowds) of a temperament that antagonized other men

at the same time that it desperately desired them.

The book does not profess to criticize Van Gogh's paintings; nor to discuss modern art or other artists, except as they are signposts to point Van Gogh up one road or down another on his passionate, impossible quest. For everything he did was in pursuit of one object, the founding of a community which should somehow work for good in the darkness of modern civilization. He was by turns art dealer, divinity student, lay preacher, tramp. Each adventure ended in catastrophe and Van Gogh began anew. Only after all other attempts had crumbled to pieces in his hands did Van Gogh try art. Art was simply another means to the same ideal end. And art failed, as well, to do what Van Gogh hoped of it. Also it drove him mad and killed him in his thirty-seventh year.

Van Gogh had no great talent for art in the beginning; in fact he had less than the average man. What he possessed was an intense quality of feeling, and it is this that makes his pictures even of chairs and sacks of potatoes curiously exciting and moving to the spectator. The story of his building up, slowly and painfully—as if building a house with his own hands—the artistic consciousness which could make use of his emotion, this story is the theme of Meier-Graefe's book and the sufficient reason for its existence. Incidentally, it is told with a delightful prose rhythm (admirably recaptured by the translator) and the diction of old fairy tales, homely, poetic, vivid.

Vincent Van Gogh, A Biographical Study.
By Julius Meier-Graefe, translated by
John Holroyd Reece. With 102 illustrations
after the works of the artist. Two
volumes. The Medici Society.