Pursuing the elusive van Gogh

by Cliff Edwards in the January 20, 1999 issue

By Kathleen Powers Erickson, At Eternity's Gate: The Spiritual Vision of Vincent van Gogh. *(Eerdmans, 192 pp.)*

Who can resist trying to solve the mystery of Vincent van Gogh's life and work? We continue to be haunted by this Dutch Reform clergyman's son, who failed to qualify as a pastor, was rejected as a missionary, and turned to art as a second choice when he was 27. He died at 37, and so had barely ten years to move from his first lesson in painting to his final masterpieces. Why did his work not sell during his lifetime, though his paintings now command prices of $80 million or more? Why do crowds of thousands and hundreds of thousands come to see his work? We now have two new opportunities to better understand van Gogh: the current traveling exhibition of 70 van Gogh paintings, and a recent book on van Gogh's "spiritual vision."

While their home museum undergoes expansion, 70 of van Gogh's paintings from the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam were exhibited at the National Gallery from October 4 to January 3. They have now traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum where they will hang until April. Then they return to Amsterdam, likely to travel no more.

During the exhibit's tenure in Washington, D.C., crowds gathered before dawn at the Constitution and Sixth Street entrance to the National Gallery. Some brought lawn chairs, some sat on the sidewalk, some huddled together in conversation. Most hoped to get a few of the free tickets available each day for visitors to the ten rooms of van Gogh paintings. A few simply collected tickets to sell to the highest bidder. On one of my visits I listened in on the conversation between a mother and her daughter, an art history major who stood ahead of me:

Mother: "So, honey, why did he cut off his ear?"

Daughter: "He had problems, mom."

Mother, sympathetically: "Don't we all, honey."

That may be a clue to part of the mystery. The drama of van Gogh's life continues to fascinate us. He is what Henri Nouwen called a "wounded healer." Nouwen once confessed to me, "It seems like all my life Vincent van Gogh has been my own spiritual guide. It's as though he went through it all, the failures, suffering and joys. You know he understands, and puts all that into a painting just for you." My own stroll through the Washington exhibit allowed me to join other devotees of van Gogh's work.

After a five-hour wait, the first 300 in line get inside to pick up tickets and see the exhibit with those who reserved their tickets months ago. It is as though those 70 paintings from Amsterdam were traveling evangelists come to feed the hungry and comfort the anxious. People move through the ten rooms set aside for the exhibit. First come the earth-colored paintings from van Gogh's Dutch period. People stare at his earliest efforts, studies of peasants, a basket of potatoes, a still life with bottles and jars, a thatched hut, the parsonage where Van Gogh lived with his family in the Dutch town of Nuenen. But it is the *Potato Eaters* that gathers a crowd unwilling to move on. The painting gives one the sense of being in the intimate, lamp-lit space at table with a weary peasant family. There is the strange sense that this meal of steamed potatoes, eaten in quietness and gratitude and shared with the viewer, is sacred. The steam creates a halo and sheds light on the people's faces and hands, themselves the color of potatoes. The painting suggests that one ought to seek significance among simple people, in the simplest moments of their days.

Soon one is in the rooms of Paris paintings. Van Gogh spent February 1886 to February 1888 in Paris, sharing a Montemartre apartment with his brother, Theo, manager of an art gallery. Here he learned to use brilliant colors, copying the impressionists around him and studying the hues of flowers. A crowd gathers, nevertheless, around one more earth-colored canvas, *A Pair of Shoes*. This is the painting that inspired Martin Heidegger to write *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Van Gogh seems to have turned two worn shoes into an icon. Perhaps he is inviting viewers to dare walking in another's shoes for a day.

Many people at the exhibition seem to be discovering a new favorite, a golden canvas of quinces, lemons and grapes. The light spills over to the frame. Van Gogh seems to invite us to see these pieces of fruit as centers of meaning, illuminated from within. Other viewers linger before a small painting of a flowerpot filled with chives. It has the power to stop people in their tracks. Van Gogh's copy of a Japanese woodcut reminds us that Japanese art and Buddhist aesthetics caught the

artist's attention.

One goes on to van Gogh's paintings from the town of Arles in Provence, the sunny south of France. A single sprig of blossoming almond in a glass of water, portraits of children, the yellow house where van Gogh lived, his bedroom--all become centers of attention for the crowds of viewers. Van Gogh presents his own daily life as a spiritual journey he wishes us to share. Then a room of paintings done during the artist's stay at the asylum in St. Remy, just miles north of Arles. He had begun to have attacks that many doctors now believe were epilepsy, and he voluntarily entered the asylum for possible treatment. Paintings of a wheatfield under the sun, an emperor moth, butterflies with poppies celebrate the simplest corners of nature as revelatory spaces. No wonder some have seen van Gogh as a 19th-century St. Francis.

Van Gogh left the asylum to return north and be closer to his brother, his brother's wife and the child they named "Vincent." He spent 70 days in a village outside Paris, Auvers-sur-Oise, and during those 70 days he painted 70 masterpieces: gardens, wheat, a golden evening sky. On a wall by itself, as one leaves, is the painting that has most fascinated people for many years: *Wheatfield with Crows under a Stormy Sky*. Paths move to the right, left and directly into the wind-tossed wheat. This may be the field where van Gogh, sensing new attacks coming on, shot himself rather than take more of the money Theo ought now to be spending on his new family. The ripe wheat in the painting reminds one of a letter van Gogh wrote to Theo: "I feel so strongly that it is the same with people as it is with wheat, if you are not sown in the earth to germinate there, what does it matter?--in the end you are ground between the millstones to become bread. The difference between happiness and unhappiness! Both are necessary and useful, as well as death or disappearance" (Letter 607).

Outside the exhibit, some compare notes on favorite paintings, some are perplexed that the exhibit contains no sunflower painting, no portrait of Dr. Gachet, no postman, no *Starry Night*. I overhear two artists who have studied every brushstroke of the canvases. One says, "I don't understand him any better, but I did get a lesson to take home. Even if some of our paintings are as bad as a few of those, keep painting. We may get some masterpieces yet."

Kathleen Powers Erickson's book is a second key to understanding van Gogh. The author, currently a freelance writer and photographer, did her van Gogh study as a

dissertation at the University of Chicago. It is a "dueling dissertation," which responds to the dissertation done in Amsterdam by Japanese scholar Tsukasa Kodera, who later published *Vincent van Gogh: Christianity Versus Nature*. Erickson seeks to refute Kodera's thesis that van Gogh finally deserted Christianity for the worship of nature. Her correction of Kodera's work is convincing. Facets of van Gogh's Christianity certainly did remain with him in one transformation or another all his brief life. Erickson emphasizes the influence of a Dutch school of liberal theology (Groningen), the Bible, and the devotional reading of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* on van Gogh's religious perspective.

Unfortunately, despite its contributions, Erickson's book uses too narrow and flawed a net in seeking to capture the elusive van Gogh. She claims to write the "first systematic account of the history of diagnoses of van Gogh's illness," and to give "a definitive diagnosis." To use the word "definitive" is reckless a century after van Gogh's death, and it is possible to claim that this is the "first systematic account" only if one omits the 300-page book by Wilfred Niels Arnold published in 1992, *Vincent van Gogh: Chemicals, Crises, and Creativity*. Erickson also ignores Judy Sund's powerful volume, *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature* (1992) in her discussion of van Gogh's debt to naturalist literature.

These omissions lead me to conclude that Erickson's almost ten-year-old dissertation has not been updated to take account of the key works that have added to our knowledge of van Gogh in the intervening years. Further, Erickson's failure to take seriously van Gogh's debt to Japanese art or his exploration of the possibility of being both a Christian and a "simple monk worshiping the eternal Buddha" (Letter 544a) further hampers her view. Van Gogh had more knowledge of Eastern art and religion than Erickson admits.

I also lost confidence in Erickson when she spoke of van Gogh's painting of "Gauguin's chair with his pipe resting on it," a strange confusion of van Gogh's painting of his own simple chair with pipe and his painting of Gauguin's more ornate chair with candle and books. A further problem is her description of a key painting, *Starry Night*. She states, "The church is the only building in the landscape that does not reflect the brilliance of the stars above. . . . It is completely dark." But anyone who has seen even the poorest print of the painting knows that the church's tower, roof and walls all reflect the beautiful blue and white lights of the heavens. It is also amazing that Erickson's editors have her translate even a four-word Latin expression into English, but leave a score of sentences that bolster her major points in Dutch

without translation.

In spite of these problems, I would enjoy debating with Erickson her view that van Gogh, while in the asylum just the year before his death, returned to his religious roots, and that this is reflected in his subsequent three (and only) paintings of traditional religious subjects: the *Pietà*, *The Raising of Lazarus* and *The Good Samaritan*. She has convinced me that we should look at those three paintings more carefully, but I would like to attempt to convince her that van Gogh was more of a Calvinist that she thinks, whether Calvin spoke through van Gogh's sometimes anti-Calvinist "Groningen School of liberal theology" or not. In my view, van Gogh is in fascinating agreement with Calvin's theology of art, a theology that freed religious art of its reliance on traditional biblical subjects.

Calvin's request that artists "paint only those things which the eyes are capable of seeing" and avoid attempts at painting "God's majesty" (*Institutes*, Book I, Chapter 11) resonates with artists like van Gogh, who sought to locate the sacred in the ordinary things of the world. The Bible and religious art were not simply to be supplemented by this new art. The new artist was to be a prophet painting a new Bible for a new age. Only when copying earlier artists whom he admired did van Gogh paint traditional religious scenes, and even then in only three of his dozens of copies of the works of others.

"There is not one little blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make men rejoice," said Calvin in a sermon. These words present a view of art that explains one more bit of the van Gogh mystery. It is not in his three isolated copies of religious works by Rembrandt and Delacroix that van Gogh's genius is to be found. It resides in his rejoicing in a blade of grass, in his painting of Augustine Roulin, a postman's wife, as a "saint" worthy of being placed on an altar. Rejecting his friend Émile Bernard's paintings of the *Annunciation*, *Christ in the Garden of Olives* and the *Adoration of the Magi*, van Gogh gives his description of a truly religious art: "I bow down before that study, powerful enough to make a Millet tremble--of peasants carrying home to the farm a calf which has been born in the fields" (Letter to Bernard, B 21). The depth of his religious vision is to be found in nativities that happen among ordinary folk today, and the closer to earth, the better.