

# Vincent and Denzel

by [Martin E. Marty](#)

January 16, 2002

At the beginning of this day, near the beginning of this year, let me suggest that you follow a new morning routine. Don't rely on coffee alone to get you started. Let me explain by taking you on a little tour not of the Art Institute of Chicago but of two colorful pages about its blockbuster exhibit "Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South." Those pages in the December 20 *Chicago Sun-Times* featured four guards and three paintings from the exhibit, which ended January 13.

Sara Fiedelholz interviewed and Jean Lachat photographed four people who got to see the paintings up close for long periods. They are museum guards. Isadore Turner, in his 14th year of guarding, chose Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* as his favorite work in the exhibition. "I always see something different. I like to imagine how the artist felt when painting," says Sunday painter Turner.

Tom Harney, another veteran, chose van Gogh's *The Raising of Lazarus*. "[It] looks like it was painted when van Gogh was having a good day . . . like he will be rising again," Harney commented. Jonni Barnes-Sanford, security person for 12 years, chose *Sunflowers*, which reminds her, a captive of four walls without windows, "of a ray of sunshine . . . a room full of sunshine."

Karen Lacklan, newer to her post, also chose *The Starry Night*. "I always see something different. I'm drawn to the [pictured] church and think about what the people would be like who attend the church and live in the houses," she says. "It is mystical. . . . It is my Denzel, because I love Denzel Washington. He is my favorite actor and this is my favorite painting. . . . I come to see the painting before I start my shift. It is the way I start my day. It is my cup of coffee."

Thanks, Ms. Lacklan, for saying it so well. I think of all the ways I start the day, often less appropriately than do the guards who "imagine," find "sunshine" or experience the "mystical" through those paintings. True, I start by "rising again," which is what, in his Small Catechism, Martin Luther taught six-year-old Martin Marty and lots of other small Lutherans to do. It's a daily turning-back-to-baptism: "In the morning,

when you get up, make the sign of the holy cross and say [the following prayers]. Then go joyfully to your work . . .”

Cured of guilt for yesterday and a bit less worried about today, I do go forth. It’s all downhill from there. Unlike Ms. Lacklan I have a cup of coffee and then read three or four newspapers—whose copy rarely stimulates imagination, leads to “rising again,” brings sunshine or inspires, as do Denzel or Vincent.

It would be a richer world if more of us followed the guards’ example. Certainly it would be a better day for me if I would let a great work of art penetrate my consciousness early in the morning. At the turn of our entrance stairs I daily change the page in the large art books which rest on a stand so that Harriet and I can be briefly inspired when we pass by. But we do not let such pages be our Denzel. I think of all the days on which any form of art (or prayer) had its only chance later, squeezed in between intervals in the day’s business, or had no chance at all. For most of us that sunless reality is the natural mode of existence, unless we choose to devote the day, or the year, to our Vincent or Denzel—along with the coffee.