Van Gogh's Portrait of Dr Gachet

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In the Spring of 1890, Dutch art dealer Theo van Gogh had a problem: His unstable, artistic older brother Vincent was about to be released from an asylum at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Vincent had no place to live and still required medical attention. On the recommendation of painter Camille Pissarro, who admired Vincent's talent and served as something of a father figure for the younger artist, Theo van Gogh contacted Dr Paul Gachet, a physician and amateur painter who was known for being sensitive to the concerns of artists and had successfully treated Pissarro for an ailment.

In May 1890, Vincent van Gogh went to live in the Auberge Ravoux, an inexpensive lodging house owned by innkeeper Arthur Gustave Ravoux and situated near Dr Gachet's home in Auvers-sur-Oise, northwest of Paris. He was under Gachet's care until he shot himself in the chest on July 27, 1890, in a field outside Auvers and died 30 hours later in his sparsely furnished room at the Auberge.

Vincent van Gogh was initially unimpressed with Gachet. He wrote to his brother Theo, "First of all, he is sicker than I am, I think, or shall we say just as much, so that's that. Now when one blind man leads another blind man, don't they both fall into the ditch?"

However, Vincent van Gogh's views quickly softened, and he soon wrote to his sister Wilhelmina, "I have found a true friend in Dr Gachet, something like another brother, so much do we resemble each other physically and also mentally." Despite this affection, van Gogh failed to listen to Gachet's sensible advice about quitting smoking and cutting down on drinking. Many writers have speculated that heavy consumption of the psychoactive drink, absinthe, influenced van Gogh's volatile mood in his final days and contributed to his suicide.

Paul-Ferdinand Gachet (July 30, 1828-January 9, 1909) was born into a bourgeois manufacturing family in Lille, France. The family moved to Mechelen in Flanders in 1845. Despite an early interest in art, Gachet studied medicine at the University of Paris, where he developed an interest in neurology and psychiatry — overlapping fields in the mid-19th century. Gachet graduated from Paris in 1858, with a thesis on depression ("Étude sur la Mélancolie") and subsequently worked at several mental hospitals, including Bicêtre and Salpêtrière. He developed a private practice in suburban Paris and worked also as a forensic physician. At age 40 (in 1868) he married Blanche Elisabeth Castets, who bore two children, Marguerite and Paul, before she died in 1875 at the age of 32.

Over the years, Gachet befriended and treated many writers and Impressionist artists, and he also amassed a large collection of their works. He supported painter Auguste Renoir through a bout of pneumonia in 1882, and advised Édouard Manet on his gangrenous leg in the days just before Manet's death in 1883 (Manet did not follow Gachet's advice). A scene including Gachet's house in Auvers was painted by Paul Cézanne; and Gachet's portrait was executed by several painters, including Ambroise Detrez (1852), Charles Leandre (1887), Norbert Goenuette (1891 — Goenuette was van Gogh's neighbor at the Auberge Ravoux) and Émile Bernard (1926 — a posthumous tribute).

Gachet apparently had somewhat of a reckless streak: He permanently damaged his ankle jumping off a bridge into a moat at age 12; and as a teenager, he rushed into a burning building to rescue some trapped horses just moments before the building collapsed in flames. At age 26, during a cholera outbreak, he treated victims of the infection that other physicians avoided, and served in the battlefield as a medic during the 1870 Franco-Prussian war. He was an early champion of the powdered-milk supplement developed by chemist Henri (Heinrich) Nestlé (1814-1890), and prescribed it to some of his pediatric patients. He also had interests in homeopathy and palm reading.
In a letter to fellow painter Paul Gaugin, van Gogh described Gachet’s face as “sensitive” and frequently displaying “the heartbroken expression of our time.” In a July 1890 letter to his sister, van Gogh wrote, “I’ve done the portrait of M. Gachet with a melancholy expression, which might well seem like a grimace to those who see it … sad but gentle, yet clear and intelligent, that is how many portraits ought to be done.” He modeled this painting on an 1839 work by Eugène Delacroix, Tasso in The Madhouse. Van Gogh also painted Gachet’s then 19-year-old daughter Marguerite, with whom he was rumored to have fallen in love during his weeks in Auvers.

Gachet signed his own paintings and sketches “Paul van Rijssel” after the Dutch name for the town of Lille (Rijssel). Gachet’s most famous work was a sketch of van Gogh on his deathbed. Dr Gachet died in 1909, and was buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

Two versions of van Gogh’s Portrait of Dr Gachet exist, as does a sketch. One painting is in private hands; it was bought for $82.5 million USD in 1990 by a Japanese businessman, who created a furor when he said he wanted to be cremated with the portrait. The other painting, considered inferior by many critics, is in the Musée d’Orsay, Paris. The first version of Van Gogh’s painting of Dr Gachet was depicted philatelically by Grenada in 2015 (Scott 4042e).