

Excerpt from: *Vincent van Gogh 400 dagen in Amsterdam* (*Vincent van Gogh 400 Days in Amsterdam*) by Nienke Denekamp

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Quotations from: *The Letters* by Vincent van Gogh (translation by Lynne Richards, John Rudge, Diane Webb)

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## Foreword

Not long before he painted his famous *Sunflowers*, Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) had looked out over the Mediterranean for the first time in his life, which was nothing like the sea he knew from the Netherlands. The Mediterranean was the colour of mackerel, Vincent wrote to his brother Theo, by which he meant ‘you don’t always know if it’s green or purple – you don’t always know if it’s blue – because a second later, its changing reflection has taken on a pink or grey hue.’ Sitting on the beach where he was working, he often ‘quite unintentionally, and despite [him]self’ thought of ‘our uncle the seaman’, who had seen the shores of the Mediterranean many times. When Vincent was 24, he had taken a preparatory course to study Theology and had lived with his Uncle Jan, a naval officer at the Amsterdam Navy Complex on the city island of Kattenburg. Vincent had thought he would become a clergyman instead of an artist.

‘It’s a beautiful city, this,’ Vincent wrote in one of the many letters he sent from Amsterdam to his brother Theo. ‘How I’d like to show you all kinds of things here.’ Vincent’s letters form the basis of *Vincent van Gogh 400 Days in Amsterdam*. We see the city through young Vincent’s eyes, who saw it as a series of artworks painted in words rather than paint. Also, thanks to it being the early days of photography, the book gives an impression of Amsterdam in the years 1873 – 1885, an interesting period. At the beginning of this period, which followed the French era, Amsterdam struggled to recover from nearly a century of stagnation and impoverishment, but, at the end of it, in 1885, the city was on the eve of what is sometimes called the Second Golden Century. In that year, construction of Central Station was nearly complete, the Concert Hall was erected, new residential areas were being built, artists and writers united in the Tachtigers (Movement of the Eighties), and the new Rijksmuseum opened its doors. The latter was the reason why Vincent – who had recently

completed *The Potato Eaters* and was about to leave the Netherlands for good – returned to Amsterdam in 1885, to see the Old Masters. He studied the techniques used by Rembrandt and the colours favoured by Frans Hals, and immediately applied what he saw to his own work. The colours of their paintings took him via the Borinage area in Belgium, Brussels and Antwerp to Paris and the South of France, where he would create his most famous paintings. And where he thought, from time to time, of his Uncle Jan in Amsterdam.

[Illustration p. 5:] Oudeschans as seen from the Montelban Tower towards the Recht Boomsslout. Photograph by Jacob Olie, February 1863

26 January 1873

A Weekend in Amsterdam

453 Keizersgracht

[Illustration p. 6:] < Residence, bookshop and adjoining art dealership of Uncle Cor on 453 Keizersgracht. Print by Johan Greive Jr, December 1882

‘Last Sunday I was at Uncle Cor’s and had a very pleasant day there and, as you can well imagine, saw many beautiful things,’ Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo at the end of January, 1873. Not long before, Vincent had spent the weekend with his Uncle Cornelis Marinus, the brother of his father and owner of the bookshop and adjoining art dealership C.M. van Gogh. Uncle Cor had just returned from Paris, and had ‘brought home splendid paintings and drawings’, Vincent wrote to his brother Theo. While it might not have been the first visit to Amsterdam by the young man from Brabant, it is certainly the first one he mentions in those of his letters that survive. Vincent was 19 years old, and had been working as the youngest member of staff of the art dealership Goupil & Cie in The Hague for three and a half years, a job he owed to his Uncle Vincent. The latter was yet another brother of his father, one who had started out with a small shop selling art supplies, and had become a very successful art dealer. His success earned him the name Uncle Cent in the family. Having remained childless, Uncle Cent divided his time between his homes in Paris, the French Riviera, and the smart village of Princenhage, near Breda. All his nephews and nieces were introduced to the art of painting at the gallery he had built next to his villa there. The Van Gogh family was large – Vincent’s father had eleven siblings, his mother had eight (see family tree on p. 77) – and family matters were discussed at length, in long letters, for instance. It is not surprising, therefore, that Vincent began a correspondence with his brother Theo, four years his junior, when Theo started work at the Goupil branch in Brussels on 1 January 1873. Following in the footsteps of his uncle and namesake, Vincent was well on his way to building a career in the international art world, and his earliest surviving letters are full of tips for his younger brother, including lists of painters Vincent recommended. ‘You must in any case go to the museum often, it’s good to be acquainted with the old painters, too,’ he wrote.

Since Vincent had started work with Goupil & Cie, he had been collecting photographs and reproduction prints of artworks that were sold at Goupil’s. The most

interesting ones were sent to Brussels by post. Vincent also recommended several of his favourite books to Theo, including those by Théophile Thoré-Bürger,

[Illustration p. 8:] The art dealership Goupil & Cie where Vincent worked

[Illustration p. 9:] Vincent (left) in 1873 and Theo in 1876, when they were both 19 years old

a well-respected Paris-based journalist and art connoisseur who wrote very accessible books about the museums in Amsterdam and The Hague. Thoré-Bürger not only discussed Dutch masterpieces, he also wrote about subjects like the development of facial hair in paintings by Rembrandt. He raised awareness of the full beards in Rembrandt's early career (*The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632), the well-groomed ones from about ten years later (*The Night Watch*, 1642) and the near lack of beards in his later paintings (*The Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Drapers' Guild known as 'The Syndics'*, 1661). The Frenchman also pointed out that France had always set the European fashion in painting beards and wigs. 'When there's an opportunity I'll send you a book by Bürger about the museums of The Hague and Amsterdam,' Vincent wrote to his younger brother. 'Everything he says is true.'

27 January 1873

The Trippenhuis

29 Kloveniersburgwal

[Illustration p. 11:] < Attendant of the Trippenhuis. Photograph: ca. 1880-1885

[Illustration p. 11:] Kloveniersburgwal with the Trippenhuis building, ca. 1860. From *Souvenir d'Amsterdam*, an album of stereoscopic photographs by Pieter Oosterhuis

On Monday morning, 27 January 1873, after a pleasant day with Uncle Cor and before boarding a train for fashionable The Hague, Vincent visited several museums in the capital, including the Rijksmuseum (National Gallery). This museum was housed at the Trippenhuis, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century city palace with a temple-like, classicist façade on Kloveniersburgwal. Designed by Justus Vingboons and originally built as a residence for the brothers Louis and Hendrick Trip, it was also home to The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). The Rijksmuseum part of the building was soon too small for the museum's large collection of world-famous Dutch masters, and parts of the collection needed to be exhibited elsewhere.

French journalist Thoré-Bürger was very disappointed by the amateurish display of Dutch artworks at the Trippenhuis, although he understood it was difficult to find an appropriate location for a respectable picture gallery in Amsterdam, an artificial island built on timber piles. 'That is why,' he explained, the Dutch masters were housed in a *maison ordinaire*, a house among other houses. To his dismay and unlike at any self-respecting European museum in those days, the works were lit by light from the side instead of from above. Conditions at the Trippenhuis were deplorable. It was so dark that a number of paintings, including *The Night Watch*, were mounted on hinged panels, so that visitors could turn the works towards the little light that entered through the windows. The canvases, which had, in some cases, become detached from their frames, had a permanent film of moisture from the atmosphere, or soot from the heater.

A dark stairwell, hung with nearly invisible paintings, led to the first floor and a low-ceilinged room where several paintings including *The Night Watch* were on display. According to Bürger, this was the most fantastic painting in the world, yet the Rijksmuseum had catalogued it with the shortest of descriptions: 'No. 228: The Amsterdam Militia

Company known as *The Night Watch*.’ ‘The lower edge of the painting is only several inches above the wooden floor, and the feet of the most important figures reach all the way down, making it look like they could just step into the room, straight at the visitor.’ This, Thoré-Bürger had to admit, was a beautiful and surprising effect.

Little had changed when Vincent viewed *The Night Watch*, fifteen years after Thoré-Bürger’s *Musées de la Hollande. Amsterdam et La Haye* was published. ‘The Trippenhuis is too small, and many paintings hang in such a way that one can’t see them properly,’ Vincent agreed. After his visit, he wrote to Theo: ‘Did you know that a large, new building will take the place of the Trippenhuis in Amsterdam?’

In 1862, a ‘Committee in preparation of the Foundation of an Art Museum in Amsterdam’ was established, but it disbanded itself a few years later, realising that, without government support, a national gallery in Amsterdam was impossible.

[Illustration p. 13:] Interior of the Trippenhuis with *Banquet at the Crossbowmen’s Guild in Celebration of the Treaty of Münster* (1648) by Bartholomeus van der Helst, photographed ca. 1880-1885

Amsterdam had suffered badly during the French era (1795-1813). After 1850, the city slowly recovered, but the contrast with other 19<sup>th</sup>-century European capitals was still great. London, with three million inhabitants the largest city in the world, had had a national gallery housed at a purpose-built museum since 1838. City architect Baron George-Eugène Haussmann’s plans had provided Paris with an entirely new and modern network of roads and streets, and Brussels soon had the same. All with government support. Amsterdam was the capital of the Netherlands, but The Hague was still the seat of power.

[Illustration p. 14:] *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt at the Trippenhuis

[Illustration p. 14:] < The Trippenhuis or ‘Treppenhuis’, as Swedish painter August Jernberg named his oil painting, 1885

[Illustration p. 15:] > Eminent art critic Thoré-Bürger (ca. 1870) by French caricaturist Benjamin Roubaud

This situation was to last quite a while, in spite of the fact that the Dutch press roundly criticised the disgraceful state of affairs and the government's *laisser-faire* attitude. When would it build a respectable new national gallery? Meanwhile, those in favour were appalled to see Dutch art, antiquities and relics sold to foreign museums for large sums of money or sometimes even just a symbolic guilder. The fact that the Trippenhuys was sandwiched between a wood and peat warehouse on the one side, and a petroleum depot on the other, suited them well: its world-famous art collection could go up in flames at any time. If that happened, the fireguards and carving knives provided by the museum, to be used to cut canvases from their frames in case of an emergency, would be of little use. The petroleum issue was discussed at length by the Senate in The Hague. How dangerous would a burning petroleum depot 50 metres from the paintings be? Why were the artworks at the Trippenhuys not insured? And was housing the national collection a matter for the government or for the city of Amsterdam?

Only in 1876, after twelve years of deliberation, architect Pierre Cuypers was appointed and construction of the Rijksmuseum began.

2 March 1873

An Exhibition at Arti et Amicitiae

112 Rokin

[Illustration p. 16:] Arti et Amicitiae, ca. 1867-1882

Within a month, Vincent van Gogh had returned from Paris and was back in Amsterdam. On 2 March 1873, he visited an exhibition at artists' association Arti et Amicitiae on Rokin, featuring a large selection of work by modern Dutch artists connected to Arti or the Pulchri association in The Hague. After this exhibition, the works – including loans from Goupil in The Hague, where Vincent worked, and Uncle Cor in Amsterdam – would be sent to the World Fair in Vienna. The Arti exhibition was so popular that it was visited by 11,000 people, not including members and their spouses. On the last Sunday, when the ticket price was reduced from 50 to 10 cents, it attracted as much as 2100 visitors. 'Despite the rain, people kept queuing most patiently,' the *Nieuws van den Dag* reported. This might also have been a tip for the Trippenhuys, which not only closed its doors at 4 pm on weekdays, but was also closed on Saturdays for cleaning and on Sundays for religious reasons.

Vincent, too, went to see the Arti exhibition that last Sunday. To his brother Theo he wrote: 'I'm curious as to the impression the Dutch will make in Vienna.' If we are to believe the newspapers from that time, the Dutch generally cut quite a sorry figure. The Dutch agricultural exhibition, for instance, amounted to very little. A large number of cheeses had been sent to put on display, but shortly after the opening, when the temperature rose, most of them were 'in such a state that it was deemed desirable to remove part of them from the building'.

[Illustration p. 18:] The Arti exhibition that interested Vincent van Gogh at the 1873 Vienna World Fair. Photograph by the Wiener Photographen Association

At the impressive machine gallery – with 41,140 square metres of iron giants from all over the world whose turning wheels and chugging pumps produced an ear-splitting noise – it became clear how much more industrialised some other countries were. As far as machines were concerned, the Netherlands was so poorly represented that, due to either thrift or



embarrassment, even the flag was absent. The *Handelsblad* reporter left the hall hanging his head in shame. He was relieved, though, to see the Dutch entry of paintings and drawings, displayed at the *Kunsthalle*. At the same time, he heavily criticised the exhibit of recently unified Germany, including a large number of uninspired portraits of the German emperor and empress in various poses and war settings. Strangely, the German portraits were covered in a greyish film ‘as if they had been dipped in milk’. They contrasted quite strongly with the ‘bright and powerful colouring’ of the Dutch art.

[Illustration p. 20:] Amsterdam, 1873, an artificial island built on timber piles where, according to French art critic Thoré-Bürger, it would be difficult to find an appropriate location for a respectable picture gallery

The exhibitions at *Arti et Amicitiae* and the World Fair consisted of 167 works by 70 Dutch artists, worth around 400,000 guilders. Despite the fact that a number of painters, including August Allebé and Matthijs Maris, refused to take part in the exhibitions, this collection definitely represented the best of Dutch art. The reporter praised the painters’ faithful rendition of nature, their refined sense of colour harmony and their impressive range of subjects. The ‘palm of victory’, however, was clearly for Jozef Israëls’ paintings.

Vincent van Gogh also thought the exhibition at *Arti* ‘very interesting’. He saw work there by artists including his cousin by marriage Anton Mauve, David Bles, Jan Hendrik Weissenbruch and Johannes Bosboom. One painting he must have made his way through the crowds for is *Going to Church for the Last Time*, by The Hague landscape painter Jacob Jan van der Maaten, featuring a funeral procession crossing a field of ripe corn on its way to church. It was a work Vincent knew well. His father had a reproduction of it on the wall in his room and mentioned it in his church services.

In the same letter to Theo Vincent wrote: ‘You’ll have heard that I’m going to London, and probably very soon.’ He had been transferred to the Goupil branch in London, very much against his wishes, ‘but we must take things as they come,’ he wrote to Theo, and: ‘I intend not to take things too hard’. On 14 March 1873, the *Nieuwsblad voor den boekhandel* (*Newsletter for the Book Trade*) published a vacancy for a new apprentice or junior clerk at Goupil & Cie.

[Illustration p. 21:] Temporary train track across the Oosterdok passage, south of the permanent rail bridge, as seen looking west. This is the first photograph of a series Pieter Oosterhuis took of the construction work for Central Station, between 1874 and its inauguration in 1889

18 March 1877

Staying with Uncle Cor

453 Keizersgracht

Four years later, in 1877, Vincent stayed with his Uncle Cor again. In a letter to Theo, he describes a walk along the Bloemenmarkt (Flower Market) on a beautiful evening when the weather was still. The plants and flowers there reminded him of the pine trees, ivy and hawthorn from their native village of Zundert. Earlier that day, Vincent and Uncle Cor had visited Uncle Stricker, the clergyman who was married to a sister of Vincent's mother. The three of them had 'a long talk about you-know-what'.

Vincent had become a family matter because, much to his parents' dismay, after working at the Goupil art dealership in The Hague, London and Paris for seven years, he had been fired. As his sister Elisabeth later wrote in her book *Personal Recollections of Vincent van Gogh*, the reason why a career as an art dealer wasn't for Vincent was his 'reserve if not awkwardness, his inability to accommodate, even'. When, on top of all this, Vincent explained to his bosses that an art dealership was actually little more than profit-seeking, a dignified type of theft, he was asked to leave.