An investigation of the vocabulary of line in Vincent van Gogh's Expression of Space

An awkward angularity and an idiocyncratic distortion of space are persistent characteristics of van Gogh's style. In spite of Vincent himself having once said that 'clumsiness and awkwardness' not only characterized his best work but were present because they were 'most certainly reasoned out and willed' (R37, III, p. 389)\(^1\), the measurable relationship between that angularity and van Gogh's deviations from the conventions of two-point perspective\(^2\) has been overlooked. To understand how the angularity of Vincent's style and his particular expression of space are related parts of a dynamic whole it is necessary to examine carefully the two authors he depended on to guide the first year of his artistic career.

During his childhood and youth van Gogh had liked to draw. Only a few of these early efforts survive\(^3\), but in view of the development of his eventual style they present us with a curious paradox. As we can see from the little farmyard scene (Fig. 1) done before Vincent was twelve and the two farmers (Fig. 2) done when he was sixteen, the young van Gogh had a remarkably discerning eye and a facile hand for both landscape and figure drawing. Why should an artist have lost—and never recovered—the particular facility he showed as a child and adolescent?

Vincent’s correspondence with his friend van Rappard reveals a second puzzling paradox. Some two years after turning to a career in art Vincent wrote van Rappard to explain what he felt distinguished his more successful drawings.

If I have the good fortune to find a model who is quiet and collected, then I draw it repeatedly, and then at last a study turns up which is different from an ordinary study—I mean more characteristic, more deeply felt. . . . You yourself said (of certain of my studies) that they are felt; all right, but it was not accidental; I drew them over and over again before, and that feeling was not in them. After that—after the iron-like ones

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1. The references in this article to van Gogh's correspondence are all, unless otherwise noted, from the three volume New York Graphic Society Edition, The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh, 1958. The underlining is as it appears in this edition. Because of the number of references to the correspondence, they are included in the text of this article, for the convenience of the reader; the number of the letter comes first and is followed by the volume number in Roman numerals and the page reference.

2. Examples of critical appraisal of the relationship of van Gogh's expression of space to that of classic perspective include the following: 'The power of expressive perception of space, which (van Gogh) possessed, was quite different from the application of the reasoned perspective doctrine of the Renaissance'. A. M. Hammacher, Van Gogh's Life in his Drawings; Van Gogh's Relationship with Signac, Introduction and Notes, (Exhibition Catalogue), London, May-June 1962, 30.

'. . . what can be said to remain of classical Italian perspective and trompe-l'oeil? Exactly nothing, apart from a semblance of depth—which however is purely imaginary. For what we have here is a new notion of space—that of modern painting—whose effect depends on a counterpoint of two-dimensional references.' C. Estienne, 'Etude critique' in C. Estienne et C. H. Sibert, Van Gogh, Geneva 1953, 37.

'The perspective of smaller objects, too, is caught in the dynamism of a representation of space that is no longer subject to the laws of linear perspective...' F. Novotny, 'Reflections', Art Bulletin, March 1953, 37.

—came these, and also that clumsiness and awkwardness. *How does it happen that I express something with that?*—Because the thing has shaped itself in my mind before I start on it . . . I say this to make you understand that, *when* there is something in it, this is not accidental but most certainly *reasoned out and willed* (R37, III, p. 389).

Almost a year later, in April 1884, Vincent wrote van Rappard free associating on the question of technique.

... I most decidedly expect that, as I gain in what I call expressive force, people will not say less frequently, but on the contrary *even more* frequently, that I have *no* technique. (R43, III, p. 397).

**Toward the end of the letter he recapitulates:**

What I am saying in this letter amounts to this. Let us try to master the mysteries of technique to such an extent that people are deceived by it and will swear by all that is holy that we have *no* technique. Let our work be so savant that it seems naive and does not stink of our sapience. (R43, III, p. 401).

To understand the angularity and distortion which characterize van Gogh’s adult work⁴ one must explain this double paradox of a childhood talent’s being denied and the mature artist’s not only taking pride in his clumsiness but citing it as being at the heart of his creativity.

A year after beginning his career in art Vincent wrote Théo that his work had changed; the announcement was abrupt, enthusiastic, and singularly specific.

Dear Theo, Though it is such a short time ago since I wrote you, I already have some news to tell you. That is to say, my drawing has changed, the technique as well as the results. (150, I, p. 239).

In addition to illustrating the letter with several pages of sketches (Fig. 3) Vincent briefly reviewed the first twelve months of his career. Only when we know exactly what his earliest training had entailed can we see why the harsh angularity of the roughest of these sketches—a winnower drawn with a flange of lines outside the frame enclosing the figure—is the touchstone to understanding what van Gogh could specifically have meant by pointing to the clumsiness of his technique as being at the heart of his expressive power.

During the autumn and early winter of 1880–81 Vincent wrote of the possibility of studying at the Academy of Art in Brussels, but in fact this was only an abortive foray into the usual paths of artistic training⁵. Actually Vincent was singularly independent in carrying out his artistic apprenticeship and followed two drawing courses, nineteenth-century versions of mail-order art lessons, one might call them. To learn to draw the figure van Gogh used the two volume course of graduated drawing exercises, *Le Cours de Dessin* by Charles Bargue⁶; to overcome ‘the difficulties of perspective’ (142, I, p. 218).

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4. Examples of critical appraisal of the angular quality of van Gogh’s style include the following: ‘(van Gogh’s) penchant for angularities, for grotesquerie, is basic to his artistic personality and it is one of the characteristics of his style which can be discovered in all periods of his work’. Chetham, *Role*, 67.

5. See Letters, 137-143.


The two volumes of this title were consulted in London in the Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum. In the United States they are not