

Van Gogh And Gauguin: Electric Arguments And Utopian Dreams

By Bradley Collins

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Although Vincent van Gogh's and Paul Gauguin's artistic collaboration in the South of France lasted no more than two months, their stormy relationship has continued to fascinate art historians, biographers and psychoanalysts as well as film makers and the general public. Two great 19th century figures with powerful and often clashing sensibilities, they shared a house, worked side by side, drank, caroused and argued passionately about art. Their brief venture together, richly documented in the artists' letters and paintings, would be compelling enough even if it had not culminated in the catastrophe of van Gogh's life - his ear cutting. This traumatic climax to van Gogh's and Gauguin's weeks spent in the "Yellow House" in Arles has raised profound questions about the nature of their relationship and about their behavior before and after van Gogh's self-mutilation. *Van Gogh and Gauguin* explores the artists' intertwined lives from a psychoanalytic perspective in order to draw a nuanced and sophisticated picture of the artists' dealings with each other. The book also examines crucial art historical issues such as the aesthetic convictions that both united and divided the two men, and the extent to which they influenced each other's art.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Bradley Collins's *Van Gogh and Gauguin* is a psychoanalyst's interpretation of the relationship between the two artists, especially during the months in 1888 they spent living in the same house in Arles, southern France. The intensity of their time together is indicated by the way it ended, with van Gogh cutting off his ear after a violent argument with Gauguin, presenting it to a prostitute, and returning home to sleep in his own blood. Gauguin fled to Paris, and they never met again, though they exchanged several letters before van Gogh's suicide 18 months later. Both men's descriptions of their experience are vague and self-serving, and what really happened in Arles has eluded researchers. Collins takes paintings by the artists and the known facts of their relationship and offers psychological insights into their temperaments and motivations. He begins with narratives of their careers to 1888, then describes what drew them together and van Gogh's desire to establish an idealized art community. Collins tells his story well, analyzing the artists' different expectations and frustrations and the effect they had on each other's art. His explanations are persuasive, and they help us understand two brilliant but willful and ultimately tragic characters. --*John Stevenson*

From Publishers Weekly

The oft-trod personal and artistic interactions of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin are given fresh dirt by journalist Collins, a Parsons School of Design professor, whose goal is to "introduce nuance and complexity into [the] polarized conception" of the artists as diametrical opposites taken by many previous writers. Debunking the notion of van Gogh as a primitive peasant, Collins points out that he read literature voraciously in three languages. Finding some truth in the myths of van Gogh and Gauguin as respectively "the innocent versus the rogue, the masochist versus the willful manipulator," the book's six brief chapters include examples of Vincent being unsympathetic (as in anti-Semitic letters) and Gauguin being noble, writing about his deranged friend, "I can't hold a grudge against an excellent heart that is ill, that is suffering, and that needs me." Admitting when we cannot know what was going on between the two men, such as when Vincent would approach the bed of the sleeping Gauguin, only to stand there silently until his friend awoke and shooed him away, Collins only briefly dips into psychoanalysis of van Gogh paintings like Gauguin's *Chair*: "By endowing the feminine chair with a phallus, Vincent turned it into a phallic mother." Collins's close, concise study succeeds, largely because of a restrained, commonsense approach whose general rationality contrasts strongly with the hysterical adulation that the two artists, especially van Gogh, still inspire in their fans. (Nov.) Forecast: The Art Institute of Chicago launches a major van Gogh/Gauguin exhibition on September 22. This book is one of six being published in conjunction with it, and should attract the more thoughtful of the painters' fans, while the Westview imprint will attract scholarly library interest.

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From Library Journal

In articulate prose, Collins elucidates the tragic relationship between Van Gogh and Gauguin during those two stormy winter months in Arles, 1888. A teacher at Parsons and a journalist for various art magazines, Collins produces a scholarly text, revealing adroit psychoanalysis and historical study. He successfully adds nuance to the previously rigid ideas about Van Gogh's and Gauguin's personalities, showing, for example, how Gauguin consciously accentuated his differences from Van Gogh in order to carve out a niche for his own art. But while Collins's analysis is thorough and erudite, it succeeds only insofar as it sets very modest goals for itself. Simply to add slight nuance to earlier theories lacks boldness, and this work, though detailed

and penetrating, wants audacity. However, these drawbacks do not take away from the text's value as an in-depth consideration of these two artists. It is a solid complement to surveys on the artists' work at this time, such as Douglas Druick and Peter Kort Zegers's *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South* (Thames & Hudson, 2001), which is accompanying an exhibition at the Chicago Art Institute this fall. Scholars with some knowledge of art history, art criticism, and/or psychoanalysis will especially appreciate this work. Recommended for academic libraries and for public libraries with large art history sections. Adam Mazel, "Library Journal"

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