

Exhibition and Film

How Victorian England inspired Vincent van Gogh and his art

Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) is usually associated with his native Netherlands or with France, the country where he painted many of his most famous works, and much less often with the UK. The latest feature film about him, *At Eternity's Gate*, directed by the American painter and film-maker Julian Schnabel, with the American actor Willem Dafoe as a compelling Van Gogh, adds to this tradition. It dramatises the last 2 years of the artist's life in France, including the rejection of his art in Paris, his failed attempt to live with Paul Gauguin in Arles, his slicing off his ear, and his confinement in an asylum—sensitively, if not always accurately. By contrast, the latest exhibition about him, *Van Gogh and Britain* at Tate Britain, is a pioneering project covering the period from the 1870s to the present day, inspired by original scholarship. It displays more than 50 of Van Gogh's own works; numerous British works that he admired according to his own writings, including socially conscious black-and-white prints of Victorian life and the landscapes of John Everett Millais and John Constable; and works by British artists influenced by Van Gogh—for example, Jacob Epstein (*Sunflowers*, 1933) and Francis Bacon (*Van Gogh in a Landscape*, 1957).

The film's title derives from Van Gogh's simple, moving oil painting *Sorrowing Old Man* ("At Eternity's Gate"), which he completed in the Saint-Paul Asylum at Saint-Rémy in Provence shortly before his death, aged just 37 years. The painting appears in the exhibition, but is not shown in the film, rather surprisingly. It depicts a seated elderly man in loose blue garb with his elbows on his knees and his head buried in his hands. In a sense it might have been a self-portrait. Van Gogh was in a deep depression 2 weeks before starting on the work in May, 1890. As the director of the hospital, Théophile Peyron, wrote in a letter to Vincent's devoted younger

brother and art dealer, Theo: "He usually sits with his head in his hands, and if someone speaks to him, it is as though it hurts him, and he gestures for them to leave him alone." Van Gogh recovered and quickly created the painting, just before abandoning the asylum for an art-loving commune at Auvers-sur-Oise in the suburbs of Paris, not long before he shot himself in July—or was

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accidentally killed by two teenagers playing with a loaded gun, as shown in the film and following an alternative theory about his death published by two Van Gogh biographers in 2011.

Indeed, the painting's origins go back almost to the beginning of Van Gogh's career as an artist in 1880, and are connected with Britain. As the exhibition catalogue points out, *At Eternity's Gate* is "the only instance" among Van Gogh's fecund output of paintings—75 works during his final 80 days at Auvers-sur-Oise—"where he 'translated' one of his own black and white works into colour". His original lithograph of the same title, also in the exhibition, was produced in The Hague in 1882. It grew out of his still-earlier Dutch watercolour, *Worn Out* (also on display), painted in 1881. The fact that the words "Worn Out" are inscribed in English on this watercolour, notes the catalogue, "reflects not only Van Gogh's ambitions to break into the British market but also his thinking about English art and literature at the time". The man's pose in the watercolour was a popular one in British book

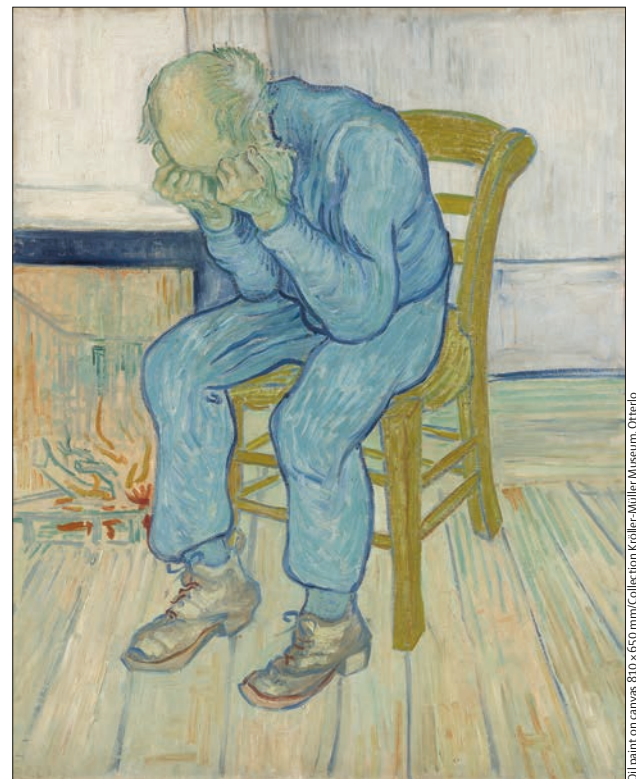
illustrations of the mid-Victorian period, such as those showing the despair and redemption of Thomas Gradgrind in the novel *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens, a favourite book of Van Gogh. In 1882, he wrote to a Dutch fellow-artist: "My whole life is aimed at making the things from everyday life that Dickens describes and these artists draw." Moreover, *Worn Out* was the title of a painting by Scottish artist Thomas Faed that was known to Van Gogh. And a similar pose featured in an immensely popular wood engraving, *Sunday at the Chelsea Hospital* by German-born British painter Hubert von Herkomer, which became an acclaimed painting, *The Last Muster*, viewed at a Royal Academy exhibition in London in 1875 by an appreciative Van Gogh.

Between May, 1873, and December, 1876, Van Gogh spent many months living and working in Britain,



Van Gogh and Britain

Tate Britain, London, UK, until Aug 11, 2019
<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/ey-exhibition-van-gogh-and-britain>



Vincent van Gogh, *Sorrowing Old Man* ("At Eternity's Gate"), 1890



Curzon Artificial Eye 2019

At Eternity's Gate

Written and directed by Julian Schnabel. Screenwriters Jean-Claude Carrière, Louise Kugelberg, and Julian Schnabel. Curzon Artificial Eye, 2019 <https://www.curzonartificialeye.com/at-eternitys-gate/>

interspersed with periods in France and Netherlands, before he became a painter. In 1873–75, he was employed by Paris-based art dealers Goupil & Cie at their London office off the Strand, and visited many art collections at institutions such as the British Museum and the Dulwich Picture Gallery. He walked a lot in London, travelled on the river by boat and on the underground railway, under the powerful influence of black and white illustrations by Gustave Doré published in 1871 in *London: A Pilgrimage*. In 1876, Van Gogh gave up art-dealing and tried teaching children at a school, first in Ramsgate then in Isleworth. Finally, he attempted to become a pastor like his father, delivering his first sermon at the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Richmond in October—a period of intense religiosity featured in the film (without mentioning Britain) when Van Gogh is interviewed by a priest in a quiet cloister of the Saint-Rémy asylum. Asked by the personally sympathetic but artistically conservative cleric why

his paintings are so “ugly”, he replies: “Maybe God made me a painter for people who aren’t born yet.”

During this British period, Van Gogh walked marathon distances alone through the countryside—a habit that continued when he became a painter in France, as frequently depicted in the film. He even walked from Ramsgate to central London via Canterbury, telling Theo in one of his many celebrated letters: “In the morning at half past three the birds began to sing upon seeing the morning twilight, ... In the afternoon I arrived at Chatham, where, in the distance, past partly flooded, low-lying meadows, with elms here and there, one sees the Thames full of ships.” But it was the working people of Victorian England—and their depiction by British artists, and also by Doré—who affected Van Gogh most. For example, Edwin Buckman’s *A London Dustyard*, published in the *Illustrated London News* in 1873 and acquired as a print by Van Gogh, probably encouraged his graphite drawing, *The Dustman*, made after a visit to a dustyard in The Hague in 1882. “I often felt low in England”, he recalled in 1883, “but the Black and White and Dickens, are things that make up for it all”. The exhibition’s third section, “Black and white: becoming a painter of the people”, explores Van Gogh’s fascination with the expanding British trade in prints and art reproductions, then known as “black and whites”. When Van Gogh himself became an artist, he collected more than 2000 prints, including many published in *The Graphic*, a British illustrated newspaper launched in 1869, such as *The Agricultural Labourer* by Von Herkomer and *Sunday Afternoon, 1 P.M., Waiting for the Public House to Open* by Edward Gurden Dalziel. The subject matter and techniques of these prints liberated his portraiture and self-portraiture up to the very end, by showing him the artistic validity of drawing and painting impoverished people, and their everyday labours and struggles—

as opposed to the subjects generally favoured by classical and impressionist painters.

Famously, Van Gogh himself was acutely familiar with mental struggle and poverty, accentuated by the persistent failure of his works to sell, despite the best efforts of his art dealer brother. In June, 1890, at Auvers-sur-Oise, under the care of a new physician Paul Gachet—a private practitioner and amateur artist sympathetic to modern painting—Van Gogh portrayed the melancholic Gachet in black and white with extraordinary animation and humanity (and a spooky resemblance to Albert Einstein), via his wrinkled face, thin wrist, crumpled sleeve, and bent tobacco pipe. This etching (Van Gogh’s only etching) appears in the exhibition in an impression from the Wellcome Collection. The film, too, responds to Gachet but prefers Van Gogh’s colour portrait of him. As Van Gogh observes and paints Gachet in the film, the patient and the doctor chat with some intimacy. “I paint to stop thinking”, says Van Gogh. “I find joy in sorrow.” He adds: “Illness can sometimes heal us.” Then you don’t need a doctor, remarks Gachet (played by Mathieu Amalric) with a smile. “It’s good to have a doctor as a friend”, replies Van Gogh. Sadly, neither Gachet’s friendship nor Theo’s devotion could save Vincent. “Ah well, I risk my life for my own work and my reason has half-foundered in it”, he wrote in a draft he suppressed of his ultimate letter sent to Theo on July 23, 1890. The disturbing words were discovered on his person after his fatal wounding. Ever since his death, despite decades of forensic study, the fascinating coexistence of Van Gogh’s mental illness and his astonishing creativity remains difficult to explain, while exerting an extraordinary grip on our contemporary imagination.

Andrew Robinson

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Wellcome Collection, London

Vincent van Gogh, *Paul Ferdinand Gachet*, 1890