



# Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art

By Debora Silverman

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A leading scholar offers fresh insight into one of the key moments in modern art history

During the fall of 1888, Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin lived and worked together in Provence. There in a yellow house at Arles, they changed the course of modern art. The relationship between the two painters came at a critical point in each of their careers, and began as a plan for a new community of artist-brothers, who would flourish in a harmonious condition of mutual support. While the two painters never achieved the goal of brotherly harmony, they nonetheless found their creativity spurred by association.

Until now, the Arles period has been interpreted in the light of the temperamental differences between the artists, culminating in the famous incident in which Van Gogh cut off part of his left ear lobe to spite Gauguin. In the shadow of the drama, their larger intellectual and theoretical debates at Arles have been neglected. Debora Silverman demonstrates here for the first time the great significance of their religious backgrounds and conflicts, with important new research on Van Gogh and Gauguin's respective Protestant and Catholic origins and formations, and fresh readings of the major pictures of the period. Both artists emerge in startling new ways, as the paintings they produced at Arles are reevaluated in the light of their divergent attempts to create a new sacred art.

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

The paintings of Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin continue to attract critical attention in books like Stephen Eisenman's acclaimed Gauguin's Skirt. The artists' stormy friendship, which climaxed in the famous incident when Van Gogh cut off part of his ear and sent it to an Arles prostitute, contains high drama amid some world-class art. Now Silverman (UCLA professor of modern European history, art, and culture and author of *Selling Culture*) weighs in with this massive new study, as ponderous as it is extensively pondered. Attempting to deepen the understanding of Van Gogh and Gauguin's work during the time the artists spent together in Arles, Silverman examines their religious education in sections like "Catholic Idealism and Dutch Reformed Realism" and "Peasant Subjects and Sacred Forms." A galumphing prose style does not lighten the load of these subjects. The author goes on at great length, for example, about Bishop Dupanloup, a 19th-century French pedagogue, and Cornelius Huysmans, a Dutch teacher, and their supposed influences on Gauguin and Van Gogh, respectively. However, these influences come off as generalized at best, and indisputably dull at worst, smothering the natural drama and excitement of both the work and the artists' lives. Dramatic rights, Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency. (Nov.)

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#### From Library Journal

The stormy relationship of Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh during their tenure in Arles has enjoyed a long history of speculation. The relationship's failure and van Gogh's infamous self-mutilation are usually interpreted to be the result of Van Gogh's psychopathology. Silverman (*Selling Culture; Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*) provides a broader perspective, emphasizing key ideological differences that likely drove the two artists apart. Gauguin and van Gogh were engaged in developing a contemporary form of sacred art, but they approached their subject matter very differently. Gauguin, who was Catholic, saw the material world as an obstacle to spiritual attainment. Van Gogh, on the other hand, was enmeshed in the social fabric of the Dutch Reformed Church and saw the material world as a direct expression of the divine. For Van Gogh, the highest form of contemplation was daily activity and attention to one's craft. It's no wonder that this brotherhood of artists, which began in friendship and was generally positive, was due to have conflict. Silverman's scholarship and lucid writing makes this one of the most refreshing and insightful texts on these two artists in years. Because there are so many, this is saying a lot.

-DSusan Lense, Columbus, OH

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#### From Booklist

Silverman concedes that the story of van Gogh and Gauguin painting together in Arles has been told many times, but she believes that art historians haven't delved deeply enough into the religious legacies of these two revolutionary painters or considered the specific nature of their divergent quests for a "new and modern form of sacred art." She redresses these omissions in a series of adept and biographically flavored readings of major paintings by both artists, in which she articulates a rarely discerned connection between the technical and the theological. Silverman contrasts van Gogh's Protestant belief in the sanctity of labor and his ecstatic reverence for nature with Gauguin's lapsed Catholicism and preoccupation with a transcendent ideal, then links these orientations to their artistic techniques. Van Gogh was lavish in his application of thick layers of paint and palpable brushstrokes, exalting in the life force he depicted, while Gauguin, more concerned with the mystical and the symbolic, used a minimum of paint to subvert painting's physicality. Silverman develops these fresh perceptions with energy and expertise, powerfully altering and enhancing her readers'

perspectives on these seminal figures and their timeless masterpieces. *Donna Seaman*  
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