



# Portrait of Dr. Gachet: The Story of a Van Gogh Masterpiece, Money, Politics, Collectors, Greed, and Loss

By Cynthia Saltzman

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At a star-studded auction in 1990, a painting was sold for the record-breaking price of \$82.5 million. That painting, Vincent van Gogh's *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, has seemed to countless admirers to portray our times as "something bright in spite of its inevitable griefs."

This fascinating book reconstructs the painting's journey and becomes a rich story of modernist art and the forces behind the art market. Masterfully evoked are the lives of the thirteen extraordinary people who owned the painting and shaped its history: avant-garde European collectors, pioneering dealers in Paris and Berlin, a brilliant medievalist who acquired it for one of Germany's great museums, and a member of the Nazi elite who sold it after it had been confiscated as a work of "degenerate art." Remarkable and riveting, *The Portrait of Dr. Gachet* illuminates, in dramatic detail, the dynamics of the art market and of culture in our time.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Only a few weeks before his 1890 suicide, Vincent van Gogh painted a portrait of Paul-Ferdinand Gachet, a local physician the painter had been fruitlessly consulting about his depression. Upon his death, the painting, like much of van Gogh's work, went to his brother, Theo. A few years later, Theo's widow sold it for 300 francs (worth, then, \$58). In 1990, a wealthy Japanese businessman paid \$82.5 million at a Christie's auction for it and promptly hid it away in a Tokyo warehouse, where it presumably remains to this day.

Cynthia Saltzman traces the painting's provenance through a century of art collecting and cultural politics. Along the way, the portrait passes through--among others--the hands of early modernist collectors, the Nazi regime (where it was shown as part of an exhibit of "degenerate" art), and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. In addition to a detailed account of the circumstances of each change of possession (it slipped out of the Nazis' hands, for example, when Herman Goerring needed a quick transfusion of hard currency), Saltzman provides a sensitive appraisal of the changing critical reputation of van Gogh and of the fluctuating market for "masterpieces" on canvas. *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* is an art history which never loses sight of the fact that art history is always a subset of a larger history.

#### From Publishers Weekly

Saltzman's meticulously researched narrative shows how historical forces and turning points in individual lives have determined the fate of a celebrated painting. The story begins in Auvers-sur-Oise, France, where a disturbed Vincent van Gogh churned out his last work before his suicide in 1890. Physician Paul-Ferdinand Gachet, a melancholic amateur painter, did little to alleviate van Gogh's suffering, but he posed for the portrait that captured, in van Gogh's own words, "the heartbroken expression of our time." Over the next century, the painting had 13 owners; it was hung in private homes and world-famous museums, and traveled to Copenhagen, Frankfurt, Amsterdam and New York. Confiscated as "degenerate art" by the Nazis and smuggled out of Germany during WWII, it was on loan off and on for 50 years to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, before fetching \$82.5 million at auction. Since the death of its last owner, a Japanese paper magnate, its whereabouts are unknown, and the art world waits for the masterpiece to resurface. Meanwhile, though this book's detail about art dealers and collectors may be more than the casual reader wishes to know, the capsule biography of van Gogh, the criminality of Nazi art thieves and the fevered May 15, 1990, art auction at Christie's provide gripping real-life drama. In all, Saltzman (a former reporter for *Forbes* and the *Wall Street Journal*) offers an illuminating case study of provenance. Eight pages of b&w illustrations not seen by PW.

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#### From Library Journal

Weeks before his suicide in 1890, van Gogh painted a portrait of his physician in a melancholy pose and uncannily labeled it "the heartbroken expression of our time." This is a richly detailed, dramatic account of the amazing journey of the portrait from its creation in a French village to the record-breaking \$82.5 million paid for it by a Japanese industrialist a century later. After several ownerships, it was placed in a Frankfurt museum only to be confiscated by the Nazis and deposited in a Berlin warehouse. When the avaricious Hermann Goring sold the canvas, it was acquired by a Jewish investment banker living in Amsterdam, who fled to New York with Dr. Gachet. Saltzman, a former reporter, weaves a spellbinding narrative involving the global art market, political upheavals, connoisseurs, dealers, and the sad visage of Dr. Gachet, which is now again on the auction block. Recommended for all audiences. ?Joan Levin, MLS, Chicago

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