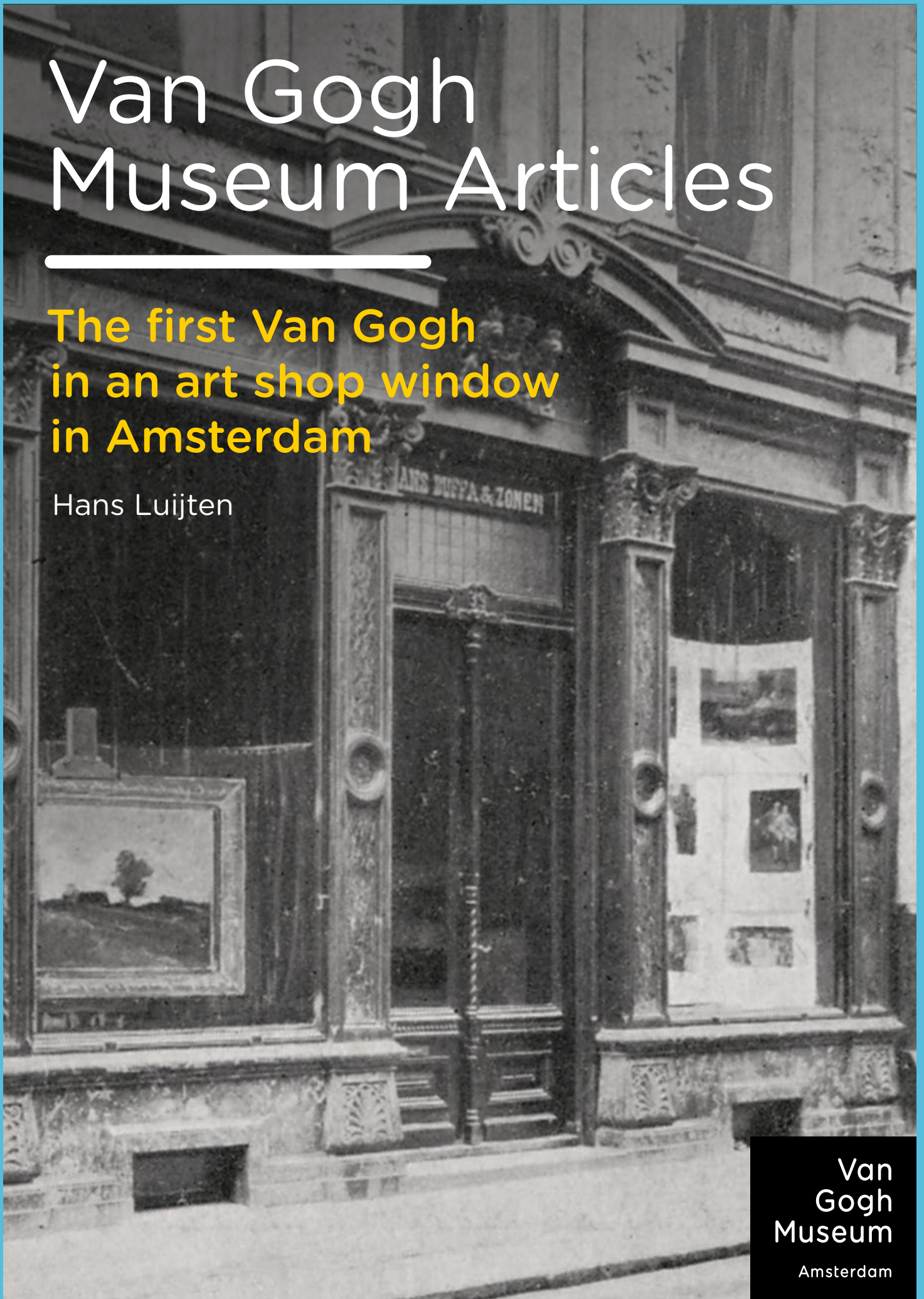


Van Gogh Museum Articles

The first Van Gogh in an art shop window in Amsterdam

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Van
Gogh
Museum
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Portrait of Hendrik Christiaan Bonger at Weteringschans in Amsterdam with works by Vincent van Gogh, 1920, photograph, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

The Van Gogh family legacy includes hundreds of letters, not only from Vincent himself, but also his siblings and his parents. They shed an interesting light on everyday life, while also offering a considerable amount of cultural, religious, social and economic context. It is surprising to see how the different family members wrote about Vincent and his art. This collection of letters and other documents is held by the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and forms part of the Van Gogh Museum collection in Amsterdam.¹ Since 2019, the museum has been working on a series of bilingual digital publications, each of which will make a completed section of this collection publicly accessible. It allows the important source texts to be published in their original form. They consist of various types of ego documents, including diaries and letters mostly, though not always, written by members of the immediate family. The first publication in the series is Jo Bonger, *Dagboeken - Diaries* (2019).² The second, scheduled for 2025, will be Isaac Israëls, *Brieven aan Jo van Gogh-Bonger - Letters to Jo van Gogh-Bonger*. The third instalment, currently being prepared, will publish part of the family correspondence including, in chronological order, all the passages in which family members write about Vincent.³

Van Gogh in the Buffa window

In addition to the Van Gogh family letters, special information can also be found in the correspondence of the Bonger family from Amsterdam. A letter written by Hermine Louise Bonger-Weissman to her daughter Jo and son-in-law Theo on Monday 15 July 1889 reveals, for instance, that Theo arranged for a painting by Vincent to be displayed in the window of the art dealers Frans Buffa & Zonen at 39 Kalverstraat in Amsterdam. She had seen it in person the previous Thursday (11 July), and informed them that the artist Ferdinand Hart Nibbrig had delivered the work to the family home at 121 Weteringschans the following day. The painting was intended as a gift from Theo and Jo to Jo's brother Henri (also known in the family as 'Han' or 'Hen'), whose thirty-fifth birthday fell on 15 July.

¹ *Choosing Vincent: from family collection to Van Gogh Museum*. Ed. Lisa Smit and Hans Luijten. Bussum 2023.

² Accessible at www.bongardiaries.org.

³ Hans Luijten, 'Family matters: the letters of the Van Gogh family', *Simiolus. Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 45-1/2 (2024), pp. 62-76.

Translated from the Dutch by Ted Alkins. My thanks to Natascha Veldhorst for her extremely valuable improvements to this essay; thanks also to Marije Vellekoop for her insightful comments. All documents with inventory numbers beginning with a 'b' or a 'd' are located at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam (VGM). The abbreviation 'F' refers to the numbers of the Van Gogh works in J.-B. de la Faille, *The works of Vincent van Gogh: His paintings and drawings*, Amsterdam 1970, and 'JH' refers to the numbers of the Van Gogh works in J. Hulsker, *The new complete Van Gogh: Paintings, drawings, sketches: Revised and enlarged edition of the catalogue raisonné of the works of Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1996.

What a fine and sweet thing you sent. Nibbrig brought it himself on Friday afternoon, but didn't want to come up, as he had some quite sick people at home. We were very sorry, but perhaps it was good, as Lijda had just arrived with Leendert. What a lovely painting. I had just been to Buffa in the Kalverstraat the other day to see it in the window. It's really kind of you to give it to Han. I gave it to him this morning and said, "from Theo and Net." You should have seen his face. Our gifts were a watch-stand and a box of cigars, and a few roses from Wim.⁴

On 11 July, Jo had written a letter from Paris to her sister Mien, which is directly related to the gift of the painting. In it, she refers to two 'packages', one for her brother Wim, who had passed his exam, and one for Henri:

So the package will now arrive just in time – perhaps it got there before this letter, but I don't think so.– Nibbrig will bring it in person – I can't tell you what a nice, warm fellow he is – we had all sorts of things to talk about, the Schans,⁵ all the boys he used to play with, Speijdel, the skating club,⁶ all sorts of things from the past.⁷ The package addressed to you is meant for Hen's birthday – so you'll need to hold onto it for a few days if you don't mind – this was just such a good opportunity to give it to him. For heaven's sake don't open it if he's there, although that would be a big coincidence. I didn't dare send him [i.e. Nibbrig] with a bigger package, otherwise I would have included something for you too.⁸

4 'Wat keurig en lief heb jelui gestuurd. Vrijdagmiddag kwam Nibbrig 't zelf brengen, maar wilde niet boven komen, omdat er thuis veel ziekte was. 't Speet ons heel erg, maar 't was misschien maar goed. want Lijda was er net met Leendert. Wat een beelderig schilderij, ik was 't net de vorige dag bij Buffa in de Kalverstraat voor de glazen gaan zien. Ik vin 't meer dan lief 't Han te geven. Vanmorgen heb ik 't hem gegeven en gezegd: van Theo en Net. Jelui had zijn gezicht moeten zien. Onze cadeaus zijn een horloge-standaardje en een kisje sigaren, en van Wim een beetje rozen.' Hermine Louise Bonger-Weissman to Jo van Gogh-Bonger and Theo van Gogh. Amsterdam, 15 July 1889. VGM, b2875. Hermine spelled 'Buffa' as 'Buva'. Jo was known as 'Net' in the Bonger family.

5 'Schans' refers to the Weteringschans, the street in Amsterdam where Jo Bonger and Hart Nibbrig grew up.

6 The ice rink of the Amsterdamsche IJclub in the Willemspark.

7 Hart Nibbrig had been a pupil at the Quellinus drawing school in Amsterdam in 1881, before going on to train at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten between 1883 and 1888. In 1888–89, he attended the Académie Julian and Atelier Cormon in Paris.

8 'Het pakje zal dus nu net op tijd komen – misschien is 't er al vóór dezen brief maar dat denk ik toch niet.– Nibbrig zal 't wel zelf komen brengen – je weet niet wat een aardige, hartelijke jongen het is – we hadden allerlei om over te praten van de Schans, van al de jongens waar hij mee speelde, van Speijdel, de IJclub, allerlei dingen van vroeger. Het pakje dat aan jou geadresseerd is, is vast voor Hen's verjaardag – jelui moeten het dan maar een paar dagen bewaren voor hem wil je – het was nu zoo'n geschikte gelegenheid om het mée te geven. Als je het in 's hemelsnaam maar niet open doet als hij er bij is, maar dat zou toch al erg toevallig zijn. Grooter pakje durfde ik hem niet goed mee geven, anders had ik er wat voor jelui ook in gedaan.' Jo van Gogh-Bonger to Hermine ('Mien') Louise Bonger. Paris, 11 July 1889. VGM, b4291a-c.

It is evident from this letter that Ferdinand Hart Nibbrig, who had brought the painting with him from Paris at Theo and Jo's request, must have delivered it to Buffa on 9, 10 or 11 July.⁹ Two comments support this: firstly the fact that Jo assumed Hart Nibbrig would not have delivered the package for Wim before Mien received the letter, and secondly that they only needed to hold on to the other package, intended for Henri's birthday, for 'a few days'. This means the painting will have hung in Buffa's window for several days, until the afternoon of the twelfth.

Henri wrote to his sister and brother-in-law on 17 July to thank them for their generous gift. He expressed his enthusiasm about the painting, for which he had immediately chosen a good place on the wall:

I say, "trust your family" to surprise me with such a famous piece. I was genuinely surprised when I opened it. I thank you both warmly and Theo again in particular. It is truly a magnificent piece. At first, I thought of hanging it in the best room, but there was nowhere there that we could get the light to fall on it properly. So I have simply kept it for my own salon, where I've hung it below "After the Glory", above my big chair. It looks more than fine there. It's truly a jewel for my cosy cage. Everyone praised and admired it hugely on my birthday.¹⁰

9 Hart Nibbrig had visited Theo and Jo regularly between May and July 1889, becoming a close friend of the new couple. In her long letter to Mien, Jo vividly described the fine day the three of them had spent rowing on the Seine. Jo informed Vincent about their friendship at the time. See *Vincent van Gogh - The Letters*. Ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker. 6 vols. Van Gogh Museum & Huygens Institute. London 2009. www.vangoghletters.org. *Letters* 2009, letter 771; 8 May 1889 and letter 786, 5 July 1889.

10 'Ik zeg: "van je familie moet je het hebben", om me zoo te verrassen met zulk een beroemd stuk. Werkelijk, ik was verbaasd toen ik het openmaakte. Ik dank jelui beiden er hartelijk voor en Theo nog eens in het bijzonder. Het is een waar prachtstuk. Eerst dacht ik het in de mooie kamer op te hangen maar we kunnen er nergens het licht goed op laten vallen, zoodoende heb ik het maar voor mijn salon gepakt en opgehangen onder "na den Glorie", boven mijn groote stoel. En het staat er meer dan mooi. Het is werkelijk een sieraad van mijn kooitje. Ieder heeft het op mijn verjaardag ten zeerste geroemd en bewonderd.' Hendrik ('Henri') Christiaan Bonger to Jo van Gogh-Bonger. Amsterdam, 17 July 1889. VGM, b2855a-b. It is not clear what Henri meant by 'After the Glory' ('Na den Glorie'), which was probably a print or reproduction.

One of four

So which was this ‘magnificent piece’? We know from Henri’s estate that he owned four paintings and two drawings by Van Gogh at the time of his death in 1929: *Small Bottle with Peonies and Blue Delphiniums* (fig. 1), *Trees and Undergrowth* (fig. 2), *Field with Poppies* (fig. 3), *Peasant Woman Binding Sheaves (after Jean-François Millet)* (fig. 4), *Vicarage Garden* (fig. 5) and *Ditch* (fig. 6). It must therefore have been one of these. After Henri died, they were inherited by his and Jo’s youngest sister, Betsy, with whom he had lived in their parental home his entire life. When she in turn died in 1944, the works joined the collection of V.W. van Gogh, the son of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bonger, and are now in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam (© Vincent van Gogh Foundation).¹¹

If we consider these works one by one, *Vicarage Garden* and *Ditch* can be dismissed, as they are drawings. *Peasant Woman Binding Sheaves (after Jean-François Millet)* cannot have been the displayed work either, as Van Gogh did not paint it until September 1889, two months later. *Small Bottle with Peonies and Blue Delphiniums* and *Field with Poppies*, meanwhile, are both rather small paintings, which would not have lent themselves very well to an inviting presentation in a dealer’s window. The most plausible candidate, therefore, would appear to be *Trees and Undergrowth*. Not only is its size a respectable 46.2 x 55.2 cm, it is exceptionally attractive in other respects too. Van Gogh used a beautifully varied palette, for instance, in this spontaneously painted landscape. Green is the dominant colour and there are complementary contrasts between the yellow in the leaves and the lilac of the tree trunks. The foliage is suggested by a combination of short, green brushstrokes and dots of bright red and blue. The artist created a vibrant effect by placing blue pigments with chrome yellow alongside emerald and chrome greens. The light yellow, horizontally placed touches subtly evoke the light shining through the trees.¹²



1. Vincent van Gogh, *Small Bottle with Peonies and Blue Delphiniums* (F 243a / JH 1106). Paris, June–July 1886. Oil on cardboard, 34.5 cm x 27.0 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



2. Vincent van Gogh, *Trees and Undergrowth* (F 309a / JH 1312). Paris, July 1887. Oil on canvas, 46.2 cm x 55.2 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



3. Vincent van Gogh, *Field with Poppies* (F 576 / JH 1423). Arles, May 1888. Oil on canvas, 24 cm x 35 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

¹¹ See Hans Luijten, *Jo van Gogh-Bonger: the Woman Who Made Vincent Famous*. London 2022, p. 481, n. 15.

¹² *Vincent van Gogh Paintings, Volume 2. Antwerp and Paris 1885–1888*, Van Gogh Museum. Louis van Tilborgh and Ella Hendriks. Amsterdam 2011, pp. 410–15; cat. 112, ‘Trees and undergrowth’.



4. Vincent van Gogh, *Peasant Woman Binding Sheaves* (after Jean-François Millet) (F 700 / JH 1781). Saint-Rémy, September 1889. Oil on canvas on cardboard, 43.2 cm x 33.2 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



5. Vincent van Gogh, *The Vicarage Garden* (F 1132 / JH 463). Nuenen, March 1884. Pencil, pen and ink, on paper, 20.0 cm x 23.4 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



6. Vincent van Gogh, *Ditch* (F 1243 / JH 472). Nuenen, March 1884. Pencil, pen and ink, paint, on paper; 42.3 cm x 34.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

First in the Netherlands

It was not previously known that a painting by Van Gogh could be seen in the Netherlands at such an early date, although works by him had been exhibited at a total of nine different locations in Paris between 1887 and the summer of 1889. The venues in question did not, incidentally, include any of the branches of Theo's employer, Boussod, Valadon et Cie, suggesting that the celebrated Parisian art dealers did not allow work by their employees' relatives to be promoted. But it is likewise entirely plausible that Van Gogh's art was far too modern for the owner's tastes, given that Boussod later reportedly declared that the 'misshapen' modern art in which Theo dealt had been detrimental to the firm's reputation. If true, this would be a sign of the dealer's conservatism.¹³

Theo married Jo in Amsterdam on 18 April 1889. He had already taken the night train north on 30 March, and the wedding was registered on 4 April. As the ceremony approached, he no doubt took the opportunity while in the Netherlands to visit art dealers, including Buffa, where he might have asked if they would be interested in displaying one of his brother's paintings for a few days. There is no evidence that Vincent himself was aware of this.

Kunsthandel Frans Buffa & Zonen was located in the centre of Amsterdam, in a district that was home to several commercial galleries and auction houses. Numerous potential buyers passed by or entered the stately building, among them collectors, critics, fellow art dealers and artists. The window displays were generally renewed each week (fig. 7).¹⁴



7. Unidentified photographer, Cover picture from the brochure of Kunsthandel Frans Buffa & Zonen, c. 1901. RKD The Hague.

¹³ Quoted in Maurice Joyant, *Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec 1864-1901 - peintre*. Paris 1926, p. 118. See also Chris Stolwijk and Richard Thomson, *Theo van Gogh, 1857-1891: Art dealer, collector and brother of Vincent*. With an essay by Sjraar van Heugten. Exhib. cat. Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), Paris (Musée d'Orsay), 1999-2000. Amsterdam and Zwolle 1999.

¹⁴ Mayken Jonkman, "En iedereen staat stil". De aansprekende etalage van de Amsterdamse kunsthandel Frans Buffa & Zonen', in: *Kunsthandel Frans Buffa & Zonen, 1790-1951. Schoonheid te koop*. Ed. Sylvia Alting van Geusau, Mayken Jonkman, Aukje Vergeest. Exhib. cat. Singer Laren, 2016-2017. Zwolle 2016, pp. 14-29.

A month after the painting was displayed at Buffa, the artist Joseph Jacob Isaacson became the first person to write about Van Gogh in a Dutch magazine, *De Portefeuille*. In his forms and colours, the author declared, Van Gogh was able to convey ‘the formidable life, the grand nineteenth-century life regaining its awareness’, and that he did so as ‘a single pioneer’ who ‘wrestles alone in the grand night; his name, Vincent, is for posterity’.¹⁵

Theo will have had a hand in this too, having earlier mentioned to Vincent that he had befriended the Dutch artist Meijer Isaac de Haan and his pupil, Isaacson. When De Haan moved in with Theo in October 1888, Isaacson shared their company regularly for several months. In June 1889, he expressed his appreciation for the works that Vincent sent Theo from the south of France.¹⁶

Theo did not have any further opportunity to promote Vincent’s work as he died on 25 January 1891, six months after his brother, but his widow Jo assumed responsibility shortly afterwards. Having set up home in Bussum with her son Vincent and the huge body of art she had inherited, she embarked on her task. On 19 December 1891, for instance, the Pulchri painters’ association in The Hague organized an art appreciation session on Van Gogh, at which its members could view several of his works, ‘provided by the v. Gogh family’ as Piet Boele van Hensbroek put it in *De Nederlandsche Spectator*. He is likely to have contacted Jo about his article, since the two were related. The works subsequently remained on display at Pulchri for another two weeks.¹⁷

From the beginning of 1892 onwards, Isaacson would act as Jo’s intermediary in contacts with Dutch art dealers. What she hoped duly came to pass, as critics began to write about Van Gogh’s work. In February 1892, Frans Buffa & Zonen exhibited ten paintings from the artist’s legacy. Willem du Tour (pseudonym of Richard Roland Holst) published on Van Gogh in the weekly newspaper *De Amsterdammer*, as did Leo Simons in the *Haarlemmer Courant*. An endless series of sales and exhibitions then followed, accompanied by articles in the Netherlands and abroad in what became a self-perpetuating cycle. All thanks to Jo, who would spend the rest of her life working with unflagging energy to promote Van Gogh’s written and painted oeuvre.¹⁸

15 ‘het geweldige, het 19de eeuwse, zich weër bewust wordende groote leven (...) ’n eenige pionier (...) alleen staat te worstelen in den grooten nacht, zijn naam, Vincent, is voor het nageslacht’. See ‘Parijsche brieven II. Gevoelens over de Nederlandsche kunst op de Parijsche Wereld-tentoonstelling’, *De Portefeuille*, 10 August 1889, pp. 233–34 and cf. J.M. Joosten, ‘Van Gogh publicaties. De eerste kennismaking met het werk van Vincent van Gogh in Nederland’, *Museumjournaal* 14-3 (June 1969), p. 155.

16 *Letters* 2009 (op. cit. note 9), letters 707, 711, 781, 782.

17 The author and critic Piet Boele van Hensbroek, who idolized Goethe, had proposed in 1885 that Jo write an article about *Faust*. See regarding this matter and for Pulchri, Luijten 2022, pp. 55–56, 139 (op. cit. note 11).

18 See further Luijten 2019 (op. cit. note 11).



‘What a lovely painting. I had just been to Buffa in the Kalverstraat the other day to see it in the window.’

Hermine Louise Bonger-Weissman to Jo van Gogh-Bonger and Theo van Gogh.
Amsterdam, 15 July 1889.

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<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/about/knowledge-and-research/van-gogh-museum-articles>