

**NEVER-BEFORE-EXHIBITED CACHE OF LETTERS  
BY VINCENT VAN GOGH TO ÉMILE BERNARD  
TO GO ON VIEW ONLY AT THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM**

**Exhibition Features More than Twenty Paintings and Drawings  
Related to the Letters by van Gogh and Bernard**

*Painted with Words: Vincent van Gogh's Letters to Émile Bernard*  
September 28, 2007–January 6, 2008

**\*\*Press Preview: Tuesday, September 25, 2007, 10 a.m. until noon\*\***



Vincent van Gogh, letter to Émile Bernard, Arles, March 1888 (Letter 2, folio 1, detail). Pen and brown ink on a single sheet of cream machine-made laid paper, 5 1/4 x 8 in. (13.2 x 20.3 cm), Thaw Collection, The Morgan Library & Museum. Photography by Joseph Zehavi, 2006.

**New York, NY, July 6, 2007**—Twenty letters from Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890) to the artist and poet Émile Bernard (French, 1868–1941) are the subject of an unprecedented exhibition on view only at The Morgan Library & Museum from September 28, 2007, through January 6, 2008. *Painted with Words: Vincent van Gogh's Letters to Émile Bernard* offers a rare look at the life and creative process of the legendary master of modern art through the letters van Gogh wrote to his friend and colleague Bernard as well as twenty-two paintings, drawings and watercolors that the two artists discussed or exchanged. Comprised of missives and artwork from the peak of van Gogh's creativity, while he was living in the south of France (1888–1889), the exhibition explores in depth for the first time the important role correspondence played in how van Gogh thought about his work and communicated his progress to his contemporaries.

Unseen by scholars and the public for nearly seventy years and never before exhibited, this cache of letters to Bernard is unlike any of van Gogh's other known writings. Distinguished by their frank, vibrant, and often humorous tone, the letters reveal everything from van Gogh's artistic methods to his emotional struggles to his sharp observations about daily life. Six include sketches that complement written descriptions of artworks and are presented alongside related works by van Gogh and Bernard, most of which have not recently been

exhibited in the United States. Following the trajectory from letter to sketch to painted masterpiece, these letters and works illuminate the significance of Bernard’s friendship at a key moment of van Gogh’s career. Renowned collectors Eugene and Clare Thaw acquired nineteen of these twenty important letters in 2001 and made them a promised gift to the Morgan, which will be the sole venue for this exhibition.

“We are delighted to present this exhibition, which explores van Gogh’s creative process through the writings and sketches he sent to Bernard and the works themselves,” said Charles E. Pierce, Jr., director of The Morgan Library & Museum. “The show is uniquely appropriate for the Morgan as it highlights two of our overarching collecting interests, the literary and the visual.”

“We are deeply grateful to Gene and Clare Thaw for their exceptional gift to the Morgan of the van Gogh letters. They enrich our holdings of artists’ letters tremendously by adding significant correspondence by a figure essential to the development of modern art.”

*Painted with Words* is organized by Jennifer Tonkovich, Curator, Drawings and Prints, The Morgan Library & Museum.

#### **FRIENDSHIP AND LETTERS**

After meeting in Paris in 1886, Vincent van Gogh and fellow student Émile Bernard embarked upon a close friendship and in 1887 began a two-year correspondence that spanned the final years of van Gogh’s brilliant yet psychologically troubled life prior to his suicide in 1890. Van Gogh’s letters to Bernard illuminate the many ways in which the artists inspired and encouraged one another. The Dutch artist took on the role of an older, wiser brother to Bernard, praising or criticizing his paintings, drawings, and poems. Bernard became a friend and confidant to van Gogh, who was living alone in Arles. The letters also chronicle van Gogh’s own struggles, as he frequently solicited Bernard’s advice or opinion on artistic issues. While the whereabouts of Bernard’s letters to van Gogh remains a mystery, his deep admiration for van Gogh is well documented— Bernard went on to become one of the earliest promoters of van Gogh’s genius, working to establish his status as a major modern artist in the years leading up to and following his death.

*Painted with Words* is the first exhibition to address the pivotal role Bernard’s friendship played while the Dutch artist was living in Arles. Writing to a fellow artist, van Gogh freely conveyed his thoughts about life and art in an open and expressive manner, providing incomparable insight into his mind and talent. The letters touch on a broad range of topics—from the philosophical to the mundane, from the amusing to the explicit. In a letter from Arles dated June 19, 1888, van Gogh wrote, “I am in better health here than in the north—I even work in the wheat fields at midday, in the full heat of the sun, without any shade whatever, and there you are, I

revel in it like a cicada.” In the same letter, he went on to describe a vision of what would later become one of his most iconic subjects, *Starry Night Over the Rhone* (1888), now in the collection of Musée d’Orsay, Paris:

*But when will I do the starry sky, then, that painting that’s always on my mind? Alas, alas, it’s just as our excellent pal Cyprien says, in “En ménage” by J. K. Huysmans: “the most beautiful paintings are those one dreams of while smoking a pipe in one’s bed, but which one doesn’t make. But it’s a matter of attacking them nevertheless, however incompetent one may feel vis-à-vis the ineffable perfections of nature’s glorious splendours.*

## ARTWORKS

Both artists’ letters included sketches to provide an idea of their work in progress. Van Gogh’s contained studies related to *The Sower* (1888), *The Langlois Bridge* (1888), *Cottages at Saintes-Maries* (1888), *Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries* (1888), and *View of Arles at Sunset* (1888). In a letter written just as he had begun work on *View of Arles at Sunset*, van Gogh wrote, “Here’s another landscape. Setting sun? Moonrise? Summer evening, at any rate. Town violet, star yellow, sky blue-green; the wheat fields have all the tones: old gold, copper, green gold, red gold, yellow gold, green, red, and yellow bronze. Square no. 30 canvas.” Along with the letter, the exhibition includes the sketch and the full-scale *répétition*, or drawing replicating a painted composition, that van Gogh sent to Bernard after finishing the painting. Such *répétitions* allowed van Gogh to experiment with translating painted works into graphic form. As independent works of art, they are among the artist’s most accomplished works on paper.



Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *Brenton Women in the Plain of Pont-Aven (after Emile Bernard)*, Arles, October–December 1888, Watercolor, 18 ¾ x 24 ½ in. (47.5 x 62 cm), Civica Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Milano, Scala/ Art Resource

Van Gogh’s pivotal trip to the Mediterranean village of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer—which engendered a turning point in his style—is documented by a lengthy letter with several enclosed sketches of the resulting compositions. One, a study of cottages at Saintes-Maries, is explored through the letter sketch and three related drawings of the subject that reveal the artist’s working method. Likewise, van Gogh’s drawing after the portrait of a young girl known as *La Mousmé* (1888), with its lengthy color notations, attests to the ways in which van Gogh communicated new developments in his work to his younger colleague.

Several works chronicle the artists’ mutual interests, including Bernard’s portrait of his grandmother, which van Gogh praised highly and which served as inspiration for his own portrait of an aged woman in Arles. Van Gogh often wrote about the critical importance of portraiture to modern painting, and such portraits

constituted a significant portion of his output while in Arles. His desire to communicate his progress in this genre is demonstrated by his painting of a Zouave officer and the related watercolor he inscribed and sent to Bernard.

Van Gogh was also interested in Bernard's work in Pont-Aven, Brittany, where, together with the artist Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Bernard developed the cloissonist style, characterized by heavy contours and flat areas of color. Gauguin brought Bernard's painting *Breton Women in a Meadow* (1888) to Arles, where van Gogh copied the work in his watercolor *Breton Women in the Plain of Pont-Aven* (1888). Both works are on view in the exhibition alongside a letter from van Gogh to Bernard sent from Saint-Rémy in October 1889, in which van Gogh praised Bernard's work at Pont-Aven, saying "Well, I'll be very curious to see studies of Pont-Aven. But for yourself, give me something fairly worked up. It will work out, anyway, because I like your talent so much that I'd be very pleased to make a small collection of your works, bit by bit."



Emile Bernard (1868–1944), *Breton Women in a Meadow*, 1888, Oil on canvas, 36 ¼ x 28 1/8 in. (92 x 74 cm), Private Collection

Major paintings discussed in the letters, such as *Enclosed Field* (1889) and *Olive Trees* (1889), provide context for van Gogh's correspondence and represent the works chronicled in his writings to Bernard. Van Gogh felt strongly that his paintings of olive trees contained as much religious feeling as Bernard's figurative depictions of Christ on the Mount of Olives.

### **VAN GOGH'S LEGACY**

As the organizer of one of the first retrospectives of van Gogh's work in Paris and the author of several early, seminal articles on the artist, Bernard made a significant contribution to van Gogh's legacy as a groundbreaking artist and an icon in the canon of art history. Bernard had begun trying to establish van Gogh's reputation before his friend's death. Recognizing the significance of his letters and their potential interest to a wider public, Bernard showed them to important art critics. Within three years of van Gogh's death, Bernard published some of the letters and enclosed sketches in the pages of the art and literature periodical *Mercure de France*. The letters to Bernard remained a distinct group. They were published by the Paris dealer Ambroise Vollard in 1911 and translated into English from the original French by Douglas Cooper in 1938. *Painted with Words* explores Bernard's contributions through a selection of periodicals and publications.

## ABOUT THE CACHE

Of the twenty-two known letters van Gogh wrote to Bernard, all but two are on view at the Morgan. Nineteen of the twenty exhibited letters to Bernard have been promised to the Morgan by Eugene and Clare Thaw; the remaining letter is on loan courtesy of the Fondation Custodia in Paris. One of the missing two letters is known only through an old photograph and is considered lost; the other belongs to a private collection. The exhibition also includes an additional letter van Gogh wrote to Paul Gauguin—his and Bernard’s mutual friend. This letter features a sketch related to one of van Gogh’s most acclaimed paintings, *Bedroom at Arles* (1888), now in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. By the time this letter to Gauguin arrived in Pont-Aven, Gauguin had already left and Bernard probably received it instead. For this reason, this last letter to Gauguin has traditionally been included in the group of letters van Gogh wrote to Bernard. It was acquired previously by Eugene Thaw and promised to the Morgan in 2000.



Major support for *Painted with Words: Vincent van Gogh’s Letters to Émile Bernard* and its accompanying catalogue was provided by the International Music and Art Foundation. Generous support was also provided by the Robert Lehman Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

## CATALOGUE

*Painted with Words* is accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue written by Van Gogh Museum curator Leo Jansen and researchers Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker. The twenty-two known letters from van Gogh to Bernard, which provide an intimate glimpse of the artists’ relationship, are published in facsimile in their entirety for the first time, along with new, complete transcriptions, substantially annotated English translations, and more than one hundred color illustrations. The full-color, 384-page, hardcover catalogue also includes an essay on van Gogh and Bernard’s relationship and reproductions of works discussed in the letters. This is the most comprehensive, informative, and accurate publication of the Bernard letters to date. Published collaboratively by the Morgan, Rizzoli International Publications, and the Van Gogh Museum, the catalogue is available at the Morgan Shop for \$50.

## THE COMPLETE VAN GOGH LETTERS PROJECT

The authors of the exhibition catalogue are working on a new edition of van Gogh’s entire written correspondence. This new scholarly edition aims to bring readers as close to the original letters as possible. The edition contains parallel translations and annotations in English and presents the latest findings relevant to the letters. This first complete edition of the more than 800 surviving letters written by van Gogh will appear online as well as in print in 2009.

## **PUBLIC PROGRAMS**

A symposium devoted to the dynamic relationship between the artists and Bernard's role in establishing the legend of van Gogh is scheduled for September 29, 2007. Panelists will include Morgan exhibition curator, Jennifer Tonkovich and catalogue authors Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker of the Van Gogh Museum.

The Morgan will offer a number of special programs held in conjunction with *Painted with Words*. Please check [www.themorgan.org/public](http://www.themorgan.org/public) after August 1, 2007, for a schedule of events.

## **THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM**

A complex of buildings in the heart of New York City, The Morgan Library & Museum began as the private library of financier Pierpont Morgan, one of the preeminent collectors and cultural benefactors in the United States. Today it is a museum, independent research library, musical venue, architectural landmark, and historic site. Nearly a century after its founding, the Morgan maintains a unique position in the cultural life of New York City and is considered one of its greatest treasures. With the 2006 reopening of its newly renovated campus, designed by renowned architect Renzo Piano, the Morgan reaffirmed its role as an important repository for the history, art, and literature of Western civilization from 4000 B.C. to the twenty-first century.

## **GENERAL INFORMATION**

The Morgan Library & Museum  
225 Madison Avenue, at 36th Street, New York, NY 10016-3405  
212-685-0008  
[www.themorgan.org](http://www.themorgan.org)

## **HOURS**

Tuesday–Thursday, 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; extended Friday hours, 10:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; closed Monday, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day. The Morgan closes at 4 p.m. on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve.

## **ADMISSION**

\$12 for adults; \$8 for students, seniors (65 and over) and children (under 16); free to Members and children 12 and under accompanied by an adult. Admission is free on Fridays from 7 to 9 p.m. Admission to the McKim rooms is without charge during the following times: Tuesday, 3 to 5 p.m.; Friday, 7 to 9 p.m.; Sunday, 4 to 6 p.m. Admission is not required to visit the Morgan Shop.

## **PRESS CONTACTS**

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