

## **VAN GOGH'S TRUE COLOURS**

*(An abridged version of a published article inspired by the exhibition 'The Real Van Gogh - The Artist & His Letters', at The Royal Academy in January 2010)*

A graphologist can only analyse and interpret frozen snapshots in time. However, the collection of letters (ranging from 1875 until Vincent van Gogh's death in 1890 – *see full article*) takes us on a journey through the latter stages of the artist's life and means we are able to piece together a personality profile in chronological order – not only from the perspective of the *content* of the correspondence, but by *analysing the text* itself. In essence, each piece of handwriting is rich in revealing the character, both conscious and unconscious of the man. They bear testament to his evolution, his changing moods and behavioural patterns. As a whole jigsaw, we are able to see the real man behind the myth and set a record straight into the bargain. Was Vincent van Gogh as mad as a box of frogs, or a genius and misunderstood? Was he needy or independent? Was he reckless, restless and unreflective? To what degree was he influenced by society and the world around him? And does it matter?

It is indeed true that Vincent van Gogh's life swung like a pendulum - from paying lip service to being a prosaic and conventional business man – to puritanical self denial – to obsession with creative expression, which finally brought him to his knees. He was intoxicated with the world around him and yet he lived life by a huge dose of reality. Somewhere along the way he fused his opposing abilities – of objectivity and subjectivity, with intelligence and creative talent - long enough to achieve something that would leave a hallmark on the world for centuries to come; benefiting people from all echelons of society, and exposing truth on many different levels. It should be noted that although van Gogh had a high intellectual capacity, possessed a certain flair and independent style that would *not* be molded by conventional teaching; his final works were produced as a result of sheer hard honest work.

The journey that led him to produce this art work was deeply pitted with sometimes unendurable obstacles. A once-upon-a-time gentle, caring human being became someone determined and obsessive, frustrated and volatile, full of angst and loneliness. All because he pursued his *métier* to the exclusion of virtually everything else in life. He refused to deviate from his path and never allowed himself to conform or be distracted by the general rules that apply to society. His final works were produced as a result of sheer hard honest work. He only became mad because he put himself under so much pressure, and because he was osmotically and dangerously influenced by everything and everybody around him. Everyone played their part, and Vincent was like a time bomb, ticking and waiting to go off. Part of the problem was that he never understood himself. Certainly he was never understood by others. He was born before his time. He marched to a different drum beat, and alienated people by his eccentric behaviour. In truth, he was a humanitarian and selflessly sacrificed himself for a curtailed life's work of self expression.

As a nation we are intrigued with Vincent van Gogh – the 'real' man, his life, his death, and all the variations and nuances of living in between – to such an extent that our fascination almost overshadows his work – which ironically was the real meaning of his life. We know that as a man he never understood himself, but he was happy to remain an enigmatic character, since it was never about himself. And so if anything can be gleaned from analysing his handwriting, it is this – Vincent was a generous, caring, thoughtful and brilliant man who was influenced and inspired by the natural world around him. When he did a job, he wanted to do it well. He was strongly motivated to share his insights and creativity with his fellow man. He lived and breathed his work. He was truly a painter for the people – he wanted everyone to see what he could see, to understand and feel everything he saw and felt, and to be affected by colour and poverty and see beauty in ugliness. By analysing the man too much, we are missing the point. So perhaps we could all just settle down and enjoy the paintings. It's what he would have wanted.