

## Vincent van Gogh: *Missionary to the Coalminers*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Vincent van Gogh is one of the best-known western artists. People around the world are familiar with his innovative Post-Impressionist paintings, particularly his intense self-portraits. In spite of his artwork's renown, however, the public knows very little about van Gogh's early life. Few people realize he had great religious faith and, before he turned to painting, he spent years trying to become a Christian minister and missionary. This essay explores this turbulent stage of van Gogh's personal development by analyzing enlightening contemporary letters written by Vincent and his family members. This was not a minor, preliminary chapter in Vincent van Gogh's biography; rather the letters reveal religious beliefs and a desire to serve others were primary motivating factors of his entire life.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Belgium, coalminer, Vincent van Gogh, evangelist, missionary, Borinage*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) is among the most famous western artists; his idiosyncratic modernist style is immediately recognizable. Although van Gogh's career as an artist spanned only ten years, his major works have become iconic and highly coveted by international collectors and museum curators. Several of van Gogh's Post-Impressionist paintings have sold for more than US\$100 million, adjusted for inflation (see, for example, Vogel 2005). Still, in spite of his fame, the public knows very little about van Gogh's early life. Few realize that he was a man of great religious faith or that, before he turned to painting, van Gogh dreamed of becoming a Christian minister and missionary.

Vincent van Gogh was born and raised in Groot-Zundert, a village in the largely Catholic Brabant region of the southern Netherlands. His mother, Anna Cornelia van Gogh, *née* Carbentus (1819-1907), was an intensely religious woman who oversaw the homeschooling of her six children. Vincent was the eldest and he was closest to his younger brother Theo, who was born in 1857. Vincent deeply respected his father, the Reverend Theodorus van Gogh (1822-1885), and wanted to please him. Vincent's father was a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church. Theodorus' own father (Vincent's grandfather) was also a Dutch Reformed pastor. In fact, the van Gogh family had produced clergymen in each succeeding generation throughout the Netherlands' Protestant Reformation, which began ca. 1525. The Reverend Theodorus van Gogh encouraged his son's interest in theology and his wish to become a clergyman.



**Figure 1**

Photograph of Vincent van Gogh, 1873.  
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When he was in his mid-twenties (fig. 1), Vincent devoted himself to studying theology and missiology, in hopes of becoming an ordained minister and missionary. For a variety of personal reasons, however, his pursuit of a career as a pastor ultimately proved unsuccessful. As an adult, Vincent wrote hundreds

of enlightening letters to his brother Theo that have survived to this day. This essay examines this turbulent stage of Vincent van Gogh's life, through probing the thoughts he conveyed in his contemporaneous letters.

## II. UNIVERSITY EXAMINATIONS

Vincent wanted to study theology at the University of Amsterdam, so he moved to the capital city in May 1877 to prepare for the entrance examinations. Three of his uncles lived in the city, including his paternal uncle, Johannes "Jan" van Gogh (1817-1885). Jan van Gogh was director of one of Amsterdam's naval dockyards, and he provided Vincent a study-bedroom in his home. From the early morning until late in the evening, Vincent diligently studied Biblical exegesis, Christian history, and philosophy. The classicist scholar, Maurits Benjamin Mendes da Costa (1851-1938) tutored him on ancient Greek and Latin. Vincent wrote to Theo, "It's an amazing amount that one has to know, and even though [my tutors] try to reassure me, it constantly gives me an indescribably strong feeling of fear" (Jansen 2009: 141 Br. 1990: 140 | CL: 119). On weekends, Vincent found time to assist at a *Sunday school*, where he honed his capacity to teach.

The English social reformer, Robert Raikes (1736-1811) was instrumental in developing the modern Sunday school movement (Laqueur 1976). Before the advent of public school systems, Protestant denominations invited children and young people from the local parish who could not afford private education to attend classes usually held weekends on the church premises. The children received a general education, acquired vocational skills, and took lessons on Christian principles and the Bible. Vincent wrote about assisting at a Sunday school in Bardesteeg, which is now part of Amsterdam's notorious "red light district."

"At one o'clock, I had to be at a Sunday school given by an English minister [August Carl Adler (1835-1907)] in Bardesteeg, he has a small but very respectable old church there. The school, though, was held in a small room where the light had to be lit even at that hour. There were perhaps some twenty children from that poor neighbourhood. ... Was received with kindness and hope to go there again sometime" (Jansen 2009: 141 Br. 1990: 140 | CL: 119).

In fact, Vincent did return to the Sunday school at Bardesteeg several times during the spring of 1878, and even hung his chalk drawings of "the Holy Land" on the dimly-lit walls of the classroom, to aid the children's Bible lessons (see Jansen 2009: 142 Br. 1990: 141 | CL: 120). In April 1878, Vincent wrote to Theo, "It's only a very small light, the one in the room of the Sunday school in Bardesteeg, let me keep it burning [an apparent reference to Leviticus 6: 13]; in any event, if I don't do it, I don't think that Adler is the kind of man who would let it go out" (Jansen 2009: 143 Br. 1990: 142 | CL: 121). This was Vincent's first experience teaching underprivileged Bible students in a cramped, darkened environment; however, he would have many similar experiences in the near future.

Vincent augmented his studies by attending services at various international churches in Amsterdam. Foreign preachers often came to Amsterdam seeking funding for evangelical missions. In late February 1878, a minister named Monsieur Dussauze of Sens, France, gave a sermon in the Eglise Wallonne (or Walloon Reformed Church, a denomination of the Dutch Reformed Church). Dussauze was a representative of the Société Évangélique de France and he described his mission to the factory workers of Sens. Monsieur Dussauze's sincerity impressed Vincent. "[A]lthough he wasn't especially eloquent as far as ease of expression goes, and though one even noticed how difficult it was for him and a little awkward, as it were, his words were moving nonetheless, because they came from the heart, and that alone has the power to make an impression on other hearts" (Jansen 2009: 141 Br. 1990: 140 | CL: 119).

Vincent's parents and his youngest siblings, Cornelis ("Cor") (1867-1900) and Willemien ("Wil") (1862-1941), lived in Etten, approximately 100 km south of Amsterdam. The Reverend Theodorus van Gogh served in Etten's Reformed Church and the family stayed in the church rectory in the town center. Occasionally, Vincent's father came to visit him in Amsterdam. In a letter to his brother Theo of February 1878, Vincent wrote,

"As you know, Pa was here and I'm very glad of it. ... [T]he most pleasant memory of Pa's visit is that morning we spent together in my study, looking over my work and talking about all sorts of things. You can imagine that those days flew by and when, after bringing Pa to the station and watching the train or even only the smoke for as long as it was in sight, I came back to my room and Pa's chair was standing there by the little desk on which the books and notebooks were still lying from the day before, even though I know that we'll see each other again quite soon, I broke down and cried like a child. ... [T]hings are beginning to get more and more serious as the exam approaches" (Jansen 2009: 140 Br. 1990).

As the weeks passed, Vincent grew increasingly pessimistic about his chances of successfully passing his university entrance examinations, and he apparently expressed these concerns to his father. In March 1878, the Reverend van Gogh sent a short letter to his son Theo, and wrote, "worry about Vincent weighs us down again, oh so heavily. I foresee, I think, that another bomb is about to explode. It is obvious that the wide-ranging nature of the study makes it more difficult than he expected [and] his heart again appears to be drawn by opposing forces. ... I fear that he has no idea of what study entails" (Jansen 2009: FR b968, 2 March 1878). In

his own letter to Theo, Vincent wrote, “It’s most certainly in doubt whether I’ll pass ... I notice that I have difficulty learning” (Jansen 2009: 141 Br. 1990: 140 | CL: 119)

### III. THE FLEMISH TRAINING SCHOOL

After sitting for his entrance examinations in Amsterdam (and believing he had failed), Vincent returned to the family home in Etten in the summer of 1878. An English clergyman and headmaster of a school in Isleworth, West London, named Thomas Slade-Jones (1829-1883) was visiting the van Gogh family and he discussed opportunities for Vincent in England and Belgium. Vincent was not yet willing to give up his studies or his hopes of becoming a minister. He was heartened to learn from the Reverend Slade-Jones that, unlike the University of Amsterdam, many English and Belgian religious schools placed primary emphasis on evangelism and communication, rather than academic prowess. Vincent knew in order to be an effective evangelist he needed to improve his public speaking skills. He wrote enthusiastically to Theo,

“What is required [at the schools in Belgium and England] is the talent to give easy, warm-hearted and popular lectures or speeches to the people, better short and to the point than long and learned. So less attention is paid to great knowledge of ancient languages and much theological study ... and more consideration is given to one’s suitability for practical work and one’s natural faith. ... In a word, one must be a *lay preacher* to succeed over there” (Jansen 2009: 145 Br. 1990: 144 | CL: 123).

A lay preacher is an evangelist or religious teacher who has not fulfilled all of the requirements to become a formally ordained cleric (van Lieburg: 2003) (fig. 2).



**Figure 2**  
Adolph Tidemand, *A Nineteenth-century Lay Preacher*, 1852.  
Public Domain.

In July 1878, Vincent, his father, and the Reverend Slade-Jones travelled from Etten to Laeken, on the outskirts of Brussels, Belgium, to visit the governors of the Flemish Training School (Vlaamse Opleidingsschool), an evangelical college. One of the founders of the Flemish Training School was Abraham van der Waeyen Pieterszen (1817-1880), a friend of the Reverend Slade-Jones (see Lutjeharms 1969). Van der Waeyen Pieterszen advocated the college accept Vincent, and he was allowed to enroll on a provisional three-month training period. If he showed promise, longer-term funding was available. Unlike at the University of Amsterdam, students at the college in Brussels could be appointed as ministers or missionaries without having first obtained a degree. Vincent returned to Etten for a month, and then began his training in Laeken in late August. His provisional period ran through November.

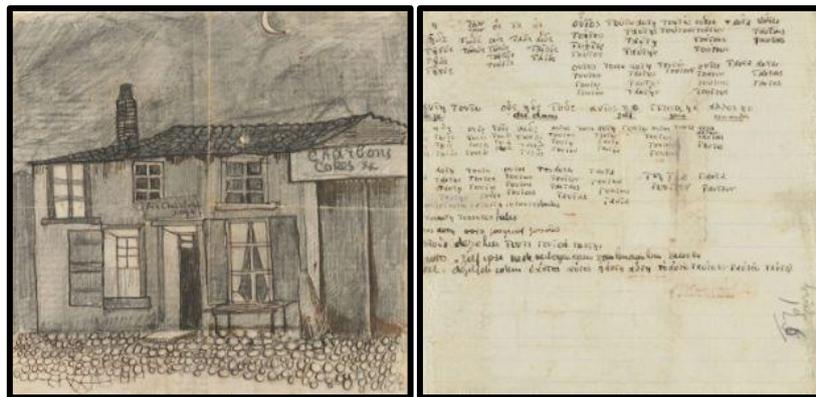
Although Vincent’s father still had reservations, he thought this was a situation where his son might succeed. The Reverend van Gogh wrote to Theo, “It seems, after all, that [Vincent] has a certain vocation for this kind of work, though I pointed out all the dark sides to him. But he remains adamant” (see Hulsker 1974: 31-32). Vincent’s mother suspected his difficult personality would be a hindrance (Jansen 2009: 147 Br. 1990: 146 | CL: 125). In a letter to Theo, Mrs. Van Gogh pondered, “How will things turn out for Vincent? We watch him go with trepidation. His ideas about everyday life are so unhealthy that it seems to me he won’t be able to teach people; may things turn out better than expected ... He is more withdrawn than ever” (Jansen 2009: FR b2433). Vincent’s sister, Anna (1855-1930) also wrote to Theo, “I hope so much that this thing in Belgium will succeed, but I fear that his extreme obstinacy and lack of human understanding won’t do him much good in his new situation” (Jansen 2009: FR b989).

When he was studying in Laeken, during the autumn months of 1878, Vincent rented a room in the home of Pieter Jacobus Plugge (1837-1931). Plugge was a member of the local church council, which supported the Flemish Training School. One of Vincent’s classmates came to the Plugge home, and he was surprised to see

how Vincent lived. Vincent refused to sleep in his own bed; rather he slept on a carpet on the floor. Vincent told his classmate he did this so he could properly empathize with the less fortunate (Deel 1952: 180-182; Jansen 2009: Jansen 2009: 148 Br. 1990: 147 | CL: 126). Vincent also took little interest in his personal appearance or the condition of his clothing, thinking these things should be of little importance to a man of God. On another occasion, Vincent explained that he neglected his appearance because of his poverty, his “profound discouragement,” and as a means to ensure the “solitude he needed” (Jansen 2009: 155 Br. 1990).

#### IV. VINCENT’S INTEREST IN PARABLES

During this time, Vincent began to take a greater interest in his own artwork and started making rough sketches of places that he found particularly meaningful. He sent a letter to Theo in late 1878 that included a simple sketch, which is known as *The Au Charbonnage Café* (fig. 3). Vincent had seen the café during the summer of 1878, when he took a brief trip to The Hague, in the Netherlands. Vincent wrote that his drawing was a type of homage to the “remarkable” coalminers he had seen at the café. “This little house is ... actually a simple inn right next to the big workplace where the [coalmen] come in their free time to eat their bread and drink a glass of beer” (Jansen 2009: 148 Br. 1990: 147 | CL: 126). The Au Charbonnage café was on a path that ran beside The Hague’s Willebroek Canal. Barges delivered coal to a gasworks plant located near the canal, and Vincent observed coal porters carrying sacks of coal from the barges to the gasworks.



Figures 3, 4

*The Au Charbonnage Café* (recto); *Greek conjugations* (verso), November 1878.

On the back of the sketch, Vincent practiced writing Dutch translations of ancient Greek pronouns that are found in early copies of the Bible’s New Testament (fig. 4). The University of Amsterdam’s entrance examinations required a basic ability to translate ancient Greek and Hebrew texts (Jansen 2009: 139 Br. 1990: 138 | CL: 117). It is interesting to note that, in this letter, Vincent links the daily life and work of coalminers with the Christian message of salvation found in the New Testament. Within a few weeks, he would make the decision to become a missionary to the coalminers. A few of the Greek terms Vincent translated are from the thirteenth chapter of the New Testament’s Gospel of Luke. In late 1878, Vincent was working on a sermon concerning the “parable of the barren fig tree,” which is found in Luke 13: 6-9. As he would do later on with his paintings, Vincent poured all of his energy into his sermons. His sermon about the “parable of the mustard seed” (Mark 4: 30-32), for example, was at least twenty-seven pages long (Jansen 2009: 146 Br. 1990: 145 | CL: 124), though the parable itself is only sixty words long.

Parables are simple stories about everyday situations that Jesus told his followers to illustrate moral and spiritual lessons. The Christian Bible’s Gospel books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record dozens of Jesus’ parables. In his letters, Vincent frequently noted the relevance he sensed parables had for his own life and aspirations. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus compared the kingdom of God to “a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (Mark 4:30-32, ESV). The influential Reformation theologian, John Calvin (1509-1564) commented on this parable, “The Lord opens his reign with a feeble and despicable commencement, for the express purpose, that his power may be more fully illustrated by its unexpected progress” (see Garriott 2020). Perhaps Vincent saw himself and his aspirations to be a minister as metaphorically related to the humble mustard seed, which grows into something significant and useful.

Jesus relates the “parable of the barren fig tree” in the Gospel of Luke:

“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down’”(Luke 13: 6-9, ESV).

Like the mustard seed, fig trees need proper conditions to flourish (rich soil, sufficient water, etc.). A healthy, mature fig tree produces valuable, mineral-rich fruit, which can be dried and carried around for months. When fig trees do not produce fruit, however, they waste valuable resources (fertile soil) and are destroyed. Jesus’ parable teaches that although God is merciful and patient, he demands results (Pianzin 2008: 235-237). For a seemingly impatient and impetuous person like Vincent, the demand for results caused great stress.

When he was studying in Amsterdam, Vincent fretted that even if he successfully completed his entrance examinations, his preparations to become an ordained clergyman “would take another six years at the very least. [And those years would be filled striving to obtain] great knowledge of ancient languages and much theological study,” rather than preparing for “practical work” based on “one’s natural faith” (Jansen 2009: 145 Br. 1990: 144 | CL: 123). Perhaps Vincent feared that, like the fig tree in Jesus’ parable, he would be “cut down” before he could produce good fruit. That was one reason Vincent opted to attend the Flemish Training School, which had a briefer program of study and a more applied curriculum. Unfortunately, though, Vincent failed his university entrance examinations and he could not complete his studies in Brussels.

## V. THE BORINAGE

In November 1878, the administrators of the Flemish Training School informed Vincent that he would not receive longer-term funding. After receiving the decision, Vincent took a long walk through Brussels in the evening. He realized he had reached another turning point, and he needed to go in a new direction. Vincent noticed the laborers in their workshops and he thought of a verse in the Gospel of John: “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work” (John 9: 4, KJV). In a letter to Theo, Vincent wrote,

“You surely know that one of the ... fundamental truths ... of the entire Bible, is ‘the light that dawns in the darkness’ [see Isaiah 9: 2 and Matthew 4: 16]. Well then, who will most certainly need it, who will have an ear to hear it? Experience has taught us that those who work in darkness, in the heart of the earth like the mine-workers in the black coal-mines, [they] are very moved by the message of the gospel and also believe it. In the south of Belgium ... there is a region called the Borinage ... The Borins do nothing but mine coal. ... [D]aylight hardly exists for [the coalminer] ... he scarcely enjoys the sun’s rays except on Sunday. ... [But] he’s used to this way of life, and when he goes down the pit, his hat topped with a little lamp whose job is to guide him in the darkness, he entrusts himself to his God Who sees his labours and Who protects him, his wife and his children. ... I should like to go there as an evangelist. ... [M]ay God point me to a place where I can be active as an evangelist in the way we spoke about, by preaching the gospel to the poor, thus to those who have need of it and for whom it is suited to perfection, and devoting my time during the week to teaching” (Jansen 2009: 148 Br. 1990: 147 | CL: 126).

Vincent left Laeken, and the home of Pieter Jacobus Plugge, for southern Belgium in early December 1878, to become an evangelist and missionary in the Borinage. Although he may have felt out of place, Vincent wrote to his father that when he arrived he had been received “with kindness by many people” (Jansen 2009: FR b2448). Benjamin Vanderhaegen (1824-1905), an evangelist in the community of Pâturages near a village called Petit-Wasmes, was one of the people who welcomed Vincent (Jansen 2009: 149 Br. 1990: 148 | CL: 127). Vanderhaegen helped Vincent rent a room in the home of a farmer named Jean Baptiste Denis (1825-1893) in Petit-Wasmes (Jansen 2009: 149 Br. 1990: 148 | CL: 127). Each night, Vincent gave Bible lessons to Mr. Denis’ children, and therefore he was only required to pay thirty francs per month for his lodgings. The winter of 1878-1879 was particularly cold, yet Vincent had a ready supply of coal and a coal-burning stove in his room, and he was provided with meals of “simple but healthy fare” (Jansen 2009: FR b2448).



**Figure 5**  
*Coalmine in the Borinage*, watercolor, 1879.  
Public Domain.

Vincent did not produce much artwork during this period, but he did paint a small watercolor showing one of the Borinage's largest coalmines (probably the Charbonnage de Marcasse, fig. 7). In the center of the image, Vincent placed a small, solitary figure dressed in blue. The man standing in the midst of the bleak environment may symbolize Vincent's loneliness and growing sense of isolation (fig. 5). Vincent van Gogh is known for reflecting emotions and ideas in his art, rather than simply representing the natural world. Vincent's other works of this period were illustrations. In his free time, he drew large thematic maps of Palestine, which Vincent thought could be of use to schools and confirmation classes – and which he hoped he could sell to help support himself (Jansen 2009: FR b2448). Unfortunately, none of these maps has survived.

Vincent's father had labored assiduously to coordinate his new situation, by sending letters of recommendation to the Reverend Pierre Péron, an administrator with the Belgian Union of Protestant Churches (Eglise protestante unie de Belgique). Immediately upon arriving in the Borinage, Vincent was put to work. Before the end of December, he had delivered several sermons in a large Protestant meetinghouse and conducted Bible-readings in coalminers' homes. His sermons were on the "parable of the mustard seed" and the "parable of the barren fig tree" and, because it was the Christmas season, he spoke about the birth of Jesus and the theme of peace on earth as well (Luke 2: 14) (Jansen 2009: 149 Br. 1990: 148 | CL: 127).

Vincent was fluent in Dutch, English, and in French, which was widely spoken in southern Belgium. Vincent wrote to Theo, "The mine-workers' language is not all that easy to understand, but they understand normal French well. If one can speak it rapidly and fluently, then it naturally resembles their dialect. ... At a gathering this week I spoke [in French] on the [sixteenth chapter of the book of Acts]" (Jansen 2009: 149 Br. 1990: 148 | CL: 127). Acts 16 describes an event during one of the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys. Paul was on an evangelical tour of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) when a vision appeared to him in the night. In the vision, a man of Macedonia (modern Greece) appeared and begged Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul writes that after he had seen the vision, he immediately "sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16: 9-10, ESV). Vincent wrote to Theo that when he spoke to the mine-workers about Paul's vision,

"They listened attentively when I tried to describe what that Macedonian was like who needed and longed for the comfort of the gospel and the knowledge of the Only True God. How we should imagine him as a worker with signs of sorrow and suffering and fatigue on his face ... How Jesus Christ is the Master who can strengthen, comfort and enlighten a man like the Macedonian, a workman and labourer who has a hard life. Because He himself is the great Man of Sorrows [see Isaiah 53: 3] ... minding not high things, but condescending to men of low estate [see Romans 12: 16], learning from the gospel to be meek and lowly in heart" (Jansen 2009: 149 Br. 1990: 148 | CL: 127).

Vincent's statement indicates that he saw his mission to the Borinage coalminers as akin to the Apostle Paul's missionary journey to the Gentiles (or non-Jews) of ancient Greece. Paul's first century A.D. work among the Macedonians and Greeks was the first Christian mission to the non-Jewish world, and it completely altered the course of European history (see, for example, Green 2010). Vincent also consciously saw it as his duty to emulate Jesus Christ's outreach to the humble people of the world. In the book of Matthew, Jesus proclaimed, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ... Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5: 3, 5). Vincent's letters reflect his desire to serve the downtrodden and lowly members of society.

In January 1879, Vincent wrote letters requesting an extended appointment in the Borinage to the Belgische Evangelisatie-Comité van de Bond van Kerken (Belgian Evangelization Committee of the Association of Churches), a wing of the Belgian Union of Protestant Churches. Abraham van der Waeyen Pieterszen, who

had previously helped Vincent gain admittance to the Flemish Training School, brought his request before the committees funding council. Van der Waeyen Pieterszen described Vincent as a “devout young man, completely devoted to work, [who] would make a good Bible reader and would do useful work in that capacity, in Wasmes and Warpignies” (Brussels 1879). Based upon that recommendation, the Committee appointed Vincent to a six-month position, albeit with a meager salary of 50 francs per month.

Soon after Vincent’s extension, his father came for a visit. The Reverend van Gogh wanted to check on Vincent’s living conditions and, apparently, he wished to inquire from his overseers whether any problems had arisen. He met with three ministers supervising the Borinage mission. Vincent sent a letter to Theo about their father’s visit. Vincent wrote that he and his father had “walked through the snow and visited a miner’s family and saw coal being hauled up from a mine called Les trois Diefs [or the ‘three heaps of earth’].” Vincent speculated, “I believe that Pa received an impression of the Borinage that he won’t easily forget, as it would be with anyone who visited this singular, remarkable and picturesque region of the country” (Jansen 2009: 150 Br. 1990: 149 | CL: 128).

In the spring of 1879, Vincent was twenty-six years old, but his father still exerted considerable control over his affairs. Just a few weeks after arriving in the Borinage, Vincent grew weary of living in the home of Jean Baptiste Denis (fig. 6) and he wrote to his parents that he had rented a laborer’s cottage and intended to live there, alone. Unfortunately, the tiny cottage had no bed, no bedclothes, and there was no one available to wash his things or cook his meals. Benjamin Vanderhaegen and a few other members of the Wasmes church council visited the cottage and saw that Vincent appeared slovenly and was living in squalor, which caused them to question his suitability for his mission. Vincent’s parents were informed that if he did not improve his conditions he might lose his post (Jansen 2009: FR b2463). During his visit in February 1879, Vincent’s father visited the cottage and compelled his son to return to the Denis home. The Reverend van Gogh later wrote to Theo that he feared living alone would exacerbate Vincent’s “eccentricities” and he perceived “again, there are worries on the horizon” (Jansen 2009: FR b2460).

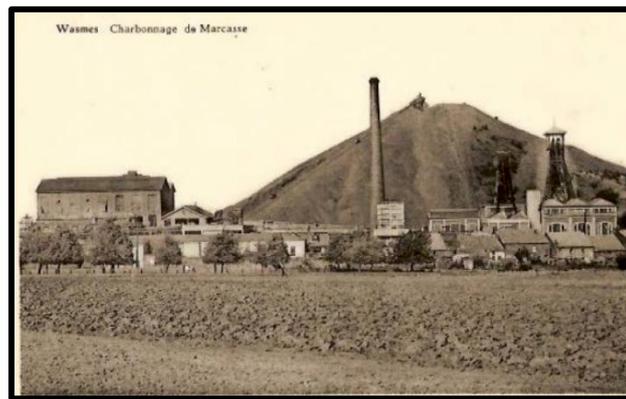


**Figure 6**

The former home of Jean Baptiste Denis, 2020.

As time passed, Vincent found the Borinage more and more appealing and he felt a growing sense of belonging. He wrote to Theo, “One has here a familiar feeling as though on the heath or in the dunes, there’s something simple and kind-hearted about the people. Those who have left here are homesick for their country; just as, conversely, foreigners who are homesick may come to feel at home here” (Jansen 2009: 150 Br. 1990: 149 | CL: 128). In order to understand the coalminers more fully, he decided to spend a day in their work environment. In a letter dated 16 April 1879, Vincent described spending six hours in one of the area’s “oldest and most dangerous” coalmines, the Charbonnage de Marcasse (Jansen 2009: 151 Br. 1990: 150 | CL: 129) (fig. 7).

“This mine has a bad name because many die in it, whether going down or coming up, or by suffocation or gas exploding, or because of water in the ground, or because of old passageways caving in and so on. It’s a sombre place, and at first sight everything around it has something dismal and deathly about it. The workers there are usually people, emaciated and pale owing to fever, who look exhausted and haggard, weather-beaten and prematurely old, the women generally sallow and withered. All around the mine are poor miners’ dwellings with a couple of dead trees, completely black from the smoke, and thorn-hedges, dung-heaps and rubbish dumps, mountains of unusable coal” (Jansen 2009: 151 Br. 1990: 150 | CL: 129).



**Figure 7**

Charbonnage de Marcasse, Wasmès, Belgium, ca. 1900.

Vincent looked after a miner who had been severely burned from head to toe in a gas explosion in the Charbonnage de Marcasse (Jansen 2009: FR b2459, 29 January 1879). He tended the miner's bandages and sat with him for hours each day during his convalescence. The miner sufficiently recovered so that he regained control of his hands, was able to take long walks, and eventually returned to the coalmine. Other Borinage coalminers suffered from typhus and various infectious diseases. In his letters, Vincent described visiting "many sickly and bedridden people, lying emaciated on their beds, weak and miserable ... they have little or no help, which means that there the sick are taking care of the sick." One ailing woman told Vincent, "Here it is the sick who nurse the sick, just as it is the poor who befriend the poor" (Jansen 2009: 151 Br. 1990: 150 | CL: 129).

According to the people who knew him, Vincent had an unorthodox, even abrasive, manner. In spite of his limitations though, to use the words of the "parable of the barren fig tree," Vincent did bear some good fruit. His failures at the University of Amsterdam and the Flemish Training School had given his parents justifiable reasons for concern, but they held out hope that he could find his direction. Several months after Vincent began his mission, Mrs. Van Gogh communicated her cautious optimism in a letter to Theo. "[I]f he yields on minor issues and forces himself to act, to live, and to learn to dress like a simple, ordinary person, he would indeed be able to earn his living being useful to others, giving us joy, visiting his family from time to time and making a good impression, letting his light shine for people" (Jansen 2009: FR b2484).

## VI. A FINAL NEW DIRECTION

Ultimately, however, Vincent's time as an evangelist and missionary was short-lived and again he fell short of expectations. The Belgian Evangelization Committee decided they no longer wanted his services. Although the committee commended Vincent for his devotion to the sick and injured and his spirit of self-sacrifice, to the point of giving his clothes to those convalescing, they noted certain critical shortcomings, including a lack of clarity and eloquence in public speaking and difficulty in organizing public meetings. According to the committee, these deficiencies rendered Vincent's performance as an evangelist, his "primary function, totally deficient" (Vingt-troisième rapport 1880: 17-18). In June 1879, Vincent received three additional months to find another position before his funding ceased. The Reverend Theodorus van Gogh wrote to Theo, "We are sorely tried by this and are literally at our wits' end" (Jansen 2009: FR b2487).

In late July 1879, Vincent left the home of Jean Baptiste Denis. He traveled to Brussels and met with Abraham van der Waeyen Pieterszen, the clergyman who had helped Vincent secure his appointment in the Borinage. Van der Waeyen Pieterszen could be of little further assistance. Vincent also showed up at the homes of some of his father's acquaintances in Brussels, but appeared very thin, unkempt, and desperate. They could not offer any long-term help either. His family learned of all this from a distance, and they were dejected. Vincent's father wrote to Theo, "We are tired and all but despondent ... I think it best to leave him to his own devices, but we watch him with trepidation and remain ready to come to his aid if necessary. We invited him to come home, but he definitely doesn't want that" (Jansen 2009: FR b2488).

Vincent returned to the Borinage with a desperate plan to re-establish himself as a lay preacher, independent from the official channels of support. He took a room in a guesthouse on the property of a coalminer named Charles Louis Decrucq (1822-1884) in Cuesmes (fig. 8), a village on the outskirts of the city of Mons. He stayed there for several unproductive months.



**Figure 8**

Home of Charles Decrucq, Cuesmes, Belgium.

During those months, Vincent and his family exchanged very few, if any, letters. The end of 1879 and the beginning of 1880 are a mysterious time in Vincent's life. He planned to continue evangelizing and performing benevolent works, but he spent most of his time reading novels and copying prints of artworks that Theo had given him. In the late spring of 1880, he finally wrote an enlightening letter to Theo that ran over four thousand words. In the letter, Vincent explained his frustrations and suggested the new direction his life would take, toward becoming one of the great modern artists.

Vincent began by clarifying why for months he had avoided his parents and the family home in Etten. "Father spoke to me of staying in the vicinity of Etten; I said no, and I believe I acted thus for the best. Without wishing to, I've more or less become some sort of impossible and suspect character in the family ... I'm inclined to believe it is beneficial and the best and most reasonable position to take for me to go away and to remain at a proper distance, as if I didn't exist." One senses Vincent's shame that he was unable to fulfill his father's wishes and successfully follow in his footsteps as a minister. "I don't know [how long] exactly, I've been more or less without a position, wandering hither and thither. Now you [may] say ... you've been going downhill, you've faded away, you've done nothing. ... [W]hat's your ultimate goal, you'll say. That goal will become clearer, will take shape slowly and surely" (Jansen 2009: 155 Br. 1990: 154 | CL: 133).

Then, crucially, Vincent suggested a link between his previous religious endeavors and his burgeoning desire to be an artist. "You must know that it's the same with evangelists as with artists. ... [E]verything in men and in their works that is truly good, and beautiful with an inner moral, spiritual and sublime beauty, I think that that comes from God ... [T]he last word of what the great artists, the serious masters, say in their masterpieces; there will be God in it. Someone has written or said it in a book, someone in a painting." Vincent resolved to continue "read[ing] the Bible, and the Gospels, because that will give you ... everything to think about," but indicated he was on the cusp of a new path as an artist, a path he would travel with all of his strength and energy. Finally, Vincent used metaphoric language to explain why he had seemed unproductive for the previous months.

"[T]here are idlers and idlers, who form a contrast. There's the one who's an idler through laziness and weakness of character, through the baseness of his nature ... Then there's the other idler, the idler truly despite himself, who is gnawed inwardly by a great desire for action, who does nothing because he finds it impossible to do anything since he's imprisoned in something, so to speak, because he doesn't have what he would need to be productive, because the inevitability of circumstances is reducing him to this point. Such a person doesn't always know himself what he could do, but he feels by instinct, I'm good for something, even so! I feel I have a *raison d'être*! I know that I could be a quite different man! For what then could I be of use, for what could I serve! There's something within me, so what is it! ... In the springtime a bird in a cage knows very well that there's something he'd be good for; he feels very clearly that there's something to be done but he can't do it; what it is he can't clearly remember, and he has vague ideas and says to himself, 'the others are building their nests and making their little ones and raising the brood', and he bangs his head against the bars of his cage. And then the cage stays there and the bird is mad with suffering. 'Look, there's an idler', says another passing bird — that fellow's a sort of man of leisure. ... But then comes the season of migration. A bout of melancholy — but, say the children who look after him, he's got everything that he needs in his cage, after all — but he looks at the sky outside, heavy with storm clouds, and within himself feels a rebellion against fate. I'm in a cage, I'm in a cage, and so I lack for nothing, you fools! Me, I have everything I need! Ah, for pity's sake, freedom, to be a bird like other birds! An idle man like that resembles an idle bird like that" (Jansen 2009: 155 Br. 1990: 154 | CL: 133).

In 1880, at the age of twenty-seven, and after spending years as a theology student, missionary, and evangelist, Vincent freed himself from his cage. He set aside his ambition to live like his father, to be his father,

and decided to become an artist. During the summer of 1880, he devoted his time to improving his skill as a draughtsman, by copying prints of works by the French Barbizon school, particularly the allegorical “peasant images” of Jean-François Millet (1814-1875). Like Millet, Vincent made it his goal to convey eternal themes through portrayals of everyday subjects. By October 1880, Vincent had left the home of Charles Decrucq and the Borinage for good, and he moved into a small artist’s studio in Brussels (Jansen 2009: 159 Br. 1990: 158 | CL: 137) (fig. 9).



**Figure 9**  
Vincent’s Brussel’s studio (1880-1881)  
was located in the building in the central foreground.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The rest of Vincent van Gogh’s life can be viewed as a new mission, in which he used his art to bring comfort to humanity and to convey cosmic, spiritual forces. The most famous painting of his first phase (1880-1886) was *The Potato Eaters*, of 1885, a social realist image filled with moralistic flavor (fig. 10). Vincent wrote that the family he depicted “have tilled the earth themselves with these hands they are putting in the dish ... they have thus honestly earned their food” (Jansen 2009: 494 Br. 1990: 497 | CL: 401). One art historian posited *The Potato Eaters* embodied the mysteries of the Christian Eucharist sacrament (Raskin 1990). Even the masterpiece of Vincent’s mature Post-Impressionist phase (1886-1890), *The Starry Night*, of 1890, contains religious meaning (fig. 11). Its swirling, nighttime sky is a dynamic, living space, a heavenly space. Art historian Lauren Soth described *Starry Night*, which was painted just months before the artist’s untimely death, as a disguised “religious subject,” which expressed “[Vincent’s] deepest religious feelings” about humanity’s relationship to God (Soth 1986: 308, 312). These and many other paintings show that, although Vincent made his mark as an artist, he never lost his sense of life as a spiritual quest or his memories of the years he spent as an evangelist and missionary.



**Figure 10**  
*The Potato Eaters*, 1885.  
Public Domain.



**Figure 11**  
*The Starry Night*, 1889.  
Public Domain.

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