

Vincent van Gogh

Seven years of painting

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Ruud Hobo

The story of Vincent van Gogh,
about his life as a painter
told by Vincent himself.

Due to high licensing costs, I unfortunately cannot feature Vincent's paintings in this book.

You can find Vincent's work at <http://www.vggallery.com>

The photos are my own.

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1 Foreword

This book contains the stories from two separate books: "Vincent in Drenthe," ISBN 9789465014593, and "The Journey of the Painter Vincent van Gogh," ISBN 9789465014982.

We do not, of course, know what Vincent experienced in Drenthe and afterward. The letters he wrote offer a limited picture. Unfortunately, the letters Vincent received from Theo, and his parents are no longer extant. In the letters written by Vincent himself, he does respond to passages from the letters he received. This allows us to deduce some things. We know nothing about the content of the meetings and conversations he had. These are events I have filled in myself. Therefore, the story is a mix of fiction and nonfiction.

This book is based on approximately 540 letters known from the moment Vincent arrived in Hoozeveer on September 11, 1883. It covers a period of almost seven years.

In part 1, in Drenthe, Vincent discovers what he wants to do with his life. And that is to be a painter. Then, his journey to realize that goal begins. You can read about it in part 2.

There are two important themes in Vincent's life.

- Vincent regularly suffered from bouts of depression. At the time, this was called melancholy. Vincent's only effective way to suppress his melancholy was to find distraction, for example, by painting.
- Since his dismissal from Goupil on April 1, 1876, Vincent has virtually never earned his own money. Consequently, he has always been dependent on what Theo and sometimes his father gave him. He is always short of money. Because of this, he cannot always paint and draw, which can cause his melancholy to resurface.

The structure of this book differs from almost all other books about Vincent van Gogh. In this book, I let Vincent speak for himself. He meets Alex de Goede, a traveling salesman, twice. Vincent tells his story to him.

After Alex de Goede bids farewell to Vincent in 1890, we take a big leap forward in time, to the year 2024.

In part 3, we search for traces of Vincent in Drenthe and then return to Auvers-sur-Oise.

The chapter titles indicate who is narrating the story.

Vincent's encounters with Alex de Goede are completely fictional. Yet, Vincent writes in the letter dated June 17, 1890: "I was pleased to meet the Dutchman who arrived yesterday."

Enjoy reading!

Ruud Hobo - Drenthe 2025

Part 1

**SPRING
1884**

2 Alex - The meeting in Nuenen in the spring of 1884.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Alex de Goede, 42 years old. I am a traveling salesman by profession. I trade in anything that can make a profit. This can be trading in wood, but also, for example, in peat, grain, or gin. Basically, anything that is in demand. Interesting emerging markets are the tobacco industry and the coal trade. The tobacco industry is mainly found in and around Eindhoven. I find this industry worth investigating further. After all, man has to be open to new opportunities.

Without boasting too much, I can say that I am quite good at my job. I know where there is demand or where it is almost certain to arise, and I capitalize on that. For example, I have set up a lucrative trade in peat. Amsterdam has a growing need for peat, and I have good agreements with the landowners in Drenthe to meet that need. That is why I have been going to Drenthe in the spring for several years. The peat excavation around Nieuw-Amsterdam will yield me a nice profit again this year. Because things are going so well financially, I do not have to work six days a week from early morning until late at night. This gives me time for other things. For example, I am interested in art, especially painting. Not to trade in, but out of pure interest. I am also interested in the story behind a painting or the life of the painter. Therefore, I like to visit museums at home and abroad. As a traveling salesman, I visit many places, and if there is a museum there, I can nicely combine my trip with a visit to that museum. Due to an ever-expanding railway network, many places are easier to reach. And much faster and more comfortably than by horse and carriage, as in my early years as a traveling salesman.

Today I am in Nuenen. Next week I am going to Eindhoven for business, but I decided to go to Brabant this weekend. Three weeks ago, I spent about four days in Southeast Drenthe regarding the peat trade I mentioned earlier. I stayed in Nieuw-Amsterdam at the inn of Hendrik Scholte. I slept in a beautiful room with a balcony. One evening, Hendrik and I got to talking, and when I mentioned that I was interested in painting, he told me that last year in October and November, a strange fellow stayed in the same room. For nine weeks. People still talk about it and laugh about it. That man thought he was a painter, but no one really liked what he made. Only himself. Who makes drawings and paintings of sod huts and other impoverished houses? One morning he disappeared

very stealthily, like a thief in the night. He was supposed to pay his outstanding debt that day. He had left a lot behind, as he was supposed to return in the spring with his brother. At least, that's what he told Hendrik. "Well, Alex, I did not believe that for a second. I should have seen it coming. He was waiting for a letter with a money order, and that letter hadn't arrived. As a result, he became increasingly nervous," Hendrik told me. And indeed, that fellow never returned. He did pay the outstanding debt with a money order from Nuenen, very surprisingly. Hendrik also told me his name: Vincent van Gogh. Unfortunately, Hendrik did not know if Vincent lives in Nuenen. I had to ask the innkeeper Hartsuiker in Hoogeveen. Since I had to go to Hoogeveen anyway to continue my journey by train, I did so. Indeed, Hartsuiker knew the address.

The story about that painter had piqued my curiosity. That's why I decided to go to Brabant earlier to look for Vincent in Nuenen.

So, at the beginning of the evening, I walk into the local pub in Nuenen. In a corner, there is a man with reddish hair and a reddish beard, sketching in a notebook. I walk up to him and ask,

"Are you Vincent van Gogh, the painter?"

He looks at me surprised and confirms.

"My name is Alex de Goede. I am a traveling salesman. I was recently in Nieuw-Amsterdam at the inn of Hendrik Scholte, and there I heard a strange story about a painter who had been there," I continue. "I would like to hear that story from your side as well. Purely out of interest."

"If you really want to hear the story, Alex, get two mugs of beer and come sit at the table with me," Vincent replies.

I get the two mugs of beer, sit down, we toast, and I listen...

The Hague

3 Vincent - The Hague, September 10, 1883.

"Let me begin my story on Monday, September 10, 1883, the day before I travelled to Drenthe." With those words, Vincent begins his story.

There are always days you will never forget. You probably have them too, Alex, and that tenth of September is one of those days. I remember that day like it was yesterday. It was drizzly outside for the umpteenth day, and a mist hung over the peatland. Seemingly relaxed, I stood there watching it, but nothing could be further from the truth. I had indeed often stood like that, with my hands on my back and a pipe in the right corner of my mouth. According to Sien, that was a characteristic posture of mine. And often, I would grab my sketch paper and chalk or charcoal to capture that view once again.

We had been living on Schenkweg for almost two years. First at number 138. Unfortunately, that house was not very good, actually a bit rickety. The rent was therefore favourable. Then at number 136. That house was much better, and I had enough space in that house for my own studio. You will understand that this was very important to me. But it was much more expensive, namely fl. 12.50 per month. It was in a new neighbourhood just outside The Hague. The neighbourhood is also close to the Rhijnspoor train station. Of course, I discussed this move with Theo first. You should know that Theo paid almost all my bills at that time. And he still does.

That Monday, I had no desire to draw at all. I was about to leave Sien, with whom I planned to marry, her two children, Maria and Willem, and The Hague. You understand, of course, that this was a very difficult decision for me. But the pressure from my family became too great. They wanted me to abandon my plan to marry her at all costs. By the way, her family was also against it. My painter friends like George Breitner and my former teacher Anton Mauve broke off their friendship with me, partly because I lived with a prostitute. The situation I was in was anything but pleasant, and as a result, melancholy took hold of me again.

I tried to postpone the decision to leave as long as possible. Maybe against better judgment. During sleepless nights, I kept asking myself, why... would not it be better to... maybe... I could not shake it. I kept

thinking about it. It was a real struggle for me. I did not want to make that major decision lightly. Try to imagine what it is like to be pressured to leave the woman you really want to marry. And leaving her would be forever! You know, Alex, it felt like another failure. Again, I was sent away. That had happened to me so many times before. I thought I finally had it together, and then it failed again. I wanted so much to have a normal family life, and with Sien and the children, which would be possible. I was already thirty years old. At that age, you already have an idea of what you will do for the rest of your life. I did not have that idea at all.

In the week before September 10th, I made the decision to leave Sien and The Hague for good. Because of the melancholy, it would be good for my peace of mind to go to Drenthe. At least, that has been impressed upon me several times. I needed peace in my surroundings but especially peace in my head because that attack of melancholy could otherwise get worse. I really did not want that. Of course, I recognized the signs. Going to a quiet environment would be much better for me. Even vital. By then, I was convinced of that. But it took a long time to come to that realization. I always hoped I could turn the situation with Sien around, but unfortunately...

On the dining table lay a map of Drenthe. It is a sparsely populated province. Here and there are some towns and smaller settlements of at most a few houses and farms. These settlements may have grown since the map is already a few years old. Places like Meppel, Hogeveen, Assen, and Coevorden are clearly smaller than The Hague and Amsterdam, where I have lived. And certainly, much smaller than places like London and Paris, where I have also lived. I had marked Hogeveen on that map with a red dot. East of Hogeveen, the word "Peatland" is written in large letters, with a canal running almost to the German border.

The painters from The Hague that I know have all been to the north of Drenthe. Mauve, for example, in Eext and Van Rappard in Rolde. I chose a different part of Drenthe. The choice for Hogeveen was therefore well-considered. There were a few reasons for that, Alex. Hogeveen is easily accessible by train. Near Hogeveen, you have the farmland that I am so fond of, but what really tipped the scales was the peatland to the east of that place. The designation "Peatland" on the map

made me strongly recall my childhood in Zundert. During school holidays, I took long walks with my parents and later with my brother Theo over the vast heathlands and peatlands. Theo and I talked extensively along the way about nature, faith, and the poverty that was visible everywhere.

I can almost hear you thinking, Alex: *"Sure, a 14-year-old boy and a 10-year-old boy, how deep or extensive could those conversations have been?"* Well, I can assure you that they were good conversations for us, and it created a tremendous bond between Theo and me. I had not yet experienced poverty myself at that time. My father was a pastor in Zundert, just as he is here in Nuenen now. He had a reasonable and steady income, and my family is also quite well-off. Just look at my uncle Jan in Amsterdam. Rear admiral is an important job. A few years ago, when I was living among the miners in the Borinage, I did experience bitter poverty, and how! I even once walked back and forth from Mons to Courrières with less than 10 francs in my pocket. A journey of three days and nights, in early March, in rain and wind, without a roof over my head.

My cousin Anton Mauve and my friend Anthon van Rappard had often been to Drenthe and spoke very highly of the beautiful nature in Drenthe. I had also heard that Max Liebermann, a German painter I admire, regularly stays in Drenthe. Maybe I could meet Liebermann there if he happened to be in Zweeloo at that time. Julius van de Sande Bakhuyzen also regularly stays at an inn in Exloo and is often found in Zweeloo. So, the idea of going to Drenthe, to an environment that fellow painters speak very positively about, was an attractive thought. I was looking forward to wandering around that area and taking a boat over one of the canals further into the peatland. Looking for the workers in the fields, the primitive life of the population, and certainly also the nature. I wanted to capture all of that with my drawings and paintings. The ordinary life of everyday people. The real life. Not those imagined landscapes that I had seen with many other painters and that you probably know as well, Alex. Yes, Hoogeveen would be my first destination in Drenthe. The next day, I would go there by train. I knew it would be a very long journey.

After the decision to leave The Hague and Sien with her children was made, there was, of course, a lot to arrange. Therefore, I first went to Smulders on Spuistraat to buy some paper and other drawing materials. I could not buy much. I simply did not have the money for it, and I knew I had to be frugal to last a while in Drenthe. Theo had

promised to send some money regularly in exchange for my drawings, paintings, and studies that I would make there. Being frugal was always good, anyway. At that time, I still assumed that I would stay in Drenthe for at least a year. My goal was to capture the nature and rural life in Drenthe in the four seasons. With this, I hoped to improve my drawing and painting skills.

I had acquired a domestic passport that was valid for twelve months. With that passport, I had the right to go wherever I wanted and stay as long as I needed. Additionally, I did not want to leave Sien and the children empty-handed. I gave her money for a few weeks' rent and to provide for their living expenses in the coming time. I had to wait and see if Sien would find decent work that could earn her enough.

That tenth of September would be a day of farewells. I wondered if I should visit Anton Mauve, my cousin by marriage. He lived just a few streets away, but I thought it might be better not to. Things were not going well between us. And still are not. We still have disagreements about views on art and especially the artist's profession. That is what happens with two "stubborn" figures who do not want to give in. Moreover, he had expressed himself very negatively about Sien and my relationship with her. Maybe I could go to Juffrouw Idastraat, where my painter friend Breitner had his studio. I had to see if I had time for that because a visit to George always took a lot of time. You do not leave George's place after just fifteen minutes!

While I was considering that, the postman came with a letter for me. Fortunately, it was another letter from Theo, my beloved brother. Theo's letters are always the pleasant and uplifting moments on difficult days for me. Especially when I feel the melancholy, which I have suffered from since my early youth, coming on. During those periods, I feel so incredibly listless, and then the words of my beloved brother are more than welcome. I was about to start reading the letter when Sien stormed in.

"Another letter from your little brother? That troublemaker. What business is it of his? He is far away in Paris but knows better than you. If he did not meddle in our lives, you would not leave, and the children would still have you as a father."

Sien was clearly having a challenging time with my upcoming departure, and she had these kinds of outbursts because of it. We were planning to get married and then still part ways... Yes, I understood her anger, Alex. In Sien's eyes, it was all Theo's fault. She thought I leaned too much on Theo's opinion and should have an opinion of my own. I would have liked to respond to her, but the words would not come. We had talked about it so many times. What more could I say? Sien did not want to stop her work as a prostitute. How many times have we argued about that?

"The children are already at my mother's, and you must leave this afternoon. I will go earn money myself this afternoon. Customers are coming. At least I earn my own money and do not have to hold out my hand like you do to your little brother."

That was one of the reproaches Sien often made to me. And yet we were crazy about each other. That did not make it any easier for us. Sien still did not want to see that she was forced into prostitution by her family. Before I could respond to that last outburst, Sien slammed the living room door shut, stormed down the stairs, and left the house. That's how it had often gone lately. Sien had those moods, but then it would be completely fine again a little later, and she would be sweet and kind to me again. But those moods, Alex, those moods...

I was sure that I had to leave, leave Sien and the children, leave The Hague, and go to the peace and space of Drenthe. But it was not easy. I had to sit down, pack a new pipe, light it, calm down, and read the letter. That was the most important thing for me at that moment. There was an extra 100 francs in the letter. That was very welcome. I could therefore buy some more paint, brushes, and paper. Of course, not too much, as I did not know how expensive life in Drenthe would be and what my stay would cost, if I could even find accommodation. Theo's words, as always, did me good. They gave me peace and support. I immediately wrote a letter back in which I, of course, thanked Theo for the money, but also outlined my plans once again.

After reading Theo's letter and mine a few times, I took my letter to the post office. Then I wandered through the city with the feeling that this would be the last time. I kept thinking back to all those afternoons I went out with George Breitner to draw people in, for example, the soup

kitchens and waiting rooms of the station. In Molenstraat, where Johannes Leurs has his shop for painting and drawing supplies, I regularly bought pencils and charcoal. When I entered the shop that afternoon, I was greeted with a broad smile. "Good afternoon, Vincent. What have I heard? Are you leaving The Hague?" And so, a conversation started in which I could explain the situation. By the time it got dark, I was back on Schenkweg and somewhat tense, I went inside.

There was still some food ready for me. Sien and the children were fortunately also home. I was afraid that she would stay at her mother's out of anger. After dinner, I packed some more things, such as my clothes and some drawing materials. I was basically ready for the trip. The week before, I had packed my paintings and studies and sent them to my brother Theo in Paris. That tenth of September was the last sad day in The Hague.

HOOGEVEEN

4 Vincent - From The Hague to Hoogeveen on September 11.

When I woke up the next day after a restless night, I noticed that Sien and the children were already up. In the living room, Sien and Maria, her six-year-old daughter, were talking about my upcoming departure, which was really going to happen that day. Fortunately, this time I did not hear any nagging or reproaches. There was more of an atmosphere of resignation and acceptance. That this is just how it goes and that nothing can be done about it. But we did feel that it could have gone differently. A feeling of regret and disappointment prevailed in both Sien and me. Maria did not understand any of it. Little Willem was just over one year old and therefore too young to grasp anything.

After a shared breakfast, I packed the last of my things. We spent the whole morning together, the four of us. I believe we took a walk and played some games with the children. I do not remember exactly. It all passed in a blur for me. At least there were no more outbursts or reproaches from Sien. The train was to leave in the early afternoon. I do not remember the exact time. After lunch, it was time. I took one last look around and then left the house with a sigh.

It was going to be a long travel day. On the advice of my friend Anthon van Rappard, I had planned it all out carefully. There is no direct train from The Hague Rhijnspoor to Hoogeveen. It is a journey of more than seven hours with frequent transfers. Meanwhile, I had to hope and pray that the connections in Utrecht and Zwolle with the different railway companies would go smoothly, otherwise, I would not reach Hoogeveen that day. There might be a cow on the tracks somewhere, or a shepherd with his flock of sheep, or the stoker might not be able to get the boiler to run properly. This could cause the train to slow down and not reach the top speed of twenty kilometers per hour. As a result, I might arrive too late at the transfer station. And that was not a pleasant prospect, no, that would be a disaster. You, as a traveling salesman, know all about that, of course.

We lived close to the Rhijnspoor station. Sien and the children naturally came with me to the station where the train was already ready for departure. After a final hug, I got on, and as the train left, my Drenthe adventure began. Would I ever see Sien again? I hoped so, but

honestly, I did not expect it. I had promised to give my address in Hoogeveen to the carpenter who lived next door. He would then pass the address on to Sien so we could write to each other. But I did not really expect that.

The journey was indeed long and tiring. I did some sketching along the way, smoked several pipes, and stared out the window a lot. Constantly wondering what the future would bring. The journey was monotonous, but I found the Veluwe after Amersfoort station very beautiful. The beautiful nature with all those different shades of green and brown reminded me of the paintings of the Barbizon painters. Paintings of famous painters such as Dupré, Corot, Rousseau and Millet. Paintings that I often saw during my time with Goupil in Paris.

Upon arrival in Hoogeveen, it was already dark. On the platform, I stood a bit forlorn, looking around. Where should I go now? Fortunately, a man approached offering his services as a porter.

"Sir, shall I take your luggage somewhere? Are you being picked up or are you going to an address here in Hoogeveen?" he asked.

I replied that I was still looking for a place to stay. I did not know my way around this area.

"Well, sir, you are lucky. I have an inn with a room available," the man replied. *"The inn is nearby, on Toldijk, just a few hundred meters away."*

And so, I unexpectedly found accommodation quickly in Hoogeveen, close to the station, with innkeeper Albertus Hartsuiker. That was a great relief. It cost one guilder per day, including food and drink. One guilder is, as you know, Alex, quite a lot, but I had no choice that moment. I could, of course, inquire about other accommodations in a few days.

Albertus's inn was an old farmhouse where he lived with his wife, Catharina Beukema, and their three children. There is a spacious taproom where the inn's guests can sit and where meals are shared. I got the back attic as a bedroom and studio and was allowed to leave my belongings in the attic if I went out for several days. I only had to pay the lodging fee if I used the room. I found that very reasonable of Albertus. Fortunately, Catharina was still preparing the evening meal. They would only eat once Albertus finished his work at the station. The train I arrived on was the last of the day, so Albertus's work was done for the day. During the meal, joined by a few other guests, I heard various