

New drawing - forged etching

On June 16, 1890, or the day after, Vincent van Gogh was invited to lunch by Doctor Paul Louis Ferdinand Gachet, who had agreed to care for him should he require treatment. They had met one month earlier and became friends. Among Gachet's personal casual interests was etching, he owned a press. Vincent gave it a try with a copper plate that had been coated by the doctor. It was the only one he would ever make. Vincent sent off two copies of his print, one to his brother Theo, the other to his painter friend Paul Gauguin. In 1903, immediately after Gauguin's death, and with Theo having died six months after Vincent, in January 1891 —, this unattractive and contorted *Portrait of Gachet*, both technically and aesthetically of poor quality, was presented to the world by the doctor as "Vincent's only etching." This assertion was repeated by his son, and subsequently published in every piece of relevant literature thereafter.

Major objections are immediately raised as a result of reading the correspondence. Vincent talked of engraving projects when he mailed the two copies, and thus one can only conclude that he was satisfied with the results of his venture. Referring to the oil *Portrait of Gachet* — completed on June 3 — Vincent's letter to Gauguin announced that he had "a" *Portrait of the doctor* which is obviously a

contradiction if he was sending a second etched one. Gauguin acknowledges the receipt of the etching, and talks of Gachet in his answer, saying he had heard of him, but that he had not met him personally and makes no connection with the etching. Lastly, Theo said that he liked the proof and, instead of associating the etching with Gachet who had invited him for lunch a fortnight earlier, or even calling it "a portrait", he warmly congratulates his brother for "this drawing".

A new discovery, unpredictable albeit impossible to ignore, changes the situation completely. In 2003, Isabelle and Patrick D. were intrigued by an inscription which they thought they perceived behind the flaking silvering of a large mirror of a Louis-Philippe frame just acquired by the couple at a flea-market in Loiret. They removed the backing, made of a double layer of board and newspaper and discovered a striking *Portrait of Doctor Gachet*, naive, not very uniform in style or technique, but highly detailed which had been traced on the back of an engraving. It was signed "Vincent", dated 1890 and identified the sitter by his artist name "Paul van Ryssel" and, still more surprising, translated into the French "De Lille".

A careful examination allows the drawing to speak for itself, and it readily gives up its secrets. Its author is Blanche Derousse, niece of doctor's maid, friend of the son and pupil of the father who had taught her the rudiments of art. The drawing is not actually a forgery, but rather a kind of pastiche mixing various elements

taken from the Gachet family on the one hand and from Vincent's work on the other.

The scenario can be reconstituted without any hesitation. The idea for this pastiche came from two photographic plates; the first one was a photograph of the doctor and the second a detail of the hands from Vincent's *Portrait of the art dealer Julien Tanguy*. Having considered where to position the projection of these two images on her large sheet of paper, Derausse asked the son of the doctor to pose for her in the courtyard of the family home. She drew his body and the background but left out the hands and the head.

The head of the doctor, imposed on the drawing of his son's body which is far too large for it, corresponds exactly to two successive projections from the glass plate negative of this photograph of the doctor taken some twenty years earlier. The contour was initially drawn by holding the plate tilted, horizontally flipped, while endeavouring to connect the head to the son's body. Small errors and later adjustments set apart — the drawing finished with ink and touches of wash — the superposition is exact on the entire circumference of the face. With the second projection, the plate was moved and the inclination was slightly rectified in order to draw the eyes, the nose and the mouth with less deformation. Although the view remains essentially frontal, since one sees the interior of the nostrils, one has the feeling that the head is seen from above because the line of the eyes has been lowered,

now well below the top of the ears. The axes of the face are not superimposed, attesting to this double projection. The hands correspond exactly to a projection, very slightly distorted, of the negative glass plate of a detail of the hands of the large Portrait of Julien Tanguy with Japanese Prints, today in the Rodin museum in Paris. Vincent had painted it in 1887 when it belonged to the van Gogh family collection.

In March 1891, just before the collection was dispatched from France to the Netherlands, the painter Emile Bernard had photographed a number of canvases for the doctor. The use of a negative as a model for the hands is attested to by the precision of the contours and a number of shadow and light inversions: the hand in the foreground is darker; the "shadow" between the fingers remains white. Various corrections were made. To connect the hands to the body, the front forearms were clearly lengthened. The jacket had to be tightened at the level of the hips, leaving clear black traces. Gaps were filled up in various ways with elements picked up from various works by Vincent in the Gachet collection. The shirt collar which could not be copied from the photograph because of the presence of the bow-tie, was borrowed from Vincent's shirt in the *Self-portrait with flames*. The rhythm of brush-strokes on the left of the background of the *Self-portrait* was borrowed in order to model the lime tree tree's bark. The final obvious borrowing is the profile of Marguerite Gachet at the piano, placed on the right of

the doctor's head behind the window. Vincent had offered Marguerite the canvas which today is in the Basle Kunstmuseum. In spite of the Vincent signature, in spite of the date and subject, this composite portrait is frankly naïve, and far too weak to pass for anything but an awkward pastiche.

What the doctor's son masked behind the mirror in the early twenties and later reinforced at the back of the frame on the eve of the Second World War — the newspapers he inserted between the two provide us with these dates — is the Rosetta Stone of the Gachet studio output. It is clear from this evidence that the talent of the Gachet workshop for producing such pastiches using photographs as models, had to be hidden away, but it was essentially intended to keep the face used for the indisputable model for the single etching done by "Van Gogh's" out of sight. Various elements illustrate it. For instance, the double line” at the edge of the eye, a photographic accident, explains the two parallel lines in the drawing, which were left out in the etching. The etching is a work of the doctor who improved Drouse's drawing, removing many of her clumsy drawing errors; he stylized it, set the scene, aged the face with creases, added a wave of hair, thickened the eyebrows and imported a hand and pipe borrowed from a drawing which the Gachets attributed to the painter Norbert Gœneutte, but which is, most probably, a drawing by Drouse.

The promotion and marketing of the etching by the Gachets reveals their cynicism, with regard to how they commercialized their forgeries, re-introducing their newly minted, deceptive gifts. Other works, also executed by Derousse after photographs taken by Bernard, this time watercolours, became the models of copies offered to various institutions, such as the Portrait of the doctor and the Two Children, given to the Louvre, today in the Musee d'Orsay; the Park of the Asylum, given to Theo's son and today in the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam.

Other transformations done by Derousse were based on postcards, engravings, or directly from watercolors painted in situ... aping Vincent. The doctor's collection with its supposed "Cézannes" and dozens of drawings, etchings and paintings, was mainly comprised of forgeries and plagiaries after other artists.

The large drawing discovered behind the mirror not only condemns the etching and the works related to it — which are still supposed to be of inestimable value — but it also reveals the lesson that the misanthropist doctor wanted to give the world : the revenge of a man ignored intended to punish his "friends" for their covetousness. And this very drawing formally nullifies any arguments from those who were taken in by the Gachets and who did their best to believe that they could not possibly have been misled.

Owing to the quality of its structural support, the number of works involved, the fact that it is more than a hundred years old, and the astronomical figures associated with Vincent's work, this dupery is without question the largest art hoax ever uncovered.