

## **VAN GOGH'S LETTERS AS BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION SOURCE: A CASE STUDY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Van Gogh used widely letters as communication medium. However, in spite of their contents value, the letters are not usually considered in social researches. Considering the personal mails importance as research sources in the information current context, we aim to analyze Van Gogh's letters to his brother Théo, from 1888 to 1890 as biographical information source. For this analysis, we used the letters 534; 557; 558; 565; 566; 567; 568; 573; 576 as research sources (they were used as samples). Van Gogh's personal letters to Théo are analyzed and presented as biographical information medium spread. As a methodology, we use the matter study to research the issue. The conclusion of the analysis allows us to notice that personal letters clarify Van Gogh's life important events and circumstances that may be used in researches as biographical information source.

**Keywords:** Information Sources; Biographical Information Sources; Letters - Vincent Van Gogh.

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

Arts are influential on many people's life, such as sensitive and not indifferent people to painting beauty, poetry, images, and sound. Not rare there are those who absorb the work of art inspiration to do certain jobs. It's art's influence on life itself, as an action/reaction movement considering that, in Aristotle's idea of mimeses, art's the representation of reality. This is the incentive to this research accomplishment.

The represented artist in this study is the Dutch Van Gogh, by virtue of his troubled life and his reputation of being one of the greatest artists of all times and one of the most expressive post-impressionists.

The chosen period to be explored in this research was the one from 1888 to 1890, because it was one of Van Gogh's most productive periods. Van Gogh was in

hospital in a madhouse and ironically this was the most productive period of his career.

Van Gogh corresponded all his life with his younger brother Théodore Van Gogh and left letters that are by themselves works of art. His texts were, at the same time, poetic and philosophical.

To get further and considering the undeniable importance in the information context sources it's our duty to present these information general concepts and specify their characteristics to end in the letters context.

It's difficult to establish the common concept of what are the media; however, we can state that media are all kinds of documents that are useful to users in any way, regardless of their support or objects.

To Baccega (2002, p.12), a document is registered knowledge:

Information has decisive role in mankind's destiny change, since it's directly linked to the knowledge and development of every knowledge area, considering that all knowledge starts with some kind of information and it's constituted of information [...] So that society knowledge won't get lost and to make it possible of being shared, it's registered in a chosen support, such as a book, an image, a disk, and turns itself into a document.

This research tried to answer this question: Are Van Gogh's letters to his brother Théo Van Gogh, from 1888 to 1890, actually biographical information source? The study main objective was to evaluate the letters written by Van Gogh to his brother Théo Van Gogh, from 1888 to 1890 as biographical information source. To the execution of this research we selected among a great number of letters written by Van Gogh to his brother Théo Van Gogh the letters 534, 557, 558, 565, 566, 567, 568, 573, 576. We believe that Van Gogh's letters to his brother Théo Van Gogh, from 1888 to 1890, are actually biographical information source and can be used as life and work studies research data of this Dutch artist.

This matter analysis was chosen to be the used method because of its practical aspects, which make the research possible and emphasize events that were important in the artist's life and work.

## **2 IMPRESSIONISTS AND POST-IMPRESSSIONISTS: HISTORICAL CONTEXTS, ESTHETICS DEVELOPMENT AND THEIR INFLUENCE**

Theoretical arguments show that authors give privilege to information sources as ideas or information holders, in the same way they deal with the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh, especially emphasizing the letters mailed between this artist and his brother (the painting salesman Théo Van Gogh).

Information is also a discussion point. Its approach is supported on authors such as Le Coadic (2004), who presents in his studies information and its relationship with Science.

About the letters, they are emphasized as information media special transmitter. According to Gil (1994, p.161):

They say nowadays that letters might have low importance to researches, since people restricted the letters numbers because of the telephone and other media. Besides, it's unlikely that letters that show personal experiences will get to the researcher's hands. For this reason the personal mail use is considered as worthless in social research except for the historical letters.

Considering these pieces of information, it's possible to consider the letters that made the exchanged universe between Van Gogh and his brother Théo as 'historical'. This way, the samples analyzed in this research have considerable value, considering that they deal with documents with historical, artistic and literary characteristics. The analyzed mails were exchanged between the Van Gogh brothers in the historical period called Impressionism.

In the mid-19th century, art history shows a concept of what would be the impressionist esthetics. Its pioneers, those who started to value light through painting evolution and to suggest movement with colorful brushes were the realists, since the impressionist esthetics is directly connected to the realistic baroque esthetics (SERULLAZ, 1965).

Impressionism appeared around 1872 to 1875, when the painters Claude Monet, Sisley and Pissarro met again and gathered in France. This movement was stated in public in the 1874 exhibition. Some artists were frustrated with the official denial of their artworks and decided to do exhibitions in the photographer Félix Nadar's studio on their own.

The visible lack of final touch and its sketch characteristic caused the critics objections. These characteristics would be considered later by other critics as their difference and strength.

Post-impressionism, that is an impressionism influence, appeared from a following generation of the impressionism. Critics used the term to include the style variety from 1880 (impressionism final phase) to 1905 (emerging of *fauves*), and to describe and classify difficult categorized artists. Impressionism main representatives were: Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), as we can notice some of the main characteristics of post-impressionism in these painters' artworks.

Van Gogh had an impressionist influence, since he kept in touch with artists as Pissarro, Degas, Gauguin, Seurat and Toulouse-Lautrec. He also tried the Seurat divisionism technique, but soon he developed the style that left its mark on his artwork: strong, spiral and broad brushes.

People were prejudiced against Van Gogh's works because his was considered a madman. After his death, Théo tried to do a great exhibition with his artwork. When he tried to choose among his brother work paintings to exhibit, Théo wrote to Émile Bernard, on September 18th 1890: "The number of painting is enormous. I can't organize a series of paintings to describe his work" (2002, p.394)

Not long after Van Gogh's death, his brother Théo became paralyzed and was brought in a hurry to Holland. Hi told about his plans to do an exhibition paying tribute to his brother. Van Gogh would become extremely influential on artists that succeeded him: the *fauves*, expressionists and the first abstractionists.

Proença (2000, p.145), says that post-impressionist expression was used to specify the developed painting from 1886 to the appearance of Cubism, between 1907 and 1908. It's a movement that includes different tendency painters, such as Gauguin, Cézanne, Van Gogh and Seurat, that only identified with impressionism at the beginning of their careers.

We used in this research the quoted author categories, and Van Gogh is mentioned as a post-impressionist artist.

### **3 INFORMATION SOURCES**

It's widely known that in the contemporary world communication is the key to success in every working field and in good social contacts. Actually it's quite normal to say that we live in an Information Society.

According to Targino (2006), Information Society is characterized by the emphasis given to information and its access. It is also responsible for the deep changes in the production systems and consolidates the quaternary sector of economy. This economy sector includes all individuals, institutions, processes, products and information life cycle activities (from its beginning to its consumption), meaning that we are in a historical context where information is in all life aspects and sometimes the amount of information is bigger than the addressees capacity to absorb them. To value information validity it's necessary to understand what it really means.

In the face of this piece of information we find it necessary to establish the information concept. Defining the term, it's necessary to notice that it's impossible to include all subject questions but only to deal with some of the discussions and encourage other proposals to this subject.

According to Le Coadic (2004), information is a written, oral or audiovisual knowledge. We agree that information aims are knowledge and to absorb its meaning sense. Information has sense fact and a transmitted meaning to an aware being through a written message in a space-time media: electric sign, wave, etc. It's an inscription done thanks to a sign system (language). Sign is a language element that associates significance to a meaning: alphabetical sign, word, mark.

Mentioning the same author, information is in a document because it specifies the information holders. Every artifact represents or expresses an object, some idea or some information by graphic, sound, visual or icon signs. Among icon signs there are words, images, diagrams, maps, pictures and symbols. Depending on the support we can name them as paper documents or electronic documents.

Using this concept as a guideline, we can conclude that document and information source are elements difficult to differentiate because they don't have

remarkable value specifying forms, which means that the difference between them doesn't compromise their informative potential. There isn't a difference between document and information source.

This way, we conclude with these definitions: a) document: object that represents or expresses some idea or information; b) information sources: information holders.

As we notice, the above concepts comprehension confirms the conclusion above mentioned: document and information source, in spite of being different, don't have remarkable value specifying forms. Usually, information sources are classified as information register conventional and nonconventional sources.

According to Magalhães (2005, p.56), conventional sources are “[...] those that usually make up the public libraries and school collections. They are usually written sources, texts or not, that are different from the electronic information sources”. Books, magazines and CD-ROM are good examples of information conventional sources. According to Campos (1988), those sources that can't be bought in regular selling places and make the librarian waste time finding and buying them are classified as nonconventional information sources. In this context, letters must be considered nonconventional information sources.

#### **4 VAN GOGH: LIFE AND WORK**

Vincent Willen Van Gogh was born on March 30th 1853, in Zundert, a small Dutch village, His mother, Anne Cornelia Barbentus, had a tendency to draw and write. This might indicate that maybe Vincent inherits his talent from his relatives.

In 1872, Van Gogh and his brother Théo separated and started to mail each other. This event started the mailing sequence that deeply left its mark on their relationship. Since then Vincent started sharing everything with Théo. Théo besides being Vincent's brother and admirer was also his protector. During his whole life supported him and helped him to become a painter.

In 1885 Vincent left his family and his country forever after broken romances and dramatic events. He lived with Théo but because of his temperamental



personality and his excessive drinking they couldn't get along and Vincent decided to move out. In the summer of 1888 he got a studio in a property in Arles and in September he rented the whole building. At this building Van Gogh tried later to accomplish his Yellow House project: an artist's town that would allow them to live together and share ideas.

Théo was worried about his brother's mental illness and loneliness and tried to help him. He invited Gauguin to join this community with his brother but didn't want to get together with his friend in the south. He only accepted the invitation when Théo agreed to give him an allowance, besides the allowance he already gave his brother. Then Gauguin left to Arles and became Vincent's first and only friend in his community.

For a while, his sharing art dream was close to be accomplished but the differences in their personalities made a great difference in their relationship and in December 1888 Gauguin and Van Gogh had a serious discussion. On Christmas Eve Van Gogh threatened him with a knife. Gauguin ran away and left him disturbed. On a fit of rage caused by his friend, *un accès de fièvre chaude* (a fever fit), Van Gogh mutilated himself. At that night he cut his left ear. This act made him one of the most known artists of all times. It's impossible to know what really happened. There are many theories but two of them are the main ones: one says that his sexual intercourses were confused so he sent his ear to a prostitute with whom Gauguin got involved. The second theory is more accepted among artists and considered more logical because it emphasizes the discussion with Gauguin and the failure of his town. These events were dramatically recorded in the self-portrait with Van Gogh's ear bandaged.

This event was the end of the relation between the artists and Van Gogh's hopes for his Artists' Community because Gauguin went away. After this Van Gogh went crazy and was frantic. He was in hospital during a period of time. Doctors blamed his illness on his excessive work but Van Gogh ignored them and continued working. In spite of his constant madness he continued working. Aware of his illness, he hospitalized himself in May 1889 in the Saint-Paul de Mausole madmen's home in Saint-Rémy.

As he mutilated himself there are many theories about his mental health. Van Gogh was paranoid and schizophrenia made it worst. His doctors said that he didn't eat properly. They also considered that he could absorb toxic substances from the paints. No one knew Van Gogh's illness origin, in spite of his crisis he kept painting. He believed that painting would keep him sane. Vincent painted 200 paintings in 12 months.

In January 1890 he heard some good news: his painting *The Red Vineyard* was sold by 400 francs. It was the only painting Van Gogh sold while his was alive, moments before his death.

On May 18th 1890, Vincent left Saint-Rémy and Provence. He went to Auvers-sur-Oise, a village near Paris, supervised by his friend and doctor Paul Ferdinand Gachet (Dr. Gachet). Van Gogh's artworks are valued at millions but they also have artistic and historical worth.

More of a work of this artist has its value measured in tens of millions; however, one can't forget that in addition to monetary value, there are artistic and historical values.

On July 27th 1890 Van Gogh was in the wheat field of Auvers-sur-Oise shooting at crows. He was suddenly infuriated and shot at his own chest but the bullet got his groin. Still alive he went home and told no one about the event. His was found in his bedroom bleeding on the bed. Dr. Gachet saw that it was impossible to remove the bullet. Théo went to Auvers-sur-Oise as soon as he knew about it. When he got there he spoke in Dutch with his brother all day long. In the early hours of the morning, at 1:30 a.m. Van Gogh whispered "I want to leave" and died after he shot at his own chest. Théo couldn't deal with the pain and sadness of losing his brother and friend. He got paralyzed and died six months later, on January 21st 1891. He was buried in Auvers-sur-Oise next to his beloved brother.

Van Gogh's last letter to Théo was found after his death. Théo got it in his brother's pocket. It had an intense declaration: "[...] I take a risk in my own work and it ruined my sanity [...]" (VAN GOGH, 2002, p.386, letter 652).



Van Gogh's life was extremely troubled. The main events of his life are registered in the letter he wrote to his brother. Although his biography authors' didn't use only his letters, they are very important to clear this painter's life.

## **5 VAN GOGH'S LETTERS AS BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION SOURCE: VAN GOGH'S CASE**

Letters are a media that is no longer widely used since technology brought us globalization and the internet.

Modern life has undeniable practice but the practice offered by media such as telephone, Internet, cell messages and others didn't exceed the letters sophisticated aspects. Letters are more elegant, romantic and also fascinating.

When we analyze letters from the literature point of view it's possible to inform that they establish a dialogue with the readers. They can use them to find out about author's biographical aspects. In personal mails readers find statements, accounts and different period events.

Van Gogh lived at a time that the main at a distance mails were letters. By means of letters the artists provided information on his paintings and sent sketches to his brother.

In February 1888 the artist has moved to Arles in search of fresh air to dedicate to his art. The letters sent to his brother provide information on his project and mood. It's the letters power of information that make them the subject of this study.

According to Holanda (2001, p.136), letter is the "[...] written or printed information addressed to many people". This is the definition that interests in this study. However we state letter definition it's necessary to add the previous remarks on information source.

That's why it's necessary to have a formal requirement to qualify letters as biographical information source and adapt the studied documents in the information source concept. In order to consider letters as real biographical sources it's also necessary to analyze their contents and veracity.

It's easy to identify the formal requirement as we stated above that information sources are information holders. Van Gogh's letters fit perfectly in this concept that further consideration is unnecessary. However the material identification will be more challenging and in order to retrieve letters important information a value consideration will be necessary.

In fact this value consideration on trusted letters is essential. To deal with Van Gogh's letters biographical contents is necessary to state that subjects explored in this study are the ones found in his letters. We intended to widely research into the artist's life in order to choose among the samples themes. As we mentioned in Van Gogh's biography chapter, his life was extremely troubled.

We considered his desire to build the Yellow House (an artists' community), the fact the he mutilated himself and his mental illness as the most important events to deal with in this research. These events were categorized in topics.

## **5.1 The Yellow House**

Through Van Gogh's letters we can take part in his artists' community creation, the Yellow House. In the letter number 534 written in September 1888, the artist described the Yellow House to his brother. This letter shows us that Van Gogh liked to use details and was worried about creating a place especially to artistic creation. We can also notice that he had a great admiration for his friend. This gets clear when his describes the bedroom that he would have his brother only if Gauguin didn't show up.

By the way, when describing the bedroom (2002, p.267, letter 534) Van Gogh refers to the walls decoration and says that the "[...] bedroom [...] that will be Gauguin's (if he comes) will have white walls with yellow sunflowers". This detail is very important because sunflowers are very frequent in his artwork. When referring to the sunflowers paintings Van Gogh says: "Do you know that Gauguin likes them very much? Among other things, he told me 'that...is...the...flower' " (VAN GOGH, 2002, p.332, letter 573).

Van Gogh's admiration for Gauguin is evident in his letters and one of the reasons for the Yellow House creation was his desire to have Gauguin close to him, as the community director. The artist refers to the house and Gauguin in this passage: "He is a very interested man and I'm confident that we'll do plenty of things together. He'll probably produce a lot here and I hope to do it too" (VAN GOGH, 2002, p.296, letter 557).

Van Gogh had high hopes on his project. The Yellow House would represent a catharsis on his emotional life, as he wanted to bring artists together in some kind of retreat to live an alternative life. He was always distant since his childhood was unhappy. However, two months later, on December 23rd, we can notice that things turned into a different way and his relationship with Gauguin was troubled in the letter 565:

I believe that Gauguin was disheartened with the good city of Arles, with the small yellow house where we worked and especially with me. In fact both of us had difficulties to overcome. But these difficulties are inside us, not outside. I truly believe that he will either leave forever or stay forever.

This whole scenario where the project collapsed the Yellow House, perhaps never really been viable since the very Gauguin, one of the strong reasons for the idealization of the colony several times demonstrated resistance in taking ahead of what idealized Van Gogh, was adjective instability behavior of the artist.

## **5.2 Self-Mutilation**

In fact, the last mentioned letter precedes the fight between Van Gogh and Gauguin. This fight ended in the self-mutilation incident. So far no one knows the reasons that made Van Gogh cut his own ear. Gauguin described the incident in a better way in his book '*Before and After*'. Gauguin describes the event in it and tells how was to work side by side with Van Gogh in the Yellow House. He also describes how his friend's behavior was days before he mutilated himself.

Gauguin (2002, p.313-315) tells that they were at a café and after drinking absinthe, Van Gogh threw the liquid in his friend's face. Gauguin had to bring him home arm in arm with him. The next day Van Gogh apologized for what happened

but Gauguin decided to leave the Yellow House. At night, after Gauguin went for a walk after dinner, he heard some steps and saw Van Gogh following him with a knife. Fortunately he gave up on his plans and ran back to his house. Later, according to Gauguin, Van Gogh cut his own ear. Van Gogh's letter to his brother Théo don't clarify the reason of the mutilation but this don't make them less important as an information source. There are only theories about his self-mutilation because Van Gogh never talked about the reasons that made him do it. Anyway, the studied letters don't lack information and are great sources to those who desire to write this Dutch painter's biography.

Van Gogh himself avoided to talk about his reasons to cut his own ear. Sometimes it seemed like he didn't understand what happened. We can have this kind of conclusion reading this passage:

Let's talk about our friend Gauguin now. Did I scare him away? After all, why doesn't he get in touch? He must have left with you. By the way, he needs to see Paris again. Maybe he'll feel more at home there than here. Ask Gauguin to write me and that I always think of him. (VAN GOGH, 2002, p.318, letter 567).

As Van Gogh wasn't a writer it was easier for him to express himself through his art. He directly mentioned his mutilation in an 1889 painting.

The real reason that made him mutilate himself was never revealed. We only have Gauguin's words to tell us how was to live with this artist before the event as it was above mentioned. We can assure that this event made his mental illness even worst. This theme will be now analyzed from his letters to his brother Théo.

### **5.3 Van Gogh's mental illness**

At the start Van Gogh seemed as he didn't care for his mutilation, in spite of repercussions of this event in his life and mental health. This is clear in some of the letters passages talks mention his illness, such as: "Tell me – was my brother's Théo trip really necessary – my friend?" (VAN GOGH, 2002, p.317, letter 566); "How I regret that you were bothered with so little, I am sorry [...]" (VAN GOGH, 2002, p.318, letter 568).

However the mutilation event and its consequences were remarkable and it didn't take a long time until the artist himself realized his condition.

In the letter 576 written on February 3rd 1889, Van Gogh shows his initial innocence about what happened as he says: "When I left the hospital with Roulin I thought that was fine. Only *later* I realized I was sick". During January, the post-trauma month, his mental health didn't allow him to have a clarification about what happened and its consequences. Only in early February he realized his situation.

By the way, Van Gogh's studios usually emphasize this curious conscience that the artist had about his mental health. In fact, all the February letters talk about his illness and Van Gogh constantly confirms and questions his disease. It was in February that Van Gogh was in hospital for the first time to treat his mental illness.

Even before his went into hospital it was possible to notice some serious signs of mental disruption, as we can read about in the letter 576, from February 3rd 1889:

I must say that the neighbors are really kind to me. As everybody here suffers from fever (from the madness) we get along just like a family [...] Therefore I ask you to stop saying that I am okay.

In this passage it's possible to notice the artist's worries. He would even say that people were trying to poison him. This is the reason for the first time his was hospitalized because of his illness. Van Gogh's madness is one of the most interesting themes in this study as we deal with his personal letters as information sources, especially with those that mention his mental illness. The letters confirm his illness since he wrote them while he was sick and still working. He created most of his known artwork when he was in hospital (Starry Night, Saint-Rémy – June 1889, is for example one of his most famous paintings and it was created in the asylum of Saint-Rémy).

## **FINAL CONSIDERATION**

This study was based on Van Gogh's personal letters to his brother Théo from 1888 to 1890. We used them to go deeper in themes that are long before discussed and were important on this fantastic Dutch artist.

The specific studied events were his desire to build the Yellow House (an artists' community), the fact that he mutilated himself and his mental illness.

Could the letters clarify important events of his life? Yes. What was explained above is a possible clarification. Van Gogh's letters to his brother provide information on the artist's final days, since he committed suicide on July 29 1890 (actually, he shot himself two days before). The communication between the brothers was intense, so other documents of this period couldn't be a more important information source than the letters.

Besides, it's important to mention that a biographical research is a theme confrontation of themes that aren't always precisely solved because the biographical study objective demands a trustworthy information gathering. Van Gogh's letters fit in those requirements and are an extremely important information source.

So we can assure that the studied letters are great biographical information sources, after all, how could someone assume a Van Gogh's biography without using his letters?

The most fascinating theme analyzed in this study was the artist's mental illness because of its difficulties. The letters provided some important information on this theme. We couldn't find a better way to confirm Van Gogh's mental illness than his own writing about it. Another interesting aspect of the studied letters information power was to notice how the artist was aware of his own madness. This next passage is a good example for this awareness:

What consoles me is the fact that now I consider madness as a regular disease and I accept it as it is. But in the crisis everything I imagined seemed to be real. [...] Save me from the explanations but I ask you and Sir Salles and Rey to assure that in early this month I go there hospitalized (VAN GOGH, 2002, p.347, letter 585).

Another aspect that assures that Van Gogh's letters are genuine information sources is the confession and intimacy aspects of them.

At last we can state that Van Gogh's letters to his brother Théo from 1888 to 1890 are great biographical information sources.



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