Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society

SELECTED PAPERS

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GEORGE BRAZILLER NEW YORK
condemned in perpetuity, he said, to repeat his doubtful successes, the
optic little landscapes with horsemen, remembered from the African
journals of his youth. In this mood, he undertook the trip to Belgium
and Holland, not knowing whether a book would come out of it,
though urged to write by his friends who had enjoyed the brilliance
of his casual talk on the painters of the past and knew his gifts as a
liter. He was certain only that the journey would not contribute to his
troubles as a painter were lodged too deep
thin his personality to be resolved by new inspirations from the past.
Yet this concentrated, solitary experience in a foreign land was a pow­
ful reawakening; it stirred his energies as nothing had done before.
The accumulated forces of a lifetime were suddenly sparked, and in a
few months, with an incredible speed, he wrote out this book which
presents his gifts better than his paintings, refined as these may be. It
achieved a greater public and provoked controversies that have not yet
borne to an end. It won the admiration of Flaubert who salut ed
Fromentin as a literary master. On the strength of the book, he
posed
candidacy for the French Academy as a man of letters; he was
feated by a minor art critic who had the bad grace to attack his
dead
ral a few months later. Fromentin’s writings had brought him no
izes like his pictures, but his name is more secure through his books.

It is curious that many years before, Fromentin had noted in a draft of an unpublish ed essay on
aine-Beuve that the great critic was a double nature, weak and contrite, a man of memories,
regrets, and tempered impressions.
Fromentin’s contemporary and admirer, Jacob Burckhardt, who quoted with approval Fromentin’s
phrase about Rubens—“sans orages et sans chimères”—criticized Rembrandt rather harshly as a
painter of the “canaille.” But unlike the Frenchman, he found Rembrandt lacking in spirituality.

The Still Life as a Personal Object—
A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh
(1968)

In his essay on The Origin of the Work of Art, Martin
Heidegger interprets a painting by van Gogh to illustrate the
nature of art as a disclosure of truth.1

He comes to this picture in the course of distinguishing three
modes of being: of useful artifacts, of natural things, and of works of
fine art. He proposes to describe first, “without any philosophical theory
. . . a familiar sort of equipment—a pair of peasant shoes”; and “to
facilitate the visual realization of them” he chooses “a well-known
painting by van Gogh, who painted such shoes several times.” But to
grasp “the equipmental being of equipment,” we must know “how
shoes actually serve.” For the peasant woman they serve without her
thinking about them or even looking at them. Standing and walking in
the shoes, the peasant woman knows the serviceability in which “the
equipmental being of equipment consists.” But we,

as long as we only imagine a pair of shoes in general, or simply look at the
empty, unused shoes as they merely stand there in the picture, we shall never
discover what the equipmental being of equipment in truth is. In van Gogh’s
painting we cannot even tell where these shoes stand. There is nothing sur­
rounding this pair of peasant shoes in or to which they might belong, only an
undefined space. There are not even clods from the soil of the field or the path
through it sticking to them, which might at least hint at their employment. A
pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet.

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread
of the worker stands forth. In the stiffly solid heavity of the shoes there is the
accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever­uni­
form furrows of the field, swept by a raw wind. On the leather there lies the
murness and saturation of the soil. Under the soles there slides the loneliness of the field-path as the evening declines. In the shoes there vibrates the silent earth, its quiet gift of the ripening corn and its enigmatic self-refusal of the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by complaining anxiety about the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the advent of birth and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected longing the equipment itself rises to its resting-in-self.²

Professor Heidegger is aware that van Gogh painted such shoes times, but he does not identify the picture he has in mind, as if different versions are interchangeable, all disclosing the same A reader who wishes to compare his account with the original these or its photograph will have some difficulty in deciding which select. Eight paintings of shoes by van Gogh are recorded by de la Faille in his catalogue of all the canvasses by the artist that had been exhibited at the time Heidegger wrote his essay.³ Of these, only three of the “dark openings of the worn insides” which speak so distinctively to the philosopher.⁴ They are more likely pictures of the artist’s own not the shoes of a peasant. They might be shoes he had worn in the pictures were painted during van Gogh’s stay in Paris 86-87; one of them bears the date: “87”.⁵ From the time before when he painted Dutch peasants are two pictures of shoes—a pair in wooden clogs set on a table beside other objects.⁶ Later in Arles painted, as he wrote in a letter of August 1888 to his brother, “une paire de vieux souliers” which are evidently his own.⁷ A second still life “deux souliers de paysan” is mentioned in a letter of September the painter Emile Bernard, but it lacks the characteristic worn e and dark insides of Heidegger’s description.⁸

In reply to my question, Professor Heidegger has kindly written at the picture to which he referred is one that he saw in a show at Amsterdam in March 1930.⁹ This is clearly de la Faille’s no. 255; there also exhibited at the same time a painting with three pairs of 10 and it is possible that the exposed sole of a shoe in this picture, led the reference to the sole in the philosopher’s account. But

neither of these pictures, nor from any of the others, could one properly say that a painting of shoes by van Gogh expresses the being of a peasant woman's shoes and her relation to nature and work. They are the shoes of the artist, by that time a man of the town.

Heidegger has written: "The art-work told us what shoes are in truth. It would be the worst self-deception if we were to think that our description, as a subjective action, first imagined everything thus and projected it into the painting. If anything is questionable here, it is that we experienced too little in contact with the work and we expressed the experience too crudely and too literally. But be all, the work does not, as might first appear, serve merely for a visualization of what a piece of equipment is. Rather, the equipamental being of equipment first arrives at its explicit appearance through and only in the artist's work.

"What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant's shoes, is in truth."11

Alas for him, the philosopher has indeed deceived himself. He has drunk from his encounter with van Gogh's canvas a moving set of citations with peasants and the soil, which are not sustained by the shoe itself. They are grounded rather in his own social outlook with heavy pathos of the primordial and earthy. He has indeed "imagined everything and projected it into the painting." He has experienced too little and too much in his contact with the work. The error lies not only in his projection, which replaces a close relation to the work of art. For even if he had seen a picture of a peasant woman's shoes, as he describes them, it would be a mistake to suppose that the truth he uncovered in the painting—the being of the shoes—is something given here once and for all and is unavailable to perception of shoes outside the painting. I find nothing in Heidegger's fanciful description of the shoes pictured by van Gogh that could not have been imagined in looking at a real pair of peasants' shoes. Though he credits to art the power of giving to a represented set of shoes that explicit appearance in which their being is disclosed—indeed "the universal essence of things,"12 "world and earth in their counterplay"13—this concept of the metaphysical power of art remains here a theoretical idea. The example on which he elaborates with strong conviction does not support that idea.

Is Heidegger's mistake simply that he chose a wrong example? Let us imagine a painting of a peasant woman's shoes by van Gogh. Would it not have made manifest just those qualities and that sphere of being described by Heidegger with such pathos?

Heidegger would still have missed an important aspect of the painting: the artist's presence in the work. In his account of the picture he has overlooked the personal and physiognomic in the shoes that made them so persistent and absorbing a subject for the artist (not to speak of the intimate connection with the specific tones, forms, and brush-made surface of the picture as a painted work). When van Gogh depicted the peasant's wooden sabots, he gave them a clear, unworn shape and surface like the smooth still-life objects he had set beside them on the same table: the bowl, the bottles, a cabbage, etc. In the later picture of a peasant's leather slippers, he has turned them with their backs to the viewer.14 His own shoes he has isolated on the ground; he has rendered them as if facing us, and so worn and wrinkled in appearance that we can speak of them as veridical portraits of aging shoes.

We come closer, I think, to van Gogh's feeling for these shoes in a paragraph written by Knut Hamsun in the 1880s in his novel Hunger, describing his own shoes:

"As I had never seen my shoes before, I set myself to study their looks, their characteristics, and when I stir my foot, their shapes and their worn uppers. I discover that their creases and white seams give them expression—impair a physiognomy to them. Something of my own nature had gone over into these shoes; they affected me, like a ghost of my other I—a breathing portion of my very self.15"

In comparing van Gogh's painting with Hamsun's text, we are interpreting the painting in a different way than Heidegger. The philosopher finds in the picture of the shoes a truth about the world as
dampness and saturation of the soil. Under the soles there slides the loneliness of the field-path as the evening declines. In the shoes there vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening corn and its enigmatic self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety about the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the advent of birth and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-in-self. 2

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In comparing van Gogh’s painting with Hamsun’s text, we see interpreting the painting in a different way than Heidegger. The philosopher finds in the picture of the shoes a truth about the world.
it is lived by the peasant owner without reflection; Hamsun sees the real shoes as experienced by the self-conscious, contemplating wearer who is also the writer. Hamsun's personage, a brooding, self-observant drifter, is closer to van Gogh's situation than to the peasant's. Yet van Gogh is in some ways like the peasant; as an artist he works, he is stubbornly occupied in a task that is for him his inescapable calling, his life. Of course, van Gogh, like Hamsun, has also an exceptional gift of representation; he is able to transpose to the canvas with a singular power the forms and qualities of things; but they are things that have touched him deeply; in this case his own shoes—things inseparable from his body and memorable to his reacting self-awareness. They are not less objectively rendered for being seen as if endowed with his feelings and revery about himself. In isolating his own old, worn shoes on a canvas, he turns them to the spectator; he makes of them a piece from a self-portrait, that part of the costume with which we tread the earth and in which we locate strains of movement, fatigue, pressure, heaviness—the burden of the erect body in its contact with the ground. They mark our inescapable position on the earth. To "be in someone's shoes" is to be in his predicament or his station in life. For an artist to isolate his worn shoes as the subject of a picture is for him to convey a concern with the fatalities of his social being. Not only the shoes as an instrument of use, though the landscape painter as a worker in the fields shares something of the peasant's life outdoors, but the shoes as "a portion of the self" (in Hamsun's words) are van Gogh's revealing theme.

Gauguin, who shared van Gogh's quarters in Arles in 1888, sensed a personal history behind his friend's painting of a pair of shoes. He has told in his reminiscences of van Gogh a deeply affecting story linked with van Gogh's shoes.

"In the studio was a pair of big hob-nailed shoes, all worn and spotted with mud; he made of it a remarkable still life painting. I do not know why I sensed that there was a story behind this old relic, and I ventured one day to ask him if he had some reason for preserving with respect what one ordinarily throws out for the rag-picker's basket.

"My father," he said, "was a pastor, and at his urging I pursued theological studies in order to prepare for my future vocation. As a young pastor I left for Belgium one fine morning, without telling my family, to preach the gospel in the factories, not as I had been taught but as I understood it myself. These shoes, you see, have bravely endured the fatigue of that trip."

Preaching to the miners in the Borinage, Vincent undertook to nurse a victim of a fire in the mine. The man was so badly burned and mutilated that the doctor had no hope for his recovery. Only a miracle, he thought, could save him. Van Gogh tended him forty days with loving care and saved the miner's life.

Before leaving Belgium I had, in the presence of this man who bore on his brow a series of scars, a vision of the crown of thorns, a vision of the resurrected Christ.

Gauguin continues:

"And Vincent took up his palette again; silently he worked. Beside him was white canvas. I began his portrait. I too had the vision of a Jesus preaching kindness and humility."

It is not certain which of the paintings with a single pair of shoes Gauguin had seen at Arles. He described it as violet in tone in contrast to the yellow walls of the studio. It does not matter. Though with some years later, and with some literary affectations, Gauguin's account confirms the essential fact that for van Gogh the shoes were a memorable piece of his own life, a sacred relic.
Further Notes on Heidegger and van Gogh

(1994)

AFTER PUBLISHING THE ARTICLE in 1968, I continued to study the art, letters, and life of van Gogh and his ideas and owe to some colleagues valuable references to other clues in interpreting van Gogh's art and thoughts. I have added the results of these pointers and my later reflections to what I believe are valid additions to the articles on van Gogh that I published in 1940 and 1968.

I note my indebtedness in this revised text to the French periodical Macula and its editor Yve-Alain Bois, now at Harvard University.

I have taken into account the article by Professor Gadamer, a disciple of Heidegger, on Heidegger's changes in his late years, and the hand-written corrections by him in the private copy of the margin of one of his posthumous printed books that were noted by the editor of Heidegger's collected works after the latter's death.1

The interpretation of van Gogh's painting in my article is supported not only by the texts and work of other artists and writers I have cited but also by van Gogh's own spoken words about the significance of the shoes in his life.

Gauguin, who spent a few months with van Gogh as his guest in Arles in the fall of 1888, recorded in two somewhat different articles a conversation at that time about van Gogh's shoes. The first is quoted on p. 140 in this volume.

Another version of Gauguin's story is in a later article that he published with the title "Nature Mortes" (Still Lifes) in the periodical Essais d'Art Libre after van Gogh's death:

"When we were together in Arles, both of us mad, in continual struggle for beautiful colors, I adored red; where could one find a perfect vermilion? He,
with his yellowish brush, traced on the wall which suddenly became violet:

Je suis sain d'Esprit  
[I am whole in Spirit]

Je suis le Saint-Esprit  
[I am the Holy Spirit]

"In my yellow-room—a small still life: violet that one. Two enormous wornout misshapen shoes. They were Vincent's shoes. Those that he took one fine morning, when they were new, for his journey on foot from Holland to Belgium. The young preacher had just finished his theological studies in order to be a minister like his father. He had gone off to the mines to those whom he called his brothers, such as he had seen in the Bible, the oppressed simple laborers for the luxury of the rich.

"Contrary to the teaching of his wise Dutch professors, Vincent had believed in a Jesus who loved the poor; and his soul, deeply pervaded by charity, sought the consoling words and sacrifice for the weak, and to combat the rich. Very, very, Vincent was already mad.

"His teaching of the Bible in the mines, I believed, profited the miners below and was disagreeable to the high authorities above ground. He was quickly recalled and dismissed, and the assembled family council, having decided he was mad, recommended confinement for his health. However, he was not locked up, thanks to his brother Theo.

"In the dark, black mine one day, chrome yellow overflowed, a terrible fiery glow of damp-fire, the dynamite of the rich who don't lack just that. The creatures who crawled at that moment grovelled in the filthy coal; they said 'adieu' to life that day, good-bye to their fellow-men without blasphemy.

"One of them horribly mutilated, his face burnt, was picked up by Vincent. 'However,' said the company doctor, 'the man is done for, unless by a miracle, or by very expensive motherly care. No, it's foolish to be concerned with him, to busy oneself with him.'

"Vincent believed in miracles, in maternal care. The madman (decidedly he was mad) sat up, keeping watch forty days, at the dying man's bedside. Stubbornly he kept the air from getting into his wounds and paid for the medicines. A comforting priest (decidedly, he was mad). The patient talked. The mad effort brought a dead Christian back to life.

"When the injured man, finally saved, went down again to the mine to resume his labors, 'You could have seen,' said Vincent, 'the martyred head of Jesus, bearing on his brow the zigzags of the Crown of Thorns, the red scars of the sickly yellow of a miner's brow.'

François Gauzi, a fellow student in Cormon's atelier in Paris, 1886-1887, has written of van Gogh showing him in his Paris studio a painting he was finishing of a pair of shoes. "At the flea market, he bought a pair of old shoes, heavy and thick, the shoes of a carter (carter retier) but clean and freshly polished. They were fancy shoes (esquenot riches). He put them on, one rainy afternoon, and went out for a walk along the fortifications. Spotted with mud, they became interesting... Vincent copied his pair of shoes faithfully."3

My colleague, Joseph Masheck, had called my attention to a letter of Flaubert that illustrates his perception of aging shoes as a person-object—a simile of the human condition. Reflecting on the inevitable decay of the living body, he wrote to Louise Colet in 1846: "In the mere sight of an old pair of shoes there is something profound and melancholy. When you think of all the steps you have taken in them, of all the grass you have trodden, all the mud you have collected...the cracked leather that yawns as if to tell you, 'well, you dope, buy another pair of patent leather, shiny, crackling, they will get to be like me, like you some day, after you have worn an upper and sweated in many a vamp.'4 Since this letter, December 13, 1846, was published in 1887, it could have been read to Flaubert's great admirer van Gogh.

The idea of a picture of his shoes was perhaps suggested by the drawing reproduced in Sensier's book on Millet, Peintre et Peinture, published in 1864.5 Van Gogh was deeply impressed by this book and referred to it often in his letters.6 The peasant-painter Millet's name appears over two hundred times in his correspondence. Comparing Millet's drawing of his wooden sabot with van Gogh's painting of shoes confirms what I have said about the pathos and crucial personal reference in the latter. Millet's sabots are presented in profile on ground with indications of grass and hay.
It was Millet's practice to give to friends and admirers a drawing of a pair of sabots in profile as a sign of his own life-long commitment to peasant life.

This personal view of an artist's shoes appears in a signed lithograph by Daumier of an unhappy aggrieved artist standing before a doormat of the annual Salon and displaying in his hands to passers-by a framed canvas of a painting of a pair of shoes, evidently his own. The protest label reads: "They have rejected this, the dopes." It was reproduced in an issue of the comic magazine *Le Charivari*, and later in a volume of Daumier's lithographs of figures, scenes, and episodes of contemporary life. It dated from a time when protest from artists rejected by the jury of academic artists who judged the paintings submitted for admission to the annual salon won the support for a Salon without an official jury from the French emperor, Louis Napoleon III.

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One can describe van Gogh's painting of his shoes as a picture of objects seen and felt by the artist as a significant part of himself—he faces himself like a mirrored image—chosen, isolated, carefully arranged, and addressed to himself. Is there not in that singular artistic conception an aspect of the intimate and personal, a soliloquy, and expression of the pathos of a troubled human condition in the drawing of an ordinarily neat and in fact well-fitted, self-confident, over-protected clothed body? The thickness and heaviness of the impasto pigment substance, the emergence of the dark shoes from shadow into light, the irregular, angular patterns and surprisingly loosened curved laces extending beyond the silhouettes of the shoes, are not all these component features of van Gogh's odd conception of the shoes?

These qualities are not found, at least in the same degree, in his many pictures of peasants' shoes. His style has a range of qualities that vary with both the occasion and mood of the moment and his interest in unusual types of theme. It is not my purpose here to account for the marked changes in style when he moves from Holland to Paris and again when he paints in Arles and then in the asylum at St. Remy. But I may note—in order to avoid misunderstanding—that in realizing that image of his dilapidated shoes, the artist's tense attitude, which governs his painting of other subjects at a later time—e.g. the probing portraits, one with his own heavily bandaged face (the result of a self-inflicted wound of the left ear-lobe), his moods and memory in confronting just those isolated personal objects—perhaps included in the frank revelation of a morbid side of the artist's self. There is in the work an expression of the self in bringing to view an occasion feeling that is unique in so far as it is engaged with the deviant absorbing deformed subject that underlies the unique metaphor of the paired shoes.

Van Gogh's frequent painting of paired shoes isolated from the body and its costume as a whole may be compared to the importance he gave in conversation to the idea of the shoe as a symbol of his long practice of walking, and an ideal of life as a pilgrimage, a personal change of experience.

Comparing van Gogh with other artists, one can say that few others have chosen to devote an entire canvas to their own shoes in isolation, yet addressed to a cultivated viewer. Hardly Manet, or Cézanne, or Renoir, hardly his often cited model, Millet. And of these few—we judge from the examples—one would have represented the shoe as van Gogh did—set on the ground facing the viewer, the loosened folded parts of shoes, the laces, the unsightly differences between the left and right, their depressed and broken aspect.

While attempting to define what "the equipmental being of equipment is in truth," Heidegger ignores what those shoes meant to the painter van Gogh himself. He finds in this signed, unique painting of the shoes that the philosopher had chosen to consider as most significant a "peasant's wordless joy of having once more withstood wanderings, trembling before the advent of birth and the shivering at the surrounding menace of death....This equipment belongs to the earth (his italics) and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of secured belonging, the equipment itself rises to its resting-in-itself as if these shoes were the ones worn by the supposed peasant woman while at work in the fields. Heidegger even conjectures that his reader could imagine himself wearing these old high leather shoes and "m
his way homeward with his hoe on an evening in the late fall, the last potato fires have died down.” So the truth about these objects, not only of the poor peasant woman “trembling before the birth” and “the surrounding menace of death”—as if the artist’s point of view were impersonal, even in placing the isolated shoes unlaced and facing the viewer, without the context of the pot’s disarray of the laces.

Heidegger believes also that this truth is divined by him “with philosophical theory” and would not be disclosed by any act of analysis alone, detached from the feet, as portrayed in a painting.

One misses in all this both a personal sense of the expression of van Gogh’s feelings of “rejection” by his own parents and learned teachers who had to come to doubt his fitness as a preacher and missionary. These breaks are familiar to readers of Gogh’s biography and letters.

When one compares the painting with the one preceding it, the father’s open Bible, its significance becomes clearer. In that leaving with the marginal presence of the small paperback volume of La Joie de Vivre (a modest statement of van Gogh’s contrastive to the great massive Bible and exposed text of the operation), he acknowledges his respect for his deceased minister by alluding to his own Christian past, but also affirms his devotion to secular lessons of his admired living author. Unlike the portable printed title of Zola’s book on its bright yellow cover, the actual content of the massive open book is barely intimated in the numerals (LIII) on the narrow band of the upper margin, exposed right leaf through the few Latin signs of its page number and the barely visible ancient author’s name ISAI. The actual words of this great prophet are withheld from the viewer, thick, vehement overlay of van Gogh’s opaque brush strokes, immovable massive book and the ironically covered text of the篇 which concern the sacrifices and sufferings of the prophet Isaiah.

The meaning of these contrasts might be deciphered by a scholarly reader of the sacred book, but will remain cryptic for the ordinary instructed viewer who has freed himself from the a
his way homeward with his hoe on an evening in the late fall after the last potato fires have died down." So the truth about these shoes was not only of the poor peasant woman “trembling before the advent of birth” and “the surrounding menace of death” —as if the artist’s point of view were impersonal, even in placing the isolated shoes before him unlaced and facing the viewer, without the context of the potato field or the disarray of the laces.

Heidegger believes also that this truth is divined by him “without any philosophical theory” and would not be disclosed by any actual pair of peasant shoes alone, detached from the feet, as portrayed in a painting.

One misses in all this both a personal sense of the expression and of van Gogh’s feelings of “rejection” by his own parents and by his learned teachers who had to come to doubt his fitness as a Christian preacher and missionary. These breaks are familiar to readers of van Gogh’s biography and letters.

When one compares the painting with the one preceding it, of his father’s open Bible, its significance becomes clearer. In that large painting with the marginal presence of the small paperback volume of Zola’s La Joie de Vivre (a modest statement of van Gogh’s contrasted alternative to the great massive Bible and exposed text of the opened Bible), he acknowledges his respect for his deceased minister father and alludes to his own Christian past, but also affirms his devotion to the secular lessons of his admired living author. Unlike the perfectly legible printed title of Zola’s book on its bright yellow cover, the religious content of the massive open book is barely intimated in the few tiny numerals (LIII) on the narrow band of the upper margin of the exposed right leaf through the few Latin signs of its page and chapter number and the barely visible ancient author’s name ISAIAH. But the actual words of this great prophet are withheld from the viewer by the thick, vehement overlay of van Gogh’s opaque brush strokes on the immovable massive book and the ironically covered text of those pages, which concern the sacrifices and sufferings of the prophet Isaiah.

The meaning of these contrasts might be deciphered by an habitual scholarly reader of the sacred book, but will remain closed to an ordinary instructed viewer who has freed himself from the authority of...
his pious parents and church and can readily grasp the significance of
the small paperback book with the familiar speaking title on the bright
sunny cover, *La Joie de Vivre* (The Joy of Living).⁸

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In Heidegger’s reprint of “The Origin of the Work of Art” in his
*Collected Works*⁹ there is a second thought or cautious note that the
philosopher had added by hand in his personal copy of the Reclam
paperback edition of the essay (1960). It is on the margin beside his
sentence: “From van Gogh’s painting we cannot say with certainty
where these shoes stand (“Nach dem Gemälde können wir nicht einmal
feststellen wo diese Schuhe stehen”) nor to whom they belong (“und
wem sie gehören”). According to the editor, Fr. W. von Herrmann, the
handwritten notes in this copy were written between 1960 and 1976,
the year Heidegger died (p. 380). The reader of these corrections will
recall their author’s original lyrical recognition in those shoes of their
deep significance as placed on the earth and in the world of the peas-
ants at work.

In publishing a selection from the marginal notes in the new edition,
the editor followed the author’s instructions to select those essential ones
that clarified the text or were self critical, or called attention to a later
development of Heidegger’s thought.¹⁰ Since Heidegger’s argument
throughout refers to the shoes of a class of persons, not of a particular
individual—and he states more than once that the shoes are those of a
peasant woman—it is hard to see why the note was necessary. Did he
wish to affirm, in the face of current doubts, that his metaphysical inter-
pretation was true, even if the shoes had belonged to van Gogh?

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¹ There is also thorough critical analysis of Heidegger’s philosophy in a later book by Jean Wahl
bearing on Heidegger’s idea of being, applied by Heidegger to shoes and art. See J. Wahl, *La Fin
l’émancipation*, 1956, and concluding pages.

² Gauguin, P. *Natures Mortes, Essais d’art libre*, IV, January, 1884, pp. 273-275. These two excerpt:
texts were kindly brought to my attention by Professor Mark Roskill.


⁴ *Correspondence*, I, Editions Pleiade, p. 41.


⁶ *Versamlede Brieven*, 1954, I: 322, 323; II: 404; III: 14, 45, 85, 151, 328; IV: 32, 12.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ironical, for in fact its story is not of the joys of family life, but of the constraints upon the idealists,
young members’ dedication to a career in music, etc. Judy Sund writes (*True to Temperament, van
Gogh and French Naturalist Literature*, pp. 109-113) that such novels had long been causes of con-
tention between van Gogh and his father.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, V. Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, Band V, Holzweg
p. 18.

It was Millet's practice to give to friends and admirers a drawing of a pair of sabots in profile as a sign of his own life-long commitment to peasant life.

This personal view of an artist's shoes appears in a signed lithograph by Daumier of an unhappy aggrieved artist standing before a doormat of the annual Salon and displaying in his hands to passers-by a framed canvas of a painting of a pair of shoes, evidently his own. The protesting label reads: "They have rejected this, the dopes." It was reproduced in an issue of the comic magazine Le Charivari, and later in a volume of Daumier's lithographs of figures, scenes, and episodes of contemporary life. It dated from a time when protest from artists rejected by the jury of academic artists who judged the paintings submitted for admission to the annual salon won the support for a Salon without an official jury from the French emperor, Louis Napoleon III.

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One can describe van Gogh's painting of his shoes as a picture of objects seen and felt by the artist as a significant part of himself—He faces himself like a mirrored image—chosen, isolated, carefully arranged, and addressed to himself. Is there not in that singular artistic conception an aspect of the intimate and personal, a soliloquy, and expression of the pathos of a troubled human condition in the drawing of an ordinarily neat and in fact well-fitted, self-confident, over-protected clothed body? The thickness and heaviness of the impasto pigment substance, the emergence of the dark shoes from shadow into light, the irregular, angular patterns and surprisingly loosened curved laces extending beyond the silhouettes of the shoes, are not all these component features of van Gogh's odd conception of the shoes?

These qualities are not found, at least in the same degree, in his many pictures of peasant shoes. His style has a range of qualities that vary with both the occasion and mood of the moment and his interest in unusual types of theme. It is not my purpose here to account for the marked changes in style when he moves from Holland to Paris and again when he paints in Arles and then in the asylum at St. Remy. But I may note—in order to avoid misunderstanding—that in realizing that image of his dilapidated shoes, the artist's tense attitude, which governs his painting of other subjects at a later time—e.g. the self-probing portraits, one with his own heavily bandaged face (the result of a self-inflicted wound of the left ear-lobe), his moods and memories in confronting just those isolated personal objects—perhaps induced the frank revelation of a morbid side of the artist's self. There is then in the work an expression of the self in bringing to view an occasion of feeling that is unique in so far as it is engaged with the deviant and absorbing deformed subject that underlies the unique metaphoric paired shoes.

Van Gogh's frequent painting of paired shoes isolated from the body and its costume as a whole may be compared to the importance he gave in conversation to the idea of the shoe as a symbol of his life-long practice of walking, and an ideal of life as a pilgrimage, a perpetual change of experience.

Comparing van Gogh with other artists, one can say that few could have chosen to devote an entire canvas to their own shoes in isolation, yet addressed to a cultivated viewer. Hardly Manet, or Cézanne, or Renoir, hardly his often cited model, Millet. And of these few—we can judge from the examples—none would have represented the shoes as van Gogh did—set on the ground facing the viewer, the loosened and folded parts of shoes, the laces, the unsightly differences between parts of the left and right, their depressed and broken aspect.

While attempting to define what "the equipmental being of equipment is in truth," Heidegger ignores what those shoes meant to the painter van Gogh himself. He finds in this signed, unique painting of the shoes that the philosopher had chosen to consider as most significant a "peasant's wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the advent of birth and the shivering at the surrounding menace of death...This equipment belongs to the earth (his italics) and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of that secured belonging, the equipment itself rises to its resting-in-itself”—as if these shoes were the ones worn by the supposed peasant woman while at work in the fields. Heidegger even conjectures that his reader could imagine himself wearing these old high leather shoes and "making
with his yellowish brush, traced on the wall which suddenly became violet:

Je suis sain d’Esprit  [I am whole in Spirit]
Je suis le Saint-Esprit  [I am the Holy Spirit].

"In my yellow-room—a small still life: violet that one. Two enormous worn-out misshapen shoes. They were Vincent’s shoes. Those that he took one fine morning, when they were new, for his journey on foot from Holland to Belgium. The young preacher had just finished his theological studies in order to become a minister like his father. He had gone off to the mines to those whom he called his brothers, such as he had seen in the Bible, the oppressed simple laborers for the luxury of the rich.

"Contrary to the teaching of his wise Dutch professors, Vincent had believed in a Jesus who loved the poor; and his soul, deeply pervaded by charity, sought the consoling words and sacrifice for the weak, and to combat the rich. Very decidedly, Vincent was already mad.

"His teaching of the Bible in the mines, I believed, profited the miners below and was disagreeable to the high authorities above ground. He was quickly recalled and dismissed, and the assembled family council, having decided he was mad, recommended confinement for his health. However, he was not locked up, thanks to his brother Theo.

"In the dark, black mine one day, chrome yellow overflowed, a terrible fiery glow of damp-fire, the dynamite of the rich who don’t lack just that. The creatures who crawled at that moment grovelled in the filthy coal; they said ‘adieu’ to life that day, good-bye to their fellow-men without blasphemy.

"One of them horribly mutilated, his face burnt, was picked up by Vincent. ‘However,’ said the company doctor, ‘the man is done for, unless by a miracle, or by very expensive motherly care. No, it’s foolish to be concerned with him, to busy oneself with him.’

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Francois Gauzi, a fellow student in Cormon’s atelier in Paris in 1886-1887, has written of van Gogh showing him in his Paris studio a painting he was finishing of a pair of shoes. “At the flea market, he had bought a pair of old shoes, heavy and thick, the shoes of a carter (charretier) but clean and freshly polished. They were fancy shoes (croquenots riches). He put them on, one rainy afternoon, and went out for a walk along the fortifications. Spotted with mud, they became interesting . . . Vincent copied his pair of shoes faithfully.”

My colleague, Joseph Masheck, had called my attention to a letter of Flaubert that illustrates his perception of aging shoes as a personal object—a simile of the human condition. Reflecting on the inevitable decay of the living body, he wrote to Louise Colet in 1846: “In the mere sight of an old pair of shoes there is something profoundly melancholy. When you think of all the steps you have taken in them to only God knows where, of all the grass you have trodden, all the mud you have collected . . . the cracked leather that yawns as if to tell you: ‘well, you dope, buy another pair of patent leather, shiny, crackling—they will get to be like me, like you some day, after you have soiled many an upper and sweated in many a vamp.’ Since this letter, dated December 13, 1846, was published in 1887, it could have been read by Flaubert’s great admirer van Gogh.

The idea of a picture of his shoes was perhaps suggested by a drawing reproduced in Sensier’s book on Millet, Peintre et Paysan, published in 1864. Van Gogh was deeply impressed by this book and referred to it often in his letters. The peasant-painter Millet’s name appears over two hundred times in his correspondence. Comparison of Millet’s drawing of his wooden sabot with van Gogh’s painting of shoes confirms what I have said about the pathos and crucial personal reference in the latter. Millet’s sabots are presented in profile on the ground with indications of grass and hay.
beautiful colors, I adored red; where could one find a perfect vermilion? He, both of us mad, in continual struggle for Aries, we were together in "When van Gogh's shoes. The first is quoted not only by the texts and work of other artists and writers I cited but also by van Gogh's own spoken words about the interpretation of van Gogh's art and thoughts. I have added the results of these pointers and my later reflections to what I believe are valid additions to the articles on van Gogh that I published in 1940 and 1968.

I note my indebtedness in this revised text to the French periodical Macula and its editor Yve-Alain Bois, now at Harvard University. I have taken into account the article by Professor Gadamer, a disciple of Heidegger, on Heidegger's changes in his late years, and two hand-written corrections by him in the private copy of the margin of one of his posthumous printed books that were noted by the editor of Heidegger's collected works after the latter's death.1

The interpretation of van Gogh's painting in my article is supported not only by the texts and work of other artists and writers I have cited but also by van Gogh's own spoken words about the significance of the shoes in his life.

Gauguin, who spent a few months with van Gogh as his guest in Arles in the fall of 1888, recorded in two somewhat different articles conversation at that time about van Gogh's shoes. The first is quoted on p. 140 in this volume.

Another version of Gauguin's story is in a later article that he published with the title "Nature Mortes" (Still Lifes) in the periodical Essais d'Art Libre after van Gogh's death:

"When we were together in Arles, both of us mad, in continual struggle for beautiful colors, I adored red; where could one find a perfect vermilion? He,
it is lived by the peasant owner without reflection; Hamsun sees the real shoes as experienced by the self-conscious, contemplating wearer who is also the writer. Hamsun’s personage, a brooding, self-observant drifter, is closer to van Gogh’s situation than to the peasant’s. Yet van Gogh is in some ways like the peasant; as an artist he works, he is stubbornly occupied in a task that is for him his inescapable calling, his life. Of course, van Gogh, like Hamsun, has also an exceptional gift of representation; he is able to transpose to the canvas with a singular power the forms and qualities of things; but they are things that have touched him deeply, in this case his own shoes—things inseparable from his body and memorable to his reacting self-awareness. They are not less objectively rendered for being seen as if endowed with his feelings and revery about himself. In isolating his own old, worn shoes on a canvas, he turns them to the spectator; he makes of them a piece from a self-portrait, that part of the costume with which we tread the earth and in which we locate strains of movement, fatigue, pressure, heaviness—the burden of the erect body in its contact with the ground. They mark our inescapable position on the earth. To “be in someone’s shoes” is to be in his predicament or his station in life. For an artist to isolate his worn shoes as the subject of a picture is for him to convey a concern with the fatalities of his social being. Not only the shoes as an instrument of use, though the landscape painter as a worker in the fields shares something of the peasant’s life outdoors, but the shoes as “a portion of the self” (in Hamsun’s words) are van Gogh’s revealing theme.

Gauguin, who shared van Gogh’s quarters in Arles in 1888, sensed a personal history behind his friend’s painting of a pair of shoes. He has told in his reminiscences of van Gogh a deeply affecting story linked with van Gogh’s shoes.

“In the studio was a pair of big hob-nailed shoes, all worn and spotted with mud; he made of it a remarkable still life painting. I do not know why I sensed that there was a story behind this old relic; and I ventured one day to ask him if he had some reason for preserving with respect what one ordinarily throws out for the rag-picker’s basket.
from neither of these pictures, nor from any of the others, could one properly say that a painting of shoes by van Gogh expresses the being or essence of a peasant woman's shoes and her relation to nature and work. They are the shoes of the artist, by that time a man of the town and city.

Heidegger has written: "The art-work told us what shoes are in truth. It would be the worst self-deception if we were to think that our description, as a subjective action, first imagined everything thus and then projected it into the painting. If anything is questionable here, it is rather that we experienced too little in contact with the work and that we expressed the experience too crudely and too literally. But above all, the work does not, as might first appear, serve merely for a better visualization of what a piece of equipment is. Rather, the equipmental being of equipment first arrives at its explicit appearance through and only in the artist's work.

"What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant's shoes, is in truth."11

Alas for him, the philosopher has indeed deceived himself. He has retained from his encounter with van Gogh's canvas a moving set of associations with peasants and the soil, which are not sustained by the picture itself. They are grounded rather in his own social outlook with its heavy pathos of the primordial and earthy. He has indeed "imagined everything and projected it into the painting." He has experienced both too little and too much in his contact with the work.

The error lies not only in his projection, which replaces a close attention to the work of art. For even if he had seen a picture of a peasant woman's shoes, as he describes them, it would be a mistake to suppose that the truth he uncovered in the painting—the being of the shoes—is something given here once and for all and is unavailable to our perception of shoes outside the painting. I find nothing in Heidegger's fanciful description of the shoes pictured by van Gogh that could not have been imagined in looking at a real pair of peasants' shoes. Though he credits to art the power of giving to a represented pair of shoes that explicit appearance in which their being is dis-

closed—indeed "the universal essence of things,"12 "world and earth in their counterplay"13—this concept of the metaphysical power of art remains here a theoretical idea. The example on which he elaborates with strong conviction does not support that idea.

Is Heidegger's mistake simply that he chose a wrong example? Let us imagine a painting of a peasant woman's shoes by van Gogh. Would it not have made manifest just those qualities and that sphere of being described by Heidegger with such pathos?

Heidegger would still have missed an important aspect of the painting: the artist's presence in the work. In his account of the picture he has overlooked the personal and physiognomic in the shoes that made them so persistent and absorbing a subject for the artist (not to speak of the intimate connection with the specific tones, forms, and brush-made surface of the picture as a painted work). When van Gogh depicted the peasant's wooden sabots, he gave them a clear, unworn shape and surface like the smooth still-life objects he had set beside them on the same table: the bowl, the bottles, a cabbage, etc. In the later picture of a peasant's leather slippers, he has turned them with their backs to the viewer.14 His own shoes he has isolated on the ground; he has rendered them as if facing us, and so worn and wrinkled in appearance that we can speak of them as veridical portraits of aging shoes.

We come closer, I think, to van Gogh's feeling for these shoes in a paragraph written by Knut Hamsun in the 1880s in his novel Hunger, describing his own shoes:

"As I had never seen my shoes before, I set myself to study their looks, their characteristics, and when I stir my foot, their shapes and their worn uppers. I discover that their creases and white seams give them expression—impart a physiognomy to them. Something of my own nature had gone over into these shoes; they affected me, like a ghost of my other—I—a breathing portion of my very self.15

In comparing van Gogh's painting with Hamsun's text, we are interpreting the painting in a different way than Heidegger. The philosopher finds in the picture of the shoes a truth about the world as
dampness and saturation of the soil. Under the soles there slides the loneliness of the field-path as the evening declines. In the shoes there vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening corn and its enigmatic self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety about the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the advent of birth and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-in-self.2

Professor Heidegger is aware that van Gogh painted such shoes several times, but he does not identify the picture he has in mind, as if the different versions are interchangeable, all disclosing the same truth. A reader who wishes to compare his account with the original picture or its photograph will have some difficulty in deciding which one to select. Eight paintings of shoes by van Gogh are recorded by de la Faille in his catalogue of all the canvasses by the artist that had been exhibited at the time Heidegger wrote his essay.3 Of these, only three show the “dark openings of the worn insides” which speak so distinctly to the philosopher.4 They are more likely pictures of the artist’s own shoes, not the shoes of a peasant. They might be shoes he had worn in Holland but the pictures were painted during van Gogh’s stay in Paris in 1886–87; one of them bears the date “87”.5 From the time before 1886 when he painted Dutch peasants are two pictures of shoes—a pair of clean wooden clogs set on a table beside other objects.6 Later in Arles he painted, as he wrote in a letter of August 1888 to his brother, “une paire de vieux souliers” which are evidently his own.7 A second still life of “vieux souliers de paysan” is mentioned in a letter of September 1888 to the painter Emile Bernard, but it lacks the characteristic worn surface and dark insides of Heidegger’s description.8

In reply to my question, Professor Heidegger has kindly written me that the picture to which he referred is one that he saw in a show at Amsterdam in March 1930.9 This is clearly de la Faille’s no. 255; there was also exhibited at the same time a painting with three pairs of shoes,10 and it is possible that the exposed sole of a shoe in this picture, inspired the reference to the sole in the philosopher’s account. But