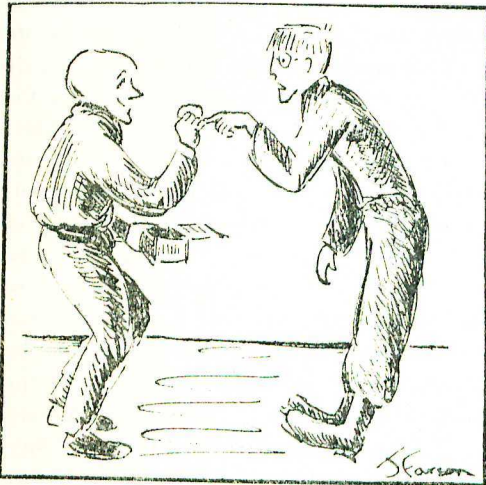


Vincent Van Gogh's Personal Possession

Bill DeWitt



I am an amateur artist, so when I was in Arles in southern France, it was natural for me to want to see all the places thereabouts that the famous Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh had been concerned with when he lived there in 1888.

I got out of the jeep and thanked the driver for the ride from Marseilles. He drove on and I was alone in Arles. I wanted to see van Gogh's house, the cafe he frequented, some of the many town scenes he had painted and even the house of *la lorette* to whom, it is said, he gave his ear after cutting it off with his razor. And I wanted to see the old drawbridge he had painted several times.

Going through a maze of narrow, cobblestoned streets, I was at length standing in front of the house I had been looking for. It was not much of a place. Although having two stories it was rather small. The sides were flat and plain. It was van Gogh's house though, and that

made all the difference in the world.

I stood across the street looking at it and thinking. Occasionally I noticed one of the townsfolk look curiously at me, apparently wondering what I was doing just standing there looking at a house. They would then glance at the house and go on their way as if having said to themselves, "Oh yes, van Gogh's house."

I imagined that Vincent was inside in his upstairs studio starting a painting. Then I remembered that in Arles he had done most of his painting outdoors, so I reconstructed the scene in my mind and he was putting the few finishing touches on his canvas. I watched him for a while. Then a voice at my side erased the scene.

He was a short, middle aged Arlesian dressed like the average townsman, and he looked to me as if he might have been a successful, small business man. He asked me if I was interested in van Gogh. Wishing to talk to someone who might have some new information on the painter, I enthusiastically answered yes. We talked about van Gogh for a while; then he asked me if I would like to go with him to his house. He said he had something interesting to show me in connection with the painter.

I was interested and as I walked along with him I wondered what it could be. I asked him but he would not tell me. He chuckled and said he wanted it to be a surprise. I thought at first that maybe it was an original van Gogh painting — but it could hardly be that. After all, van Gogh originals are far too valuable to be found in the possession of a small shopkeeper. Still . . . ? Oh, I thought, it is probably just some thing of

Vincent's personal possessions — a brush, perhaps.

My Arlesian friend stopped at a door, opened it and invited me in. It was a small, stone house built flush with other similar ones on each side. He led me into a modestly furnished room — the living room, apparently. The chairs, one of which he invited me to take, the pictures, none of which could possibly have been done by van Gogh, and the room itself all seemed old and colorless. In a word it simply seemed foreign to me.

I selected the most sturdy looking chair and sat down while my friendly host, all smiles now, was getting a square box from the lower shelf of a bookcase. He opened it as he walked toward me and stopping right in front of me, pulled out a glass jar full of a clear liquid with a small object inside. He thrust it in my face and said, "Voici, Vincent's ear!"

I jumped back in the chair and looked at the thing. My mouth fell open. It was indeed an ear. And as he had said, it was indeed a surprise. He stood there grinning and holding the jar before me. I sat there speechless. Why, he is as crazy as van Gogh, I thought. What does he expect me to say? My next thought concerned getting out of there without delay.

It was apparent, however, that I would have to do something so I decided

to humor him. I said finally, and rather weakly, "Oh . . . it is?" Immediately he began a spirited description of its history and of how he had acquired the ear. He even took it out of the jar and made me touch the . . . the thing, horribly white and dripping with the preservative. I do not remember the details of his story too well because at the time I was more interested in getting away; but I remember that he did say something about his grandfather having been an admirer of the painter and about having obtained the severed ear from the house of **la lorette**. Finally, after he had run down somewhat, I made my escape by saying I was due back in camp. At the door I thanked him insincerely for his hospitality and left without further delay.

I was at least six blocks away before I stopped in a cafe and ordered two cognacs. After they went down I felt better and the experience seemed almost humorous. Yes, thinking of it, it was funny. Boy! I thought, what a story it will make when I get home! I can tell them I touched Vincent van Gogh's ear. But wait a minute. Can I? I just remembered something I had oddly enough not noticed until I had turned my head, as I was leaving, to answer my ex-host's good-bye. Now that I thought of it, I would almost swear **he** had only one ear.

I stood on a lava-like outcropping looking over a stretching mass of burnt and torn trees, which threw their warped black fingers into the thin wash of the blind sun. Shell craters, water-filled, reflected the anemic sun's glow and made

a picture of black and dull gold. The sun seemed to wait on the stretching horizon as if it wanted to bring life to this desolation, and, with a quivering beam of encouragement, slid down the earth's curve.

Les Hunt