

THE FUNERAL RITES
OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

by

Yvonne Ada Wickenden

© 2019

Never in his life did Vincent Van Gogh think that his work would receive such universal success. Never, for that matter, did his contemporaries believe that he would eclipse them in such an astounding manner. His paintings have been shown throughout the country, and, in each showing, have received instant approval. The reputation he enjoyed while alive is of no great moment. What is of importance is the fact that at the present writing, he is far and away the most popular of the moderns. Philadelphia, Boston, and Cleveland received his work with wild acclaim.

I have followed Van Gogh's rise to prominence with great interest. My father, the late Robert J. Wickenden, knew him during his life and assisted him at the time of his death. My interest, therefore, is different from that of the average person. It happens, also, that Auvers-sur-Oise, the little country town in France, where Van Gogh spent the last days of his life, is the place where I was born and spent my childhood. One can readily understand

then, the host of memories which flood my mind every time I see or hear anything about Vincent Van Gogh.

At odd times I had heard my father speak of Van Gogh's death, but at such times, he gave only snatches of the whole story. Upon one occasion, however, a short time before his own death, he recounted for me the story of the tragedy. I shall try to put that story on paper. .

One evening, when after a hard day's work, father and I were enjoying a lengthy discussion of our favorite subject, Art. We were seated before an open fireplace in the living room of our home. Father was relaxed in his great armchair, while I sat at his feet with an open book in my lap. Together we watched the flickering flames as they made fantastic designs upon the wall. The scene was one to invite memories, and unconsciously we found ourselves returning in thought to our little home in France.

My mother had long since died, and since that time father and I had become inseparable companions, until now we enjoyed that perfect understanding which comes from long association. As father talked, time and space disappeared, and we were once again living the old life in Auvers. The spirits of his colleagues on both continents, now seemed to come to life again. The anecdotes, he gave about them, were very unique and humorous. I marveled at these new sketches and urged him to go on, saying: "I think that any

one like you, father, who has known many of the leading contemporary artists, should publish a history of art, especially as you have such a fine knowledge of the old masters."

Whereupon he replied: "It pleases me very much to see how highly you esteem your father; but such an undertaking would be very expensive and would require a great deal more time and money than I can afford to give.

While we were talking along in this manner, I slowly turned the pages of the book. My gaze was suddenly arrested by a work of Van Gogh. Not noticing that I was intently studying something, father stepped beside me to see what it was that absorbed my interest.

His comments, on the contemporary artists he knew, and my remarks had put him in a fine reminiscent mood. Therefore, as he looked down at the open book, which I was holding, he started to narrate the death and burial of Vincent Van Gogh. I was most impressed by the way he dramatized the entire scene. He made those moments live again, impressing on me such a story I could never forget. Today, some years after, the entire episode is as vivid in my mind as the day he told it to me.

In the summer of 1890, the peaceful little town of Auvers-sur-Oise, France, was overshadowed by the tragic, shocking news of the suicide and death of Vincent Van Gogh.

Suicide? Why it was unheard of in Auvers! The simple peasant folks shrunk back in horror and none would go near

the gloomy cottage, which to their mind was as much cursed. as Van Gogh himself.

When Vincent Van Gogh came to settle in Auvers, in May 1890, from the first, he gave the impression of being eccentric and deranged and for that reason he was shunned by the people in the town. Very soon, everyone knew, that before coming to Auvers, he had cut off one of his ears when he became temporarily insane in Arles, Provence, in southern France. He attempted suicide again when he tried to shoot himself in a haystack on the plain of Auvers. This attempt was foiled by a peasant who chanced to come to that particular stack to inspect its condition. In his room, some time after this incident, he shot himself in the stomach and the shot proved fatal.

"Upon hearing of Van Gogh's critical condition," my father, I went to his assistance. After all, he was my neighbor, and it was only right that I should help him."

I was struck with my father's tone of voice. It seemed as though someone in Auvers was still finding fault with his action, and he, in a grieved yet resolute accent, wished to impress, on whoever it was, that he was justified in his action.

"The sick-room presented the most distressing and woeful appearance. Van Gogh was in a very grave condition when I reached his bedside and I did what I could to help the doctor until Van Gogh's brother, Theo, arrived two days later."

"Silence and darkness fell over the dismal cottage

when Vincent Van Gogh breathed his last in the early morning hours of July 29, 1890. The shutters were tightly closed and only we three went about the place."

Despite the fact that father was well-liked in the town, he could get no one to render any service. He also encountered the greatest difficulties in the burial arrangements. There arose objections for a plot in the cemetery of Auvers. After a great deal of arguing, the town officials finally gave their consent. As for the funeral director, he condescended to furnish a casket, but he refused the use of the hearse because he believed the curse on Van Gogh might contaminate the vehicle. My father's fine oratory in French language was at play. With all the fluency of a cultivated French gentleman, father tried to dispel the superstition which had seized the owner of the hearse. But to no avail. Nothing daunted, father went to a neighboring town, the town of Mery, which is situated on the bank opposite Auvers on the Oise river.

Mery is a small industrial town a few miles nearer to Paris than Auvers and to the peasants of Auvers, in the 90's Mery showed a Parisian influence in many ways. As if a few miles made a difference, my father said smiling.

At all events, he did secure the vehicle although he met, with some opposition. While it is true the hearse was shabby and old, nevertheless it served the purpose, even though the team of horses and conveyance were shorn of their customary black drapes.

"Only a few artists came to the funeral. I didn't know them and I don't remember their names," my father went on to say.

The funeral took place three days after Vincent Van Gogh's death. It was a fine summer afternoon around the first of August, when the body was carried out from the little cottage and placed on the shabby looking hearse. The pall-bearers were: Vincent Van Gogh's brother, Theo, the Doctor, my father and another artist. Devoid of all the usual trappings, the funeral cortege presented a dismal sight to the passerby. A tall, lanky, young art student, most queer in every way, stood out from everyone else in the procession. He walked alone in the rear, wan face, holding in his right hand and at arm's length a withered wild carrot blossom known as Queen Anne's lace, with a very long stem. .

It was a very warm day with a cloudless sky. The sun radiantly shone in all its splendor in contrast with the woeful funeral. Slowly, silently, except for the greaseless axles of the wheels which seemed to take the plaintive sound of sobbing women, the mournful procession went up the winding road to the cemetery. To walk along the dusty road in the full heat of the day was very trying.

While every one of the mourners showed discomfort from heat and dust and wiped the perspiration from their brow, father said, "the odd young beaux arts student appeared to be unmindful of it all. He neither changed his sad expression, nor his dramatic pose. Walking all the way at a regular pace, body slightly leaning

forward, he never dropped the withered wild carrot blossom, which he held at arm's length in his right hand.

"Somehow this withered wild carrot blossom struck me as symbolic of Vincent Van Gogh," Father continued to say as he glanced at the fire.

As they reached the top of the hill, the plain of Auvers, which is an extensive plateau, stretched out in all its glorious beauty before them. The vast golden wheat fields were bespeckled with flaming red poppies. There were also fields of red clover and lucern in full bloom. Lustily the birds sang oblivious of what was going on about them.

Arrived at the cemetery, the driver stepped down and opened the heavy wrought iron gate. The ghostlike white statues looked like spirits, either standing or kneeling, while others with outstretched wings feigned to fly over well-kept tombs. Weeping angels, smiling angels, serene angels with clasped hands in prayer, all seemed to have gathered there purposely to receive the forlorn group.

Fervent prayers, repeated at every funeral and offered by frequent as well as occasional visitors, like incense vapors enveloped the whole surroundings into a solace beyond words. Above the birds continued their uninterrupted songs in full harmony with all that is heavenly.

Father interrupted his story to rake the red-hot embers together and placed more wood on the fire sending up the flames in a cheerful and warm blaze.

Crunching pebbles under foot along the cemetery path, the procession passed graves that looked more like attractive flower beds. There were plots elaborately decorated with artificial flowers made of beads, shells or metal shaped in crosses, wreaths and other appropriate designs. Further away, a strange black figure leaning on a shovel, stood motionless in front of an open grave.

What a contrast with the white robed angels of the Cemetery!

The procession, headed in that direction, stopped at this very plot. Strangely enough the weird figure moved and answered at the driver's call. Dropping the shovel, he came forward. It was the grave-digger, who had been standing there as though in a trance. He now helped taking the body from off the hearse. In turn the pall-bearers took Vincent Van Gogh to his final resting place.

"There were no floral tributes to speak of, except for the withered wild carrot blossom which the young beaux arts student very gravely deposited alongside the tomb. I placed a pot of bright salmon color geranium in full bloom as my offering. Later Dr. Cachet planted sunflowers on the grave." This, father said, with a distant look and he went on to say: "Around the grave all stood with bowed heads, while I read the funeral service. We were now in communion with the Almighty whose grace dispelled the dark cloud of tragedy. Whatever our beliefs, we all were in unison as we slowly and solemnly repeated the Lord's prayer."

I continued to sit by the fireplace for some time after father finished the story. Then awakening as though from a dream, I said good night and went up to my room.

Father, however, did not answer, for he was in a different world. I left him there gazing at the dying embers of the fire.