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NCIS: Provence: The Van Gogh Mystery

For many decades, suicide was the unquestioned final chapter of Vincent van Gogh's legend. But in their 2011 book, Pulitzer Prize-winning biographers Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith offered a far more plausible scenario—that Van Gogh was killed—only to find themselves under attack. Now, with the help of a leading forensic expert, the authors take their case a step further.

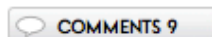
By Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith



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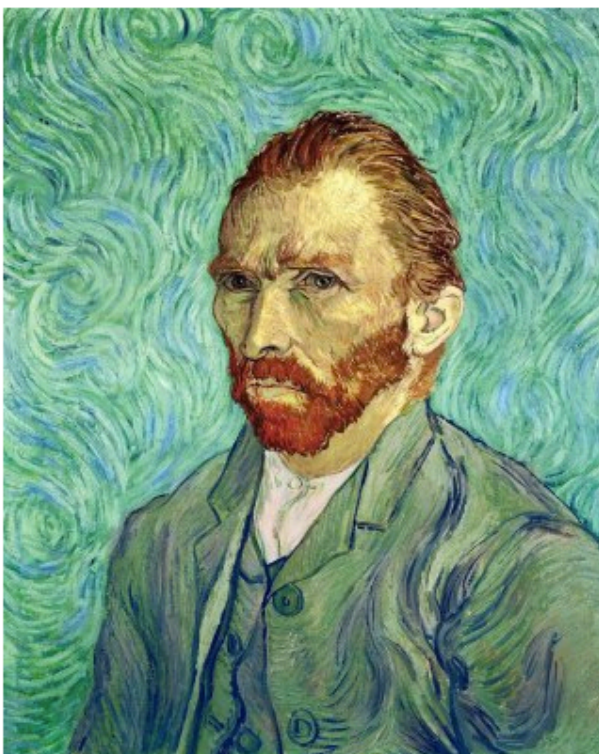
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RELATED JOHN RICHARDSON REEXAMINES VAN GOGH'S LIFE—AND WHETHER HE TOOK IT

A lone figure tramps toward a field of golden wheat. He carries a canvas, an easel, a bag of paints, and a pained grimace. He sets up his kit and begins to paint furiously, rushing to capture the scene of the swirling wheat as a storm approaches. Murderous crows attack him. He flails them away. As the wind whips the wheat into a frenzy, he races to add the ominous clouds to his canvas. Then the threatening crows. When he looks up, his eyes bug out with madness. He goes to a tree and scribbles a note: "I am desperate. I see no way out." Gritting his teeth in torment, he reaches into his pocket. Cut to a long shot of the wheat field churning in the storm. The sudden report of a gun startles a passing cart driver. The music swells. "The End" appears against a mosaic of famous paintings and a climactic crash of cymbals.



BY DEAGOSTINI/GETTY IMAGES.

It's a great scene, the stuff of legend: the death of the world's most beloved artist, the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh. *Lust for Life* was conceived in 1934 by the popular pseudo-biographer Irving Stone and captured on film in 1956 by the Oscar-winning director Vincente Minnelli, with the charismatic Kirk Douglas in the principal role.

There's only one problem. It's all bunk. Though eagerly embraced by a public in love with a handful of memorable images and spellbound by the thought of an artist who would cut off his own ear, Stone's suicide yarn was based on bad history, bad psychology, and, as a definitive new expert analysis makes clear, bad forensics.

In 2001, when we visited the Van Gogh Foundation archives, in Amsterdam, for the first time, we had no inkling of the surprise that lay at the end of our 10-year effort to write the definitive biography of Vincent van Gogh. The only bias we brought with us that day was "Please, God, let him be straight!"

Our 1998 biography of Jackson Pollock had drawn a lot of flak for its conclusion that the legendarily macho painter had homosexual yearnings (on which he occasionally acted). The evidence was overwhelmingly convincing; how could we not address it? Nevertheless, some critics denounced "the accusation" as an outrageous slur. They even argued that we had brought out the pink in Pollock because we were gay, on some sort of posthumous recruitment drive. Preposterous as this was, we didn't want to go through the gauntlet again. (Spoiler alert: Vincent was most definitively straight.)

The archives occupy an old town house next door to the Van Gogh Museum. We had been warned to expect a chilly reception. Van Gogh is a national hero. Who were we? For starters, Pulitzer Prize or no, we spoke not a word of Dutch. Nevertheless, the two archivists, Fieke Pabst and Monique Hageman, welcomed us warmly. Before long, they were bringing us stacks of folders, offered with a smile and a few encouraging words, such as "We thought you might find these interesting, too." We spent weeks copying file after file, many of which contained documents only in Dutch, which we would later have to have translated.

It took about five years of such efforts before the museum conferred on us the rare privilege of a visit to "the Vault." Somewhere in the bowels of the Van Gogh Museum (the location has since changed) there was a large, windowless room with concrete walls and cruel warehouse lighting. Against the walls were stacks of the high-tech aluminum "crates" used to transport the museum's treasures to exhibitions around the world.

The senior curator for drawings, Sjraar van Heugten, unlocked the Vault door and took us inside. He slid a Solander box onto a tabletop and opened it to reveal a stack of drawings that Van Gogh had made early in his career. The letters were there, too. The actual letters. We held them in our (gloved) hands. On the top of a filing cabinet stood a copper bowl featured in one of his most famous still lifes. Over there, the plaster nude figure that appeared in dozens of drawings and paintings. Suddenly, we realized we were surrounded not just by the products of his imagination but by the objects of his daily life, and we felt the almost religious spell attached to him. But, meanwhile, our digging in the archives was beginning to undermine one of the pillars of that faith: the story of how the artist died.

Van Gogh himself wrote not a word about his final days. The film got it wrong: he left no suicide note—odd for a man who churned out letters so profligately. A piece of writing allegedly found in his clothes after he died turned out to be an early draft of his final letter to his brother Theo, which he posted the day of the shooting, July 27, 1890. That letter was upbeat—even ebullient—about the future. He had placed a large order for more paints only a few days before a bullet put a hole in his abdomen. Because the missile missed his vital organs, it took 29 agonizing hours to kill him.

None of the earliest accounts of the shooting—those written in the days immediately after the event—mentioned suicide. They said only that Van Gogh had “wounded himself.” Strangely, the townspeople of Auvers, the picturesque community near Paris where he stayed in the last months of his life, maintained a studied silence about the incident. At first, no one admitted having seen Van Gogh on his last, fateful outing, despite the summer crowding in the streets. No one knew where he would have gotten a gun; no one admitted to finding the gun afterward, or any of the other items he had taken with him (canvas, easel, paints, etc.). His deathbed doctors, an obstetrician and a homeopathist, could make no sense of his wounds.

And, anyway, what kind of a person, no matter how unbalanced, tries to kill himself with a shot to the midsection? And then, rather than finish himself off with a second shot, staggers a mile back to his room in agonizing pain from a bullet in his belly?

The chief purveyor of the suicide narrative was Van Gogh’s fellow artist Émile Bernard, who wrote the earliest version of artistic self-martyrdom in a letter to a critic whose favor he was currying. Two years earlier, he had tried the same trick when Van Gogh cut off part of his ear. Bernard spun a completely invented account of the event that thrust himself into the sensational tale. “My best friend, my dear Vincent, is mad,” he gushed to the same critic. “Since I have found out, I am almost mad myself.” Bernard was not present at the time of Vincent’s fatal shooting, but he did attend the funeral.

If later accounts are to be believed—and they often are not—the police briefly investigated the shooting. (No records survive.) The local gendarme who interviewed Vincent on his deathbed had to prompt him with the open question “Did you intend to commit suicide?” To which he answered (again, according to later accounts) with a puzzled equivocation: “I think so.”

That account, like almost all the other “early accounts” of Van Gogh’s botched suicide, rested mainly on the testimony of one person: Adeline Ravoux, the daughter of the owner of the Ravoux Inn, where Van Gogh was staying in Auvers, and where he died. Adeline was 13 at the time. She did not speak for the record until 1953. When she did, she mostly channeled the stories her father, Gustave, had told her half a century earlier. Her story changed constantly, developing dramatic shape, and even dialogue, with each telling.

Around the same time, another witness stepped forward. He was the son of Paul Gachet, the homeopathic doctor who had sat for a famous portrait by Van Gogh. Paul junior was 17 at the time of the shooting. He spent most of the rest of his life inflating his own and his father’s importance to the artist—and, not incidentally, the value of the paintings father and son had stripped from Vincent’s studio in the days after his death. It was Paul junior who introduced the idea that the shooting had taken place in the wheat fields outside Auvers. Even Theo’s son, Vincent (the painter’s namesake and godson), who founded the museum, dismissed Gachet Jr. as “highly unreliable.”

By the time these belated reports appeared, of course, Bernard's suicide story had been mainlined into Van Gogh biography through the illicit back channel of Stone's fictionalized page-turner.

So how did the legend of suicide survive with so little to support it? It helped that Van Gogh died at the right time. The art world was finally turning his way. In fact, an apoplectically laudatory review of his work had appeared in a prominent Paris magazine just months before his death. The timing didn't quite fit the narrative of despairing suicide, but that genie had left the bottle. Boosted by the gripping tale of his final act of martyrdom, Van Gogh's celebrity took off like a rocket. *Lust for Life* just filled in the trajectory. The movie received a banquet of rave reviews, a bouquet of Oscar nominations, and one win (for Anthony Quinn, as a stoic, supportive, truth-defying Paul Gauguin).

Eventually, we worked up the courage to share our skepticism about the suicide legend with friends at the museum. To our surprise, their reaction was muted: reserving judgment but definitely intrigued. One senior scholar even ventured some support for our doubts. "Your case is very strong," he mused. "There are several things that puzzle one if you want to explain suicide... He showed no intention of 'stepping out.'" We found out later that another museum researcher had already expressed his own suspicions about the suicide story. In 2006 he brought them to the attention of a senior official, who advised him to abandon that line of inquiry as "too controversial."

If Van Gogh didn't shoot himself, who did shoot him?

In 1890, René Secrétan was the 16-year-old son of a Paris pharmacist whose family summered in Auvers. In Paris, René's lycée education admitted him to bourgeois society. In Auvers, it gave him license to bully. He said he modeled his behavior on his hero, Wild Bill Cody, whose Wild West Show René had seen in Paris the year before. He bought a souvenir costume (fringed buckskin, cowboy hat, chaps) and accessorized it with an old, small-caliber pistol that looked menacing but often misfired.

He found an easy target in the strange Dutchman named Vincent. By the time René arrived for the summer, Van Gogh was already the object of rumor and ridicule. He trudged through town with his mangled ear and awkward load, setting himself up to paint anywhere he pleased. He drank. He argued fiercely in an unintelligible tumble of Dutch and French.

Unlike René, whose father was a powerful figure in the summer community, Vincent had no friends. Using his brother Gaston, an aesthete, as his front man, René artfully slipped into the vacuum. He cozied up to the lonely painter at his café conversations with Gaston about art. He paid for another round of drinks. Afterward, René would mock the strange Dutchman to amuse his merry band of mischief-minded summer boys.

René let Vincent eavesdrop on him and his friends when they imported "dancing girls" from Paris. He shared his pornography collection. He even posed for some paintings and a drawing. Meanwhile, he conspired with his followers to play elaborate pranks on the friendless tramp they called Toto. They put hot pepper on his brushes (which he often sucked when deep in thought), salted his tea, and sneaked a snake into his paint box.

There it was, all in the files: the details mostly in a late-life narrative from the cowboy himself, René. But every detail checked out with the other eyewitness accounts from Auvers. And it didn't say anything new, really. Vincent had faced similar bullying and ridicule in every place he ever painted.

And there was this: a long-neglected account by a woman from a distinguished Auvers family who had broken with the community *omertà* to say that Van Gogh was far from the wheat field at the time the fatal shot was fired. He was, according to her, on the road that led to the Secrétan family villa.

René later became a respected French banker and businessman, distinguished himself as a marksman and hunter, and retired as a country gentleman. Outraged by Kirk Douglas's portrayal of Toto as a cleaned-up, larger-than-life hero ("grotesque," he called it), René took his last opportunity to set the record straight.

Granted, it was not an airtight case. Not surprisingly, René denied having had any role in Van Gogh's shooting, other than providing the dodgy gun. ("It worked when it wanted," René joked. It was just "fate" that it wanted to the day it shot Van Gogh.) He said he had already left Auvers when the incident happened (oddly rushing off in the middle of the season).

But it was a lot sturdier base for a case than the suicide theory. We even had a kind of corroboration from an august, unexpected source. The eminent scholar John Rewald had traveled to Auvers in the 1930s and interviewed locals when the painter's death was still in living memory. Later, he confided to many people, including at least one on the record, a rumor he had heard there: that some "young boys" had shot Vincent accidentally. The boys never came forward, he was told, because they feared being accused of murder, and Vincent chose to protect them as a final act of martyrdom.

In the end, we put our support for the new theory into a legal-brief-like appendix at the end of our book. We labeled it "an alternate circumstantial explanation" and argued that it better fit the few firmly known facts about the shooting, and the even fewer reliable accounts, than the traditional suicide story. That seemed sufficiently cautious.

But not cautious enough. The book received wide attention in the press: mostly great reviews, many gratifying superlatives, a brief appearance on the *New York Times* best-seller list, and deals for a dozen international editions (in almost as many languages). In short, it was taken seriously by many thoughtful people.

But angle-crazy, on-deadline newspaper editors (especially in the U.K.) cut through the book, all 900 pages of it, and went straight to the appendix. VAN GOGH MURDERED! the headlines screamed. PAINTER SLAIN BY TEENAGERS. Among Van Gogh's constellation of fans, however, many refused to let the legend die. They raced to the Internet to register their grievance. "It can't be right," one said in response to our years of research. "This isn't the Vincent van Gogh that I know from *Starry, Starry Night*."

Some in the much smaller circle of Van Gogh scholars, art historians, curators, experts, and specialists weren't too happy, either. Many had done years of research and writing that was deeply embedded in the old narrative. They didn't just disagree with our new reading; they were enraged by it. We called them "the Flame-Keepers."

We met with one for tea at Claridge's, in London. A specialist on Van Gogh's years in England, he grandly stirred his blend and pronounced our theory "just dead wrong." Another specialist, with whom we shared a stage at the opening of a Van Gogh exhibition in Denver, was so choked with indignation that he refused even to discuss the subject when the audience raised it.

Through it all, to its credit, the museum maintained an appropriate academic restraint, posting on its Web site only a polite demurral: "All things considered, it would be premature to rule out suicide as the cause of death."

Two years later, the Flame-Keepers finally struck back.

In 2013, two scholars affiliated with the museum, Louis van Tilborgh and Teio Meedendorp, published a critical review in *The Burlington Magazine*, a British art journal. (The journal invited us to respond but did not ultimately publish our written response.) The reviewers' defense of the suicide narrative rested almost entirely on a new reading of the scant surviving forensic evidence.

Their unlikely source was a small pamphlet self-published by an Auvers town historian in the months after the first sensational headlines about our book's theory of the death hit the French media. The pamphlet's author claimed to have identified the long-missing suicide weapon. Oddly, he ignored the eyewitness description of Van Gogh's wound given by the attendant physician, Paul Gachet Sr., who was interviewed on the subject in the 1920s. He relied instead on a description given in the late 1950s by the "highly unreliable" Paul junior (who never saw the wound) and an analysis of it by unnamed "ballistics experts."

We had consulted numerous medical and forensic experts in putting together our book's reconstruction of Van Gogh's fatal wounding. But now we had a competing analysis that we could take to an appropriate umpire. Dr. Vincent Di Maio had already enjoyed a long and distinguished career as one of the world's leading handgun forensic experts when, only weeks after we contacted him, he came to national attention as a key witness in the trial of George Zimmerman, the neighborhood-watch coordinator of a gated community in Sanford, Florida, who fatally shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, an African-American high-school student, in February 2012.

At our request (and waiving any fee), Dr. Di Maio agreed to compare the forensic evidence as presented in our book to the "new" account relied on by the Van Tilborgh-and-Meedendorp article.

Their review made much of Paul junior's description of the wound as having a "brown and purple halo around [it]." The purple halo, according to the two art historians, proved that "the gun must have been fired at very close range ... and was caused by the bullet's impact." The brownish ring, they said, "indicated that the barrel of the gun was close to the chest, because it was caused by powder burns." In order to leave such a trace, they concluded, "the impact area would have to have been bared" (presumably by Vincent). "Or did someone else ask him to lift up his shirt?" they added wryly.

Dr. Di Maio differed on almost every point. That “purple halo”? It had nothing to do with the proximity of the gun barrel to Vincent’s body. “In fact, this is subcutaneous bleeding from vessels cut by the bullet and is usually seen in individuals who live awhile,” Di Maio wrote in his report. “Its presence or absence means nothing.”

As for Van Tilborgh and Meedendorp’s other “aha” clue—the “brownish ring”—it was simply “an abrasion ring and seen around virtually all entrance wounds,” according to Di Maio. “It just indicates an entrance.”

Finally, where the two art historians deduced that the brownish ring was “a trace” of powder burns and therefore Vincent must have bravely bared his torso before firing the fatal shot “with the barrel close to [his] chest,” Dr. Di Maio gives the powder burns a far more prominent role but paints a far less dramatic picture of the scene.

Even if one were to accept Van Tilborgh and Meedendorp’s account of the wound, he wrote, “it would be extremely difficult to shoot oneself in this location [i.e., on the left side] with the left hand. The easiest way would involve putting one’s fingers around the back of the grip and using the thumb to fire the gun. One might grasp the gun with the right hand to steady it... Using one’s right hand is even more absurd. You would have to put the right arm across the chest and again place one’s fingers on the back of the grip and use the thumb to fire the gun. One might then grasp the gun with the left hand to steady it.”

Van Gogh was, in fact, right-handed. But in either scenario, Di Maio observed, “one would have ‘powder burns’ on the palm of the hand grasping the body of the gun.” He noted that handgun cartridges in 1890 were loaded with black powder because smokeless powder had only recently been developed (1884) and was used only in a few military rifles. “Black powder is extremely dirty,” Di Maio wrote. “On burning, 56% of its mass is solid residue. Close range wounds from black powder are extremely dirty.”

If Van Gogh had shot himself, even in one of the strange contortions dictated by the location of the wound (not to mention while holding his shirt up, as dictated by Van Tilborgh and Meedendorp), “[he] would have held the muzzle of the revolver at most a few inches away,” according to Di Maio, and “most probably it would be in contact with the body.” In such a case, “there would have been soot, powder tattooing and searing of the skin around the entrance. These would have been grossly evident. None of this is described [in any of the forensic accounts]. This indicates the muzzle was more than a foot or two away (closer to two rather than one).”

(The “grossly evident” powder burns described by Di Maio were not noted by any of the dozen people who reportedly saw Van Gogh between his wounding and his death.)

Di Maio’s conclusion? “It is my opinion that, in all medical probability, the wound incurred by Van Gogh was not self-inflicted. In other words, he did not shoot himself.”

Which brings us back to the question: If Van Gogh didn’t shoot himself, who did shoot him? On the one hand, we have a cocky 16-year-old twirling the death weapon with visions of frontier gunplay in his head and a history of taunting the strange painter-man. We have a witness who

saw Van Gogh on the road to the Secrétan family villa on the night of the shooting, and we have persistent local rumors that the artist was killed not by his own hand but by “young boys”—rumors recounted by a prominent scholar in the 1930s, before *Lust for Life* fever swept the record smooth.

On the other hand, we have the fanciful, self-inflating testimony of a grudgeful friend (Bernard) who died believing that Vincent had hogged the spotlight of history that rightfully belonged to him; the double-decker hearsay of the elderly Paul Gachet Jr., who had spent a lifetime enriching himself off Van Gogh’s reputation by publishing accounts of their relationship and donating a number of Van Gogh’s works to the Louvre museum; and the increasingly dizzy fancies of Adeline Ravoux, who, as a young girl, sat (terrified) for a portrait by a strange man who became a famous painter, and half a century later found herself swept up in Hollywood legend-making.

Years ago, when all this began to emerge from our research, a curator at the Van Gogh Museum predicted the fate that would befall such a blasphemy on the Van Gogh gospel. “I think it would be like Vincent to protect the boys and take the ‘accident’ as an unexpected way out of his burdened life,” he agreed in an e-mail. “But I think the biggest problem you’ll find after publishing your theory is that the suicide is more or less printed in the brains of past and present generations and has become a sort of self-evident truth. Vincent’s suicide has become the grand finale of the story of the martyr for art, it’s his crown of thorns.”