



Letter to the Editor

Vincent van Gogh's epilepsy

To the Editor:

Whether Van Gogh (1853–1890) had epilepsy has been subject to doubt and conjecture in the fields of art and medicine. Even epileptologists have had divergent views. Gastaut admitted that Van Gogh had epilepsy, but considered that his seizures were triggered by alcohol [1–3], whereas according to Hughes, Van Gogh more likely suffered from fainting fits [4].

The recent edition of Van Gogh's correspondence (*Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, 2009) makes the diagnosis of epilepsy indisputable. The letters permit a diagnosis from 1888 (age 35), but seizures may have started earlier. Thus, on May 23, 1889, he wrote his brother Theo:

I dare to believe that once one knows what it is, once one is aware of one's state and of possibly being subject to crises, that then one can do something about it oneself so as not to be caught so much unaware by the anguish or the terror. Now, this has been diminishing for 5 months, I have good hope of getting over it, or at least of not having crises of such force.

His doctors made a clear diagnosis of epileptic seizures. In a transcript of the admission certificate on May 9, 1889, the asylum's doctor, Dr. Peyron, wrote:

I the undersigned, Doctor of Medicine, Director of the St. Rémy Mental Home, certify that the man named Vincent van Gogh, aged 36, a native of Holland and at present domiciled in Arles (Bouches du Rhône), under treatment at this city's infirmary, suffered an attack of acute mania with visual and auditory hallucinations that led him to mutilate himself by cutting off his ear.... Based on all the above, I consider that Mr. van Gogh is subject to attacks of epilepsy, separated by long intervals.

This same day, Van Gogh wrote to Theo: "As far as I know the doctor here is inclined to consider what I've had as an attack of an epileptic nature." Interestingly, the monthly notes of the asylum doctor contain a notion of a family history of epilepsy:

This patient has been admitted there following an attack of acute mania, which occurred suddenly, accompanied by visual and auditory hallucinations that terrified him. During that attack he cut off his left ear, but he has no more than a vague memory of all that, and is not aware of it. He tells us that his mother's sister was Epileptic, and that there are several cases in his family. What has happened to this patient may be no more than a continuation of what has happened to several members of his family.

Van Gogh also reported the comments of his young doctor, Dr. Rey, in his letter to Theo dated 23 May 1889:

For the sufferings of anguish aren't funny when you're caught in a crisis. Most epileptics bite their tongues and injure them. Rey told me that he had known a case where someone had injured his ear as I did, and I believe I've heard a doctor here who came to see me with the director say that he too had seen it before.

Theo, who met Dr. Peyron, also wrote him:

He doesn't consider you mad at all, and says that the crises you have are of an epileptic nature. (From Theo to Vincent, 4 October 1889)

The correspondence highlights unpredictable spontaneous seizures recurring at regular intervals, in a quasi-periodic manner, which is a common feature of epilepsy, as patients now often record in seizure diaries. According to Van Gogh's remarks, he had an average interval between attacks of 3 months. Being aware of this periodicity, he tried to plan his train trip from Saint-Rémy-de-Provence to Paris/Auvers-sur-Oise just after a seizure.

I consider a new crisis likely in the winter, i.e., in 3 months... unfortunately, it's to be feared that this will always recur from time to time. (To Theo, 6 September 1889)

I leave aside the hope that it wouldn't recur—on the contrary I must tell myself that from time to time I'll have a crisis. (To Theo, 10 September 1889)

I'm quite confident, after warning you, to wait for the winter and the crisis which may recur then. (To Theo, 20 September 1889)

I've just said the same thing to Mr. Peyron, and I pointed out to him that crises like the one I've just had have always been followed by three or four months of complete calm. I wish to take advantage of this period to move.... So please write to Mr. Peyron that he should let me leave, let's say on the 15th at the latest. If I waited I would let the good moment of calm between two crises pass, and leaving now I'll have the free time necessary to make the other doctor's acquaintance. Then, if in a while from now the illness were to recur it would be foreseen. (To Theo, 4 May 1890)

The letters also show fatigue and sleep deprivation as triggering factors, another classic feature of epilepsy. Van Gogh and his brother were concerned by the risk of a train trip. Vincent wrote to Theo:

I suspected that he [Dr. Peyron] believed there was a connection between my previous trip and the crisis that closely followed it. (5 October 1889)

But first we'll see a little if this journey might provoke another crisis. I almost dare hope not. (19 November 1889)

Theo gave more details:

Your journey to Arles was absolutely disastrous for you, will the travelling not do you harm this time? ... The fatigue of the journey

and the sensation of rediscovering places you have known may have an influence on your illness. (From Theo to Vincent, 3 May 1890)

Some excerpts strongly suggest that Van Gogh also had tonic-clonic seizures:

Now the shock had been such that it disgusted me even to move. (To Theo, 23 May 1889)

For many days I've been absolutely distraught, as in Arles, just as much if not worse, and it's to be presumed that these crises will recur in the future, it is ABOMINABLE. I haven't been able to eat for 4 days, as my throat is swollen. (To Theo, 22 August 1889)

I feel a little worn out by this long crisis. (To Theo, 2 May 1890)

Lastly, he feared the consequences of having seizures in public, including the risk of being maltreated by witnesses who did not know him, and mentioned the chronic social handicap.

The main thing is to know the doctor [of Auvers] so that, in the event of a crisis, one doesn't fall into the hands of the police and isn't forcibly carried off into an asylum. (To Theo, 5 October 1889)

I assure you that it's already something to resign oneself to living under guard, even in the event of it being sympathetic, and to sacrifice one's freedom, to stand outside society and to have only one's work, without distraction. (To Theo, 4 May 1890)

His brother could be overprotective:

In any event on the day you've decided to come here you absolutely must be accompanied during the entire journey by someone you trust. (From Theo to Vincent, 3 May 1890)

Van Gogh refused these precautions:

Well, I'll be very simple and as practical as possible in my reply. First, I categorically reject what you say that I should be accompanied throughout the journey. Once on the train I no longer run any risk, I'm not one of those who are dangerous—even supposing I have a crisis, aren't there other passengers in the carriage, and besides, don't they know what to do in all the stations in such a case? You're giving yourself worries here that weigh on me so heavily that it might directly discourage me.... I've tried to be patient up to this point, I haven't done any harm to anyone, is it fair to have me accompanied like a dangerous animal? No thank you, I protest. (To Theo, 4 May 1890)

His brother was worried:

Since you find it such an annoyance to travel with someone from the asylum, for heaven's sake, you must risk it, although I'm not like you and wouldn't do it, to avoid, should the crisis seize hold of you again, all the miseries that would emerge should you, at an unknown station, have to deal with people you don't know and who would treat you who knows how. (From Theo to Vincent, 10 May 1890)

The whole correspondence testifies to Van Gogh's lucidity. He conveyed the feeling of a life rendered unpredictable by epilepsy, with the constant fear that a seizure will occur. As described in his letter to Theo on 8 October 1889, he reacted by involving himself thoroughly in his work: "It drives me to work and to seriousness, as a coal-miner who is always in danger makes haste in what he does." This gave rise to the amazing work that is today appreciated for its true worth.

Acknowledgment

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References

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