

Van Gogh Museum Articles

An offer you *can* refuse

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Van
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Museum
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Vincent van Gogh in the Van Gogh Museum, 1973, photographer Jan Versnel, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



Vincent van Gogh, Almond Blossom (detail), 1890, oil on canvas, 73,3 cm x 92,4 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Visitors to the Van Gogh Museum are guaranteed enjoyment of masterpieces like *The Potato Eaters*, *Sunflowers* and *The Yellow House*, each of which forms part of a representative survey of Vincent van Gogh's artistic development. The artist's work is famous and much loved, while the Van Gogh Museum, which opened to the public in 1973, has become a landmark in Amsterdam's museum quarter. Yet it was far from inevitable that the collection should have remained intact or that it would end up in this purpose-built museum. A rival was lurking in the wings in the early part of the twentieth century, and if they had had their way, things would have turned out very differently.

The extraordinary legacy of Vincent and Theo van Gogh

The opening celebrations for the Van Gogh Museum on 2 June 1973 fulfilled the 'heart's desire' of the eighty-three-year-old retired engineer Vincent van Gogh (1890–1978). In his inaugural speech, the museum's founder called it 'a miracle that so much of Vincent's work has been kept together'.¹

This Vincent was the son of the art dealer Theo van Gogh (1857–1891) and Jo van Gogh-Bonger (1862–1925), and the nephew of the celebrated artist. When the baby was born, his uncle started work on a gift for him: a painting of blossoming almond branches against a blue sky (fig. 1).² Theo had written to his brother immediately after the birth on 31 January 1890 to share the happy news: 'As we told you, we'll name him after you, and I'm making the wish that he may be as determined and as courageous as you.'³

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1. V.W. van Gogh: speech on the opening of the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, 2 June 1973, vgm b6621.
 2. *Almond Blossom* (F671). Vincent van Gogh to Anna van Gogh-Carbentus, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Wednesday, 19 February 1890, <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let855/letter.html>. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, Nienke Bakker (eds.) (2009), *Vincent van Gogh - The Letters*. Version: [October 2020]. Amsterdam and The Hague: Van Gogh Museum and Huygens ING. <http://vangoghletters.org>
 3. Theo to Vincent, Paris, Friday, 31 January 1890, <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let847>. Like the artist, the youngster's full name was Vincent Willem van Gogh, but he too went by Vincent.

The joy of the new arrival – and opportunities to share in it – were short-lived. The thirty-seven-year-old Vincent van Gogh died on 29 July 1890, followed half a year later by his brother Theo on 25 January 1891 at the age of thirty-three. Baby Vincent celebrated his first birthday the following week.⁴

The brothers' deaths left Jo van Gogh-Bonger in sole charge not only of her little son (fig. 2) but also of all Van Gogh's drawings, paintings and letters, plus the collection of artworks that Vincent and Theo had jointly assembled. Theo had not left a will, which meant that half of the works of art went to Jo and the other half to baby Vincent. Precisely how they were to be divided was not specified. Until Vincent became an adult in 1911, Jo retained control over his share of the inheritance. From the moment she found herself alone, Jo committed herself to ensuring Vincent van Gogh's work and his life would become widely known and loved. She saw to it that his work could be seen at exhibitions and made strategic sales to individuals and influential dealers, all with the aim of raising the artist's profile. A nucleus of favourite works was kept strictly apart from these transactions – works that were destined to remain within the family.

2. *Jo van Gogh-Bonger and Vincent van Gogh*, 1892, photographer J.F. Hennequin, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



1. Vincent van Gogh, *Almond Blossom*, 1890, oil on canvas, 73.3 cm x 92.4 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



4. Han van Crimpen, 'Introduction', in: Leo Jansen, Jan Robert (eds.), *Brief happiness: the correspondence of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bonger*, Waanders, Zwolle 1999, p. 49.

In 1901, Jo married her second husband, the artist Johan Cohen Gosschalk (fig. 3). She reverted to the name Van Gogh-Bonger a year after Johan too had died in 1912, giving her the same surname as her son once more.⁵ Young Vincent grew up surrounded by his uncle's work and greatly respected his artistic legacy, but for his own part yearned for a career outside the world of art.⁶ At the age of seventeen, he began to study mechanical engineering in Delft, graduating in 1914. To avoid confusion with the artist, Vincent was widely referred to – especially in later years – as ‘The Engineer’ after his chosen profession.

Even while Vincent focused on his studies, the art collection remained a regular topic of discussion between himself and his mother. Jo consulted him, for instance, whenever important decisions had to be taken regarding the collection, including the sale of works. Although over the years Vincent became increasingly involved in the management of the estate and its activities – from the 1920s onwards in particular – it was Jo who remained in charge until her death.⁷



3. Vincent van Gogh, *Jo Cohen Gosschalk-Bonger and Johan Cohen Gosschalk in the dining room at 77 Koninginneweg, Amsterdam*, c. late 1910 - early 1911, photographer Bernard Eilers, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

4. *Josina van Gogh-Wibaut and Vincent van Gogh in the sitting room of Jo van Gogh-Bonger's house, Koninginneweg 77, Amsterdam*, 1915, photographer Bernard Eilers, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



Vincent married Josina Wibaut (1890–1933) in 1915 and went on to work in France, America and Japan before settling in Amsterdam in 1920 (fig. 4).⁸ Together with Ernst Hijmans, a friend from his student days, he set up a management consultancy, which specialized in the critical observation and analysis of business processes and then proposing improvements based on those findings. They pioneered the introduction of this field in the Netherlands, following its initial development in the United States.

5. Hans Luijten, *Alles voor Vincent. Het leven van Jo van Gogh-Bonger*, Prometheus, Amsterdam 2019, pp. 331, 359, 363, 387.
 6. V.W. van Gogh, *Speech on the eighty-fifth birthday of V.W. van Gogh*, 1 February 1975, vgm b7439.
 7. Luijten 2019, pp. 345, 474.
 8. Josina was a daughter of Alderman Floor Wibaut. The couple had four children.

Following his mother's death in 1925, Vincent assumed full responsibility for the estate and swiftly decided that no further works would be sold.⁹ While Vincent took good care of his uncle's legacy, he was reluctant at first to present himself as the nephew of the famous artist and focused instead on his own career. It was not until after 1945 that he actively began to promote the collection. He started to give lectures and was intensively involved in numerous exhibitions in the Netherlands and abroad (fig. 5).¹⁰

Vincent wanted the art collection to remain intact even after his death and recognized that it would be broken up if he failed to act. Works would have to be sold to pay the inheritance tax bill, and what was left would then be shared among his three children.¹¹ To avoid this, he struck a deal with the Dutch State, under which he sold the Van Gogh estate in 1962 to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, which he had founded two years earlier. The government provided the necessary funding and undertook to build a museum, while the City of Amsterdam supplied a plot of land in the museum quarter. Vincent's children gave their blessing to their father's plans for a museum and waived their inheritance. With some 200 paintings, 500 drawings and over 800 letters, the Van Gogh Museum nowadays manages the largest collection of works by Vincent van Gogh anywhere in the world.¹²



5. Vincent van Gogh, arrival in Montreal, unknown photographer, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

9. Luijten 2019, pp. 476–477.

10. Johan van Gogh, 'The history of the collection', in: E. van Uitert, M. Hoyle, *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, Meulenhoff/Landshoff, Amsterdam 1987, pp. 1–8.

11. Theo (1920–1945) - Vincent and Josina's eldest son - was active in the Dutch resistance during the Second World War. He was captured shortly before hostilities ended and executed.

12. The Vincent van Gogh Foundation placed the collection on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum. Van Gogh 1987, pp. 6–7. Luijten 2019, p. 483.

Bid for the collection

It is primarily due to the efforts of Jo van Gogh-Bonger, therefore, that Vincent van Gogh's life and work have become so well known. Exhibitions in the Netherlands and abroad and strategic sales of drawings and paintings cultivated a growing interest among collectors and dealers. In 1911, Jo received a spectacular bid to purchase the collection of works by Van Gogh. Johannes de Bois, head of the Hague branch of C.M. van Gogh art dealers revealed this event seven years later in the newspaper *Haarlem's Dagblad*. De Bois had been in contact with Jo since 1908 and had regularly sold works from her collection.¹³

'It may now be reported for curiosity's sake that in the summer of 1911, the author of this article approached Mrs Cohen Gosschalk as was, with an almost unlimited mandate from a client who wished to acquire this collection in its entirety for his museum. Despite the exceedingly high bid he was permitted to make, he was nevertheless disappointed and, resolutely and with a serene smile, sent packing. A commercial defeat, if you will, that only increased my admiration for she who rebuffed my offer all the more.'¹⁴

The idea that Jo would sell off the collection was unthinkable.¹⁵ The estate was co-owned by her son, who was still studying in Delft at the time, and Jo was hard at work on the ambitious edition of Van Gogh's correspondence, due for publication in 1914, to which she had devoted her heart and soul.¹⁶ The letters were sure to attract additional attention to the collection and so she would not have had the slightest inclination to sell all of Van Gogh's works at a stroke.

It is not known whether Jo and Vincent ever discussed or dreamed about the possibility of creating their own museum in due course, but it certainly cannot be ruled out. Willem Steenhoff, the future deputy director of the Rijksmuseum, referred as early as 1901 in the newspaper *De Amsterdammer* to the danger of Van Gogh's estate being broken up. He recommended that the collection be housed in a separate building or in a dedicated gallery at an existing museum.¹⁷

13. The business in The Hague closed in October 1911 and De Bois joined Maison Artz on 1 November, at which point the firm changed its name to 'Artz en de Bois'. F. Heijbroek, E.L. Wouthuysen, *Kunst Kennis en Commercie. De kunsthandaalar J.H. de Bois 1878-1946*, Uitgeverij Contact, Amsterdam/Antwerp 1993, pp. 28, 36.

14. J.H. de Bois, 'Van Kunst en Kunstenaars. No. 105', in: *Haarlem's Dagblad*, 23 March 1918. De Bois dated his article 6 March 1918.

15. The influential Parisian dealer Gaston Bernheim-Jeune had previously asked Jo in 1906 whether she would be willing to sell him all the works that had featured the previous year in the large-scale Van Gogh exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum. While Jo did not take him up on his offer, she subsequently increased the asking price of the paintings she sold individually. Luijten 2019, pp. 320–321.

16. The first volume was published in June, with volumes two and three following later that year. Luijten 2019, p. 396.

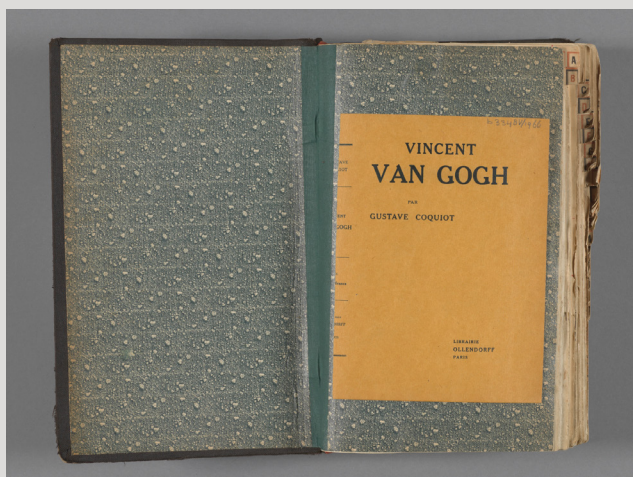
17. Luijten 2019, p. 266. Willem Steenhoff, *De Amsterdammer*, 24 March 1901. Steenhoff had been writing reviews for *De Amsterdammer* since 1899, the year in which he was first employed as an assistant at the Rijksmuseum, where he subsequently rose to the position of deputy director in the period 1905–1924.

A visit from Coquiot

Johannes de Bois' revelation obviously prompts the question of who was this aficionado who was so eager to get hold of all Van Gogh's work in the summer of 1911? Jo van Gogh-Bonger left no record of it and no reference to the bid has survived on her son Vincent's part either. The answer seems to lie in a notebook kept by the French author and art critic Gustave Coquiot (1865–1926), who published on Paul Cézanne and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec among others. Coquiot was something of an opportunist, who was not averse to supplying favourable exhibition reviews in return for cash or other gifts. He played an important role at the beginning of the twentieth century in promoting the then unknown Pablo Picasso, who repaid him by painting Coquiot's portrait.¹⁸

In 1922, Coquiot was working on a book about the life of Vincent van Gogh.¹⁹ For research purposes, he visited all the places the artist had lived and spoke to people who had known Van Gogh personally. The author and his wife Nana travelled to Amsterdam in June on the invitation of Jo van Gogh-Bonger, who had already advised him on a number of matters. The couple visited Jo and Vincent, each of whom held part of the collection. They gave Coquiot the opportunity to study the artworks and Jo in particular shared potentially interesting information and memories for his publication.

Coquiot recorded his impressions and all the snippets he picked up in a notebook and later typed up the bulk of the handwritten notes he had made during his stay in the Netherlands. As he worked, he supplemented some of the factual information with additional details or personal comments. He added this reworked version to the section 'mes notes personnelles de Hollande (en face!)' in a large record book in which he gathered all manner of information about Van Gogh and the journey that the author had made in the artist's footsteps (fig. 6).²⁰



6. Gustave Coquiot, *Inside and cover of record book*, 1922, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



18. John Richardson, *A life of Picasso. Volume 1. 1881–1906*, Pimlico, London 1992, p. 198. Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Gustave Coquiot*, Paris, 1901, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.
19. Gustave Coquiot, *Vincent van Gogh*, Librairie Paul Ollendorff, Paris 1923.
20. 'My personal notes from Holland (face to face!)'. Coquiot wanted to visit Jo on 12 June, but she was only free the following day, which is how he came to talk to Vincent first. He went to Jo's home on 13 June and later dined with Vincent and his wife Josina van Gogh-Wibaut. Jo van Gogh-Bonger to Gustave Coquiot, 27 December 1921, vgm b3270; 2 May 1922, vgm b3271; 11 June 1922, vgm b3268. Gustave Coquiot, Notes of the journey to The Netherlands and Belgium, vgm b7150; Gustave Coquiot, Record book with notes for a biography on Vincent van Gogh, pp. 14, 20–21, vgm b3348. He inserted the typed notes about his stay in the Netherlands after the letter M and added further notes on smaller sheets between these numbered pages. Coquiot made a few small typing errors, which have been corrected here.

Coquiote could be condescending and had a tendency to caricature people in his writing. The notes of his visits to Vincent and his mother are no exception. Despite the sympathetic reception they both gave the Frenchman, there is no trace in his notes that he sensed the exceptional value – emotional as well as material – that the art collection represented for them. Indeed, Coquiote considered the devotion with which Jo honoured the estate and held onto everything – Van Gogh’s sketchbooks, for instance – to be over the top: ‘Elle a le culte des souvenirs, même jusqu’au fétichisme, c’est ainsi qu’elle conserve des petits calepins ayant appartenu à Vincent, choses sans intérêt absolument.’²¹



7. Vincent van Gogh,
Sunflowers, 1889,
oil on canvas, 95 cm x 73 cm,
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Coquiote recorded which paintings he saw during these visits. Vincent had *Almond Blossom* and *The Bedroom* at his home, for instance, and Jo *The Potato Eaters* and *Sunflowers* (fig. 7).²² It is plain, nevertheless, that the critic was not enthusiastic about the collection as a whole, commenting disparagingly: ‘Au fond, toutes ces oeuvres de Vincent, petites, moyennes, et grandes, un peu en dépôt chez la mère et le fils. Rien ne se fait valoir. Ce n’est pas encourageant à revoir. Et cependant quel culte Mme V.G. Bonger garde à Vincent!’²³

21. ‘She worships these mementos, even to the point of fetishism, which is why she keeps little notebooks that belonged to Vincent, things of absolutely no interest.’ Coquiote, Record book, p. 20, vgm b3348. Some of Coquiote’s other comments were even more negative. Regarding Jo’s second marriage to Johan Cohen Gosschalk, for instance, he remarks: ‘pourquoi ce deuxième mariage, elle ne cessera de nous parler de Theo.’ (‘why this second marriage, she will not stop telling us about Theo.’) He also mocked Jo’s statement that she did not want the tombs of her late husband and brother-in-law in Auvers to be disturbed: ‘Mme V G Bonger me l’a nettement exprimé: Elle ne veut pas que l’on touche, en quoi que ce soit, aux tombes des deux frères Van Gogh ! Tant pis pour les mangeurs de cadavres.’ (‘Mrs V G Bonger told me clearly: She does not want the tombs of the two Van Gogh brothers to be touched, in any way! Too bad for the corpse eaters’). Coquiote, Record book, p. 21, vgm b3348; Coquiote, Notes, 14 June 1922, vgm b7150.
22. Coquiote, Record book, note on separate page before p. 19 and p. 19, vgm b3348; Coquiote, Notes, 13 June 1922, vgm b7150. There were two versions of *Sunflowers* in the collection at the time of Coquiote’s visit. Jo and Vincent probably had one each. One of the versions (F454) was sold to the National Gallery in London in 1924. Luijten 2019, p. 457. The other (F458) is now in the Van Gogh Museum. *The Bedroom* (F482), *The Potato Eaters* (F77) and *Almond Blossom* (F671) also belong to the Van Gogh Museum collection.
23. ‘Essentially, all these works by Vincent, small, medium and large, more or less in storage with the mother and her son. Nothing stands out. It is not encouraging to see this again. And yet how Mrs V.G. Bonger continues to worship Vincent!’ Coquiote, Record book, p. 21, vgm b3348.

Coquiot wrote down several questions in preparation for his meeting with Jo. He wanted to know, for instance, whether there were any other important private collections with works by Van Gogh. The art critic was already aware of the most prominent other collection in the Netherlands, as he noted among his questions for Jo: 'voir, si possible, Mme Kröller à la Haye?'²⁴ Helene Kröller-Müller's collection of Van Goghs was the second largest in the world by that point, after Jo and Vincent's.²⁵ Coquiot had already visited The Hague before coming to Amsterdam. He had not spoken to Kröller-Müller, however, and an attempt to view her collection failed. Coquiot probably did not realize that he needed to make an appointment to see the collection, which was displayed in a building at 1 Lange Voorhout. He turned up to find a locked door – not that he was bothered by this: 'Allé à l'hôtel de Mme Kröller. Fermé. Je ne regrette rien. Ces collections à coup de millions me dégoûtent.'²⁶ The subject of Kröller-Müller's collection came up during Coquiot's visit to Jo. He devoted just a single sentence to this in his account, but the author did refer to an absolutely remarkable event (without giving the year), which Jo evidently confided to him:

'Elle a refusé de vendre à Mme Kröller toute l'œuvre de Vincent, bien que Mme Kröller fit l'offre d'une somme illimitée!'²⁷

24. 'If possible, see Mrs Kröller in The Hague?' Gustave Coquiot, Notebook, vgm b3347.

25. Eva Rovers, *De eeuwigheid verzameld. Helene Kröller-Müller 1869-1939*, Bert Bakker, Amsterdam 2010, p. 196.

26. 'Went to Mrs Kröller's mansion. Closed. I have no regrets. These collections costing millions disgust me.' Coquiot, Record book, p. 7, vgm b3348; Coquiot, Notes, 10 June 1922, vgm b7150.

27. 'She refused to sell all of Vincent's works to Mrs Kröller, even though Mrs Kröller offered an unlimited sum!' Coquiot, Record book, p. 20, vgm b3348.

The Kröller-Müllers: enchanted by Van Gogh

Does Coquiot's note tie in with Johannes de Bois' revelation in the *Haarlem's Dagblad*? Was it Helene Kröller-Müller who set her sights on the collection managed by Jo van Gogh-Bonger in the summer of 1911? If so, why did De Bois mention a male client, while Coquiot referred to Mrs Kröller? To link the two sources, we first need to explore the background and history of the Kröller-Müller collection.

Helene owed her interest in art and her love for Van Gogh's work to her teacher H.P. Bremmer, with whom she took lessons in art appreciation from 1905 onwards. She also employed Bremmer one day a week beginning in 1907 to help her build an art collection of her own. Henceforward, Helene devoted herself – with Bremmer's decision invariably being final – to collecting and exhibiting modern art.²⁸ She secured her first painting by Van Gogh in 1908, followed in the next few months by three more of his works. By the time several years had passed, Van Gogh formed the heart of the collection.²⁹

Helene Kröller-Müller never had any personal contact with Jo van Gogh-Bonger or the latter's son Vincent, but her collection was enriched through intermediaries and art dealers with works by Van Gogh from the estate that Jo managed.³⁰ One such middleman who crops up several times in this context was the aforementioned Johannes de Bois of C.M. van Gogh art dealers. In 1908, for instance, Bremmer purchased the painting *Four Sunflowers Gone to Seed* via De Bois on Helene's behalf. The work cost her 4,800 guilders – the largest sum she had spent so far on a work of art.³¹

She received the funds to build her art collection from her husband, the extremely wealthy businessman Anton Kröller. Her art budget depended on earnings at the family business Wm. H. Müller & Co., founded by her father and of which Anton was now director. She encouraged her husband to take lessons from Bremmer as well, so that he too would develop a feeling for art, arguing that she did not want to be in a position where she was 'freely spending his money on things which had no appeal for him'.³²

She need not have worried: Anton did indeed prove to have an interest in art, and while he felt more of an affinity at first with seventeenth-century masters than with modern painting, he became increasingly drawn to Van Gogh's art and was immediately enthusiastic when Helene bought her first works by the artist. All the same, the resolute businessman viewed art first and foremost as an investment: he recognized that paintings and drawings could appreciate in value, just like stocks and real estate. Unlike that of the old masters, Van Gogh's work had yet to be generally accepted, which meant it was still relatively cheap. Anton Kröller was earning just over half a million guilders a year at the time – a great deal of money, certainly, but barely enough to purchase a single Vermeer, whereas paintings by Van Gogh could be had for a few thousand. They were, in short, an attractive investment for the entrepreneur.³³

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28. During his time in The Hague, Gustave Coquiot not only failed to view the Kröller-Müller collection, he also paid Bremmer a visit, only to find that he was away on business in Paris. Coquiot, Notes, 10 June 1922, vgm b7150.
29. Hildelies Balk, *De Kunstpaus. H.P. Bremmer 1871-1956*, TOTH, Bussum 2006, p. 241. Rovers 2010, pp. 85–97, 102–109.
30. Over thirty works by Van Gogh that had initially belonged to Jo and Vincent ultimately wound up in the Kröller-Müller collection. Luijten 2019, p. 333.
31. *Four Sunflowers Gone to Seed* (F452). De Bois sold this work on behalf of the art firm C.M. van Gogh. Heijbroek, Wouthuysen 1993, p. 195. Rovers 2010, p. 105. Luijten 2019, pp. 333–334. Balk 2006, p. 390. Chris Stolwijk, Han Veenenbos, *The account book of Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger*, Primavera Pers, Leiden 2002, p. 173.
32. Helene Kröller-Müller to Sam van Deventer, 14 November 1911, quoted in: Rovers 2010, p. 95.
33. Ariëtte Dekker, *Anton Kröller 1862-1941. Leven op krediet*, Prometheus/Bert Bakker, Amsterdam 2015, pp. 232–234.

In 1909, Anton bought a Van Gogh for himself: the painting *Roses and Peonies*.³⁴ He regularly attended auctions with Bremmer and sometimes made purchases without consulting Helene, proving to be more impulsive in that respect than his wife. According to Sam van Deventer, who enjoyed a very close relationship with the couple, both professionally and privately, it was usually Helene who bid at sales, doing so 'excellently, keeping a cool head'. The same could not be said of 'de heer Kröller' who 'was overly hasty and emotional'.³⁵

Anton and Helene visited an exhibition of Van Gogh's French work at the Rotterdamsche Kunstkring on Sunday, 26 June 1910, for which Jo van Gogh-Bonger had loaned about sixteen works that were not intended for sale.³⁶ A few days later, Helene wrote to Sam van Deventer that her husband had been 'full of admiration' and that he 'would have liked nothing better than to buy up all the paintings not yet spoken for'. For her own part, she did not dare to think so big. 'If another were to come along, I would be more than happy, but I have little hope in that regard. When one finds something so beautiful oneself, and when one sees it so clearly, one always thinks that everyone must see it too and that everyone would wish to have it.'³⁷ The couple subsequently acquired various works through De Bois that originated in Jo and Vincent's collection, including *Blossoming Chestnut Trees* and *Portrait of a Young Woman*.³⁸ When De Bois reported back to Jo about the paintings sold, he mentioned the amounts but not the identity of the happy new owner.³⁹

34. *Roses and Peonies* (F249). Rovers 2010, p. 96.

35. S. van Deventer, *Kröller-Müller. De geschiedenis van een cultureel levenswerk*, H.D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, Haarlem 1956, p. 109.

36. Luijten 2019, p. 350; List of works lent by Jo van Gogh-Bonger, vgm b2200.

37. Helene Kröller-Müller to Sam van Deventer, 28 June 1910, HA500180, Archief Kröller-Müller Museum. See also: Dekker 2015, p. 232; Rovers 2010, p. 96. The exhibition could be seen from 11 June to 10 July 1910: advertisement, *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 11 June 1910.

38. *Blossoming Chestnut Trees* (F752). *Portrait of a Young Woman* (F518). Heijbroek, Wouthuysen 1993, pp. 31-32, 196-199. Stolwijk, Veenbos 2002, pp. 176, 188.

39. J.H. de Bois to Jo van Gogh-Bonger, 1 November 1910, vgm b5401.

The summer of 1911

In those first few years, Helene mainly purchased art based on her personal interest and under Bremmer's tutelage. There was an important change of course in 1911, however, in the way she wished to pursue her collecting activities in future. The immediate prompt was a bout of serious illness: towards the end of August 1911, Helene was admitted to the Diaconessenhuis hospital in Amsterdam for examination. She spent several days there before being informed that only a high-risk operation could save her life. As she lay in her hospital room digesting this news, she reflected on her life, her loved ones and her art collection. Her thoughts turned to the spring, when she had admired Karl Ernst Osthaus' collection of modern art at his museum-residence in Germany. Helene had been inspired by the way this patron of the arts, motivated by ideals of edifying the public, had used his museum to bring added cultural value to the industrial city of Hagen. The desire to pursue a similarly lofty goal had been bubbling away in her mind ever since and having been confronted by her own mortality, Helene took a firm decision. Collecting simply for her own pleasure was no longer enough: she wanted to create a legacy for herself and ran through the possibilities from her hospital bed.

When Anton came to pick her up on 26 August, Helene told him about the life-threatening operation she would have to undergo. She then shared her vision with him of the future of the art collection: if she failed to survive the procedure, she wanted to bequeath it to Dutch museums. If she should pull through, however, she had a much more ambitious plan in mind: in that case, Helene wanted to expand the collection and to house it in a dedicated museum, which she would donate to the Dutch people on her death.⁴⁰ She shared her museum plans with her confidant Sam van Deventer too, informing him with some relief of Anton's positive reaction: '*Mijnheer* also said: I think it's a good idea. I'm glad to know and you can build on that a little.'⁴¹

Helene worked on various possible scenarios in the summer of 1911 – the same period in which the dealer De Bois was seeking to acquire all the Van Goghs administered by Jo van Gogh-Bonger on behalf of an avid art lover, as he later wrote in the *Haarlem's Dagblad*. Coquiote's personal notes from 1922 state, without mentioning a year, that Jo had refused to sell her collection to 'Mme Kröller'. Helene was the public face of the collection and so it is logical that when discussing the matter with Jo, the critic would have referred to her rather than to Anton Kröller.⁴²

So was it Helene Kröller-Müller who tried to acquire the collection in the summer of 1911? It seems unlikely, given her state of health. She felt ill, was facing a major operation and her future was uncertain. Her dynamic husband, however, might have taken a very different view. It is highly plausible, therefore, that he was the client who gave De Bois *carte blanche* to acquire the collection of Van Goghs from the artist's estate. Anton had said the previous year, after all, that he would ideally like to buy up all the Van Goghs not yet spoken for. And now his seriously ill wife had boldly informed him of her intention to establish a museum of her own. Perhaps he wanted to surprise her – offer her a ray of hope in the highly stressful period before her operation. If this spectacular plan were to succeed, she could immediately make her museum a reality. Money was no object, and such a purchase would, moreover, constitute an attractive investment, for which the enterprising Anton was always on the lookout. The fact that the institution Helene had in mind did not even exist yet would not have prevented the energetic businessman from impressing on De Bois that he wanted to acquire the collection of Van Gogh's work for 'his museum'.

40. Rovers 2010, pp. 11-12, 168-172. Balk 2006, pp. 212-213.

41. Van Deventer 1956, p. 47.

42. Coquiote, Record book, p. 20, vgm b3348.

The two largest collections in the world

Helene's certainty about her decision to found her museum and the vigour with which Anton pursued his goals, were matched only by Jo's determination to retain her stewardship of Van Gogh's artistic legacy. Competitive and proud, Anton was used to getting his own way and it must have been very deflating for him to have been left empty-handed. It is plausible that he never told Helene about his abortive attempt to purchase the collection. Had she been aware of the fact, she would probably have mentioned it, but there is no reference to the subject in her correspondence.

The purchases that the Kröllers made after Helene's successful operation on Monday, 23 October 1911 show that they truly had set their sights firmly on Van Gogh. She was discharged from hospital in mid-November and purchased twelve Van Gogh drawings from C.M. van Gogh art dealers in The Hague just a week later.⁴³ Now that Helene had a new goal in life – a museum of her own – nothing was going to stop her achieving it. She began to purchase art, Van Gogh's work in particular, on a breathtaking scale and at a pace to match.⁴⁴ Helene was very grateful to Anton for his generosity: 'he understood that nothing was more important to me than this collection.'⁴⁵

The year 1912 in particular proved to be sensational. The collection was enriched in the spring by a series of spectacular purchases. When Anton visited Paris on business in April, Helene and Bremmer also travelled to the French capital to spend 'a few more tens of thousands of guilders' on Van Gogh.⁴⁶ Convinced as he was of the huge significance that the art collection would continue to possess in the future, Anton instructed Bremmer to 'track down all the best Van Goghs'.⁴⁷ They visited several art dealers in Paris and within the space of twenty-four hours, the collection had already grown by seven Van Gogh paintings and two of his drawings. Anton then accompanied Bremmer to the art dealer Amédée Schuffenecker, just outside Paris, where they acquired eight more works for 63,000 guilders. The Kröllers ultimately spent a total of over 115,000 guilders on paintings and drawings by Van Gogh in April 1912.⁴⁸

Helene and Bremmer proceeded to Amsterdam the following month for the auction of the Hoogendijk collection on 21 May. On this occasion, she acquired four paintings by Van Gogh, including *Bridge at Arles (Pont de Langlois)* for no less than 16,000 guilders.⁴⁹ A further addition to the collection was made in November with *Interior of a Restaurant*, a painting held at the time by Jo van Gogh-Bonger and her son, which was now sold by De Bois (fig. 8).⁵⁰ By the end of the year, Helene had added as many as a hundred works to her collection, including almost thirty paintings by Van Gogh. The high sums paid by the Kröllers drove up prices, which – allied with the growing appreciation of the artist's work – prompted Jo van Gogh-Bonger to raise her prices too and to place fewer paintings on the market. Her average asking price for a painting had risen from around 1,000 to approximately 2,700 guilders between 1905 and 1911. After June 1912, it shot up to 5,000 guilders.⁵¹

43. Rovers 2010, pp. 181–183. Heijbroek, Wouthuysen 1993, pp. 201–202.

44. Rovers 2010, p. 188. Balk 2006, p. 214.

45. Quotation from Helene Kröller-Müller's notes to a memorandum written to the government in 1933, in: Van Deventer 1956, p. 114.

46. Helene Brückmann-Kröller to Paul Brückmann, 11 April 1912, quoted in Rovers 2010, p. 190.

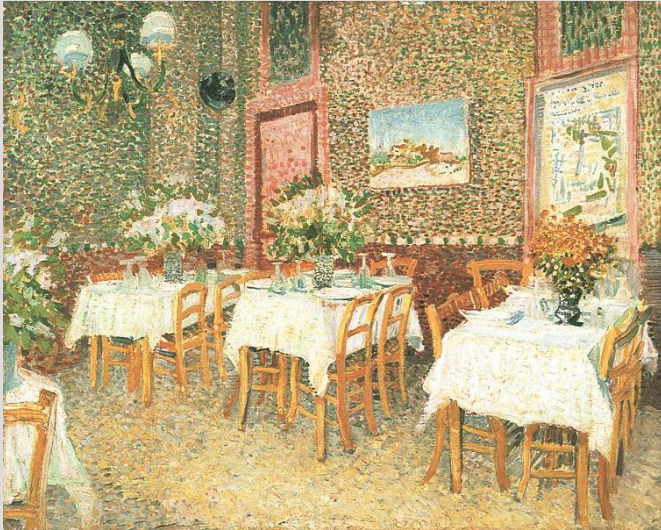
47. Idem.

48. Rovers 2010, pp. 190–193. Dekker 2015, p. 233–234. Balk 2006, p. 214.

49. *Bridge at Arles* (F397). Rovers 2010, p. 193.

50. Johannes de Bois had previously held *Interior of a Restaurant* (F342) on consignment several times. Heijbroek, Wouthuysen 1993, pp. 36, 193. Luijten 2019, p. 340. Stolwijk, Veenenbos 2002, p. 169.

51. Stolwijk, Veenenbos 2002, pp. 124–131. Rovers 2010, pp. 195–196, 233. Luijten 2019, p. 335.



8. Vincent van Gogh,
Interior of a Restaurant, 1887,
oil on canvas,
45,5 cm x 56 cm,
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

So numerous were their purchases that there was not enough space at the Kröllers' residence in Scheveningen to accommodate all the works of art. But Anton came up with a solution: in March 1912, before they had even set off for Paris, he purchased the building next door to his Müller & Co. offices at 3 Lange Voorhout in The Hague and part of the collection was transferred there. Helene turned the large rooms with their high walls into exhibition spaces. It was only possible at first for family, friends and business associates to admire the art collection, but as of the autumn of 1913, interested parties could make an appointment to view it on Mondays and Fridays between ten and four o'clock.⁵²

Having purchased so many in 1912, Helene now felt she had enough works by Van Gogh in her collection. She was a little annoyed, therefore, when Anton came home with three more of them two weeks after the Hoogendijk sale.⁵³ Helene now tried to persuade her husband that it was time to stop buying the artist's work, pointing out that they already owned paintings from all periods of his career. She compared their collection, moreover, with that of Jo (still going by the name of her late second husband, Johan Cohen Gosschalk, at that time): 'we have a veritable wealth of Van Goghs, the largest in the world alongside Mrs Cohen. Is that not a cause for pride?' She nevertheless kept her options open, in case 'something very special' should turn up.⁵⁴

Yet there was still no end in sight to the purchases: when Lodewijk Enthoven's collection came up for auction in 1920, Bremmer acquired twenty-six paintings and six drawings by Van Gogh on Helene's behalf, paying more than 110,000 guilders for them.⁵⁵ Eight years later, over a hundred of Van Gogh's drawings belonging to the collector Hidde Nijland in Dordrecht came onto the market. Helene felt that the asking prices were too high, but Anton had no hesitation in instructing Bremmer to buy all of them for their collection, which now ran to ninety paintings by Van Gogh and around 170 of his drawings.⁵⁶ These works formed the core of the Kröller-Müller collection and still do so today.⁵⁷

52. Dekker 2015, p. 233. Rovers 2010, pp. 209–210, 233–237.

53. Helene Kröller-Müller to Sam van Deventer, undated [1912], quoted in: Rovers 2010, p. 196.

54. Helene Kröller-Müller to Anton Kröller, 13 January 1913 [Helene incorrectly wrote 1912], HA502195, Archief Kröller-Müller Museum. See also Rovers 2010, pp. 195–196.

55. Rovers 2010, pp. 334–335. Balk 2006, p. 216.

56. Rovers 2010, pp. 388–389. Dekker 2015, pp. 561–562. Teio Meedendorp, *Tekeningen en grafiek van Vincent van Gogh in de collectie van het Kröller-Müller Museum*, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo 2007, pp. 399–401.

57. Van Deventer 1956, pp. 115–116. A.M. Hammacher, *Catalogus van schilderijen uit de XIXde en XXste eeuw*, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo 1956, pp. 54–66. Jos ten Berge et al., *De schilderijen van Vincent van Gogh in de collectie van het Kröller-Müller Museum*, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo 2003.

The Van Gogh Museum and its research sources

As is well known, the world's two largest Van Gogh collections have been preserved for the Dutch nation. Preparations dragged on for some considerable time, but the Kröller-Müller Museum finally opened to the public in the Hoge Veluwe National Park in 1938. Helene died the year after at the age of seventy and her husband followed in 1941, aged seventy-nine.⁵⁸ For thirty-five years, their museum was the number one place in the Netherlands for people to see Van Gogh's work. The Van Gogh family's collection, meanwhile, has been on public display at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam since 2 June 1973 (fig. 9).

As soon as the arrangements for the museum were firmly in place in 1962, The Engineer Vincent van Gogh began to make occasional purchases of artworks and documents that would be an interesting addition to the collection. In 1966, he had the opportunity to purchase Gustave Coquiot's archives from an antiques dealer in Paris for 4,000 francs. Vincent did not initially expect to find any interesting documents among them, as he considered Coquiot's book on Van Gogh 'not very important'.⁵⁹

Coquiot had published it in 1923 and despite the previous year's negative comments in his personal notes regarding the way Jo van Gogh-Bonger cherished the estate, he dedicated the finished result to her. He publicly expressed his admiration for Jo's work and his gratitude for all the information she had entrusted to him. The *Algemeen Handelsblad* newspaper praised the book for its 'liveliness of tone and presentation', but the author's comments about 'Dutch people and things'



9. Vincent van Gogh at the Van Gogh Museum, 1973, photographer Jan Versnel, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

did not go down well. Coquiot's style of writing was as disrespectful in this instance as in his notes, prompting the paper's critic to complain: 'To our mind, there is something childish and narrow-minded in the prejudice of his reflections, which are frequently sarcastic and disdainful.' In the journalist's view, Coquiot's attitude was unworthy of Van Gogh's 'so pure and simple personality'.⁶⁰

58. Rovers 2010, p. 452. Dekker 2015, p. 9.

59. V.W. van Gogh to the board of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, 28 November 1966, vgm b7120.

60. Anon, 'Vincent van Gogh', in: *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 14 April 1923.

When Coquiot's archives were offered for sale in 1966, The Engineer travelled to Paris to see it with his own eyes. Aside from the critic's correspondence, they included the previously mentioned notebooks and the record book containing the comment that Jo had refused to sell all of Van Gogh's works to Kröller-Müller. It is not known whether Vincent read what Coquiot had written about their meeting in 1922. However, after he had spent a morning examining the material, he concluded that the author had made a 'very careful study' and decided that the ensemble was so valuable that he went ahead and bought it.⁶¹ The archives were eventually placed in the Van Gogh Museum, where they have since formed part of a large collection of sources – a treasure trove for researchers dedicated to the life and work of Vincent van Gogh.⁶²

61. Vincent purchased the archives for the Vincent van Gogh Foundation so that it would be placed in the planned Van Gogh Museum along with the estate. V.W. van Gogh to the board of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, 28 November 1966, vgm b7120.

62. I am grateful to Ariëtte Dekker, Eva Rovers and Hans Luijten, for their critical scrutiny of my reconstruction and the valuable information and feedback they have provided. Thanks also to Bas Mühren of the Kröller-Müller Museum for giving me the opportunity to study documents.

‘It is a miracle
that so much of
Vincent’s work
has been kept
together.’

V.W. van Gogh, speech on the opening of the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, 2 June 1973

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