

In the footsteps of Van Gogh
walk relating to

The Hague School and the Young Van Gogh

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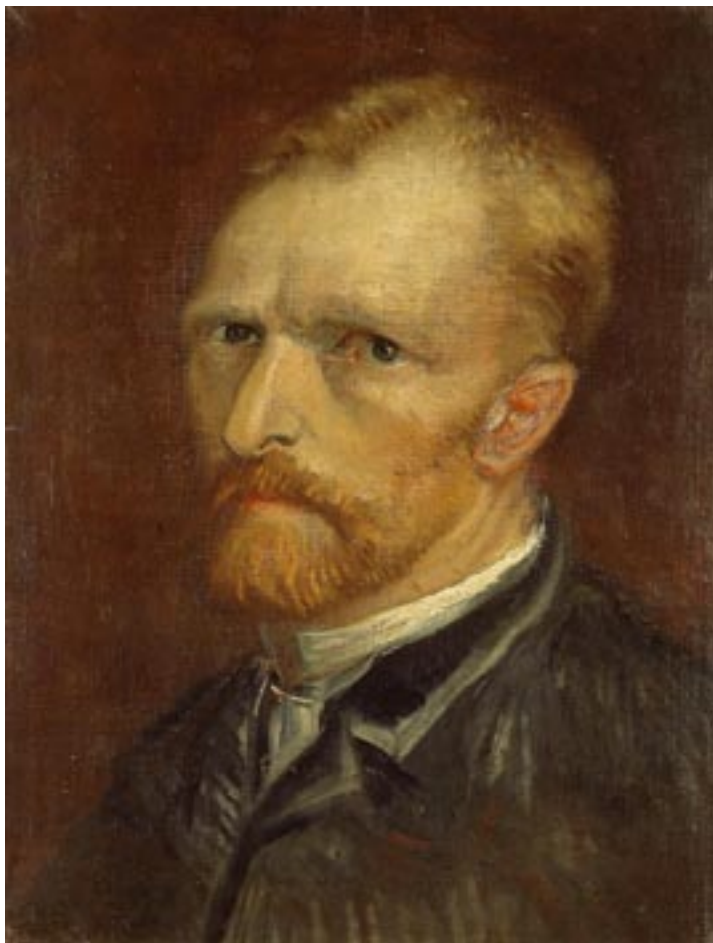
**Gemeente
museum
Den Haag**

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BIOGRAPHY

- 30 March 1853 born in Zundert
- 1 May 1857 birth of brother Theo
- July 1869 apprenticed to the Hague branch of
goupil art dealers
- May 1873 transferred to London branch
- May 1875 moved to Paris branch
- April-June 1876 teaches in Ramsgate
- June-December 1876 works as teacher and curate in Isleworth
- January-April 1877 works in a bookshop in Dordrecht
- May 1877-July 1878 pursues religious studies in Amsterdam
- August-November 1878 attends lay evangelical school in Brussels
- November 1878-July 1879 evangelist in the Borinage mining area, Belgium
- July 1879-October 1880 stays on in the Borinage (Cuesmes)
- oktober 1880-april 1881 in Brussels
- April-December 1881 stays with his parents in Etten. In love with Kee Vos
- December 1881-Sept. 1883 in The Hague. Cohabits with 'Sien'
- September-December 1883 in Drente
- December 1883-Nov. 1885 stays with his parents in Nuenen
- November 1885-Feb. 1886 in Antwerp
- February 1886-Feb. 1888 in Paris
- February 1888-May 1889 in Arles
- 23/24 December 1888 catastrophic row with Gauguin
- May 1889-May 1890 in mental asylum at Saint-Rémy
- May-July 1890 in Auvers-sur-Oise
- 27 July 1890 shoots himself
- 29 July 1890 dies, aged 37



Vincent van Gogh, Self-Portrait, 1886 - 1886,
oil on canvas, collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

INTRODUCTION

Van Gogh's artistic career lasted barely ten years. His Hague period covered a mere twenty months, from December 1881 to September 1883, but it was at this time that he acquired his drawing skills and started to make watercolours and oil paintings. He could not possibly have developed as he did without the influence of the Hague School artists.

Vincent Van Gogh knew and admired the work of practically every member of the Hague School. The strongest influence was that of Anton Mauve, who was married to one of his cousins and gave Vincent lessons for a short time. Vincent was also on good relations with Weissenbruch, Blommers, De Bock, Van der Weele and Breitner. With the last, he spent time exploring the poor working-class areas of The Hague. Life in those areas of the city supplied Vincent with a wide variety of interesting subjects. Most of these slums have since been demolished, so it is not always possible to visit the exact places where Vincent lived and worked in The Hague. Others have survived but are too far away to include in this walk. The **Schenkweg**, for instance, where Vincent lived, is much too far away. Anyway, it has changed so much that it is virtually unrecognisable. Fortunately, quite a lot of the streets in the old part of The Hague have survived and are still very much as they were when Vincent was here. The Scheveningen that Vincent knew has also disappeared, but you can still see it exactly as it was then if you visit the Panorama Mesdag, where this tour ends.



Theo Mesker, Bookstall of David Blok, 1877, oil on canvas, collection Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam

Vincent himself walked for miles and miles in and around The Hague. This walk is not that long but it will enable you to follow to some extent in his footsteps.

START TOUR

The tour begins in the **Binnenhof (I)**, the very oldest part of The Hague. Here, under the arches, stood bookstalls where Vincent bought illustrations from periodicals like "The Graphic" and "The Illustrated London News". He was especially interested in works focusing on the miserable lives of the poor, the unemployed and the homeless. This is where he found the series of "Heads of the People" that he imitated. He also drew a distinctive portrait of the bookseller himself. It was also on these bookstalls that he found the works of social criticism and socially committed novels by authors like Balzac, Zola, Dickens, Hugo, Michelet and Beecher Stowe that had a major influence on him.

Leaving the **Binnenhof**, cross the **Buitenhof** in the direction of the Grote Kerk (also called the **Oude Kerk** or the **Jacobskerk**).

On your left you will see the entrance to the Passage, a shopping arcade which was still under construction when Vincent lived here. It was here that, after his death, the first exhibition of his work was held in 1891 in rooms above Café Riche, now a restaurant.



Vincent Van Gogh, Portrait of the booksalesman Jozef Blok, 1882, pencil, pen, watercolour and lithographic ink on paper collection Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, (purchased in 2005)

The area surrounding the **Grote Kerk** is an ancient marketplace, still in use in Vincent's day. Vincent liked to visit it to paint street scenes or draw 'types' of working-class people. He sent his brother Theo a "little sketch of the potato market [...] *The bustling of the workmen and the women, with the baskets being unloaded from the barge, is very intriguing to look at [...] the life and movement in such a scene, and the types of people.*" (letter 229). But he often felt that all the people got in his way and stared at him, and he was annoyed by their comments. In a letter to his brother Theo, he complains, "*This afternoon I must go to the potato market again. It is impossible to paint there because of the people; they already give me trouble enough*". He goes on to wish he could simply go into one of the houses around the marketplace and sit down at the window to work without being disturbed! And in letter 202: "*You should know that at present I am working out-of-doors as early as four o'clock in the morning - in the daytime it is too difficult to work in the street because of the passers-by and the street urchins*".

If you live in The Hague, you may sometimes get irritated by all the road mending and other work going on in this area. If so, remember that things were the same in Vincent's day, and that he was fascinated by it all! "*Now I come to this sketch, that was done [...] under a rain of dust, in a street where I was standing in the mud, amid all the noise and confusion, and I send it to you to show that my sketchbook proves I try to catch things as they happen.*" (letter 190).



Vincent van Gogh, *Woman Scouring Pots*, 1883/85, chalk on paper, 54.5 x 43.7, collection Kröller-Müller Museum Otterloo

Walk on now to the **Oude Molstraat (2)**. It was in backstreets like this that Vincent found the working people he liked to depict: rag pickers, men carrying sacks of potatoes, a woman carrying coal, a woman busy at a washtub, men loading coal... On the right, at numbers 23-27, was the former 'Oude Mannenhuis'. Among Van Gogh's favourite subjects at this time were the destitute old men who lived in old people's homes like this. He also drew the soup kitchens that distributed food to the poorest of the poor. These were subjects ignored by the successful, established members of the Hague School: Breitner and Van Gogh had them all to themselves. Vincent wrote to Theo: "*I see paintings or drawings in the poorest cottages, in the dirtiest corners and my mind is irresistibly drawn in that direction*" (letter 218).

Vincent was well aware that there were two separate worlds in The Hague: the world of the respectable middle and upper classes and the world of the poor working classes. He discovered the unbridgeable gulf between the two when he dismayed and bewildered his friends and relatives by setting up house with an alcohol-addicted, pregnant prostitute called Sien Hoornik. Mauve, who had initially given him practical and moral support, broke off relations with him. Vincent's only source of income was the money he received from his brother Theo. And Theo could not afford to support Sien, her daughter and later also her baby, as well as meeting Vincent's expenses. Van Gogh's period in The Hague was one of extreme poverty.



George Hendrik Breitner, *Distribution of Soup*, 1882, watercolour, collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

On your left you will pass the **Juffrouw Idastraat (3)** This was where Willem Maris and Blommers had their studios in premises owned by a fencing master called Siebenhaar. Later, Breitner joined them there, taking over Apol's studio. Vincent appreciated Breitner's portraits of women, especially his "street women", but he also once compared work by him to "mildewy wallpaper". Breitner's opinion of Van Gogh was not always positive either, but their mutual criticism did little to harm their friendship.

Turn left now into the **Molenstraat** and look out for Goedman's, a shop selling art materials, on the right. Goedman's didn't exist in Vincent's day, but it does date from 1910, not so very long after. It is no exaggeration to say that, when Vincent was here, the Van Gogh family dominated the art dealing business in the Netherlands: no fewer than three of Vincent's uncles on his father's side were art dealers: Hendrik Vincent (Uncle Hein), Cornelis Marinus (Uncle Cor or C.M.) and Vincent (known as Uncle Cent because he had such a good head for business). Uncle Cent had shop selling art materials in the centre of The Hague. Artists who couldn't pay their bills left paintings at the shop in lieu of payment and Uncle Cent sold them on to settle the debt. That was how his art dealing business began. Later, he merged with Goupil, a famous Parisian firm of art dealers, and the once humble Maison Van Gogh moved to an upmarket location on the Plaats.



'Juffrouw Idastraat', The Hague, End of 19th Century, collection Gemeentearchief Den Haag

Facing Goedman's, turn right and walk to the end of the **Molenstraat (4)**, then turn right again into the **Noordeinde** and continue until you come to the **Plaats** on your left. Stop at number 20, now a men's clothing store. Van Gogh first got to know The Hague when he was training to become an art dealer. He came to the city in 1869, at the age of 16, as an apprentice in his Uncle Cent's art dealing business. By then, it was operating under the name of Goupil and was based in this building. So it is here that Vincent had his first job. Uncle Cent had retired for health reasons and the business was being run by a Mr Tersteeg. He wrote to Vincent's parents praising "the diligent, industrious lad" and in 1873, when Vincent was promoted and sent to work in London, Tersteeg wrote him a glowing reference. However, he turned against Vincent when, at the age of 30, he set up house with the dipsomaniac prostitute Sien Hoornik (illustration: Sien with Cigar). Initially, Vincent used his influential connections to try to sell his work. But Tersteeg saw no market for Vincent's drawings of down-and-outs and advised him to make more 'saleable' work. His Uncle Cor commissioned a few townscapes but Vincent had to wait a long time for payment and then received less than the agreed amount "*with a kind of scolding into the bargain: did I think that such drawings had the slightest commercial value?*" (letter 9 to Anthon van Rappard). Tersteeg tried in vain to persuade Vincent to leave Sien.



'De Plaats', where Vincents 'uncle Cent' owned the art trade Goupil, End of 19th century, collection Gemeentearchief Den Haag

The only person who stood by Vincent through thick and thin was his brother Theo. Without his financial and moral support, Vincent could never have survived as an artist.

At the time, Theo was living in Paris, in charge of one of Goupil's branches in the city. For almost ten years, his regular remittances were practically Vincent's only source of income. From time to time, Theo had to make business trips to The Hague. But Vincent never arranged to meet his brother here at the art gallery: he felt too much "like Robinson Crusoe" in his old working clothes and was afraid of embarrassing his elegant, well-dressed, well-groomed brother!

Turn left out of the **Plaats** and walk on to the **Lange Voorhout**. After passing the Kloosterkerk and the Pages' House, turn left and go to the end of the **Kleine Kazernestraat** to have a look at the **Kazernestraat (5)**. This is where Weissenbruch had his studio. For a time, Van Gogh produced watercolours resembling those of Weissenbruch in terms of technique, mood and subject. Vincent admired his work and Weissenbruch actually gave him some practical advice. Although Weissenbruch was critical enough to be nicknamed 'the merciless sword', he recognised the merits of Vincent's work and urged him to continue with it.

Retrace your steps to the **Lange Voorhout**.



Vincent van Gogh, Sien with cigar, 1882, pencil, white chalk and ink, collection Museum Kröller-Müller Otterloo

Cross the **Lange Voorhout** diagonally to the left and look for **Pulchri Studio (6)**.

The Pulchri Studio artists' association had been set up in 1847 with Weissenbruch and Bosboom among the founding members. Members could come here to draw from live models and to look at and discuss each other's work. The membership of the association included – as it still does – both artists and art-lovers. Thanks to the influence of Anton Mauve, Vincent was able to draw from live models at Pulchri Studio and in February 1882 he attended one of the presentations of members' work.

Blommers, who wanted to help Vincent, suggested that the young artist should be allowed to present his work based on engravings from English and French journals, even though he was not a member. Unfortunately, the committee thought it was not worth devoting an evening to work of 'such limited artistic significance'. Needless to say, Vincent was disappointed and angry.

Go back via the **Heulstraat** to the **Noordeinde** and turn right.

In Vincent's day, there were constant roadworks going on here because part of the street was being asphalted. It was the first road in The Hague to be surfaced in this way.



J. H. Weissenbruch, Fishmarket, 1873, collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

There was also extensive demolition work, especially to clear away the rickety neo-gothic structures built in the 1840s for King Willem II. *“Yesterday I saw workmen in the Noordeinde busy pulling down the section opposite the palace. Men all white with plaster dust, with carts and horses [...] the whole place full of character”* (letter 299). The Gotische Zaal (Gothic Hall) is the only one of these structures that still survives. In it, Vincent visited an exhibition by the Society of Dutch Watercolourists.

Continue to the very end of the **Noordeinde**. On your left, at number 96, is a house built in 1916 for an art dealer called S.J. Sala. It is known as the Maris House because the frontage incorporates reliefs showing the heads of Jacob, Willem and Matthijs Maris. Unlike Vincent, Jacob Maris was on good terms with Mr Tersteeg at Goupil’s and earned a good income from his paintings. There were disadvantages, however: Tersteeg had highly restrictive contracts with both Jacob and Matthijs. Matthijs suffered particularly from the pressure of having to produce commercial paintings he didn’t really believe in and not being able to do the kind of work he really wanted to do. Eventually, the situation was to destroy him. It elicited this touching passage in one of Vincent’s letters to Theo, in which he seems to see himself as a kindred spirit: *“If they hadn’t made Thijs Maris too wretched and too melancholy to work, perhaps he would have found something wonderful. I think of that fellow so often, Theo, how marvellous his work is. It is as if he dreams - but what an artist he is!”* (letter 408).



Willem Bastiaan Tholen, A sketch evening at Pulchri, 1888-1889, collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

On the left is the little **Maziestraat (7)**. It was once full of stables, coach houses, coachmen’s houses and workplaces. It gives some impression of the ‘hofjes’ that Vincent liked so much. The term is misleading because the ‘hofjes’ which survive in the centre of The Hague and other Dutch towns today are nothing like the ones where people like Sien’s mother lived. They have all disappeared long ago. Between 1850 and 1900, the population of The Hague more than tripled, expanding from 60,000 to 210,000. The majority of the newcomers were accommodated in slums created by building warrens of tiny houses tucked in behind the existing buildings lining the main streets of the inner city. These new homes for the poor were primitive and poorly, if ever, maintained. The only access to the resulting slums was via narrow passageways or doors and that was why they acquired the name ‘hofjes’. But they were nothing like the charming groups of almshouses we know today, which were built at an earlier period to house decent, often devout elderly women living alone.

From the end of the Noordeinde, cross straight over the **Scheveningse Veer** and carry on into the **Zeestraat (8)**. Look on the right-hand side of the street for the building housing the Panorama Mesdag.



Matthijs Maris, Baptism at Lausanne, c. 1862-4, watercolour, collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

The Panorama is a circular painting measuring a massive 1680 square metres. It took Mesdag, his wife Sientje, Breitner, De Bock and Blommers four months to paint it. The subject is the view from the top of the Seinpostduin at Scheveningen, a spot Mesdag knew well because it was the highest dune in the area and offered a literally panoramic view of the beach, the modern seaside resort, the sea, the old village of Scheveningen and in the distance, on the horizon, The Hague. The Panorama was to provide a lasting record of a view that was expected soon to be gone forever, because the Municipality of The Hague was planning to level the dune to provide sand for the construction of hotels and restaurants. Mesdag was opposing the plans fiercely but in vain. The lion's share of the work on the Panorama was done by Mesdag himself. Blommers confined himself to painting a fisherwoman with children, while De Bock worked mainly on the dune landscape. The most difficult part, the old village of Scheveningen – with all the associated problems of perspective that had to be resolved if a perfect optical illusion was to be created – was in the hands of Breitner, who also painted a cavalry division exercising on the beach. Like Vincent, he was always short of money and could use a well-paid commission. Vincent himself was full of admiration for the Panorama, sighing that the painting's only fault was its very faultlessness!

Vincent worked a great deal in and around the old part of Scheveningen. He found plenty of inspiration for his favourite theme of people at work, especially in the dunes, where there were net-menders, men working in the potato fields or around fish-drying barns (“seen from a height they are enormously Ruysdael-like” he commented in a letter to Van Rappard), people burning weeds and even labourers on job-creation projects: “long rows of diggers - poor people employed by the municipality - in front of a patch of sandy ground, which must be dug” (letter 301). He also brought home beach scenes, sometimes with sand from the dunes still clinging to them, and views of the sea and fishing boats. There is no doubt that these represent Vincent's happiest moments during his time in The Hague.



People's men at 'het Slijkede', The Hague, End of 19th century, collection Gemeentearchief Den Haag



Detail Panorama Mesdag, The Hague, 1882, Detail 'Cavalry on a run', painted by George Hendrik Breitner

You have now come to the end of the tour. It has taken you through the older parts of the city centre, following wherever possible in the footsteps of Vincent van Gogh. If you now visit the Panorama Mesdag, you can step back in time and see Scheveningen exactly as he saw it.

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Opening hours
Tuesday till Sunday 11.00 - 17.00 h

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Vincent van Gogh, Weed Burners, 1883,
watercolour, 19.4 x 36, Caldic Collection



Hendrik Willem Mesdag, Winding the anchor, 1895,
Private collection



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