A comparison and contrasting of the lives and work

of

VINCENT VAN GOGH and RODERIC O'CONOR

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Introduction:

Vincent Van Gogh, a Dutchman, and one of the best known and most emotional painters of all time; Roderic O'Conor, a reclusive Irish painter, about whom even the Irish know practically nothing; at first glance these two men seem to have very little in common except for the fact that they both painted in France around the same time and were influenced to a certain degree by the impressionist style of painting which had originated there a few years earlier. However, a more detailed examination reveals that an unexpected number of similarities occur in their lives and work, and these form a good basis from which the two painters can be compared and contrasted. Unfortunately, because of O'Conor's retiring nature, there is not a great deal of information on his life readily available, and his works, in general, are scattered and not widely reproduced in books. Information on Van Gogh, on the other hand, is easy to obtain because his sad life as a painter, which was well documented through his correspondence with his brother, Theo, caught the imaginations of many people and thus prompted much to be written about him.

This thesis is divided into two sections: the first looks at the lives and backgrounds of the two artists, and the second examines their work.

Part 1.

Comparing the lives of Van Gogh and O'Conor.

Upon beginning an examination of the life of a person it is not out of order to start with a brief word about the social times of the country he was born and brought up in.

Holland in the time of Van Gogh:

Vincent Van Gogh was born at the beginning of intensified social development and artistic renewal in the Netherlands, a time ripe for another Dutchman to make himself famous in the world of art. There had been a long period of decline in Dutch power, prestige, and inventiveness, commencing in the latter half of the 17th century with the rise of English military might and the prolonged war with France. The 18th century had been marred by

decadence among the rich, and the country's internal affairs became stagnant. Napoleon's domination at the close of the century and a war with England resulted in the loss of many of its overseas possessions, and its shipping and foreign trade were cut off.

Holland began to revive in 1813 when the present constitutional monarchy was formed after Napoleon's defeat. The revival did not get into full swing, however, until the middle of the century - about the time of Van Gogh's birth. Prosperity returned and the country's spirit was reborn. Holland became a thriving trading, shipping, industrial and banking centre, and as a result it became a nation ruled by a middle class that placed a high value on the accumulation of wealth. Its agricultural and dairy land was divided into small parcels requiring the exertion of a large peasent class that remained poor in spite of its incessant labour..

Van Gogh's life, like his work, is now part of a myth; he is in fact generally placed among the last few heros of the romantic world to be haunted by an implacable curse. People have tried to gather, from a fairly uninspiring childhood, signs of what could have formed him. His origins have been minutely examined. His father was the minister of the parish of Groot-Zundert, in the Dutch province of Brabant, where Vincent was born on 30th March 1853. His mother's family were goldsmiths.

Vincent was the second child born to his parents; the first, also called Vincent, was born - and died exactly a year earlier on 30th March 1852. The grief that his mother suffered following the death of the first Vincent appeared to have persisted through the second Vincent's early years, and sharing his dead brother's name he constantly reminded his mother of her loss, and the result was that she did not seem to be able to love him. Mostly because of this rejection by his mother, then, Vincent's behaviour as a child - and indeed as an adult - was antagonistic and provoked disharmony. He described his youth as 'gloomy and cold and sterile.'

At the age of sixteen he was employed by Goupil (a well-known art dealer for whom several of his relations had already worked) in The Hague, and in 1873 he was transferred to London, where he was to have his first disappointment in love: Ursula Leeger, his landlady's daughter, turned down his offer of marriage. This precipitated the second stage of his life: a search for a purpose to his own existence, which resulted in a sense of religious vocation. From then on he was dogged by failure: at the entrance examinations for the faculty of

theology at Amsterdam University, and at the school of practical evangelism in Brussels. Then came his violent experience as preacher among the miners in Borinage, the most squalid of mining villages, where, refusing any sort of compromise, Vincent became more humble than the humble, renouncing everything - house, clothes and food - in an excess of generosity which was naturally neither accepted nor understood by the miners. He overwhelmed them with cures and evangelical fervour; they loved him but failed to comprehend his excessive zeal. Finally it was his disrespectful attitude to authority that deprived him of his career as an evangelist and he became disallusioned. Within a few months he had dropped his evangelistic work, withdrawn from the world, and embarked upon a nine month period of deep and silent misery. Finally, in July 1880, at the age of 27, he suddenly announced his intention to become an artist. Then followed his intense self-training until he headed for Antwerp in 1885.

Ireland in the time of O'Conor:

Roderic O'Conor was born in Ireland three years after the Great Famine of 1846-7. The whole country was subdued, while emigration continued to reduce the population every year. The landholders had suffered severly from inability to collect rents and there was a wholesale transfer of estates to new owners. Their first concern was to reduce the number of smallholdings and to substitute grazing for tillage on larger consolidated farms. Evictions were widespread and cottages were burnt down at once by the landlords to prevent other impoverished tenants from occupying them. However, the 1890s witnessed the birth of the Irish revival with the founding of the Gaelic League.

O'Conor's origins are rather obscure in comparison to Van Gogh's; he was born in Co.Roscommon on 17th October 1860 of a land-owning family who realized some money, as so many Irish country families did, out of the Land Purchase Acts. He had a minor public school education in England, being presumably identifiable with the Roderic O'Conor who matriculated at St.Lawrence's College in June 1878, but did not, as has been claimed, proceed to the University of London. He returned to Dublin to go to the Metropolitan School of Art, and then went to Antwerp to continue his artistic training.

This brings the life-stories of the two painters to the point when they both left their native lands and headed for Antwerp. Up until now it has been difficult to draw any parallels between them because of the lack of

information available concerning O'Conor's early years. But it can be seen that, though they were born within seven years of each other, their artistic careers began around the same time. It was 1880 by the time Van Gogh managed to find his vocation in the world of art, and O'Conor would, at that time, have been about twenty years old and following a course in the Metropolitan College of Art.

Antwerp:

Having painted 'The Potato Eaters' in May 1885 the first half of Van Gogh's career had come to a natural conclusion. He now felt freer to seek new solutions to his life problems, and was motivated by his developing needs as an artist to search for new approaches to art. Holland had become for him a dark, unfriendly place that was an extension of his cold family, and he still felt like an outsider in his own country and in its world of art. To accomplish his aims he had to live in a city. He decided to go south, an idea that symbolized his search for light and joy and his intent to change from an art of dark tones to one of bright contrasts. Antwerp was to be his first stop. It was ideal for making the transition from Holland to France and from Dutch art to French art, and he remained there for three months. He rented a cheap room above a paint dealer's shop and his prodigious energy was immediately channelled into art. He entered the Antwerp Academy of Art in January 1886 but it didn't live up to his expectations and he often got into arguments with the teachers.

O'Conor went to Antwerp after he had finished his term at the Metropolitan School of Art in 1881, and there worked at the Academy of St.Luke. It was also an Antwerp address that he gave in connection with the Taylor Awards at the R.D.S. in 1883.

The first similarities between the lives of the two artists are now becoming clearer. Both temporarily lived in Antwerp in order to develop their techniques of painting by instruction in an academy. Moreover, they were there within 2-3 years of each other; O'Conor stayed for two years, leaving around 1883, and Van Gogh arrived at the end of 1885. The major difference between them though was that Van Gogh had had no previous formal instruction in art, being totally self-taught up until then, whereas O'Conor was continuing his training. There was also, of course, the difference in age between them at the time they were in Antwerp - Van Gogh then being 32, a decidedly later than average age for beginning training in an academy, as against O'Conor's more usual 22-23 years.

19th century Paris:

In the year of the Paris Exhibition, 1867, monarchs, princes and lesser folk had thronged the City of Light, admired, as many Frenchmen did not, the new boulevards and churches, and been fascinated by the high-stepping horses, the shining landaus and the elegance and pageantry of high society. Of the serious and sober France that lay beyond the city's ramparts Europe had scarcely caught a glimpse.

In 1815 France emerged from the wars battered and shaken, with a government it despised and a hated aristocracy which had learned nothing. Much of the overseas empire had gone and the merchant marine scarcely existed. Under the Third Republic, however, Paris gradually became more prosperous. Trade flourished, writers and painters were producing books and pictures which interested the whole of Europe, and the air was full of life. People came from all over the world to stay in Paris or to live there. It was rapidly becoming a most amusing, inspiring and beautiful city.

Emigration:

Van Gogh left Holland in 1885, never to return to his native land; O'Conor left Ireland in 1881, and he, too, never retraced his steps. Both were searching for a place in which they could be at one with themselves and their environment, both went south to France, and both discovered that the French Impressionist movement had something to offer them.

Although Van Gogh inevitably became an outcast wherever he went, he continued his search for an accepting environment: during his ten years as an artist he lived in eleven different places.

In March 1886 Vincent burst into his brother's appartment in Paris, having just arrived from Antwerp. Since he no longer felt 'absolutely green' where his art was concerned, he was sure that Paris would accept him, and he counted on France to be a brighter and friendlier land that would encourage originality and alleviate his longstanding depression.

He spent two years in Paris and during this time his style underwent a complete change, and he began producing the kind of paintings for which he is famous, full of sun and life. However, it was abandoned as abruptly as it was invaded when he departed for Provence in 1886. This new

countryside reminded him of Holland - but an idealized Holland, and for a while he seemed to have found a place he could relate to. But it was here that his mental torments eventually built up to such a degree that he voluntarily sought seclusion in an asylem, and after fifteen months he left Provence, responding to a gnawing homesickness that had been growing on him during the later years of his self-imposed exile. In May 1890 he began heading towards Holland once more. He stopped off in Paris for three days where he saw his sister-in-law and nephew for the first time, before proceding on to Auvers, twenty miles north-west of Paris. This picturesque town proved to be Vincent's last temporary place of residence, for he was there only seventy days before he took it upon himself to terminate his life.

When O'Conor first went to Paris he worked in the Atelier Durand. Once finished there he did not spend all his time in Paris either, and during 1889-1890 he was at Grez-sur-Loing, near Nemours. When he first went to Brittany, a favourite haunt for artists, is not known, but he was certainly there by 1892 and, like many of his collegues, resided at Pont-Aven. When he gave up going to Brittany is not known either. He still spent part of the time there in the 1900s as his submissions to the Salon des Indépendants of 1904 were sent in from Finistère. He was back in Paris by the autumn of 1904, as his picture in the Salon d'Automne of that year was designated as coming from the Rue du Cherche Midi, and it is generally thought that he was more or less permanently settled in Paris from then on. Little information concerning his later life can be uncovered except that towards the end of his life he married Mlle. Renée Honta. He died at Nueil-sur-Layon in March 1940.

O'Conor and Van Gogh both had the same fundamental need in mind when they turned towards France; they needed to find a place that would bring out the best in themselves and their art. O'Conor discovered in the wild and isolated landscape of Brittany a totally absorbing subject for his art, and he was lucky enough to be able to settle for that. The contrasts of Brittany and Paris appear to have provided him with ample scope for his work, and he deemed it unnecessary to travel further afield. In fact, he was invited by Gauguin to accompany him to the South Seas, but declined. Instead, he stayed in Paris, and little by little withdrew from public to end his days in almost a hermit-like existance.

In contrast to this, Van Gogh was never able to settle down anywhere for any length of time. His life

seemed to follow the pattern of a circle that is not quite joined: beginning in Holland, he journeyed to north France, from there to south France, and then started back again, getting as far as Auvers; tragically, though, he knew all the time that by retuning he still would not find the home that he longed for. This knowledge played a large part in his final decision to commit suicide.

Ties with homelands:

For men who have left their native countries there are almost always some indications in their manner or work which betray the fact that they do not quite belong to their adopted country in the same way that they belong to their land of birth and upbringing. These indicative traits are much more marked in the case of Van Gogh than they are in that of O'Conor.

It is relatively easier to find traces of Holland in Van Gogh's life because his work represents a continuous self-portrait which is inseparable from his life, and coupled with the voluminous correspondance in which that work is reflected, it can be seen that the Dutch rearing that he had had influenced almost everything that he did thereafter. His Dutch rearing provided him with traits that were essential to his success as an artist: he was a hard worker, intent on developing his skills as Dutchmen are wont to do, and Dutch persistance in the face of rejection was another source of strength. Like the typical Dutchman, Vincent was a realist, and he decried excessive use of the imagination. He also felt the need for co-operative effort.

As a youth Van Gogh was proud of his native land and his countrymen. But as he grew older he became increasingly sensitive and critical of them. He harangued against their narrow-mindedness, their self-righteousness, their greed, hypocrisy and academism, none of which characteristics he himself possessed. Then towards the end of his life he grew very homesick for Holland and yearned for it even though he knew he could not be happy there.

O'Conor, on the other hand, did not seem to have any strong nationalistic feelings; he was unquestionably less emotional regarding the land of his birth. To judge from the limited information available, he seemed to lose interest in Ireland altogether once he had settled down in France. He didn't appear to possess any blatant Irish characteristics either (except perhaps his partiality to a bottle of whiskey) and his physical appearance was more

like that of a Frenchman. The only direct contact he seems to have had with Ireland was in the form of a sister who visited him every year until about 1925. Denys Sutton, however, wrote that 'it is an indication of the native affinity felt by an Irishman for the Celtic world that when O'Conor went to France he found his way to Brittany ... and slthough it might be permissible to think of him as a French artist, his love of Celtic Brittany and a mysterious dreamy quality in some of his pictures give his work an essentially Irish touch.' The Roland, Browse and Delbanco catalogue for 1956 tends to agree and states that 'one is tempted to diagnose the Irish temperament behind the French tradition which had taken complete hold of O'Conor.'

Where the question of the ties with their homelands arises then it can be seen that the two painters were not of the same bent, one being from all appearances totally indifferent to it, and the other loving and hating it in an inextricably confusing manner - initially straining to free himself of its constraints, then breaking away and seeking everything that is in opposition to it, and finally yearning to return to it.

Physical appearances and characters:

In physical appearance the two painters could not have been more contrasting: a fellow student of Van Gogh's at the Antwerp Academy described him as a strange fellow, dressed in a blue blouse similar to those worn by Flemish cattle dealers, wearing a fur cap on his head, and using a crude board for a palette, - 'an unpolished, nervous, restless man who crashed like a bombshell into the Antwerp academy.' A.S.Hatrick, a student in Paris described him as 'a rather weedy little man, with pinched features, red hair and beard, and a light blue eye. He had an extraordinary way of pouring out sentences, if he got started, in Dutch, English and French, then glancing back at you over his shoulder and hissing through his teeth. In fact, when thus excited, he looked more than a little mad; at other times he was apt to be morose, as if suspicious. To tell the truth, I fancy the French were civil to him largely because his brother, Theodore, was employed by Goupil & Co. and so bought pictures.'

Vincent himself repeatedly complained that he was ugly, coarse and aged beyond his years. At the age of 30 he described himself as a man 'with wrinkles on my forehead and lines on my face as if I were 40, and my hands are deeply furrowed.' He also had halting speech, and this was one of the factors he had to take into account

in his decision to abandon a career as a preacher. Some have assumed that Vincent's awkward, sometimes eccentric use of the French language was due to his foreign birth, but it has been pointed out that his Dutch was of a similar nature. It was often clumbsy but at the same time poetic. Vincent viewed himself as a rough peasent painter, and he defied the cleanliness, the fussiness and the niceties he had been taught as a child.

O'Conor was physically made of a much different metal than Van Gogh. His self-portrait in the Municipal Gallery reveals his very French appearance, his sallow complexion, his untidy dark hair and his drooping moustache, as well as suggesting something of his introspective and anti-social nature. A photograph of O'Conor taken in 1889-90 shows him as he was at Grez-sur-Loing - a burly and humerous-looking man. An American painter, Brookes, who met him there described him as 'the handsome gifted young Irish painter ... of whom great things were expected.' Clive Bell, who met O'Conor in Paris about 1930, came to know him well and has provided an instructive portrait of him in his memoirs: he was 'a swarthy man with black moustache, greying when I met him, tallish and sturdy ... he carried a stick and there was nothing Bohemian about his appearance.' O'Conor's late self-portrait (Coll.Alden Brookes) reveals a man who had reckoned with life; it is dramatic and strong.

Although the physical attributes of O'Conor and Van Gogh were plainly dissimilar there were several points of ressemblance in their characters.

The story of Van Gogh is a never-ending struggle to control, modify, glorify or deny a deep-rooted melancholy and loneliness. The struggle with these feelings not only helped to shape his personality but stimulated his creative urge and did much to determine the content and style of his work. By reason of childhood experience, parental teaching and religious conviction Vincent thoroughly believed in the value of suffering. His early years left him lacking the faith and trust that is essential to an optimistic view of the world, a lack that left him vulnerable to frightening preoccupations with life and death. To offset these feelings of isolation he had a need to be productive. And to work was to be 'good' and it provided him with a sense of goodness that helped to mollify the shame and guilt of a depression that lasted his whole life. He was humble, ascetic and taciturn, and disliked ostentation and publicity about himself. He was also self-critical, although he recog-

nized his merits when not overly depressed. He was entirely lacking in the Dutch virtue of stolidity, being impetuous and emotional. Gauguin described his as an 'impatient and independant nature' and said that where his work was concerned 'Vincent knew no fear and no obstinacy.' Vincent remained irremediably an exile, self-tormented, turning others against him. The anger that he was unable to vent openly was sometimes directed towards himself but more often it went into the aggressive task of creating pictures, especially apparent in his last years when he attacked the canvas with a fury. He had a strong aversion to old age; as the years passed he grew increasingly afraid that aging would result in the loss of the skill and creativity that alone made his life worth living. But while afraid of failure, it has been suggested that the threat of success (which was just beginning to show itself to him shortly before his death) may have been even more alarming.

Although the personality of O'Conor clearly fascinated many of those who came across him, he remains something of a mystery man. He disliked talking about himself and his early life. One may suspect that he was determined to go his own way and to guard his privacy. Naturally of an independant nature, he cared little for the dictates of fashion, and, like Van Gogh, based his existance on a single-minded devotion to the arts.

The memory of O'Conor was cherished by some of the survivors of that small band of painters with whom he had been on friendly terms in the Paris of the 1900s. The members of this group, which included Clive Bell, Somerset Maugham and Sir Gerald Kelly, evidently appreciated his qualities and ability. Yet they also acknowledged that his was a somewhat difficult, if unusual character. Unfortunately, nearly all these early companions lost touch with him towards the end of his career, when he apparently led a retired and even lonely existance. Somerset Maugham described him critically in 'The Magician'(1908) as 'a tall, dark fellow with strongly marked features, untidy hair and a ragged black moustache.' He provided a more elaborate portrait of O'Conor in his full-scale novel 'Of Human Bondage'(1915), in which the character Clutton is partly based on the Irish artist. 'At Gravier's, where they ate,' were Maugham's words, 'and in the evening at the Versailles ... Clutton was inclined to taciturnity. He sat quietly, with a sardonic expression on his gaunt face, and spoke only when opportunity occurred to throw in a witticism ... He seldom talked of anything but painting, and then only with the one or two persons whom he thought worthwhile.' Other similarities between Clutton and O'Conor are brought out by the fictional character's

admiration for Gauguin, who, if not named, is clearly meant.

Another and more direct account of the artist is provided by Arnold Bennett, who likewise came across him in Paris. He related how he had dined with O'Conor and Stanilaws: 'They had not left Paris for Christmas, and they seemed rather sad and bored and deserted.' A month later he wrote: 'O'Conor dined with me last night. He still slanged Sargent, and said that Renoir was a master. In literature, with his usual charming violence, he cursed Conrad's style (very cleverly) and was enthusiastic about Thackeray.'

Kikione remembers him as a charming person who would go out of his way to help a struggling artist; in fact, he said, he could be relied upon for a café créme, a meal or even the purchase of a picture. Another source describes him as having a gruff personality and that he parted with his pictures ungraciously.

As O'Conor became more introverted, he saw less and less of his fellow painters and yet he is said to have been affectionately nicknamed 'Le Père O'Conor' and, according to Clive Bell, they were always very pleased to see him. Bell also Wrote: 'I suspect he was a tragic figure, though he kept his tragedy to himself.'

The strongest points of ressemblance between the characters of the Irish and Dutch painters seem to be their dual need to withdraw from the world and become increasingly preoccupied with their art. In Van Gogh's case this development happened quickly, within a few years, but in O'Conor's the changeover occurred more slowly, probably taking a couple of decades. Both guarded their privacy with a fierce determination and ended up leading rather solitary lives, for Van Gogh never married and O'Conor was an old man before he did.

Both possessed aggressive personalities that seemed to invite argument. Taciturnity, ungraciousness, independence, and an inclination to be difficult are also characteristics that can be used to describe them both. They shared, moreover, a fear of old age and the effects it might have on their art, and other bonds included a tendency to collect pictures and a great love of reading and learning. Van Gogh was a voracious reader, often completing a book a night, and reading books of special interest many times. Books not only gave him new ideas and reawakened old feelings but also stirred up visual impressions. He had left school just before his fifteenth birthday; like many men of great talent, he claimed he

learned 'absolutely nothing' in school. Whatever the limits of his formal education, Vincent's love of reading and intellectual curiosity helped him to become well-informed in languages, literature, world events and art history. His ability to express himself in writing has made his collected letters almost as famous as his art. His self-imposed isolation aided his acquisition of knowledge, for books, like nature, were substitutes for human relations.

O'Conor's love of books and art history was just as marked. His remarkable understanding and knowledge of modern painters very much influenced the development of taste in circles such as those which revolved around Clive Bell and Roger Fry. Bell wrote that O'Conor 'had known most of the more interesting French painters of his generation - the Nabis, for instance, but the acquaintance had been allowed to drop.' Was this evidence perhaps of that reluctance to become too engaged which seems to have been a feature of his character and his painting?

Within his limits, those of a cultivated amateur, O'Conor, although adverse to art-dealing establishments, was one of the most alert connoisseurs of his generation. Early on, for example, he discerned the qualities of Douanier Rousseau. At one time or another he owned pictures, prints or drawings by Bonnard, Gauguin, Rouault, Laprade, Delacroix, Van Gogh, and Vlaminck to name but a few. In the 1900s he had shown his enthusiasm for Cézanne and El Greco. Neither did he decline to alter his views on artistic matters: according to Alden Brookes he turned against Gauguin and Modigliani. Perhaps it was his solitary nature and his financial independence which helped him to survey the Parisian scene so intently and so perceptively.

The major difference then between the characters of Van Gogh and O'Conor lay in their ability (or lack of it) to find an environment in which they could be content in both artistic and social terms. In his early life O'Conor had a lot going for him; he was popular with his friends, was thought of as a talented painter, and was attractive to the opposite sex; he was able to settle down in France and find scope enough for his art without a great deal of soul-searching. Van Gogh, on the other hand, was viewed as a misfit given to producing eccentric paintings, was unattractive to women, and was unable to remain part of a closely-knit group. Moreover, he could never stay in one place for very long without becoming discontented and restless. He didn't see that it was his underlying depression that caused him to fail in so many spheres of his life; he attributed his 'heavy depression' to constant failure.

Finances and styles of living:

The financial positions of the two painters were very different even though neither of them lived off the sale of their pictures. Van Gogh received a sum of money that was adequate for food and lodgings each month from his brother, Theo. He could not sell any of his paintings. Feeling unloved and deprived, he was convinced that his parents and their psychological successors owed him his due, and so didn't hesitate to demand the help that ordinarily is only given to a child. He even tested Theo's loyalty when his brother was about to be married by demanding his full monthly allowance in advance, and a considerable sum besides to buy oil colours with. But even though throughout his career as an artist he expected his father and then Theo to supply his needs, at the same time the growing weight of his debt filled him with remorse and contributed to the pressures which led to his having a mental breakdown in 1888 (which was the first of many that occurred more frequently the older he got). Theo's marriage, in Vincent's eyes, opened a rift between the two brothers that could never be closed, and for a while he thought of getting himself out of the way by joining the Foreign Legion.

O'Conor did not have any financial worries owing to his fortunate possession of private means; these saved him from the necessity of stepping into the arena and earning money by selling pictures. Kikione said that he was a rentier, but it is worth mentioning that his studio in Rue du Cherche Midi was a very modest place. However, in the years before the second World War life in France was exceedingly cheap.

Allied to one's financial state is the style in which one lives, so having seen a fair difference in the incomes of O'Conor and Van Gogh, a corresponding difference can be expected to exist between their modes of living.

When he was in Antwerp, Paris and Provence Vincent spent so much on paints, canvasses and models that little remained. For extended periods his sole meal was breakfast, supplemented in the evening by coffee and bread. Not surprisingly he complained of faintness, weakness, loss of weight and digestive trouble. He also had serious problems with his teeth. It could be assumed from Vincent's frequent complaints about his financial plight that he was on an extremely meagre allowance. It has been pointed out, though, that the 150 francs per month that Theo gave him was twice the starting salary of a French school-teacher of the time. Vincent's half-starved condition, however, was not solely rooted in the need to divert limited

resources into materials and models: it was a manifestation of an ascetic, masochistic stage in which he sought suffering, humiliation and martyrdom. Nevertheless, he craved recognition and understanding of himself and his work so much that he often rationalized his dependency by convincing himself that Theo (who was in the picture-dealing business) and he were partners, with Theo supplying money and encouragement and he supplying the pictures.

Later, in Arles, Vincent made some friends, went to bull-fights in the Roman arena, and visited the local houses of prostitution. He was then turning out a prodigious amount of work. But as could be predicted this involvement was still not enough for him to maintain his serenity, and he took recourse to unhealthy amounts of alcohol and tobacco. Pipe smoking, though, was one of his few earthly pleasures, and there are many pipe smokers among his works.

It was in Arles also that he had his first serious mental breakdown. Many factors accounted for it - the strain of the previous months, the long days of work in the sun, irregular meals and too much coffee, tobacco and poor wine - these may well have been enough to cause the crisis, latent for years, in a nervous system so highly strung; but the two immediate factors were undoubtedly Gauguin's (who had been his painting companion for the previous couple of months) irrevocable decision to leave, which meant the collapse of his long-cherished dream of an artists' community, and the news he received the same day of Theo's engagement, which meant the certainty that he would be even more of a financial burden to his brother than he was already. Between Christmas 1888 and Easter 1889 Vincent suffered several attacks of delirium which led him, on his own initiative, to ask for admittance to an asylem. He subsequently stayed in the sanitarium of Saint Paul-de-Mausole voluntarily for a year and a week, during which time he worked hard in between attacks of illness. In 1890 he left Provence for the North but committed suicide in Auvers before reaching Holland.

O'Conor, not being in as limited a financial bracket as Van Gogh, nor in such torment of mind, led a more normal life. In the late 1880s, in the company of Brookes, one can get some idea of his ways from Brookes' son, Alden, who recalled how his father would tell stories of their days together - of how they would 'think nothing of polishing off a bottle of whiskey between them of an evening; or of how they visited Van Gogh in his studio (my father had met the brother); the then unknown Van Gogh's pictures were so cheap that the two of them actually thought of perhaps buying a few to paint over and use as

canvasses. True, when I came to telling the stories I had heard, if he accepted the whiskey bottle story with a countenance of grace, at the tale that he, the now modern connoisseur, had once thought to paint over Van Gogh's canvasses he bristled with outrage, cried 'Never!' and told me that my father had filled me full of a lot of nonsense.'

O'Conor's connections with the French art world and his discrimination clearly destined him to fulfill the role of a pontiff among the Anglo-Saxon painters and critics who visited Paris in the 1900s. He became the leader of the group of men who often met for dinner at Le Chat Blanc in the Rue d'Odessa. This circle included Penrhyn Stanilaws the illustrator, Paul Bartlett the sculptor, Alexander Harrison the painter, James Morrice, and Gerald Kelly. O'Conor appeared to dine out for most of his meals in his earlier life, with friends in restaurants at lunch time, and often in the homes of friends in the evenings. But as he got older he did this less and less as he increasingly withdrew from society.

Music appealed to O'Conor; however, Bell stated that he rarely made the immense effort of going to a concert. 'In music,' the writer observed, 'his taste was austere, and he would snarl at Morrice for his romanticism and laxity. He would refuse, for instance, to accompany Bell and the Canadian painter to hear Traviata at the Opéra Comique; he remained in his quarter grim and uncompromising. He played the violin - to himself and not very well - and it was typical of him probably that at a time when the pianola was so popular that he refused to own one.'

Women and love:

As was mentioned earlier both O'Conor and Van Gogh tended to lead relatively private lives; the former didn't marry until he was about into the last decade of his life, and the latter did not at all. Also there are no records of children born outside of wedlock attributed to either man. What accounted for their bachelorhood?

In the case of Van Gogh his remaining single was not his choice. His inability to be part of a closely-knit group did not allow him to remain committed to one woman any more than to adhere to one school of art or one church. Yearning with his whole being to give himself to something, he found himself barred from the 'true life' to which he aspired, by which he meant a man's natural life with wife and children, by the fact that his fierce, almost mystical

determination to achieve this goal was so powerful that it threatened his intended partner. It frightened parents, relatives, women, artists, and even his brother, Theo, contributing to the failure of every attempt at intimacy. He found that the only way left open to him 'to extricate himself from life' was the way of art, and the desire for intimacy in life was paralleled by an obsession with it in his art. He was forever sketching pairs of people - companions and lovers who stood together, sat together, walked together, worked together, grieved together, etc. In the characteristic Van Gogh pair, one body overlaps the other, as if merged with it. Other objects were also turned into symbolic human couples - pairs of cypresses, pairs of cottages, pairs of chairs, pairs of paintings on a wall, pairs of bottles on a table, pairs of windows in a room.

Vincent's unhappy alliances with women began in Holland and continued in France, although little is known about the French ones. He suffered intensely when his offers of marriage were refused. He had a compulsion to help suffering women but these intentions always resulted in failure: his association in Holland with a pitiful prostitute, Sien, disrupted his relations with his own family; she herself proved to be completely untrustworthy and in the end he was forced to abandon her and her children. Attempts to help a neighbour, Margot, in her distress only increased the turmoil in her family and finally led to her attempted suicide.

Vincent liked young children and especially babies. The presence of babies, who represented rebirth and immortality, relieved his sadness, and numerous drawings and paintings of babies attest to his fascination with re-creating them. Thus his pictures became his companions, his mistresses and his children.

In contrast to Van Gogh's fruitless efforts to terminate his bachelorhood, O'Conor stayed single (until his old age) voluntarily. Another extraction from the testimony of Alden Brookes reveals that O'Conor had in fact got engaged to be married when he was around the age of thirty; the outcome provides an additional insight into his personality: 'In the early days,' states Brookes, O'Conor was ... a favourite of the ladies ... He became engaged to a young Swedish painter, and all seemed for the best until the future bride thoughtlessly one day received on the side a young countryman of hers who had come to pay her back a loan she had made to him. That was all that was necessary. O'Conor broke off the engagement sharply, and no matter that at such an outcome the unfortunate lady suffered a nervous breakdown ... As for O'Conor, no more of marriage; and though he went from mistress to mistress

thereafter, he kept for himself the privilege of separate lodgings and the freedom to go out alone every evening and dine with his friends.'

When O'Conor did eventually get married it was to Mlle.Renée Honta who was born in Pau in 1894 and who was also a painter. At the time of the marriage he was about seventy, which would have made her around thirty-six. There is no information forthcoming relating to their married life except for Bell's conclusion: 'her companionship mitigated the painful loneliness of his old age.'

Religion:

In the aspect of religion the two artists again differed, though to what extent it is hard to say since there is practically no mention of it in any of the accounts concerning O'Conor. However, the fact that nothing is mentioned must surely invite the opinion that it did not play a prominant rôle in his life. The only person who did bring up the subject of religion was Arnold Bennett who had this rather vague comment to make: 'We came back ... and went through a lot of my books. He (O'Conor) proved himself at once a fairly accomplished bookman. But late in the evening when we were talking about religion, Malthusianism, etc., I discovered that in some matters his ideas were a strange mixture of crudity and finesse.' Unfortunately Bennett doesn't go on to say what these ideas were and so a comparison with Van Gogh in terms of religious conviction is not possible. Nevertheless, one can discern that religion meant a lot less to O'Conor than it it did to Van Gogh.

As a young man Van Gogh had tried to find the way out of his morass of depression by following in the footsteps of his father and the other Van Gogh ministers. Unsatisfied, he turned to the life of a poor evangelist, but this, too, failed him; depression returned and he bitterly rejected church religion. He did not wish to abandon religion but to seek a less threatening and more comforting one than the strict Dutch Calvanism. In this he was not alone because in 19th century Europe there was widespread breakdown of religious belief. But Vincent's thoughts and emotions concerning religion were too many and complex to be described in full here; basically, he loved Christ but hated Christianity. The story of Christ put its mark on his life as an artist: like Christ Vincent began the work for which he is remembered late in life, continued it for only a few years, and died young. Equating himself with Christ and Christ with art, his paintings became visual rather than spoken parables, and his pictures of sowers portraits of Christ as well as self-portraits. His identifications

with Christ and immortal artists of the past like Rembrandt generated a secondary self-confidence in him.

With just a few exceptions Vincent shunned religious portraiture in his art. In part, the Calvanism may have had something to do with this since it banned church paintings and portrayals of holy subjects. But there was more than this to account for Vincent's avoidance of mystical religious portraiture; his reluctance sprang partly from a concern that 'frightful ideas,' mainly self-destructive in nature, might break into conciousness, and that he might act upon them. To conclude, however, it was his strong, though precarious faith in a loving God that made both life and art possible for Van Gogh.

Deaths:

Perhaps the most striking contrast of all in the lives of the two men is the manner in which they met their deaths. Van Gogh's suicide at the height of his career stands out starkly against O'Conor's many reclusive years of old age.

Considering Van Gogh's life of suffering and his glorification of death, suicide was not an unexpected end. He was attracted to and stimulated by death, and seized many opportunities to discuss it. Putting life into pictures helped him to counteract this preoccupation. But finally the pressures that had been building up in his mind overcame him and led him to his last carefully-planned gesture of self-destructive violence. In the sunny solitude of open fields on July 27th 1890 he shot himself fatally in the chest. When night was falling he stumbled back to the inn where he was staying. Two doctors decided the bullet was inaccessible and applied a dressing to the wound. Vincent was not in serious pain, his mind was clear, and he proceeded to smoke his pipe throughout the night. He died peacefully in Theo's arms at one o'clock in the morning of July 29th. He was four months past his 37th birthday.

No details of the death of O'Conor are available except that he died as an octogentarian on March 18th 1940 at Nueil-sur-Layon and was buried in the cemetery of the local church. In the view of Denys Sutton O'Conor 'suffered perhaps the common fate of many expatriots; his old friends had died off and fresh ones were more difficult to make. It is also possible that he may have felt that he had failed to fulfill his ambitions.' Somerset Maugham may appear to be a little sharp in the assessment of Clutton O'Conor that occurs in 'Of Human Bondage' but some truth may lie in his words: 'He saw Clutton in twenty years,

bitter, lonely, savage and unknown; still in Paris, for the life there had got into his bones, ruling a small cenacle with a savage tongue, at war with himself and the world, producing little in his increasing passion for perfection he could not reach.'

In actual fact, under closer scrutiny, it can be seen that the latter stages of the lives of O'Conor and Van Gogh were much more similar than one would at first imagine. The prospect of old age was viewed with rebellion by both men, and they both turned to seclusion from the world and immersion in their work as a means of dealing with it. The deciding factor that made the difference in the end lay in a certain dissimilarity of their temperments - namely, the ability to form relationships with other people; Van Gogh was not able to, and ended his life because the prospect of the long years of isolation that loomed ahead was unbearable; O'Conor, on the other hand, whose character did not contain self-destructive tendencies, could relate to people if he wanted to, so he was able to obtain the company of a woman to help alleviate the loneliness. Thus, because of this discrepency in their natures he outlived Van Gogh by almost half a century.

Part 2.

Comparing the work of Van Gogh and O'Conor.

Artistic trends in 19th century Holland:

Although painting continued to be fashionable and painters technically competent, Holland did not produce a single great artist during the 18th century and the first half of the 19th. Johan Jongkind emerged around 1850, working in the tradition of Dutch landscapists. He and Boudin are regarded as the immediate precursors of the Impressionists. Like Van Gogh after him, he had severe psychological problems and deserted Holland for France. Beginning about 1870, a group known as the Hague School also made a Dutch contribution to the arts; among them Vincent especially admired Josef Israëls, pre-eminently a painter of humanity. Taking their lead from the French Barbizon School, English landscapists and 17th century Dutch, these artists returned to nature and the everyday subjects of Holland's Golden Age, but added a modern idiom.

Van Gogh's artistic training:

Van Gogh's artistic accomplishments were a remarkable achievement for a man with so little formal schooling in art. They were made possible by a training that began in childhood, a spontaneous, partly unconcious 'learning' that arose out of the pressure of inner needs. An important part of this learning process was an intense fascination with looking. Indeed, he seemed to derive more pleasure nurturing himself through his eyes than through his mouth. It was because of a life-time of intense looking that Vincent was able to say only one year after embarking on his life as an artist that his eye was 'well-trained and steady.' But he was also well prepared for his task as a painter because his visual interest had always been directed towards his predecessors in art. The development of his style had a lot to do with his ability to visualize the world in terms of paintings, old and new.

Vincent's artistic training began in mid 1880 in the Borinage after nine months of depressive 'hibernation' while the decision to turn to art germinated. He emerged from being Vincent the Failed Evangelist in a new identity as Vincent the Peasent Painter. He also dissociated himself from the Van Gogh name and became simply 'Vincent.' Until 1882 he devoted himself almost exclusively to drawing, trying to get some action and structure into his work which up until then had been stiff and motionless. He drew mainly peasents and peasent scenes. When he went to

stay in The Hague his interest in depicting peasents extended to their city relatives, the labourers and slum-dwellers. In the middle of 1882 he returned to painting watercolours, which he had begun in Etten, and soon after painted his first oil. Although he followed Dutch tradition, he utilized materials and techniques that best expressed his own feelings. He liked the rough graphite of a carpenter's pencil and preferred a rough paper to the popular smooth type. He limited himself to 'simple colours and avoided 'nice' colours.

Until now Vincent had begun each picture with a sharp outline of his subject and paid little attention to modelling or light effects. But during the latter half of 1882 he began to experiment with light and shade. His interest in colour began to emerge through the use of oils. In 1883 he went to the remote, dismal Drenthe district in north-east Holland to try and live 'far away, alone with nature'. Three months later he was back with his family who had moved to Nuenen and he remained there until 1885.

This period in Nuenen was probably the most prolific in Vincent's career as an artist. Almost one quarter of his total known output originated there - 225 drawings, 25 watercolours, 185 oils and a few lithographs. Oils became his principal preoccupation, and his drawings were often merely studies for them. In May 1885 he reached the height of his development in the North when he painted 'The Potato Eaters'. He now began to feel a need to see 'the world of painters and pictures', to visit museums, mingle with other artists and paint from the nude; he decided to go south, stopping in Antwerp on the way.

Vincent entered the Antwerp Academy of Art in January 1886. He attended the night classes and also joined two night drawing clubs. The clubs gave him the opportunity to draw from the nude female, and he also accepted the necessity of drawing from plaster casts, even though he had refused earlier. Soon, however, he was embroiled in arguments with his teachers, mercilessly criticizing them for their method of working from the outline, rather than modelling with the brush. Painting the human figure became his chief interest in Antwerp, but, due to his painful selfconsciousness, putting life into the figures didn't come easily to him, and the figures reflect this stiffness and awkwardness despite his excellence as a draughtsman. In his attempt to overcome the problem he tried to 'keep the faces animated' by talking to the models as they posed.

Vincent's confidence in his work increased and soon the technique of drawing was no problem to him. Now he aimed at 'originality and broadness of conception' and

set his heart on going to Paris.

Arriving in Paris, he enrolled in the studio of Fernand Cormon. The studio attracted the most talented students in Paris because Cormon, though a conventional painter of no particular distinction, as a teacher gave his students considerable freedom. For the following few months Vincent spent four hours each morning in the studio drawing from models and plaster casts. In the afternoons he studied the masterpieces in the Louvre and the Luxembourg Palace. Through these, and his brother's art gallery, Vincent was exposed to the work of the most creative artists in Europe. The brief spell he spent in Cormon's studio, though, was the last formal instruction he received.

Artistic trends in 19th century Ireland:

The only certain thing about Irish art in the period from 1850 to 1916 is its diverse and fragmented nature. No simple pattern emerges. However, the late 19th century saw a considerable change in Irish painting, one which reflected the greatly increased Continental influence of the training of Irish painters. At this time it was rare for them to go to English art schools unless they were residents in England. The elder John Butler Yeats and Orpen were the only two painters of importance to do so. Therefore there was no Irish equivalent to the painting of Burne-Jones, Orchardson or Waterhouse, and there was a steady decline in the quantity of subject picture painting. Nathaniel Hone went to Paris in 1853, and his influence, together with that of artists like Augustus Burke, Aloysius O'Kelly, or even Frank O'Meara, may have been the cause for the extraordinary number of young Irish students who studied abroad in the 1800s. These incuded Kavanagh, Osbourne, Nathaniel Hill, Thomas Moynan, Henry Allen, Dermod O'Brien and, of course, Roderic O'Conor.

O'Conor's artistc training:

When O'Conor finished his formal education in England in 1878 he attended the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin. In 1881 he crossed over to Belgium and there worked at the Academy of St.Luke in Antwerp. The choice of Antwerp rather than Paris to study was quite normal for Irish students at this time. The man who attracted them, and contemporary English students, was Charles Verlat, a rather tedious academic painter, but a good teacher. His training tended to leave his pupils with a tight, controlled style with paintings finished in the studio from drawings made from the model outside, and with a subject-matter more or

less anecdotal. All his Irish students outgrew his influence in due time, though their innate conservatism, except in the case of O'Conor, was confirmed by Verlat's strictly conventional art and no doubt made it more difficult for them to appreciate the avant-guard art of Impressionism when they came into contact with it in France. With the notable exception of O'Conor, all the Irish artists who trained abroad were virtually un-influenced by the Impressionists but accepted the plein-airism of Jules Bastien Lepage. If, later on, Osbourne and Lavery came to appreciate Manet and Whistler they were unusual in this.

After two years O'Conor left Antwerp and went to Paris where he is stated to have studied under Carolus Durand. This was his final stage of training. The gaps in the knowledge of O'Conor are most marked at the beginning and end of his career; there is enough information, though, to enable one to see that he followed the normal trends and fulfilled the recommended requirements of the time to prepare him for his chosen role as Artist. In this aspect he differs exceedingly from Van Gogh who spent the best part of four years teaching himself before attempting to learn from two brief periods of instruction. In terms of progress in art, those brief periods were profitable, but he saw to it that he didn't remain long enough to become indoctrinated into ways that did not suit him. The differences in the ages and the temperaments of the two men account for their dissimilar attitudes to the authority of formal art training: Van Gogh was 32, had already progressed to a considerable degree along a certain path of artistic development and, rather unusually, was undergoing an extremely late adolescenthood; O'Conor, on the other hand, was only 25, was of a less rebellious nature at this stage and, having adhered to the normal pattern of training so far, was indoctrinated to expect the authority of instructors, and did not fight with his teachers.

Did the initial art training the two men received in their homelands have any lasting effects on their work? The extent to which O'Conor's Irish training influenced his later work is very difficult to evaluate because he hadn't really begun his career before he left for Belgium and France. Had he stayed and worked in Ireland for a while before going there might have been a few traces of Irishness in his art, but in view of his Antwerp training and his life-time spent in France one is inclined to agree that there are virtually no Irish influences to be found at all. Van Gogh, in contrast to this, was saturated in traditional Dutch ways of painting by the time he left Holland, and though he purposely tried to

purge all the Dutchness from his work in an effort to break the psychological ties that held him to his family and country he never really succeeded. The Dutchness remained latent until it came to the surface again near the end of his life when he began to think of returning to Holland.

Art phases:

The work of both Van Gogh and O'Conor can be divided into three categories. The pictures of Van Gogh's first phase, executed in Holland and Belgium between 1880 and 1885 tend to be sombre and dark with the emphasis on sorrow and isolation. Those of his second phase, executed in Paris, were ones of transition from darkness to lightness in terms of his encounter with the French Impressionists, and the bright, vibrant pictures of Arles and Auvers represent his third phase during which he reached his peak as a painter.

The three phases in O'Conor's work are not as distinct but exist nevertheless: the first was the most impressionistic, from about 1886 to 1900, when he painted strongly under Van Gogh's influence; from 1900 to 1910 was his best period when his colours became rich and well-balanced; after 1910 his work became more diverse and his style ranged more widely, possibly with a certain loss of intensity.

In terms of time, O'Conor's first phase coincided with Van Gogh's second and third phases. Their art careers, moreover, cannot be compared phase for phase since Van Gogh's first phase has no equivalent in O'Conor's work and O'Conor's last period has none in Van Gogh's work. It is first necessary, then, to summarize the latter's early painting years so as to keep the balance of events on an even keel.

Van Gogh's early period:

Van Gogh's first phase of painting in Holland (1880-1885) were the years of his 'black painting', when he was deeply involved in portraying scenes of social conditions. It is not surprising that these pictures had Dutch qualities, for in his youth he was thoroughly steeped with the knowledge of Dutch artists of the past and present. His subject-matter was mainly drawn from peasent life around him, which he depicted as realistically as possible - peasents at work, peasent homes, the fields, portraits of common people, street scenes, churches and still-lifes. Much of it resembled the old Dutch genre paintings that

had 'a touch of the curious and a moral to be learned', and, like his predecessors his pictures were intended for

'Farms' Drenthe 1883 (Van Gogh)

the general public, not the connoisseur. His palette was based on the customary tones of the northern painters, too, - earth colours like ochres and siennas; he developed an unfinished, earthy quality and learned to paint with thick, unsmoothed strokes, a style which produced effects that fascinated him while simultaneously expressing his rough ways. The composition of his pictures was classical, with the line of the horizon half-way down, and distinct relationships of light and shadows. His interiors of weavers and peasents caught in their daily attitudes of work were based on classical perspective, with its central vanishing point. The minute and descriptive attention paid to detail (his still-lifes were already a symbol of human presence), and the distribution of solid objects under the light were part of the long tradition of northern figurative imagery which can be traced to Rembrandt and Frans Hals.

In May 1885 Vincent reached the peak of his artistic development in the North when he painted 'The Potato Eaters', a sombre portrayal of a peasent family of five seated around a bowl of steaming potatoes. 'I have tried to emphasize', Vincent wrote, 'that these people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labour, and how they have honestly earned their food'. The gloomy atmosphere, the coarseness of the human features, and the melancholic interplay between the inhabitants of this 'grimy cottage', as Vincent called it,

reveal their poverty, their suffering and their despair.

'The Potato Eaters' Nuenen 1885 (Van Gogh)

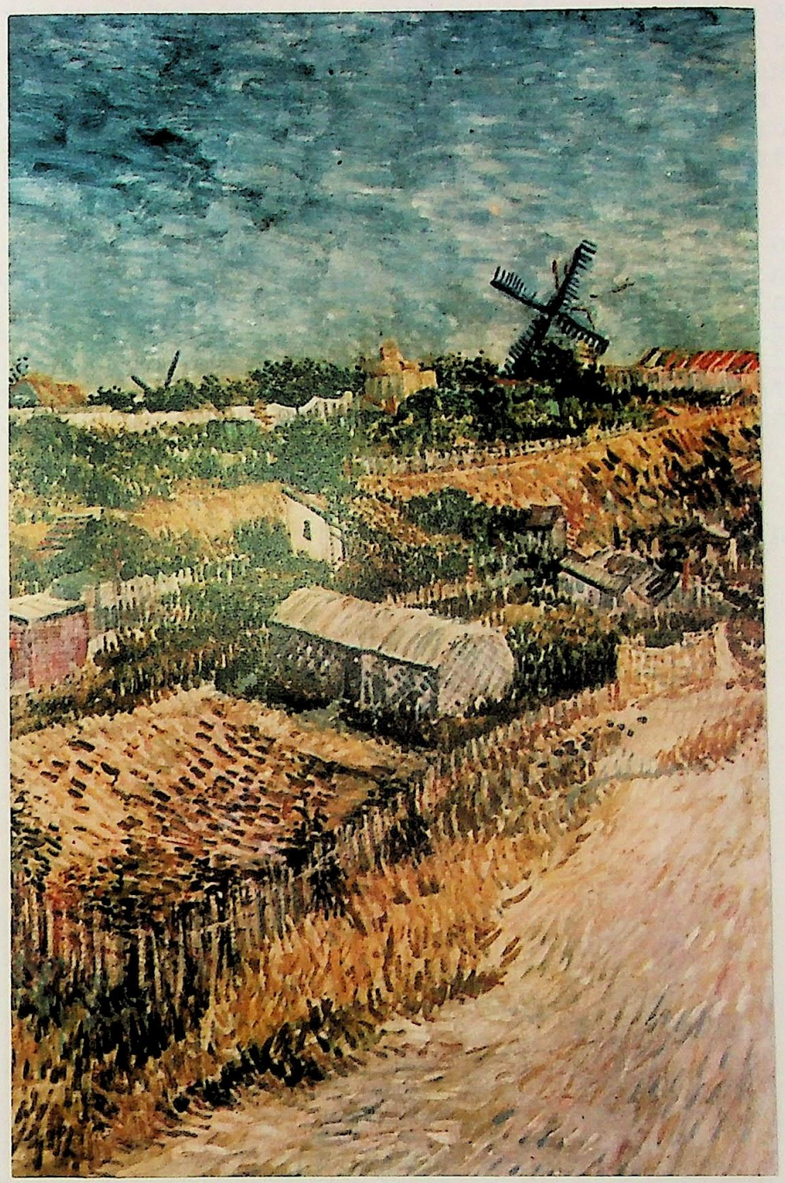
The influence of French Impressionism:

The interval between 1886 and 1890 is the key period that links O'Conor to Van Gogh. During this time they shared an adherence to Impressionism and painted with a freshness and breadth of execution that could stand comparison with the Sisleys and Pissarros of the time. Because O'Conor viewed the Parisian scene so perceptively he became aware of Van Gogh's work relatively soon after it was executed, and by the end of the 1880s had begun to understand the methods of the Dutchman; thus many of his paintings of the early 1890s were very much influenced by Van Gogh.

Van Gogh broke his last links with realism and the academic tradition half-way through his Paris period. The pictures he painted in France were intuitive and rapidly executed, not the meticulous work of his typical Dutch predecessors. He was more interested in stirring emotions than in respecting natural colours and natural proportions, although his proportions were often surprisingly accurate. No artist, and no Dutch artist in particular, had ever been so brash with colours and light effects. He infused his pictures with a non-Dutch glare. While Rembrandt, Hals, Josef Israëls - and he himself when living in Holland - expressed deep emotions, they were exhibited with

Dutch constraint; in comparison, Vincent's later pictures were often shocking.

Vincent found Paris full of action and enthusiasm, with a climate of rebellion and determined change. By the time he arrived and became acquainted with Impressionism, the movement had already passed its peak; the eighth Impressionist Exhibition, held in 1886, was also the last one of these painters as a group. At first Vincent was disappointed with the movement but that sentiment soon

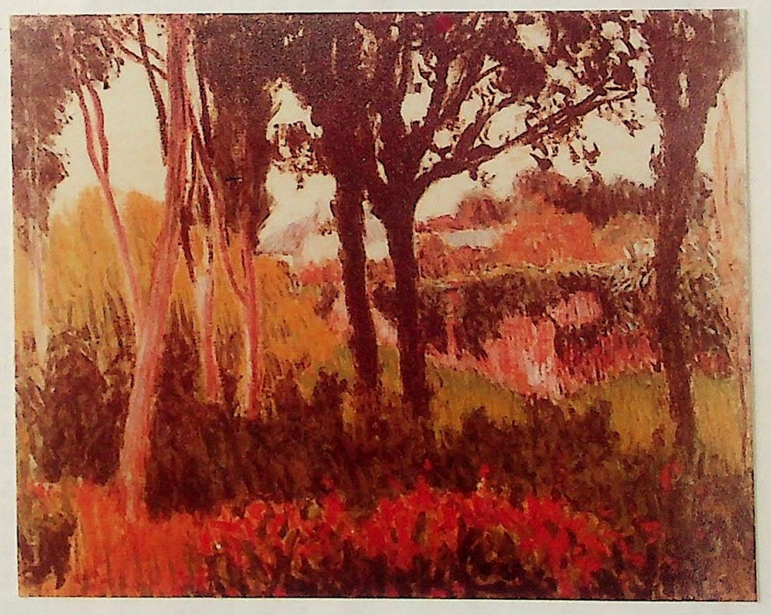


'Gardens on the Butte Montmartre' Paris 1887 (Van Gogh)

turned to admiration as he became won over to the new trends, and his Paris work was greatly influenced by them. For a while Vincent was so intent on learning the secrets of shimmering colour that he adopted the fine brushwork of Pissarro and Sisley, and used a delicate touch that hid his own ebullience. In a long series of works exhibiting the spring and early summertime of 1887, he practiced outdoor painting in the Impressionist spirit, with varying degrees of success and by means of various techniques. These canvases, depicting the banks of the Seine, park scenes and other themes much in favour with the Impressionists, offered him the opportunity of making his palette lighter and more colourful. He started working with unmixed dots, short lines and strokes in bright and mostly even primary colours. He applied these techniques sometimes fairly constantly, sometimes very freely, and there was a great diversity of style in the paintings of those years.

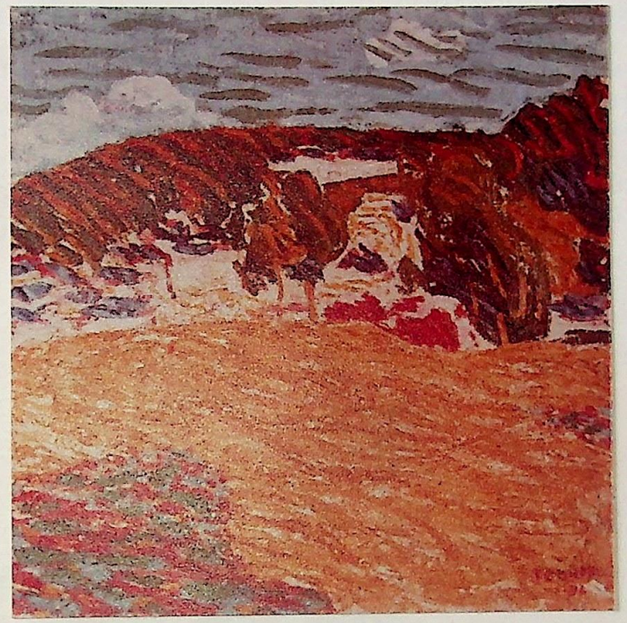
Because the Impressionists avoided stirring up deep feelings in the beholder, however, they could be no more than a helpful adjunct in the full artistic development of a man like Van Gogh. Having assimilated and digested those aspects of Impressionism that suited him, his later works continued to be executed using Impressionist techniques but was easily distinguished by its emotional intensity and rough modelling.

Roderic O'Conor, like Van Gogh, adopted the new and



'La Ferme de Lazaver, Finistère' 1894 (O'Conor)

exciting colours of the Impressionists. The earliest picture recorded by him to have survived is his 'Yellow Landscape, Pont-Aven', dating from 1887, and it shows him clearly as being under the influence of the movement, particularly Sisley. In 1889 he showed three pictures, including a Belgian landscape, at the Salon des Indépendants, and the following year he exhibited ten (which, incidentally, was the same number that Van Gogh exhibited that year in that same Salon). He was associated with Signac, Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec and the American painter, Brookes, but Van Gogh was definitely the artist who influenced him the most during these years, even though the Dutchman was receiving little public recognition at



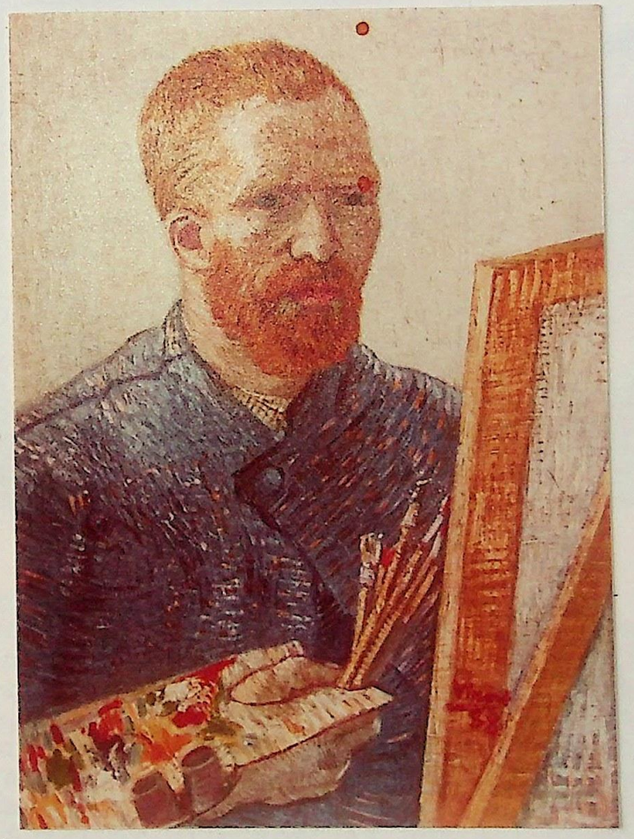
'Field of Corn, Pont-Aven' 1892 (O'Conor)

the time. O'Conor followed his example of using colour as a means of expression, combining it with line to express emotion as strongly as possible. In 'Ferme de Lazaver' (p.28), the vivid colours, though based on those of a real landscape, are stronger and more immediate. His brushstrokes - which also recall the work of Van Gogh - not only translate lines in the landscape but are used to obtain a luminous effect. O'Conor found that he related well to Brittany, and the nature of his style at this time can also be gauged from other dated pictures such as 'Field of Corn, Pont-Aven' (1892), which also displays his use of simplified forms and the juxtaposition of pure colours. In addition, like Van Gogh and the rest of this generation of painters, he disregarded the Renaissance idea of trying to creat the illusion of a third dimension,

accepting the fact that the canvas was two-dimentional, and treating the picture as a flat pattern.

Other influences:

Impressionism wasn't the only thing that affected the work of O'Conor and Van Gogh in Paris during the 1880s and 1890s. Apart from the contents of art galleries and museums, which both men would most likely have been acquainted with, there were also the exhibitions held in Salons and galleries which would have exposed them to all the most modern painters in Europe. In 1886 alone four important exhibitions representing the different techniques of the moment were put on. In the Salon de Mai, among the academic portraits and fashionable pictures, there were canvases by Puvis de Chavannes and Albert Besnard, who had tried to produce an inoffensive medium between middle-class traditions and a sort of 'modernism' acceptable to the ordinary public. At the eighth Impressionist exhibition they would have discovered Seurat's 'Grande-Jatte', and works by Signac, Pissarro, Odilon, Redon, Gauguin,



'Self-Portrait in Front of Easel' Paris 1888 (Van Gogh)

Both Van Gogh and O'Conor admired the Pointillists, especially Georges Seurat, but neither of them could follow Seurat's neat scientific approach, one totally at odds with their own inclinations. Besides, their need to put life into their pictures would not permit the rigidity and stillness of Seurat's canvases. The nearest they went to Seurat's theory was to execute the Pointillist technique rapidly and instinctively; for example, Van Gogh's 'Self-Portrait in Front of Easel' (p.30) demonstrates a scintillation of colour (though this portrait is more subdued in tone than most of his others). Pure, unmixed primary colours, in good-sized daubs, have been put on the palette in the lower left-hand corner of the painting, and on closer inspection the vivid colours, in the form of small touches of paint, are rediscovered everywhere except on the background and on the easel. If this picture is compared with O'Conor's 'Still Life with Cups' (p.31), one can see the similarity in the colours and their application techniques straight away. Like Van Gogh's portrait, the colours of the still life are mainly the primaries, only this time the emphasis is on the red instead of the blue. The brushstrokes are slightly more hap-hazard in the latter, but are still in the form of daubs and short lines except for the background.

Van Gogh owed to Paris, too, his direct knowledge of the freehand brushstrokes of the Japanese prints which the Goncourt brothers had introduced to the city, and a new perspective, entirely instinctive and absolutely opposed to the classical rules of the West. From these Japanese prints he learned to use broad surfaces of bright colours. Printed from wood-blocks, the prints had peculiar light effects; he obtained similar effects by making his painted surfaces thick and rough in the style of Monticelli. Vincent's own words on Japanese art were: '... you cannot study Japanese art without becoming much gayer and happier ... I envy the Japanese the extreme clearness which everything has in their work. It is never tedious, and never seems to be done too hurridly. Their work is as simple as breathing, and they do a figure in a few sure strokes with the same ease as if it were as simple as buttoning your coat'.

Vincent also maintained an admiration for the Marseilles painter, Adolphe Monticelli, for a long time, so Monticelli's influence can be expected to last right through the years 1888-1890. In his letters Vincent said, in unmistakable terms, that (together with Delacroix) he regarded Monticelli as his master.

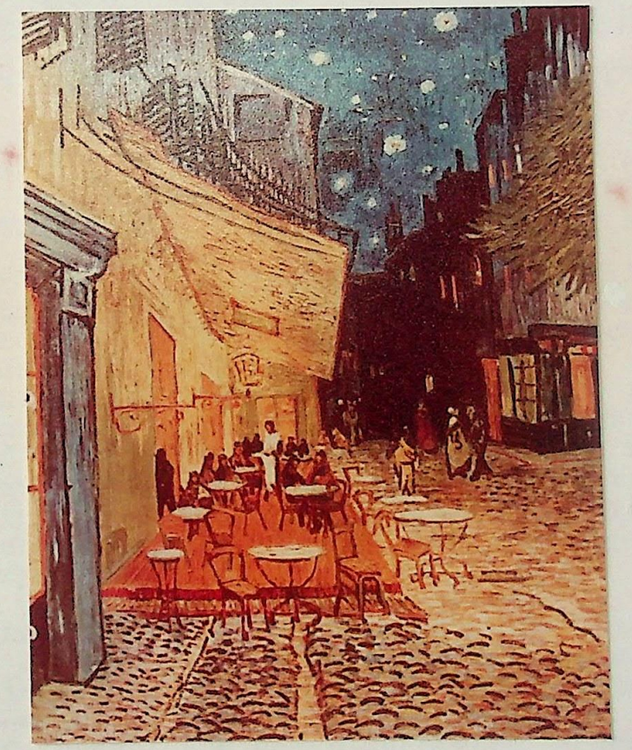
One of the larger influences on O'Conor's earlier

'Breton Peasent Knitting' (Close-up) 1893 (O'Conor)

work, discounting those of the Impressionists and Van Gogh, was the art of Gauguin and the Pont-Aven circle, which he joined in Brittany in the 1880s. Though he could have met in Paris some of the painters like Emile Bernard, Filigier, Séguin and Chamaillard who settled in Pont-Aven, he presumably strengthened his contacts with them in Brittany. In a number of paintings between 1890 and 1893 a trend towards simplification and the placing side by side of pure colours indicates the influence of the Pont-Aven circle, eg. 'Field of Corn' (p.29) and 'Breton Peasent Knitting'. The method of coloured stripes used in these paintings, which was his own personal touch, was like an

attempt to combine the ideas of the Pont-Aven School with those of the Pointillists, but there is also some flavour of German Expressionism detectable, especially in the latter picture. But O'Conor never fully applied the theoretical teachings as evolved by Gauguin and Bernard, for he sought neither the primitive contour nor the symbolic colour. With him, as with Van Gogh, all theories remained subservient to a very direct pictorial approach towards reality.

It is also worth mentioning that in the late 1880s O'Conor and Van Gogh both tried their hands at etching. Van Gogh's are mostly landscapes and remind one of his Paris drawings. They are very linear, with hatched strokes. Some twelve etching plates by O'Conor are known, including an etched portrait of 1888. In 1893 he executed a series of etchings of landscapes which, with their free contours, indicate that he had learned something from Séguin, who, according to Denys Sutton, advised him in such matters. One of his prints was dedicated 'to my friend, Warrener'. This must have been the William Warrener who exhibited in the Salon des Indépendants in 1892. Séguin himself was a close friend of O'Conor's, to whom he would turn when hard-pressed financially.



'Café Terrace at Night' Arles 1888 (Van Gogh)

Continuing development:

Van Gogh's last period, which, strictly speaking, was not a period in its own right but a continuation of the development he began in Paris, was the most diverse in his career and lasted from February 1888 to July 1890. In

'Starry Night' Provence 1889 (Van Gogh)

Provence, perhaps more successfully than at any other time, he integrated technical abilities developed from years of practice, a broad knowledge of art and literature, and the various aspects of his personality into the production of a highly individualistic body of art. His pictures are wide-ranging in style partly due to his familiarity with the techniques of other artists, and partly to his varied moods. Some are drawn with the detail and accuracy of a draughtsman, some are Impressionistic, some have exaggerated forms. Some are done with thin washes, others with heavy impastos; some with densely-packed dots or short strokes of contrasting colours, others with broad expanses of unbroken surfaces of solid colour. Some have a mood of peaceful relaxation (eg.'Café Terrace at Night' p.34), while others are shocking displays of tormented passion (eg.'Starry Night').

Monticelli (who died in 1886) was the most direct influence on Vincent in Provence. He saw himself as a continuation of the Marseilles painter, both as a human being and as an artist, because Monticelli, like Vincent, was a poor outcast and never succeeded in having a happy love life with a woman, and the former sensed their

affinity.

During his stay in Arles his confidence in his work was high, and his exuberant mood was reflected in many of his pictures. The magnificent blossoming trees were among his first canvases; they are remarkable for combining an Impressionist style, an emotional fervour, and an absence of any manifestation of disharmony. During the summer he painted the first of his sun-drenched sowers (see p.51 for example), and then did a round of the parks and flowering gardens of the town. He also executed many portraits and in August, did the first in his famous series of sunflowers.

'Blossoming Pear-Tree' Arles 1888 (Van Gogh)

In about 1897 some change became apparent in O'Conor's style, and his handling of paint became more fluid. His coast scenes especially were painted with great brio and he often used thick impastos (see 'Nude in a Stormy Seascape' p.50). Two further examples of this change are his 'On the Coast, Finistère' (p.37) and his 'Landscape With Rocks'

(p.38). That he began to favour pinks and oranges, which colours frequently reappear in his later works, can be seen from these two paintings, and in the latter especially, his use of direct colours placed unbroken on to the canvas suggests some affinities between his practice and that of the Fauves. However, in the opinion of Denys Sutton, it would be excessive to claim him as an actual and deliberate precursor of this style. The 'Landscape With Rocks' also reveals some awareness of Monet's coast scenes; this artist's influence may likewise be detected in several of his later works.

O'Conor also showed enthusiasm for Cézanne (whom Van Gogh admired as well) and El Greco. He is known to have owned many photographs of Cēzannes works, and the French painter's influence is discernable in certain landscapes, 'Millhouse Landscape', for example, which have parallel 'hatched' brushstrokes. There is also, according to Anne Crookshank, an interesting connection between O'Conor's 'Breton Peasent Knitting' (p.33) of 1893 and Cézanne's

'On the Coast, Finistère' 1895-1900 (O'Conor)

'Old Woman with her Rosary Beads', which is usually dated a few years later.

'Landscape With Rocks'. 1895-1900 (O'Conor)

By the turn of the century O'Conor, in general, favoured an intimist approach which can be discerned in 'The Nude' of about 1900, and which Denys Sutton thinks could be compared with work of Bonnard and the Nabis.

'The Nude' c.1900 (O'Conor)

'Millhouse Landscape' 1890-1910 (O'Conor)

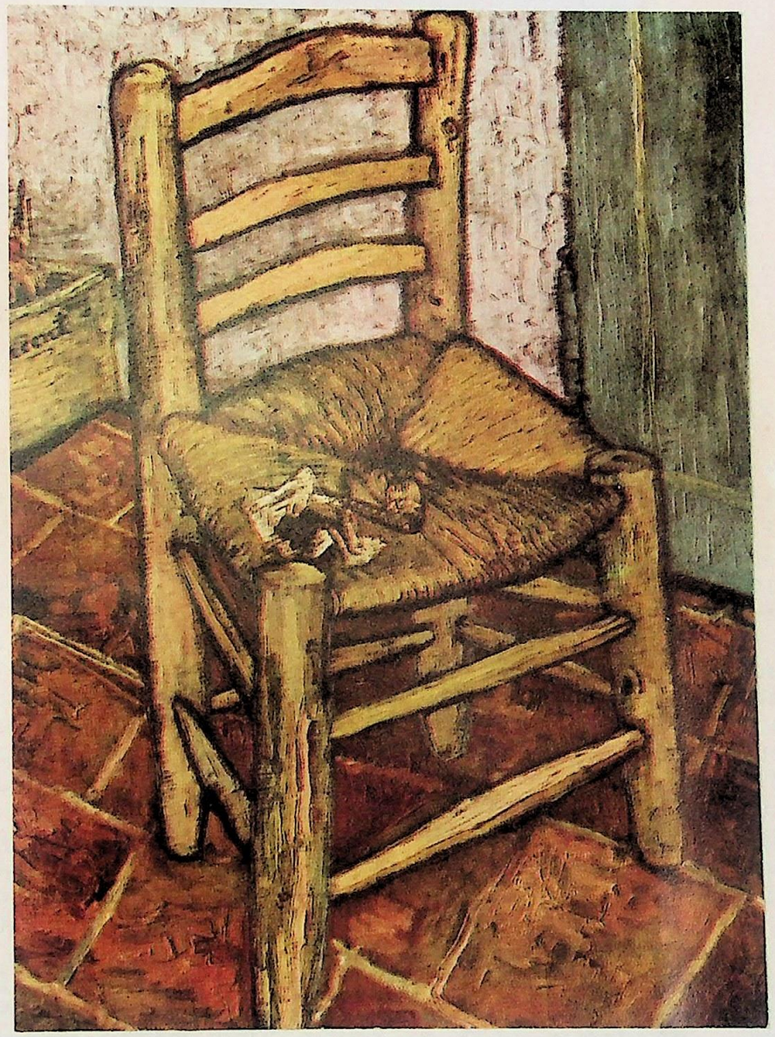
Connections with Gauguin:

Their friendship with Paul Gauguin was perhaps the most prominent bond between Van Gogh and O'Conor. Both of them painted with Gauguin and briefly experimented with his theories of art, but neither of them could adopt them.

Van Gogh had long cherished an idea of forming a society of artists who would work together like monks for the common good and for the good of art, so providing opportunities for artistic and economic collaboration; he also planned that Gauguin and Bernard should be the first members. After many entreaties from Vincent, Gauguin, at heart a calculating egoist, finally left Brittany and

went to Arles. He went not so much out of friendship to Vincent but out of a sense of obligation to Theo, who had helped him in his direst need and was now arranging his first one-man show.

At first the two artists got on quite smoothly. Gauguin was pleased with his new surroundings, the admiring tribute paid him by Vincent, and the chance of using the situation as a financial stop-gap. The changes that became apparent in Vincent's work at this time have often been attributed to the influence of Gauguin; from the former's letters it is evident that Gauguin immediately assumed the dominant role towards the admirer; he showed off his greater experience of life and tried to influence the



'The Yellow Chair' Arles 1888 (Van Gogh)

younger collegue with his new views on art. His recent work in Brittany had become visionary, and - though Vincent criticized it - this tendency of Gauguin's gave him the courage to paint a few 'abstractions', pictures

'Gauguin's Chair' Arles 1888 (Van Gogh)

composed from memory or imagination without a model. But his moral conscience and his abiding concern for sound craftsmanship prevented him from pursuing this 'charmed path', which he well realized was not for him. Like Cézanne and O'Conor, he needed to surrender himself to the outside world. Nevertheless, in several of his pictures of this time whose themes were drawn from the world around him Vincent successfully achieved the difficult synthesis between his own personal expressiveness and Gauguin's decorative presentation. Gauguin (known for his literary pretensions and self-justifying bias) wrote: 'At the time I arrived in Arles, Vincent was full of Neo-Impressionism and was in serious trouble which made him very sad ... he got no further than incomplete, soft, monotonous harmonies; the clarion call was lacking. I undertook the task of showing him the way, which proved easy, for I found rich and fertile soil ... From that day onward Vincent made surprising progress; he appeared to discover what lay within him, hence that whole series of sunflowers after sunflowers in full sunshine'. The truth of the matter was, though, that Vincent was at his prime

as an artist when Gauguin joined him, and the Synthetic style which Gauguin, together with Bernard, had developed in Pont-Aven was scarcely tracable in Vincent's work after Gauguin's departure.

Once the novelty of working together wore off a veiled contest began between the two men, who were diametrically opposed both in their art and their temperaments. On the day before their final quarrel Vincent painted his own rustic chair, 'a chair of wood and straw, all yellow on red tiles'. He also painted Gauguin's more sumptuous red and green armchair, as out of fear and respect he dared not even ask Gauguin himself to pose for a picture. On his own chair is a pipe that has gone out and some tobacco; on Gauguin's is a lighted candle and two novels. Thus the pictures become symbolic portrayals of himself and his comrade, and reveal the differences between them. The next day the two men got into a fierce argument after drinking absinthe. Threatened by Vincent, Gauguin left the house and went to a hotel. In his violent state of excitment, Vincent withdrew to his room, slashed off the lobe of his left ear and carried it as an offering to the prostitute he liked best, Rachel. The episode caused Gauguin to flee to Paris and Vincent to be hospitalized.

It is uncertain when or where Roderic O'Conor first met Gauguin: it is generally assumed that it was after the latter's return from Tahiti in 1893, but it could have been earlier. They were clearly on intimate terms by 1894-5 as Gauguin even went so far as to suggest that O'Conor should accompany him on his second and final trip to the Pacific. Mr Alden Brookes thought this was wonderful and when O'Conor refused asked: 'Why didn't you go?' O'Conor replied in snuffling indignation: '.. do you see me going to the South Seas with that character!'

It was in 1894 that Gauguin presented O'Conor with a coloured monotype with the dedication: 'For my friend, O'Conor, one man of Samoa'. In addition, the Irish painter owned pictures, prints and a small wooden sculpture by Gauguin. The closeness of their relationship transpires from the fact that Gauguin even borrowed O'Conor's studio for a while, presumably the one in Rue du Cherche Midi. Sir Matthew Smith, who also knew O'Conor well, recalled how 'O'Conor had found there some of Gauguin's discarded canvases and how he was flattered to discover that Gauguin had made use of one of his own drawings for part of a composition'. O'Conor was also reported as having been with Gauguin and Séguin at Saint Julien in 1895.

It is obvious, then, that both Van Gogh and O'Conor

counted their contact with Gauguin as the great event of their lives. It was through Gauguin that the strongest link between the Dutch and Irishman was formed, and they might easily have ended up working together had Van Gogh decided upon his contemplation of joining Gauguin in Brittany, in spite of the disastrous outcome of their partnership in Arles. But while both acknowledged Gauguin as a very great artist, nevertheless, neither were blind to his ambitious, self-centred and mercenary character. His influence on their art was not profound or long-lasting because both of them sought more than Gauguin's mixture of Neo-Impressionistic theories, Japanese design concepts and Symbolist precepts could offer. They were seeking an expressionism based on perfect craftsmanship. Vincent wrote: 'I should like to paint in so simple a way that anyone with eyes can see clearly what is meant'. O'Conor said of Gauguin's work: 'There is something here that doesn't belong - an artificial literary quality'.

Portraits and self-portraits:

It was through the portrait that Van Gogh best compensated for his physical frustration. His portraits were efforts to make contact with other people, and he affirmed that portrait painting interested him more than landscapes. This liking for portraits made him differ

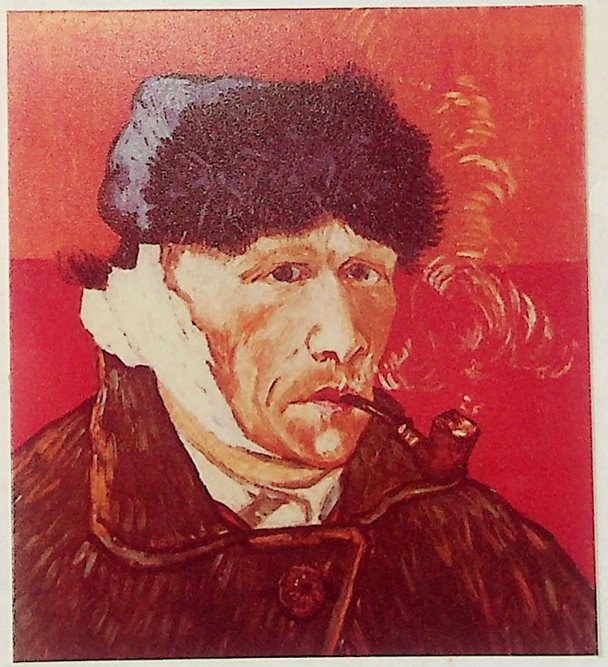
'A Young Breton Girl' 1890-1904 (O'Conor)

'Peasent Girl in a Cornfield' Auvers 1890 (Van Gogh)

exceedingly in this respect from O'Conor, who painted very few. Indeed, the only portrait of O'Conor's to which reference can be readily found is 'A Young Breton Girl', which is in the Municipal Gallery, Dublin ('Breton Peasent Knitting' cannot really be looked upon as a portrait). Moreover, to realize just how different their styles of portrait painting were compare O'Conor's 'A Young Breton Girl' (p.43) with a Van Gogh portrait of similar subject-matter, for instance 'Peasent Girl in a Cornfield'. The

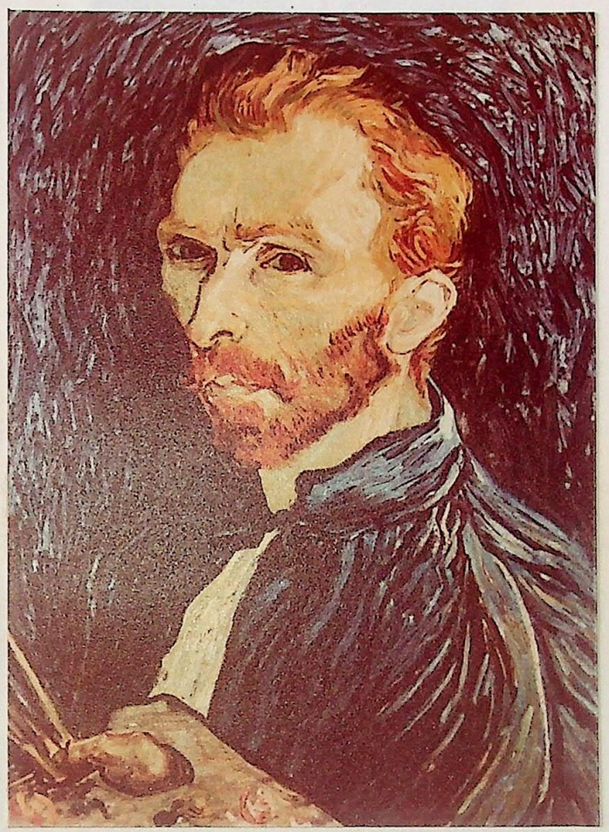
two pictures are worlds apart. O'Conor's peasent girl sits calm and composed, dressed in a black Breton dress with a large black and white collar and a small, white hat. She looks straight ahead and her hands are clasped in her lap. The background is almost a monotone and it consists of vertical brushstrokes of several muted colours merged together into brown. The face of the girl is carefully moulded and shaded, even though the colours are seen to be daubs of strong green, red and yellow paint when the picture is viewed from close range. In fact, the colours, the calmness and the simplicity of the painting almost remind one of Vermeer's work.

Van Gogh's 'Peasent Girl in a Cornfield' is diametrically different to the Breton portrait in every way. This girl wears a big yellow hat with a knot of sky-blue ribbons, a rich blue dress with orange spots, and a large white apron. She is sitting slouched in a cornfield dotted with poppies, and her hands lie idle on her apron. One gets the impression that it is a bright, breezy sort of day. The girl's face is thick with paint and her cheeks are very red. She has none of the softness of O'Conor's portrait, being roughly outlined in blue and black paint for the most part, and even Van Gogh himself admits of the picture: '... but I'm afraid it's a bit coarse'. However, both painters paid attention to reality, and both pictures are post-impressionistic. Also interesting to note is that both the peasent girls seem to have an air of resignation.



'Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe' 1889 (Van Gogh)

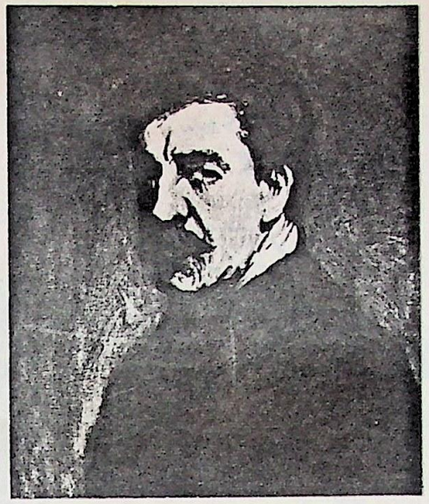
Van Gogh is one of the artists who most insistantly and searchingly raised the fundamental question of self-identity. Altogether the forty self-portraits painted or drawn in less than five years, the continuous self-portrait reflected in his art as a whole, and the large quantity of his correspondence constitute one of the most dramatic and penetrating explorations of self ever attempted. His self-portraits range from simple pencil sketches to multi-coloured oils. As a group they are remarkable for the tremendous variation he bestowed on his physiognomy. The



'Self-Portrait' Saint-Rémy 1889 (Van Gogh)

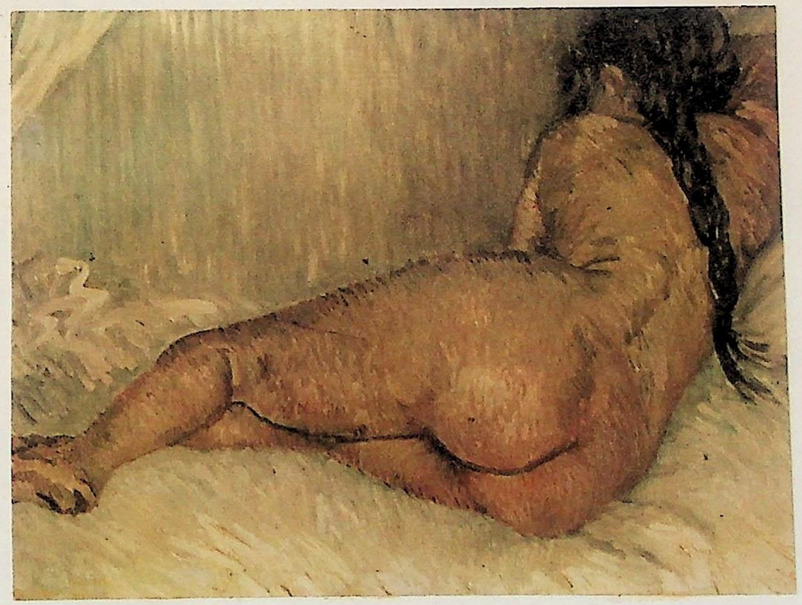
shape of his head varies from oval to triangular to long to narrow. His nose varies in length, width, shape, ranging from aquiline to bulbous to straight. His appearance is sometimes distorted by the placing of his eyes asymetrically in his skull. On occasion he has the dress and mien of a gentleman, on another, of a peasent. In some he appears small and retiring, in others, strong and audacious; in some contemplative, in others a man of action. Sometimes he is coarse and ugly, only to be refined and dignified at other times. Such variations in appearance reflect the multitude of contradictory images he had of

himself and of the way he wished to reveal himself to the world.



'Self-Portrait' 1903 (O'Conor)

In the area of self-portraits, O'Conor's output was also minute compared with that of Van Gogh. References to only one etched and two painted self-portraits can be uncovered; the later painted 'Self-Portrait' (not the one shown above) shows, in the words of Denys Sutton: 'a man who had reckoned with life; it is dramatic and strong'. The earlier one (shown above) is in the Municipal Gallery,



'Reclining Nude' Paris 1886 (Van Gogh)

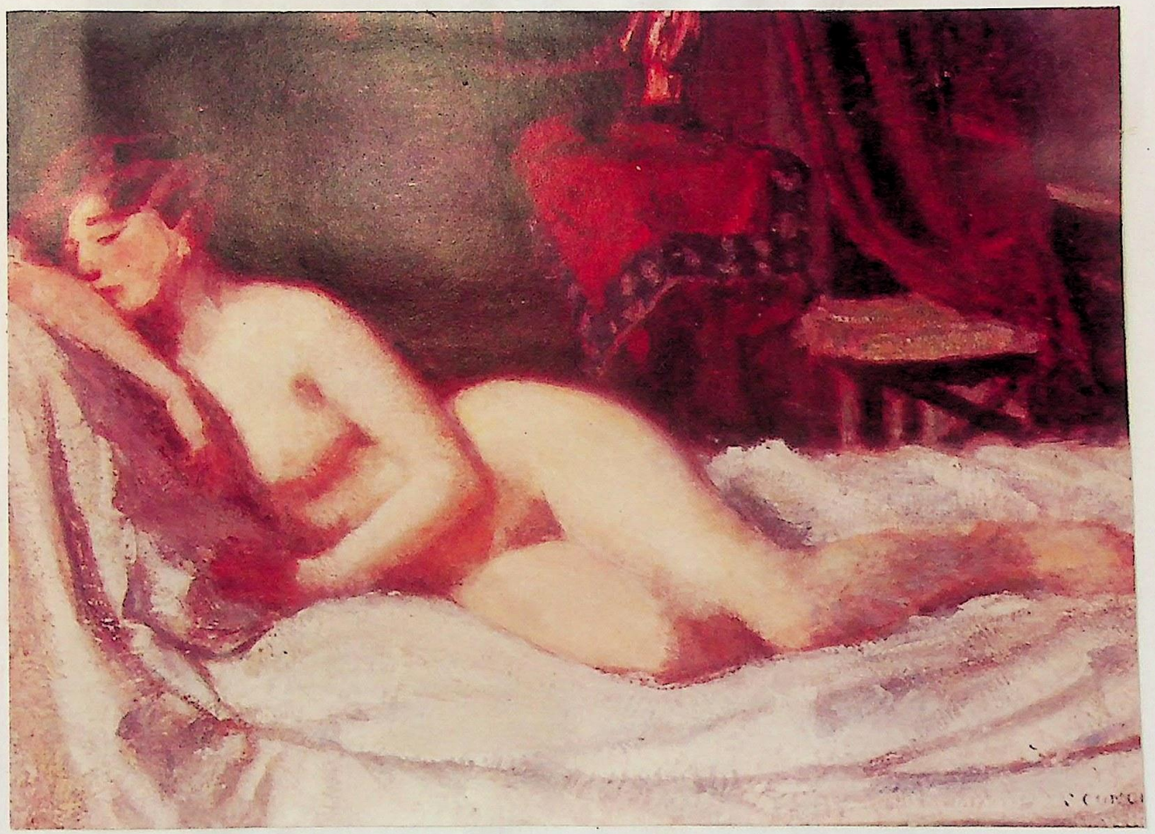
Dublin. On looking at it one gets the impression that when painting it O'Conor did not want to reveal much about himself. He seems to be almost unwilling to look out of the canvas - as if he was made to pose against his consent. It is painted much in the style of 'A Young Breton Girl', dark clothes and background, and strong shadows on the face, as well as colours that appear more subdued from a distance, but turn out to be brighter on closer inspection.

Portrayal of women:

'Sorrow' The Hague 1883 (Van Gogh)

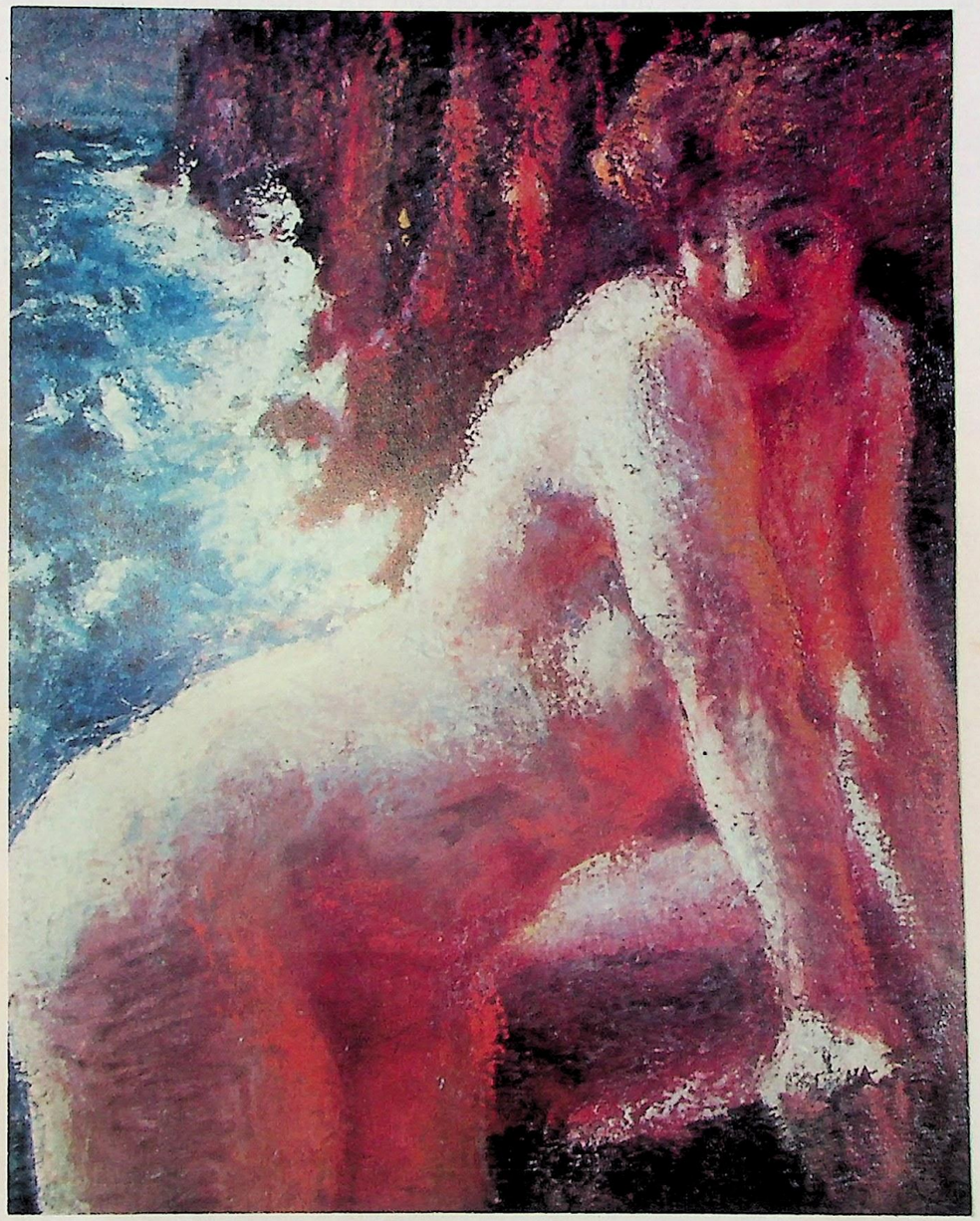
'Nude Woman Reclining' Paris 1886-7 (Van Gogh)

Most of the women depicted in Van Gogh's art are marked by sadness and tragedy, so deeply were these features of a woman ingrained into his mind. Early portraits done in Holland show women with bowed heads and downcast eyes, women made ugly by the cares and sorrows of a



'Romantic Nude Reclining on Bed' Undated (O'Conor)

fruitless existence. In Antwerp, having come to terms with his inability to conduct a steady relationship with a woman, he declared that he preferred painting a woman's figure to possessing it. Nevertheless, her tragic countenance persisted in his canvases. With a few exceptions, the women he portrayed later in France appear to be sad, worn out or ugly, although the bright colours and the exciting backgrounds of the Provençal portraits may distract the viewer



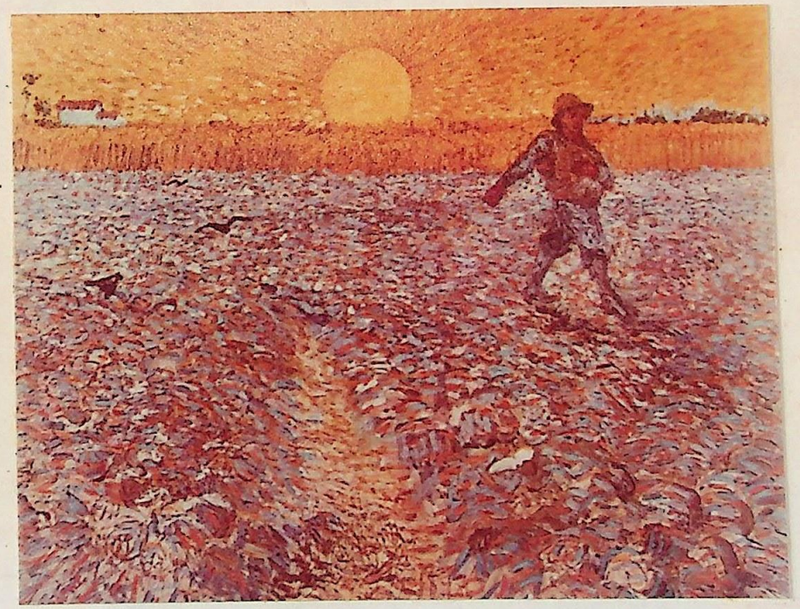
'Nude in Stormy Seascape' Undated (O'Conor)

from these unhappy features. His studies of nude figures from Paris (eg.'Nude Woman Reclining' p.49) must be among the ugliest and least desirable women in the history of art.

O'Conor's pictures of women reflect his totally different attitude towards women to that of Van Gogh. Most of them convey his appreciation of the sensual aspects of the female form, and he seemed to consider the composition of these paintings as especially important; the figures had to be arranged aesthetically into the canvases at all times. The fact that he got on well with women and was successful in having relationships with them is also reflected in his pictures by his habitual use of warm colours and soft outlines. An exception to this tendency can be seen on page 63, but notice that the figure is still gracefully arranged. Some of his nudes of the early 20th century show that he exerted a considerable influence on Matthew Smith.

Landscapes:

For both Van Gogh and O'Conor spring and summer were the triumphal seasons. They both preferred to paint landscapes pervaded with light and colour. It was in their landscapes that they persisted the longest using the Impressionist shimmering and dappling techniques. By and large Van Gogh made more use of short strokes than O'Conor did, and often placed the strokes in swirling forms so that

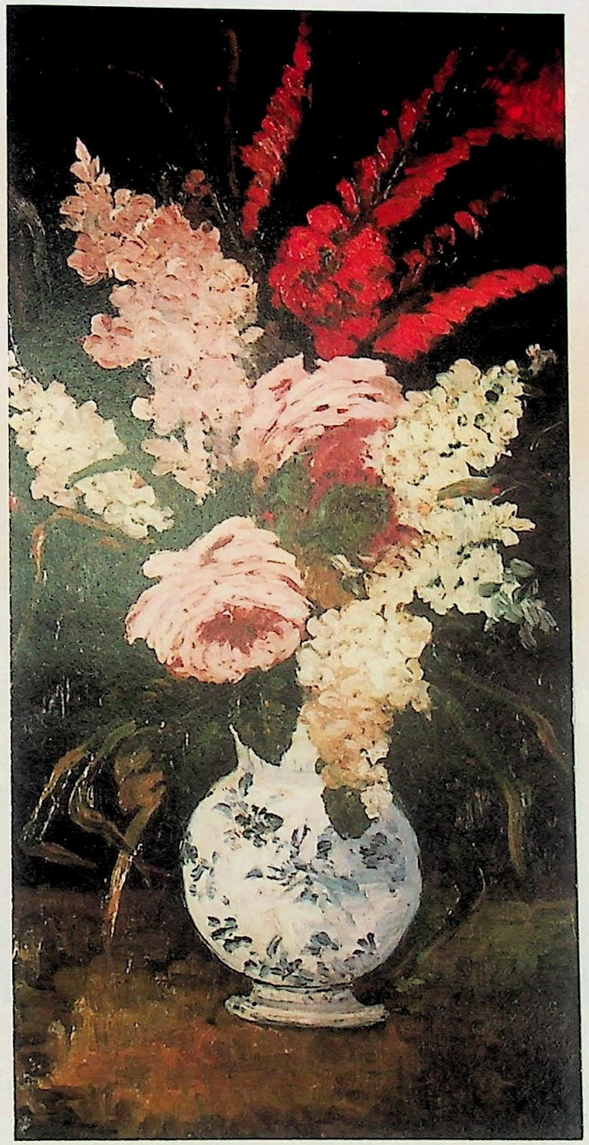


'Sower with Setting Sun' Provence 1888 (Van Gogh)

'Landscape' Undated (O'Conor)

'The Green Vineyard' Provence 1888 (Van Gogh)

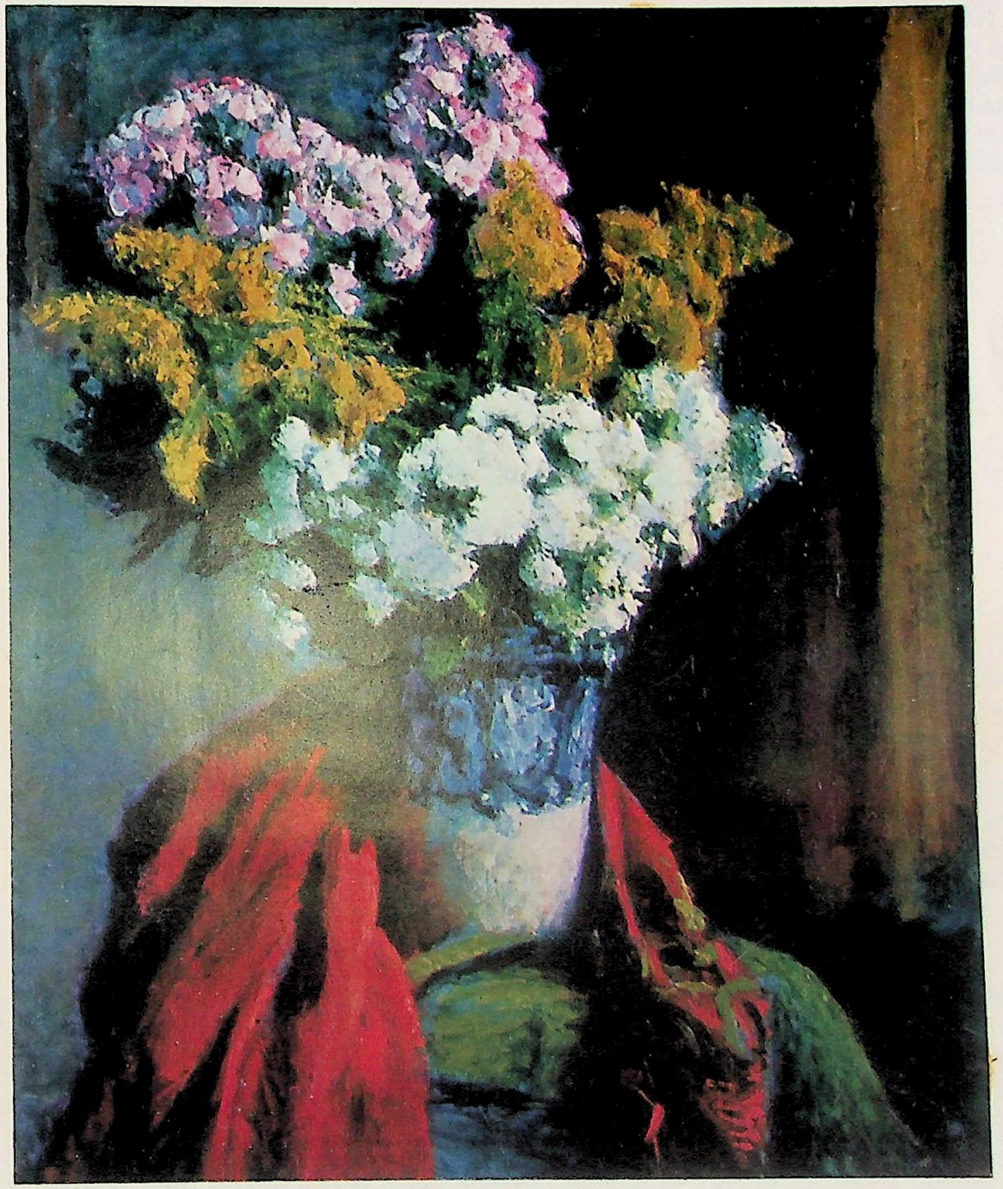
the pictures seem to writhe with life (eg.'Starry Night' p.35). Both artists liked using vertical and diagonal 'hatched' strokes (eg.'Gardens on the Butte Montmartre' by Van Gogh p.27 and 'La Ferme de Lazaver' by O'Conor p.28). Some of Van Gogh's later landscapes often employed a blobby technique, for example 'The Green Vineyard' p.52 where the paint seems to squelch all over the place. O'Conor's landscapes became more fluid around the turn of the century, as did the rest of his art, and there are more seascapes among his works than there are among Van Gogh's.



'Flowers' Paris 1886 (Van Gogh)

Still lifes:

Where still lifes were concerned the paintings of the two men were often very close in character, especially when



'Still life White Carnations' Undated (O'Conor)

the subject-matter was flowers. Take, for example, Van Gogh's 'Flowers' p.53 and O'Conor's 'Still life White Carnations' (shown above). They are extraordinarily alike. Both show clusters of flowers of different varieties in

vases, standing out against a dark background. The dominant colours of both pictures are red, pink and white, with additional areas of blue and yellow in O'Conor's. The brushstrokes bear considerable resemblances - except that Van Gogh's look a little more hasty. The major difference between the paintings is that O'Conor uses light and shade to a much greater degree than Van Gogh does, and this is perhaps the most important and constant dissimilarity between the two artists' developments of style; it occurs again and again in their portraits, self-portraits, nudes and still lifes (eg. compare the self-portrait on p.45 with that on p.47; and compare the sunflowers on p.56 with the geraniums on p.57).

General subject-matter:

Both men, because of their approach to art, found it essencial to draw their themes directly from nature and the world around them. Van Gogh's brief experimentation under the prompting of Gauguin to attempt imaginative paintings, and his one or two trial pictures with religious titles were the only times he deviated from the course he had set himself; O'Conor, as far as one is able to judge, never dabbled with religious subjects, and appeared to adhere strictly to real life pictures with one exception only - his 'Romeo and Juliet' (p.59), whose theme was taken from literature.

Undoubtedly the favourite subject-matter of both men was peasent life, and the countryside in which they lived. They also had a penchant for painting from the nude and still life. Van Gogh especially loved flowers. The sun-flower had a particular fascination for him. Far removed from the Dutch tulip that he ridiculed, this rough-stemmed, coarse-leafed, indelicate object, used for fodder and cheap fuel, is the peasent flower pre-eminent; from this stand-point it was the equivalent of a peasent portrait and a self-portrait.

A point that presents itself quite noticably, though, when discussing subject-matter, is that Van Gogh painted a much wider variety of things than O'Conor did - in fact, he painted everything everywhere that came before his eyes. O'Conor, on the other hand, severly limited himself to paintings of very conventional theme; he never took it upon himself to encompass any other subject-matter than the very usual. The contrast between them in this respect, then, is strong - one man restrictive, and the other painting everything from a bird's nest to a brothel. The question that arises naturally from this is why did O'Conor limit himself so; there do not even appear to be any street-scenes among his works. Perhaps he was striving to reach

perfection, as Somerset Maugham said of Clutton, and considered this as the best method of doing so.

Colour:

When Van Gogh left Holland and began painting in France the sombre chiaroscuro of the North disappeared and a palette of primary colours and vibrant luminiosity took its place. Seeing himself deteriorating into a 'little old man', he strove to paint pictures of youth and freshness. He criticized the academic artists whose 'correct' colours resulted in 'dead' pictures. Learning from Delacroix, Rubens and others, he struggled to find lively

'Sunflowers' Arles 1888 (Van Gogh)

'Still life Geraniums' Undated (O'Conor)

combinations of pigments. Monticelli made two important contributions to Vincent's use of colour: one was to use it arbitrarily, and the other was the ability to make his colours glow with 'a metallic, gem-like quality'. Japanese art also helped him to develop this latter quality, as well as showing him how to use broad surfaces of bright colours, omission of shadows, and silhouetting of objects on a light background. Vincent pressed beyond these influences, and that of Impressionism, to mould his own style by maintaining the linear accuracy of the form and by concentrating the bright zones of colour into what he saw and felt. He tried to reach the very core of colour by going to the primaries and complimentaries. It was with a view to developing further his blue and yellow colour scheme - as he realized, the key colours of the South: sunshine in a blue sky - that he decided to go to the Mediteranean (see

his 'Sunflowers' p.56). There, covering vast uniform surfaces with chrome and cobalt, Vincent succeeded in restoring the absolute primacy of colour, a primacy it had lost since the medieval illuminators or Simone Martini. But with Martini and the illuminators pure colour was a nearly stable element which didn't allow for much variance; Vincent's modern colour, though, for all its intensity, allowed for the subtlest variations. An order for colours shows that Vincent's palette in Arles consisted of silver white, Prussian blue, Veronese green, emerald, madder red, and the three chromes (yellow, orange and lemon).

In many of these aspects O'Conor's colour doesn't resemble Van Gogh's. In not one of his still lifes, nudes or portraits does he cover large areas with a uniform colour. The only places in which he has almost done so are in the skies of some of his landscapes. Neither does he omit shadows, or silhouette dark objects against a light background (with the possible exception of his 'Breton Peasent Knitting'). In his earlier painting years he was very fond of using reds and greens (see 'La Ferme de Lazaver' p.28 and 'Still Life Geraniums' p.57), and reds, greens and yellows (see 'Breton Peasent Knitting' p.33 and 'Still Life of Cups' p.31), but as his handling of paint became more fluid and his use of impastos began to result in more blended tones, he changed to pinks, oranges and blues (see 'On the Coast, Finistère' p.37 and 'Nude in Stormy Seascape' p.50). Bonnard's work also influenced him in his trend to more radiant colour. Shortly after the turn of the century, O'Conor's colours were probably at their richest, strongest and most spontaneous; in the opinions of some, his 'uninhibited joy and unsophisticated use of colour explain the sympathy' which Matthew Smith felt with O'Conor when they met in Paris after the first World War.

Although O'Conor didn't cover large areas with solid colour, in many of his earlier works he frequently applied unbroken colour in smaller measures. This technique caused him to be mentioned in connection with the Fauves and the German Expressionists, and certainly some of his art does appear to approach - and in some cases run parallel to - these movements. For example, traces of Fauvism can be seen in the colouring of his 'Breton Peasent Knitting', while his tendency towards Expressionism can be discerned from the intense colours and fervent embrace of his 'Romeo and Juliet' p.59, which can be compared with Munch's 'The Kiss', though in no way similar in technique.

Brushstrokes:

One of the secrets of Van Gogh's Nordic genius was

'Romeo and Juliet' Undated (O'Conor)

his ability to make each detail quite distinct within a vast expanse pervaded by light. The skillfully regulated use of unitary elements as simple as dots, straight lines and curves, applied in sprinklings, hatchings or volutes enabled him to render with precision the form, texture, and luminous colouring of objects. Monticelli's influence can be seen in Van Gogh's 'empâtements'of small brushstrokes in his Parisian flower paintings of 1886.

Vincent solved the problem of his impulsiveness by acquiring a great proficiency with his tools and, once he had left Holland, began to praise the merits of painting rapidly. 'Van Gogh started painting feverishly, furiously, with a rapidity that stupified his fellow students', said an eyewitness. 'He laid on his paint so thickly that his colours literally dripped from his canvas on to the floor'. Another said that 'he attacked the canvas like a real savage'. In this way, Vincent projected himself into the

context, the forms, the strokes, the colour, the movement, even the materials of his pictures; he wished them to appeal not only to the eye of the beholder but also to the sense of touch. He regarded painting as a dirty business, and preferred to use inexpensive, common materials.

During the last years of his life, Vincent used very vigorous strokes - both sweeping arabesques and straight lines, sometimes enhancing, sometimes replacing the perspective of earlier days; also, his fatal attraction towards heaven in the year before he killed himself contributed to an increasing tendency toward vertical movement in his pictures.

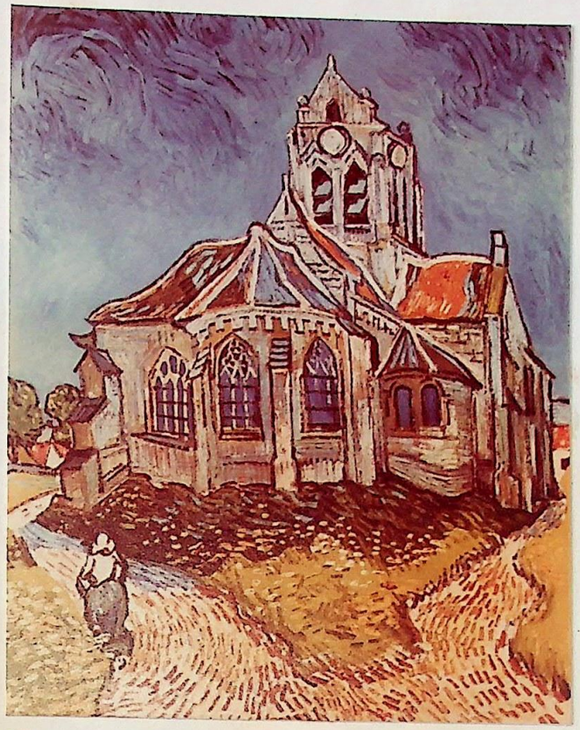
'Portrait of Marguerite Gachet' Auvers 1890 (Van Gogh)

If O'Conor's use of colour was closer to that of Gauguin, his brushwork was much nearer to that of Van Gogh,

and was in no way like the work of the main Pont-Aven group. Like Van Gogh, he employed 'hatched' brushstrokes and daubs of colour, but he did not have the scope of execution that the Dutchman had. Nevertheless, his freedom of brushstroke can be readily appreciated in many of his early works especially. There is a similarity between his 'Still Life Geraniums' p.57 and Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' p.56 in their free handling of paint, even though much of the paint on the latter picture was applied with a palette knife.

'Still Life Nature Morte aux Fruits' Undated (O'Conor)

O'Conor's style grew more fluid as his brushstrokes gradually merged together more. His painting 'Still Life Morte aux Fruits' shows this development at a sort of half-way stage, and his 'Romantic Nude Reclining on Bed' p.49 is an example where the evidence of brushwork is minimal. Because of this increased fluidity, O'Conor's style of



'Church at Auvers' 1890 (Van Gogh)

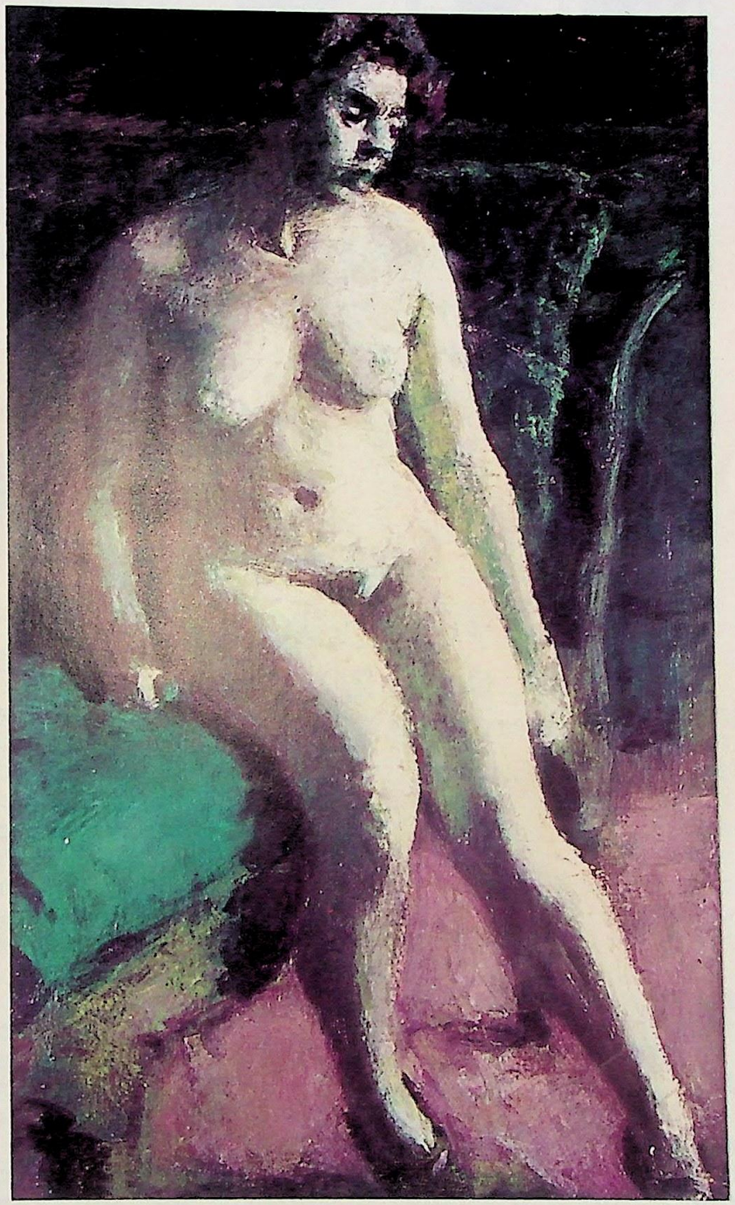
brushwork tended to diverge from that of Van Gogh as he got older, because the latter never gave up his earlier habits of paint application, as one can see from his 'Church at Auvers' which was painted a month or two before his death.

O'Conor's late phase:

O'Conor's last period, which is judged by Bruce Arnold to have been from around 1910 to his death in 1940, is not an easy one to talk about because of the scarcity of pictures dating to this time, even though it is a thirty year span that is in question - a longer interval of time than his two previous phases put together. Luckily, however, the period is not particularly relevent in this discussion because it is not a time that O'Conor's work shared affinities with Van Gogh's (and Van Gogh had been dead for twenty years by 1910). A brief indication of O'Conor's direction after 1910 will, therefore, suffice.

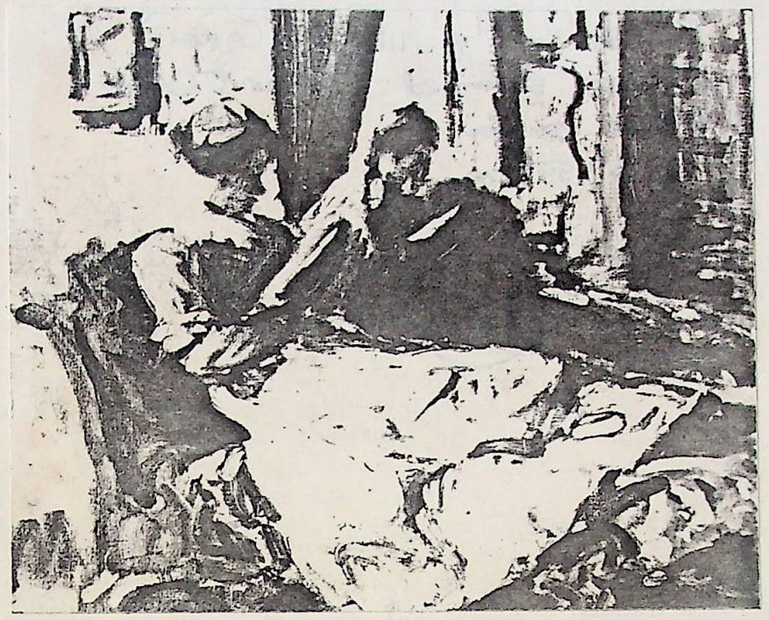
Somerset Maugham's Clutton said that he was 'through with the Impressionists; I've got an idea that they'll seem very thin and superficial in a few years. I want to make a

clean sweep of everything I've learnt and start afresh'. These words, in fact, faithfully reproduce the developments in Roderic O'Conor's painting, according to Denys Sutton, which was marked by a growing interest in a more direct and spontaneous use of colour. In his later paintings also, as has been said already, his tendency was towards expressionism. His work became more diverse and his style ranged more widely, and it is possible that his art, on the whole,



'Seated Nude on Couch' Undated (O'Conor)

became sightly darker in tone and more intense in feeling. In the 1920s Matthew Smith worked with O'Conor for a time and was, by his own admission, influenced more by him and his free use of colour than by any other artist. O'Conor also made an impression on Clive Bell, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant.



'A Quiet Read' c.1910 (O'Conor)

Conclusion:

Having reached the final stages of this comparative, some attempt must be made to answer the question that has been lurking behind the lines of every page throughout: Why, when O'Conor had so much in common with Van Gogh, and was acquainted with so many distinguished exponents of contemporary French art, did he remain so inconspicuous? The very fact that he can stand up to comparison with Van Gogh in so many ways and yet still be unknown is almost paradoxical. Roland, Browse and Delbanco of London, who are mainly responsible for bringing O'Conor and his work to public attention in recent years, are of the opinion: 'That Roderic O'Conor remained unknown is mainly due to the fact that he ... never tried to exhibit his pictures publicly ... was never in touch with any of the Paris art dealers, and never organized an exhibition of his work'. Bruce Arnold also states words to this effect. Strangely enough, however, the research for this thesis has uncovered many references to exhibitions in which O'Conor's work figured; Denys Sutton wrote that in 1904 O'Conor was elected a

Van Gogh sought a victory for which the price was life itself. The tension became so acute, the need to overcome his personal self, even his individuality as an artist, so obsessive that only by succumbing to the annihilation of the self could his work become an existential act, and not an individual one.

When it comes to O'Conor's place in relation to the artistic movements of the time and his contribution to art, things are not quite as plain; Terence De Vere White wrote: 'If Gauguin had never existed, O'Conor would be a very considerable painter. That hard beauty of his (Gauguin's) has no parallel in any other Irish contemporary ... In scraping the Gauguin barrel the work of this follower comes to light and finds a welcome as 'Paddy the next best thing'. One is inclined to view this last sentence as somewhat underestimating after studying O'Conor in detail. It implies that he followed Gauguin's theories closely, which he did not. In fact, like Van Gogh, he 'painted in a state of perpetual revolt against all considerations of theory'. He had untheoretical and independant attitudes to painting and cared little for the dictates of artistic fashion. Like Van Gogh, he was determined to go his own way and was fiercely opposed to ready-made ideas. The first part of De Vere White's statement, however, is probably true enough, because if Gauguin had not been around O'Conor could have been the leader of the Pont-Aven group if he had wanted to. It is most likely, though, that O'Conor's basically detatched and solitary nature would not let him get involved with the group to the extent of going to the trouble of making out theories and indoctrinating others with them. After all, when Gauguin went off to Tahiti the second time there was nothing to stop O'Conor from projecting himself more into the life of the group. He had their respect for his knowledge of artistic matters: John Russell said of him: 'He knew what was best in contemporary French painting'. It must, therefore, have been O'Conor's anti-social nature and consistent avoidance of involvement that prevented him from making more of himself, and so must account in large part for his subsequent obscurity. In the light of this, O'Conor's principal claim to fame does really rest on his relations with Gauguin and the Pont-Aven circle. Perhaps, if he had been a more outward-going person he could have been responsible for greater things. He was a more important artist than his lack of fame suggests, but just how much more is difficult to evaluate.

His place in Irish art is easier to assess; despite his Antwerp training, O'Conor was unique among his Irish collegues as the only Irishman who became an artist in the international sense, becoming fully integrated into the

Continental movement of the time; but because of his reclusive existence in the last decades of his life, his reputation in Ireland only began to emerge about fifteen years ago. His art in Ireland represents Post-Impressionism basically. Anne Crookshank says that 'as an Irish painter, he was the most outstanding international figure of his time ... he alone emerged from the bywaters to work with vigour in the mainstream of modern European art'.

Van Gogh's claims to greatness are undisputed the world over, and his contribution to art undeniable. O'Conor was not a great painter like Van Gogh, but he was a painter of distinct merit, whose life and contribution demand study, not only for their own right, but for their connection with the French School. He therefore deserves to have more recognition, which he never sought but which is undoubtedly due to him for his talent and sincerity.

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