

The Still Life as a Personal Object— A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh

(1968)

IN HIS ESSAY ON *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Martin Heidegger interprets a painting by van Gogh to illustrate the nature of art as a disclosure of truth.¹

He comes to this picture in the course of distinguishing three modes of being: of useful artifacts, of natural things, and of works of fine art. He proposes to describe first, “without any philosophical theory . . . a familiar sort of equipment—a pair of peasant shoes”; and “to facilitate the visual realization of them” he chooses “a well-known painting by van Gogh, who painted such shoes several times.” But to grasp “the equipmental being of equipment,” we must know “how shoes actually serve.” For the peasant woman they serve without her thinking about them or even looking at them. Standing and walking in the shoes, the peasant woman knows the serviceability in which “the equipmental being of equipment consists.” But we,

as long as we only imagine a pair of shoes in general, or simply look at the empty, unused shoes as they merely stand there in the picture, we shall never discover what the equipmental being of equipment in truth is. In van Gogh's painting we cannot even tell where these shoes stand. There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes in or to which they might belong, only an undefined space. There are not even clods from the soil of the field or the path through it sticking to them, which might at least hint at their employment. A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet.

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stands forth. In the stiffly solid heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field, swept by a raw wind. On the leather there lies the

dampness and saturation of the soil. Under the soles there slides the loneliness of the field-path as the evening declines. In the shoes there vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening corn and its enigmatic self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety about the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the advent of birth and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth* and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-in-self.²

Professor Heidegger is aware that van Gogh painted such shoes several times, but he does not identify the picture he has in mind, as if the different versions are interchangeable, all disclosing the same truth. A reader who wishes to compare his account with the original picture or its photograph will have some difficulty in deciding which one to select. Eight paintings of shoes by van Gogh are recorded by de la Faille in his catalogue of all the canvasses by the artist that had been exhibited at the time Heidegger wrote his essay.³ Of these, only three show the “dark openings of the worn insides” which speak so distinctly to the philosopher.⁴ They are more likely pictures of the artist’s own shoes, not the shoes of a peasant. They might be shoes he had worn in Holland but the pictures were painted during van Gogh’s stay in Paris in 1886–87; one of them bears the date: “87”.⁵ From the time before 1886 when he painted Dutch peasants are two pictures of shoes—a pair of clean wooden clogs set on a table beside other objects.⁶ Later in Arles he painted, as he wrote in a letter of August 1888 to his brother, “une paire de vieux souliers” which are evidently his own.⁷ A second still life of “vieux souliers de paysan” is mentioned in a letter of September 1888 to the painter Emile Bernard, but it lacks the characteristic worn surface and dark insides of Heidegger’s description.⁸

In reply to my question, Professor Heidegger has kindly written me that the picture to which he referred is one that he saw in a show at Amsterdam in March 1930.⁹ This is clearly de la Faille’s no. 255; there was also exhibited at the same time a painting with three pairs of shoes,¹⁰ and it is possible that the exposed sole of a shoe in this picture, inspired the reference to the sole in the philosopher’s account. But

FIG. 1



FIGURE 1. Vincent van Gogh: *Shoes*, 1886, oil on canvas, 15 x 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ "', Vincent van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

from neither of these pictures, nor from any of the others, could one properly say that a painting of shoes by van Gogh expresses the being or essence of a peasant woman's shoes and her relation to nature and work. They are the shoes of the artist, by that time a man of the town and city.

Heidegger has written: "The art-work told us what shoes are in truth. It would be the worst self-deception if we were to think that our description, as a subjective action, first imagined everything thus and then projected it into the painting. If anything is questionable here, it is rather that we experienced too little in contact with the work and that we expressed the experience too crudely and too literally. But above all, the work does not, as might first appear, serve merely for a better visualization of what a piece of equipment is. Rather, the equipmental being of equipment first arrives at its explicit appearance through and only in the artist's work.

"What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant's shoes, *is* in truth."¹¹

Alas for him, the philosopher has indeed deceived himself. He has retained from his encounter with van Gogh's canvas a moving set of associations with peasants and the soil, which are not sustained by the picture itself. They are grounded rather in his own social outlook with its heavy pathos of the primordial and earthy. He has indeed "imagined everything and projected it into the painting." He has experienced both too little and too much in his contact with the work.

The error lies not only in his projection, which replaces a close attention to the work of art. For even if he had seen a picture of a peasant woman's shoes, as he describes them, it would be a mistake to suppose that the truth he uncovered in the painting—the being of the shoes—is something given here once and for all and is unavailable to our perception of shoes outside the painting. I find nothing in Heidegger's fanciful description of the shoes pictured by van Gogh that could not have been imagined in looking at a real pair of peasants' shoes. Though he credits to art the power of giving to a represented pair of shoes that explicit appearance in which their being is dis-

closed—indeed “the universal essence of things,”¹² “world and earth in their counterplay”¹³—this concept of the metaphysical power of art remains here a theoretical idea. The example on which he elaborates with strong conviction does not support that idea.

Is Heidegger’s mistake simply that he chose a wrong example? Let us imagine a painting of a peasant woman’s shoes by van Gogh. Would it not have made manifest just those qualities and that sphere of being described by Heidegger with such pathos?

Heidegger would still have missed an important aspect of the painting: the artist’s presence in the work. In his account of the picture he has overlooked the personal and physiognomic in the shoes that made them so persistent and absorbing a subject for the artist (not to speak of the intimate connection with the specific tones, forms, and brush-made surface of the picture as a painted work). When van Gogh depicted the peasant’s wooden sabots, he gave them a clear, unworn shape and surface like the smooth still-life objects he had set beside them on the same table: the bowl, the bottles, a cabbage, etc. In the later picture of a peasant’s leather slippers, he has turned them with their backs to the viewer.¹⁴ His own shoes he has isolated on the ground; he has rendered them as if facing us, and so worn and wrinkled in appearance that we can speak of them as veridical portraits of aging shoes.

We come closer, I think, to van Gogh’s feeling for these shoes in a paragraph written by Knut Hamsun in the 1880s in his novel *Hunger*, describing his own shoes:

“As I had never seen my shoes before, I set myself to study their looks, their characteristics, and when I stir my foot, their shapes and their worn uppers. I discover that their creases and white seams give them expression—impart a physiognomy to them. Something of my own nature had gone over into these shoes; they affected me, like a ghost of my other I—a breathing portion of my very self. ¹⁵

In comparing van Gogh’s painting with Hamsun’s text, we are interpreting the painting in a different way than Heidegger. The philosopher finds in the picture of the shoes a truth about the world as

it is lived by the peasant owner without reflection; Hamsun sees the real shoes as experienced by the self-conscious, contemplating wearer who is also the writer. Hamsun's personage, a brooding, self-observant drifter, is closer to van Gogh's situation than to the peasant's. Yet van Gogh is in some ways like the peasant; as an artist he works, he is stubbornly occupied in a task that is for him his inescapable calling, his life. Of course, van Gogh, like Hamsun, has also an exceptional gift of representation; he is able to transpose to the canvas with a singular power the forms and qualities of things; but they are things that have touched him deeply, in this case his own shoes—things inseparable from his body and memorable to his reacting self-awareness. They are not less objectively rendered for being seen as if endowed with his feelings and revery about himself. In isolating his own old, worn shoes on a canvas, he turns them to the spectator; he makes of them a piece from a self-portrait, that part of the costume with which we tread the earth and in which we locate strains of movement, fatigue, pressure, heaviness—the burden of the erect body in its contact with the ground. They mark our inescapable position on the earth. To “be in someone's shoes” is to be in his predicament or his station in life. For an artist to isolate his worn shoes as the subject of a picture is for him to convey a concern with the fatalities of his social being. Not only the shoes as an instrument of use, though the landscape painter as a worker in the fields shares something of the peasant's life outdoors, but the shoes as “a portion of the self” (in Hamsun's words) are van Gogh's revealing theme.

Gauguin, who shared van Gogh's quarters in Arles in 1888, sensed a personal history behind his friend's painting of a pair of shoes. He has told in his reminiscences of van Gogh a deeply affecting story linked with van Gogh's shoes.

“In the studio was a pair of big hob-nailed shoes, all worn and spotted with mud; he made of it a remarkable still life painting. I do not know why I sensed that there was a story behind this old relic, and I ventured one day to ask him if he had some reason for preserving with respect what one ordinarily throws out for the rag-picker's basket.

'My father,' he said, 'was a pastor, and at his urging I pursued theological studies in order to prepare for my future vocation. As a young pastor I left for Belgium one fine morning, without telling my family, to preach the gospel in the factories, not as I had been taught but as I understood it myself. These shoes, as you see, have bravely endured the fatigue of that trip.'

Preaching to the miners in the Borinage, Vincent undertook to nurse a victim of a fire in the mine. The man was so badly burned and mutilated that the doctor had no hope for his recovery. Only a miracle, he thought, could save him. Van Gogh tended him forty days with loving care and saved the miner's life.

Before leaving Belgium I had, in the presence of this man who bore on his brow a series of scars, a vision of the crown of thorns, a vision of the resurrected Christ.

Gauguin continues:

"And Vincent took up his palette again; silently he worked. Beside him was a white canvas. I began his portrait. I too had the vision of a Jesus preaching kindness and humility."¹⁶

It is not certain which of the paintings with a single pair of shoes Gauguin had seen at Arles. He described it as violet in tone in contrast to the yellow walls of the studio. It does not matter. Though written some years later, and with some literary affectations, Gauguin's story confirms the essential fact that for van Gogh the shoes were a memorable piece of his own life, a sacred relic.

- 1 Martin Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1950), 7-68. Reprinted separately, in paperback, with an introduction by H.-G. Gadamer (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1962). Trans. by A. Hofstadter, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in A. Hofstadter and R. Kuhns, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty* (New York: Random House, 1964), 649-701. All quotations are from the excellent Hofstadter translation and are reprinted by permission of Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., New York. It was Kurt Goldstein who first called my attention to Heidegger's essay, presented originally as a lecture in 1935 and 1936.
- 2 *Origins of the Work of Art*, 662-63. Heidegger refers again to van Gogh's picture in a revised letter of 1935, printed in M. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by R. Manheim (New York: Anchor Books, 1961). Speaking of Dasein (being-there, or "essent") he points to a painting by van Gogh. "A pair of rough peasant shoes, nothing else. Actually the painting represents nothing. But as to what is in that picture, you are immediately alone with it as though you yourself were making your way wearily homeward with your hoe on an evening in late fall after the last potato fires have died down. What is here? The canvas? The brushstrokes? The spots of color?" (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, 29).
- 3 J.B. de la Faille, *Vincent van Gogh* (Paris: 1939): no. 54, fig. 60; no. 63, fig. 64; no. 225, fig. 248; no. 331, fig. 249; no. 332, fig. 250; no. 333, fig. 251; no. 461, fig. 488; no. 607, fig. 597.
- 4 La Faille, *op. cit.*, nos. 255, 332, 333.
- 5 La Faille, *op. cit.*, no. 333; it is signed "Vincent 87."
- 6 La Faille, *op. cit.*, nos. 54 and 63.
- 7 La Faille, *op. cit.*, no. 461. Vincent van Gogh, *Verzamelde brieven van Vincent van Gogh* (Amsterdam: 1952-64), III, 291, letter no. 529.
- 8 La Faille, *op. cit.*, no. 607. Van Gogh, *Verzamelde brieven*, IV, 227.
- 9 Personal communication, letter of May 6, 1965.
- 10 La Faille, *op. cit.*, no. 332, fig. 250.
- 11 *Origins of the Work of Art*, 664.
- 12 *Origins of the Work of Art*, 665.
- 13 "Truth happens in van Gogh's painting. This does not mean that something is rightly portrayed, but rather that in the revelation of the equipmental being of the shoes that which is as a whole—world and earth in their counterplay—attains to unconcealment...The more simply and essentially the shoes appear in their essence...the more directly and fascinatingly does all that is attain to a greater degree of being. (*Origins of the Work of Art*, 680).
- 14 La Faille, *op. cit.*, no. 607, fig. 597.
- 15 Knut Hamsun, *Hunger*, trans. by G. Egerton (New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc., 1941), 27.
- 16 J. de Rotonchamp, *Paul Gauguin 1848-1903*, 2nd ed. (Paris: G. Cres, 1925), 33. There is an earlier version of the story in: Paul Gauguin, "Natures mortes," *Essais d'art libre*, 1894, 4, 273-75. These two texts were kindly brought to my attention by Professor Mark Roskill.