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Cover picture

Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear (1889) by Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890).

Vincent Van Gogh is probably the most mythologised artist in Western art and his act of cutting off his ear forms a crucial part of the narrative of the tormented artist fired by madness to create work of genius. New research by Bernadette Murphy described in her book *Van Gogh's Ear: The True Story* (Chatto & Windus, 2016) gives a more balanced and less romanticised account. Her findings also inform a recent, major exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, entitled *On the Verge of Insanity: Van Gogh and His Illness*. Murphy draws several conclusions from her research: Van Gogh cut off his whole ear, not just part of it as several authorities have claimed. He did not give the severed ear to a prostitute but to a young woman who worked as a cleaner in a local brothel. He did not drink absinthe, which was previously thought to have contributed to his breakdown; he was probably not even a heavy drinker. Van Gogh was never committed to an asylum but went there voluntarily. Lastly, his art was created *in spite* of mental illness, not as a result of it.

We know that in the town of Arles on 23 December 1888, Vincent Van Gogh cut off his left ear. He was in the midst of a mental breakdown and preoccupied with religious matters. He had just received a letter from his brother Theo, announcing his engagement. Vincent was dependent on Theo financially and the news meant that his allowance would be greatly reduced. On the same day Paul Gauguin, who had been staying with Vincent at the Yellow House, announced he was leaving. Van Gogh's dream of creating an artistic brotherhood in Arles was disintegrating. This picture was painted around 17 January 1889 after Van Gogh had left hospital and shows him back in his studio in the Yellow House.

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We are always looking for interesting and visually appealing images for the cover of the *Journal* and would welcome suggestions or pictures, which should be sent to Dr Allan Beveridge, British Journal of Psychiatry, 21 Prescot Street, London E1 8BB, UK or bjp@rcpsych.ac.uk.



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