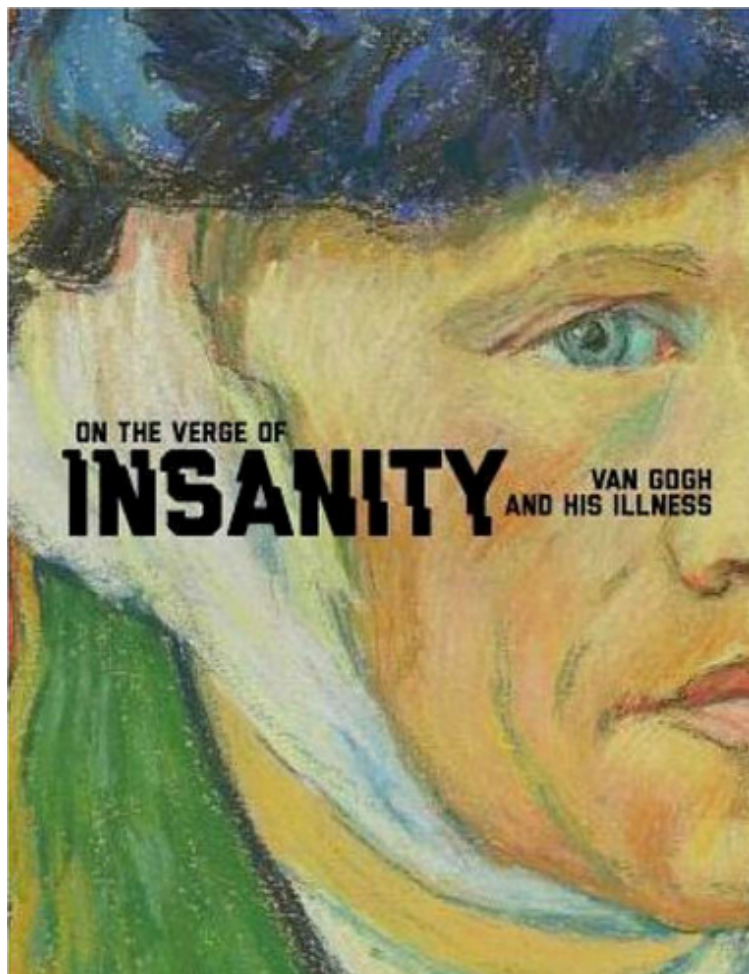


Inside the Mind: Author sheds light on van Gogh's illness

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"On the Verge of Insanity: Van Gogh and His Illness" by Nienke Bakker, Louis van Tilborgh and Laura Prins. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016, 176 pages, \$30.



“The dramatic moment when Vincent van Gogh cut off his ear and his subsequent suicide are among the best-known events in his life and, for many, the most fascinating,” Nienke Bakker explains in “Van Gogh’s Illness: The Witnesses Recall,” her contribution to “On the Verge of Insanity: Van Gogh and His Illness,” the new book she co-wrote with Louis van Tilborgh and Laura Prins. “His self-harm marked the beginning of a series of mental breakdowns, which have prompted widely diverging interpretations and medical diagnoses.”

Like many readers, I have known about the troubled genius van Gogh since early childhood. His story, like many who have come to occupy a prominent place in the cultural lexicon, has an enduring quality that is simultaneously difficult to explain and undeniably self-evident. His portfolio includes more than 2,100 works of art, including about 860 oil paintings – most of which were completed in a little more than 10 years.

He is so well-known today it is hard to believe he actually sold only one painting during a life spent struggling with personal demons in abject poverty, supported primarily by his younger brother Theo. He only achieved worldwide acclaim after he committed suicide at age 37. To this day, he remains the embodiment of “misunderstood genius.”

“On the Verge” has been published as a companion resource to the groundbreaking exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum and consists of a foreword and four chapters. The wonderfully-crafted narrative is lavishly illustrated with a variety of reproduced artworks, letters, drawings, diagrams, various historical documents and a plethora of vintage photographs. Truthfully, the book has some of the most stunning visuals I have ever seen in printed form; I spent more time inspecting and poring over these graphics than I did reading the text that accompanied them. Despite never having taken a course in art history, I was mesmerized by this exquisite primer. I did find my background in

psychology and mental health served me well as I meticulously made my way through page after page of what can best be described as a postmortem treatment of the life and death of one of the most intriguing human beings who ever lived.

On a very fundamental level, “On the Verge” is the quintessential detective story – speculation about the exact nature of Van Gogh’s illness has been ongoing since his death 126 years ago in 1890. As the authors make abundantly clear, theories about the nature of his affliction continue to evolve as our understanding of mental illness advances with each passing generation. As forensic tools become more sophisticated, and as cognitive science unearths new realities about how the brain can, and often does, malfunction in unpredictable ways, new layers of analysis and inference are constantly being added to the tapestry of possible reasons for van Gogh’s erratic and self-destructive behavior.

“From the 1930s onwards, psychiatrists began to interpret van Gogh’s mood swings as a form of manic-depressive disorder,” Prins writes in “What Was Wrong with Van Gogh? A Summary of the Diagnoses,” one of two chapters she contributes to the volume. “This condition, referred to since 1980 as ‘bipolar disorder,’ is characterized by recurring episodes of abnormally intense moods. Depressive periods are marked by despondency and a lack of energy or ‘joie de vivre.’ During manic periods, by contrast, patients experience an abnormally heightened or agitated mood and extreme activity, making them frenetic and chaotic.”

“Borderline personality disorder is a relatively new diagnosis, which was officially described for the first time in 1980,” she continues a little later. “It was first suggested as a possible cause of van Gogh’s condition in the late 1990s. BPD is characterized by unstable relationships, fear of abandonment, identity issues accompanied by a chronic sense of emptiness, impulses including the suicidal, mood swings lasting from several hours to a maximum of a few days, and intense anger.”

As you may have surmised, “On the Verge” has something for everyone. Artists will be enthralled by the various works included on almost every page, while historians will be captivated by the chronology of events serving as a backdrop for van Gogh’s life and times. Perhaps the group that will find the book hardest to put down will be those who work in the diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders. There are clues everywhere, and more are constantly being discovered with each subsequent review of the available evidence.

Bakker is curator of van Gogh paintings at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, Netherlands; van Tilborgh is a senior researcher at the museum and a professor of art history at the University of Amsterdam; and Prins is an assistant researcher. Although not listed as one of the primary authors, it is important to note the involvement of Teio Meedendorp, another senior researcher at the museum, who helped with various aspects of this project.

“Van Gogh will always be of interest to physicians and psychologists,” the authors note in the conclusion. “It is unlikely, however, that we will ever be able to answer once and for all precisely which illness it was that afflicted him.”

“Most scholars today would probably agree that van Gogh’s illness must have been a combination of psychological and neurological factors, genetic predisposition and an unhealthy lifestyle,” they add a little later. No doubt. But still, after making my way through this superbly written and exhaustive exploration of a life that came to a tragic end much too soon, I found myself wanting to know more. I believe many readers would feel the same way. I recommend this one highly.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.