Shortly after arriving at Auvers-sur-Oise on May 20, 1890, Vincent van Gogh placed himself under the care of Dr. Paul Gachet, a homeopathic doctor recommended by Camille Pissarro. Gachet was also an amateur printmaker who had amassed a modest art collection through his friendships with other artists. In an effort to develop a personal relationship with the Dutch painter, Gachet invited Van Gogh to his join his family for Sunday lunch on May 25. Within a few weeks, Van Gogh had painted an oil-on-canvas portrait of the doctor. “I’m working on his portrait,” Van Gogh wrote to Theo on June 3, “the head with a white cap, very fair, very light, the hands also in light carnation, a blue frock coat...
According to Gachet’s son, after their Sunday lunch on May 25, Dr. Gachet gave Van Gogh a varnished copper plate and offered to help print it on the small hand press he used for making his own etchings. Within thirty minutes, Vincent had drawn a portrait of Dr. Gachet seated in his garden smoking a pipe (fig. 1). They immediately went to Gachet’s studio, where the doctor guided his friend, who had never made an etching before, through the process of acid-biting and printing the plate. Experts believe Van Gogh and Gachet printed around fourteen impressions, experimenting at times with various colored inks and different methods of wiping the plate. Unlike a conventional printmaker, Van Gogh occasionally took the additional step of handworking the impression after printing it by reinforcing or correcting areas with black chalk or pen and ink, producing a unique version that might be described as a monoprint.

Many experts have questioned the accuracy of the account given by Gachet’s son, especially with respect to exactly when Van Gogh produced this etching. The inscription in the upper right has been interpreted as either the fifteenth or twenty-fifth of May 1890. However, the first digit is almost indecipherable (under magnification it looks more like an m than a 1 or 2), and even the 5 is questionable. What is certain is that Van Gogh could not have made this etching on May 15 because he did not arrive in Auvers until May 20. Curiously, there are no comments in the artist’s letters about working in this new medium until June 17, when Van Gogh told Paul Gauguin of plans to make etchings after *The Arlésienne* (F542), *Road with a Cypress and Star* (JH1983), and “reminiscences” of Provencal landscapes. Curator Sjraar van Heugten believes Van Gogh probably made his etching of Dr. Gachet around June 15, another Sunday afternoon spent at the doctor’s home. If so, Van Gogh must have sent an impression to Theo shortly afterward because six days later Theo praised it in a letter dated June 23: “And now I must tell you something about your etching. It’s a real painter’s etching. No refinement in the procedure, but a drawing done on metal . . . It’s amusing that Dr. Gachet has this press, painters who make etchings are always complaining that they have to go to the printer for the proofs.”

Due to differences in the handwriting and printing technique, Van Heugten also believes the inscription in the upper right was
added by Gachet. While the broken, fuzzy, crayonlike lines of the figure and landscape are consistent with the medium of soft-ground etching (created by drawing on a coated palette, then biting the lines into the plate with an acid bath), the thinner lines of the inscription were created by the drypoint technique of scratching directly into the plate. The figure and landscape were also drawn with considerably firmer, more confident lines than the hesitant writing of the inscription. Van Heugten further notes that the handwriting style of the inscription matches the handwriting on Gachet’s prints, and while Gachet dated his prints, Van Gogh never did. Since the etching process requires writing backward to make the text readable, it seems logical that Gachet, a more experienced etcher, may have volunteered to add the inscription.

Whatever the process, exactly when Van Gogh drew and printed the plate remains speculative. Perhaps Gachet gave Van Gogh the plate on May 25, inscribed the date at that time, and Van Gogh drew or printed it later. Or perhaps the inscription refers not to the moment of printing but to the date of Van Gogh’s first Sunday lunch with Gachet—as if he thought of the etching as a souvenir of their relationship. Based on the artist’s letters and other documented events, Van Heugten believes Van Gogh probably made the etching around June 15, when he wrote enthusiastically to his brother about exploring the new medium: “I really hope to do a few etchings of subjects from the south, let’s say 6, since I can print them free of charge at Mr. Gachet’s; he’s very willing to run them off for nothing if I do them . . . Of course we’ll leave him free to run off copies for himself.”

Van Gogh’s etching of Dr. Gachet was not his first attempt at printmaking. His initial foray occurred in the fall of 1882, when he made six lithographs that mostly depicted single figures observed from everyday life. As an avid collector of popular British and French illustrated magazines, Van Gogh saw printmaking as a means of supporting himself and finding a larger audience for his art. Rather than turning to the popular medium of wood engraving, he was led in another direction after discovering French transfer or Buhot paper. Theo was apparently the person who made Van Gogh aware of this paper, as indicated by the letter the artist sent to his brother in November 1882:

Do I understand correctly that this paper is such that when one does a drawing on it (I assume in autographic ink), this drawing—without using a second draftsman or engraver or lithographer as an intermediary—can be transferred as it is onto a stone, or that a print can be made of it, so that any number of impressions can be obtained, the latter then being facsimiles of the original drawing? If this is the case, be so good as to give me all the information you can find about how
Another advantage offered by this paper is that it allows the artist to print a lithograph without reversing the image. After producing six lithographs using Buhot paper in late 1882, Van Gogh made two more in the summer of 1883. He printed his last lithograph, *The Potato Eaters*, inspired by his painting of the same title, in the fall of 1884, but without the aid of transfer paper, so the image is reversed.

After moving to Antwerp in 1885, Van Gogh abandoned printmaking and devoted himself to developing his skills as a painter. Five years later, when Dr. Gachet made his small hand press available, Van Gogh became intrigued by the possibility of replicating his seminal works of the past year through etchings. His larger plans never materialized, though, as they were abruptly cut short by the artist’s suicide on July 27, leaving the portrait of Dr. Gachet as his only etching and final achievement in printmaking.

Of the sixty-one known versions of Van Gogh’s etching of the doctor, experts believe only fourteen were personally printed by the artist. Most of the others were apparently printed by Dr. Gachet or his son, who retained the plate after Van Gogh’s death. Gachet’s son often inscribed handwritten notes on the back, indicating who pulled the impression and, in some cases, whether it was made for a specific individual, such as the impression printed in the summer of 1895 for Van Gogh’s biographer, Julius Meier-Graefe. The popular title *L’Homme à la Pipe (Man with a Pipe)* was apparently invented by Gachet or his son and frequently appears among the handwritten notes on the verso. Many etchings are marked on the face by one of the three collector’s stamps used by the Gachet family.

The Van Gogh Museum retains nine impressions of this etching, all printed by the artist with Gachet’s assistance. Five are printed in black ink, the others with an overall tone of yellow ochre, sanguine, greenish blue, light orange, and yellow brown. Several impressions are selectively wiped to leave specific areas with a heavy layer of dark ink—obvious signs of experimentation with unique tonal variations—and one impression features hand-worked additions in pen and black ink. All nine impressions are printed on laid paper with watermarks of either “PL BAS” or “ED & Cie.” There are no annotations on the verso, although the impressions do have the collector’s stamps of the Gachet family on the recto.

A small number of the impressions printed by Van Gogh can also be found in private collections, including versions with hand-
worked corrections and reinforcements. One impression from a private collection is particularly noteworthy for the handwork applied with black chalk in and around the figure’s right shoulder (fig. 2). There are two different collector’s stamps of the Gachet family at the bottom of the image: the head of a fox in the lower center, and the letters P, F, and G surrounded by an oval in the lower left. Two annotations appear in the lower right: “Inédit 1er Etat” in black chalk, and “Eaforde de Van Gogh” in brown ink. The etching is also inscribed on the back: “Man with a Pipe (Dr. Gachet). Unique etching by Vincent van Gogh. Auvers 25 May 1890. I the undersigned, Paul Gachet, certify that this impression was one of those printed at Auvers by the doctor and Vincent at the time the plate was engraved. Paul Gachet [Jr.]” (fig. 3). These notes in the handwriting of Gachet’s son clearly indicate that the etching is a unique impression printed by Van Gogh and Dr. Gachet in Auvers.

Curiously, handwork has also been observed in posthumously printed impressions. Examination by microscope reveals that printed lines in the Cleveland Museum of Art’s version of this etching were later reinforced with black ink applied by hand (fig. 4). A handwritten inscription on the back—“Epreuve ancienne—Tirage de P. van Ryssel [Dr. Gachet]”—indicates that
Dr. Gachet, identified by his artistic nom de plume, P. van Ryssel, printed the image. The annotation makes no mention of Van Gogh’s involvement but does continue: “(Portrait of my father, Dr. Gachet). Etching by Vincent van Gogh, Auvers-sur-Oise, May 1890—Paul Gachet [Jr.]” How can we explain handwork in a posthumous print? Perhaps Gachet or his son reinforced the lines because the copper plate began breaking down after repeated printings. If so, then this impression is a far more collaborative effort than anyone previously suspected.

Van Gogh’s etchings of Dr. Gachet, printed in different colors and exhibiting individual adjustments and reinforcements applied by hand, offer a fascinating parallel to the artist’s practice of painting répétitions as a means of making subtle improvements to his own compositions (fig. 5). Although Gachet’s son confessed that they printed some posthumous etchings for commercial reasons, he defended the practice as a means of making Van Gogh’s art better known: “The plate was frequently printed during the lifetime of Dr. Gachet, who circulated the prints widely in order to honor Vincent’s wish to have his work publicized. We have continued this practice on an even larger scale by first donating [the etching] to certain museums, and above all by distributing it to Japanese artists, up until the day art dealers began getting involved.”

Fig. 4. Dr. Gachet (Man with a Pipe), June 1890. Vincent van Gogh. Etching and drypoint, enhanced with black ink on laid paper; 18.1 x 15.2 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund 1948.303, F1664.

View larger image

Fig. 5. Portrait of Dr. Gachet: The Man with a Pipe, June 1890. Vincent van Gogh. Etching and drypoint, printed in red ink on laid paper; 18.1 x 15.2 cm. Fondation Pierre Gianadda, Martigny, Switzerland F1664.

View larger image
crucial to note that Van Gogh never objected to the production of posthumous prints for the purpose of more widely circulating an artist’s *oeuvre*; he even collected such prints himself. Gachet’s son considered Van Gogh and his father collaborators engaged in a process of experimental printmaking, a process the doctor and his son apparently continued after the artist’s death.17 A comprehensive study of all the etchings of Dr. Gachet, including examination by microscope, should be undertaken to understand more fully the exact nature and differences in the handwork of lifetime versus posthumous impressions.

NOTES


2 Ibid.


5 Vincent van Gogh to Paul Gauguin (Auvers-sur-Oise, RM 23), June 17, 1890. This is a draft for a letter that was never sent.

6 Van Heugten, *Graphic Work of Vincent van Gogh*, p. 82.

7 Theo van Gogh to Vincent van Gogh (Paris, letter 890), June 23, 1890.

8 Etchings are made by covering the plate with wax. After the artist draws the forms into the wax, the plate is bathed in acid, which incises the lines into the plate. In soft-ground etching, the wax is mixed with tallow so that it becomes tacky but does not harden completely. The artist places paper or cloth over the wax, draws the image, and then removes the paper, leaving lines that are acid bitten into the plate. The lines in soft-ground etching have a soft, crayonlike appearance.


10 Anne Distal and Susan Alyson Stein speculate that Van Gogh may have bitten the copper plate on May 25 but not printed it until several days later. See Distal and Stein, *Cezanne to Van Gogh: the Collection of Dr. Gachet* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), p. 101.


12 Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh (The Hague, letter 280), November 5, 1882. Van Gogh often underlined words in his letters for emphasis; the italics here reflect the emphasis in the original text.

13 Documents at the Van Gogh Museum indicate there may be four additional impressions; see Van Heugten, *Graphic Work of Vincent van Gogh*, p. 99.
The plate was part of the Gachet bequest to the Musée d’Orsay.

This impression, now in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. R. Stanley Johnson of Chicago, is annotated on the back by Meier-Graefe, indicating that it was printed by Dr. Gachet and obtained on a visit to Auvers in the summer of 1895.

Gachet’s son explained in a letter to Theo’s widow, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, that ten impressions were printed for the Schneider Gallery in Frankfurt in 1912. He is quoted here from his unpaginated manuscript cited in Van Heugten, Graphic Work of Vincent van Gogh, p. 84.

Gachet [Jr.], Les 70 jours, p. 142.

HOW TO CITE THIS WORK

Fig. 1. Recto of Man with Pipe (Dr. Gachet), June 1890. Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). Etching and drypoint printed in black ink on laid paper with handwork in black chalk; 18 x 15.1 cm. Private collection F1664.

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Fig. 3. Verso of fig. 1.

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Fig. 4. Dr. Gachet (Man with a Pipe), June 1890. Vincent van Gogh. Etching and drypoint, enhanced with black ink on laid paper; 18.1 x 15.2 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund 1948.303, F1664.
Fig. 5. Portrait of Dr. Gachet: The Man with a Pipe, June 1890. Vincent van Gogh. Etching and drypoint, printed in red ink on laid paper; 18.1 x 15.2 cm. Fondation Pierre Gianadda, Martigny, Switzerland F1664.

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