

The Library as Method The Scholarship of Evert van Uiter (1936–2021)

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Evert van Uiter occupied a distinctive position in Dutch art history. A professor of art history at the University of Amsterdam from 1984 to 2001, he was above all a scholar of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a career-long focus on Vincent van Gogh. Yet to call him a Van Gogh specialist in the conventional sense would be reductive. Van Uiter was interested in something more fundamental: how artistic identity is constructed through reading, rivalry, and the strategic concealment of sources. His method was consistently iconographic in the Panofskian tradition, but pursued with an unusual insistence on the chain of textual transmission — on tracing, precisely, which books were on the desk when a painting was made.

His life partner, the art historian Claudine Chavannes-Mazel, described his library of approximately 7,500 volumes — now housed in the former American Embassy on the Lange Voorhout in The Hague — as "the head of Evert." The remark is more than biographical colour. It articulates the epistemological core of his practice: that images are carried by words, and that art-historical analysis begins with reconstructing what an artist read.

I. Intellectual Formation and Context

Van Uiter studied at the University of Utrecht before completing his doctoral research at the University of Amsterdam, where he defended his dissertation on 7 June 1983, *cum laude*, under the supervision of Professor Hans Jaffé. The dissertation, published as *Vincent van Gogh in creative competition: Four essays from Simiolus*, gathered four articles he had published between 1977 and 1982 in *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, the leading Dutch art-historical journal, of which he was also an editor.

His formative intellectual context was shaped by two competing forces in Van Gogh scholarship. On one side stood the psychologising tradition that had dominated the field since the mid-twentieth century, positioning Van Gogh as the paradigmatic tormented genius — a tradition exemplified by the psychoanalytic studies collected in *Van Gogh in Perspective* (ed. Welsh-Ovcharov, 1974) and anatomised with some scepticism by Van Uiter himself in his footnotes.¹ On the other stood the rigorous iconographic-contextual tradition represented by the *Simiolus* circle, which had brought systematic scholarly scrutiny to bear on Dutch and Flemish art history since the journal's founding in 1966.

Van Uiter's distinctive contribution was to apply the rigour of the second tradition to the problems of the first — to take seriously the question of Van Gogh's artistic intentions without retreating into biography or pathology.

II. The Dissertation: *Creative Competition* (1977–1983)

The First Essay: *Aemulatio* as Analytical Framework

The opening essay, "Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin: a creative competition" (*Simiolus* 9, 1977), establishes the analytical framework that governs the entire dissertation. Van Uitert introduces the classical principle of *aemulatio* — the tradition, codified in Renaissance and seventeenth-century art theory, by which artists defined themselves not through autonomous originality but through competitive surpassing of chosen models.² He draws explicitly on Samuel van Hoogstraten's *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst* (1678) and Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* (1790) to establish that emulative competition was a structural feature of artistic practice, not merely a psychological accident of the Van Gogh–Gauguin relationship.

The essay's most significant contribution is its systematic dismantling of Gauguin's claim to theoretical originality. Van Uitert demonstrates that Gauguin's influential ideas about abstraction, sensation, and the spiritual dimensions of line and colour — presented in his letters and *Notes synthétiques* as personal revelation — were in large measure derived from Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (1867), Balzac's mystical novella *Louis Lambert* (1832), and the sensationalist psychology popularised by both. Gauguin never acknowledged these sources. Van Uitert's argument is not that Gauguin was dishonest, but that this concealment was itself structurally characteristic: the avant-garde artist of the nineteenth century was required to appear original, and the sources that shaped his thinking were therefore necessarily occluded.³

This insight had consequences for how Van Gogh's position should be understood. Where previous scholarship had either psychologised Van Gogh's relationship to Gauguin or treated their disagreements as purely stylistic, Van Uitert reads them as a coherent competitive dynamic: Van Gogh deliberately constructed his artistic identity in opposition to Gauguin's, point by point, across a period of several years.

The Second Essay: The Iconography of the *Poet's Garden*

"Vincent van Gogh in anticipation of Paul Gauguin" (*Simiolus* 10, 1978–79) extends the analysis to the period immediately before Gauguin's arrival in Arles in October 1888. Van Uitert reconstructs, in meticulous detail, the programme of decoration Van Gogh designed for the Yellow House — including the famous *Poet's Garden* series — and traces it to a network of texts that Van Gogh had recently read.

The centrepiece of the argument concerns an article by Henri Cochin, "Boccace d'après ses oeuvres et les témoignages contemporains," published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in July–August 1888, which Van Gogh explicitly mentions in his letters as having made a lasting impression on him. Van Uitert shows that the iconographic programme of the *Poet's Garden* — Gauguin cast as Petrarch, Van Gogh as Boccaccio, the park at Arles as the garden of Renaissance poetry — flows directly from this article, combined with Van Gogh's reading of Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841) and his long familiarity with Félix Bracquemond's *Du dessin et de la couleur* (1885).⁴

The significance of this reconstruction extends beyond iconographic detail. Van Uitert demonstrates that Van Gogh's decorative programme was not a response to Gauguin's theories but an anticipation of them — an attempt to establish a claim to artistic relevance *before* his more theoretically sophisticated colleague arrived. This reverses the standard reading of the Arles collaboration, in which Gauguin is typically cast as the dominant theoretical presence.

The Third Essay: Vincent's Original Contribution

"Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin in competition: Vincent's original contribution" (*Simiolus* 11, 1980) addresses the question of what Van Gogh's specific artistic contribution was, once the competitive structure of his relationship with Gauguin has been established. Van Uitert's answer is: portraiture. Where Gauguin disparaged the genre as insufficiently abstract, Van Gogh identified it as the terrain on which he could assert a genuine difference.

The essay's extended analysis of the *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (June 1890) is the most intricate piece of iconographic argument in the dissertation. Van Uitert links Gachet's melancholic pose not merely to the doctor's personal circumstances — the recent death of his wife, his eccentric personality — but to a precise chain of cultural references: Gachet's own 1858 medical dissertation on melancholy (*Étude sur la mélancolie*), the iconographic tradition of melancholy as a condition of creative genius traceable to Dürer's *Melencolia I*, and the two Goncourt novels visible on the table (*Germinie Lacerteux* and *Manette Salomon*), which Van Uitert reads as programmatic references rather than casual props. The portrait, he argues, was explicitly designed as Van Gogh's contribution to the competitive discourse about what modern portraiture could be — and was offered to Gauguin as such in a letter.⁵

The Fourth Essay: Van Gogh's Concept of His Oeuvre

"Van Gogh's concept of his oeuvre" (*Simiolus* 12, 1981–82) is the most influential of the four essays and the one that most directly shaped curatorial practice. Van Uitert argues that Van Gogh conceived his paintings not as individual works but as a coherent, intentional *oeuvre* — a claim he substantiates through a systematic analysis of Van Gogh's signing practices, his use of the distinction between *étude* and *tableau*, his habit of grouping works thematically and noting these groupings in letters, and his programmatic organisation of paintings into decorative series.

The essay's literary-historical dimension is equally important. Van Uitert situates Van Gogh's oeuvre-consciousness in the context of the nineteenth-century literary tradition of the quest for the masterpiece: Zola's *L'Oeuvre* (1886), Balzac's *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* (1831), and the Goncourts' *Manette Salomon* (1867) — all novels in which the artistic masterpiece fails, and all of which Van Gogh read and explicitly referenced. Van Gogh's acceptance of failure as constitutive of artistic practice — his acknowledgement that "the siege of failure" was inherent to the profession — emerges from Van Uitert's reading as a conscious intellectual position, derived from literature, rather than a passive biographical fact.

The curatorial consequence was direct. If Van Gogh had a concept of his own oeuvre, the appropriate exhibition would not be chronological but structural — reconstructing the internal logic of his artistic programme. This argument provided the intellectual basis for the major Van Gogh retrospective of 1990, jointly mounted at the Van Gogh Museum and the Kröller-Müller, which Van Uitert co-organised.⁶

III. Beyond the Dissertation

Van Uitert's inaugural lecture, *Het geloof in de moderne kunst* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff/Landshoff, 1987), extended his analytical approach to modernism as a whole. Drawing on the same iconographic-contextual method, he proposed that the modernist movement should be understood as

a quasi-religious institution — complete with dogmas, heresies, conversion experiences, and sacred texts — rather than as a neutral stylistic development.⁷ The lecture is closely argued and extensively documented, and has not yet received the attention it deserves in the English-language literature on the sociology of modernism.

His second major public lecture, *Ironie in de beeldende kunst* (Amsterdam, 1995, the second P.C. Hooft Lecture), pursued a complementary theme: irony as the structural counter-movement to modernist faith, the mechanism by which the movement's claims to transcendence were both sustained and undermined from within.

IV. Methodological Character and Scholarly Position

Three features of Van Uitert's scholarship warrant particular emphasis in the context of the existing literature.

First, his consistent refusal to psychologise. In a field that had accumulated an enormous psychoanalytic literature around Van Gogh — from the early studies by Nagera (*Vincent van Gogh: A Psychological Study*, 1967) to the forensic biographies of Naifeh and Smith (*Van Gogh: The Life*, 2011) — Van Uitert's position was distinctly methodological rather than polemical. He regarded the artist's interior life as inaccessible and irrelevant to art-historical explanation; what mattered was the structure of the work and the demonstrable network of its sources. This position aligned him broadly with the iconographic tradition of Panofsky and, closer to home, with the methodological rigour of the *Simiolus* circle, particularly his colleague Peter Hecht.⁸

Second, his treatment of rivalry as productive structure. Van Uitert's use of *aemulatio* anticipated, in important respects, the sociological approach to artistic fields developed by Pierre Bourdieu in *Les Règles de l'art* (1992), though Van Uitert arrived at his position from the history of art theory rather than from sociology. Both scholars understand artistic identity as relational — defined by differentiation rather than autonomous originality. The parallel has not been systematically explored in the secondary literature.⁹

Third, his insistence on the artist as reader. The systematic reconstruction of an artist's library — not as biographical curiosity but as explanatory resource — is the defining methodological commitment of Van Uitert's work. It has obvious precursors in the iconographic tradition (Panofsky's reconstruction of humanist programmes, Wind's *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*), but Van Uitert applies it to the relatively unconventional territory of a nineteenth-century Dutch painter and the vernacular literary culture he inhabited.

V. Reception and Legacy

Van Uitert's essays were standard references in Van Gogh scholarship from their publication onwards, cited by Hulsker, Welsh-Ovcharov, Roskill, and all subsequent major contributors to the field. The 2001 exhibition catalogue by Douglas W. Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South* — the most thorough treatment of the Van Gogh–Gauguin relationship in the scholarly literature — engages extensively with Van Uitert's framework, taking his *aemulatio* thesis as a starting point while developing the analysis in new directions, particularly

with respect to the religious and symbolic dimensions of the artists' shared programme.¹⁰ Debora Silverman's *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (2000) similarly builds on Van Uitert's documentation of the artists' literary sources while proposing a different interpretive framework centred on confessional culture.¹¹

What remains underdeveloped in the secondary literature is a critical assessment of Van Uitert's methodological limitations. His refusal to engage with the economic structure of the art market — the role of Theo van Gogh as dealer, the market pressures that shaped both artists' production choices — leaves a significant dimension of the competitive dynamic he describes unexplained. Equally, his bracketing of Van Gogh's illness and psychological instability, while methodologically principled, means that the rupture of December 1888 — the central event of the Arles collaboration — remains analytically inert in his account: something that happened, but not something his method can address.

These are genuine limitations. They do not diminish the achievement. Van Uitert gave Van Gogh studies a structural framework it had previously lacked, and demonstrated, rigorously and with lasting effect, that the most celebrated of tortured geniuses was also a highly deliberate intellectual who read widely, thought carefully about his position in art history, and designed his oeuvre with programmatic intent.

Complete Bibliography of Works by Evert van Uitert

Articles in *Simiolus*

Van Uitert, Evert. "De toon van Vincent van Gogh: opvattingen over kleur in zijn Hollandse periode." *Simiolus* 1 (1966–67), pp. 106–15.

Van Uitert, Evert. "Twee gedichten van William Blake: 'Florentine ingratitude' en 'To Venetian artists.'" *Simiolus* 2 (1967–68), pp. 46–59.

Van Uitert, Evert. "Democratisering van de kunst: de avant-garde en de negentiende eeuw." *Simiolus* 3 (1968–69), pp. 1–3.

Van Uitert, Evert. "Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin: a creative competition." *Simiolus* 9 (1977), pp. 149–68.

Van Uitert, Evert. "Vincent van Gogh in anticipation of Paul Gauguin." *Simiolus* 10 (1978–79), pp. 182–99.

Van Uitert, Evert. "Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin in competition: Vincent's original contribution." *Simiolus* 11 (1980), pp. 81–106.

Van Uitert, Evert. "Van Gogh's concept of his oeuvre." *Simiolus* 12 (1981–82), pp. 223–44.

Books and exhibition catalogues

Van Uitert, Evert. *Vincent van Gogh. Leven en werk*. Amsterdam, 1976. [Also published in German (Cologne, 1976), English (London, 1979), and Spanish (Barcelona, 1980) editions.]

Van Uitert, Evert. *Vincent van Gogh. Tekeningen*. Bentveld-Aerdenhout, 1977; 2nd ed. 1985.

Van Uitert, Evert. *Vincent van Gogh in creative competition: Four essays from Simiolus*. Amsterdam, 1983. [Doctoral dissertation, Universiteit van Amsterdam, defended 7 June 1983, *cum laude*; supervisor: Prof. dr. Hans Jaffé.]

Van Uitert, Evert [with Truus Trompert]. *Een leven als model: herinneringen aan het meest befaamde Nederlandse beroepsmodel in de 20e eeuw*. Venlo, 1985.

Van Uitert, Evert. *Van Gogh in Brabant: schilderijen en tekeningen uit Etten en Nuenen*. Zwolle, 1987.

Van Uitert, Evert. *Het geloof in de moderne kunst*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff/Landshoff, 1987. [Inaugural lecture, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 10 November 1986.]

Van Uitert, Evert [ed., with Michael Hoyle]. *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*. Amsterdam, 1987.

Van Uitert, Evert [with Inemie Gerards]. *In de lijn van Jan Toorop: symbolisme in de kunst*. The Hague, 1994.

Van Uitert, Evert. *Ironie in de beeldende kunst*. Amsterdam, 1995. [Second P.C. Hooft Lecture.]

Selected contributions to periodicals and catalogues

Van Uitert, Evert. "De Vangogh-manie als uitvloeisel van de genie-cultus." *Vrij Nederland*, 1 September 1973, p. 23.

Van Uitert, Evert. "De legenvorming te bevorderen: notities over de Vincent van Gogh-mythe." In exh. cat. *Rond de roem van Vincent van Gogh*. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, 1977, pp. 15–27.

Van Uitert, Evert. Various articles in *De Gids* (1988–93) and *De Volkskrant* (dates various), including "Moeilijke tijden: te pijnlijk om te schilderen, te lelijk om tentoon te stellen?" *De Gids* 151 (1988); and "Robert Wilson, gastconservator in museum Boymans-van Beuningen." *De Gids* 156 (1993).

Van Uitert, Evert. "Geometrisch abstracte kunst in Nederland 1945–1960." *De Gids* 151 (1988).

Annotated Bibliography of Key Secondary and Contextual Works

On Van Uitert's scholarship and the Van Gogh–Gauguin field

Druick, Douglas W., and Peter Kort Zegers. *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South*. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2001. — The most comprehensive scholarly treatment of the Van Gogh–Gauguin relationship. Engages directly with Van Uitert's *aemulatio* framework and his documentation of the artists' literary sources, while

extending the analysis to technical, religious, and institutional dimensions. The standard reference for the subject.

Hulsker, Jan. *Van Gogh en zijn weg: al zijn tekeningen en schilderijen in hun samenhang en ontwikkeling*. Amsterdam, 1977. — The standard catalogue raisonné used by Van Uitert for all dating and identification of works. Hulsker's biographical approach contrasts sharply with Van Uitert's structural method, but the two scholars shared the same primary source base.

Roskill, Mark. *Van Gogh, Gauguin and the Impressionist Circle*. London, n.d. [c. 1970]. — The pioneering English-language study of the Van Gogh–Gauguin relationship. Van Uitert cites it frequently, generally to distance himself from its tendency to read the rivalry as a "line-colour antithesis" rather than as a structural competitive dynamic.

Silverman, Debora. *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. — Major interpretive study organised around confessional culture (Protestant versus Catholic) as the determining matrix for the artists' divergent approaches. Draws on Van Uitert's source documentation while proposing a fundamentally different explanatory framework.

Welsh-Ovcharov, Bogomila. *Vincent van Gogh: His Paris Period, 1886–1888*. The Hague, 1976. — Essential study of Van Gogh's formation in Paris; frequently cited by Van Uitert in his reconstruction of the sources available to Van Gogh before Arles.

Sources analysed by Van Uitert

Blanc, Charles. *Grammaire des arts du dessin*. Paris, 1867 (repr. 1870, 1876, 1880). — The widely read handbook of aesthetic theory from which Gauguin derived his ideas about line, colour, and abstraction. Van Uitert's demonstration that Gauguin's theoretical formulations closely parallel Blanc's, without acknowledgement, is one of the central arguments of the first *Simiolus* essay.

Balzac, Honoré de. *Louis Lambert* (1832); *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* (1831). Both in *Études philosophiques*, Paris, 1854. — The primary literary source for Gauguin's mystical theory of artistic sensation and the "Specialiste"; also central to Van Uitert's analysis of Van Gogh's oeuvre-consciousness in the fourth essay.

Bracquemond, Félix. *Du dessin et de la couleur*. Paris, 1885. — The decorative-art handbook that Van Gogh read repeatedly and that underpins Van Uitert's account of the decorative programme in Arles.

Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. London, 1841. — Source for Van Gogh's conception of the artist as prophetic poet; Van Uitert identifies its direct influence on the *Portrait of Eugène Boch* and the *Poet's Garden* series.

Goncourt, Edmond and Jules de. *Manette Salomon*. Paris, 1867. — Novel about the artist destroyed by marriage; Van Uitert reads its presence on the table in the *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* as a programmatic reference to Van Gogh's theory of modern portraiture.

Zola, Émile. *L'Oeuvre*. Paris, 1886. — Novel about the failure of the artistic masterpiece; central to Van Uitert's fourth essay on Van Gogh's oeuvre-consciousness.

Methodological context

Panofsky, Erwin. *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1939. — The foundational text of the iconographic-contextual tradition within which Van Uitert's method is situated.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Paris: Seuil, 1992. [Eng. trans. *The Rules of Art*. Cambridge: Polity, 1996.] — Bourdieu's theory of artistic fields as structured by competitive differentiation offers a sociological parallel to Van Uitert's *aemulatio*-based analysis, arrived at independently and from a different disciplinary direction.

¹ Van Uitert notes his reservations about the psychoanalytic tradition in "Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin: a creative competition," *Simiolus* 9 (1977), p. 151, n. 11: "The psychological literature concerning Vincent van Gogh is very extensive ... I hope to go into this subject more fully in another article." The promised article never appeared; the footnote marks the deliberate methodological boundary.

² The classical formulation of *aemulatio* in seventeenth-century Dutch art theory appears in Van Hoogstraten's *Inleyding* (1678), p. 215: "Come now, my young painters who are goaded into activity by the honour and glory of the great Masters, let yourselves be freely fired by your emulation." Van Uitert cites this passage in his opening essay.

³ Van Uitert, *Simiolus* 9 (1977), pp. 160–63, on Gauguin's use of Blanc and Balzac.

⁴ Van Uitert, *Simiolus* 10 (1978–79), pp. 192–95, on the Cochin article and the *Poet's Garden* iconography.

⁵ Van Uitert, *Simiolus* 11 (1980), pp. 87–95; the letter offering the Gachet portrait to Gauguin is Complete Letters no. 643.

⁶ The connection between the fourth *Simiolus* essay and the 1990 exhibition is described in the UvA in memoriam by Van Uitert's colleague: "one of the articles from his dissertation, 'Van Gogh's concept of his oeuvre,' proved a strong starting point for the most important exhibition in the history of the Van Gogh Museum, the large retrospective of the artist in 1990."

⁷ Van Uitert, *Het geloof in de moderne kunst* (1987), pp. 7–15.

⁸ The methodological affinity with Hecht is evident in their co-authored articles in *Simiolus*, including "The paragone debate: ten illustrations and a comment" (1984) and "The debate on symbol and meaning in Dutch seventeenth-century art" (1986).

⁹ Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art* (1992), pp. 289–355 on the structure of the literary field; the parallel with Van Uitert's *aemulatio* framework has not, to the author's knowledge, been developed in the secondary literature.

¹⁰ Druick and Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin* (2001), pp. 1–12 (introductory essay) and *passim*.

¹¹ Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (2000), pp. 3–20.