

“I think of myself as a painter.”
Harriet Beecher Stowe

“Books and reality and art are
the same kind of thing for me.”
Vincent Van Gogh

VINCENT VAN GOGH and HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

A Personal Journey of Convergence

I have loved art and books all my life, but those joys were always shadowed by my awareness of racism. I saw no way those three concerns could coalesce for me until I made the startling discovery that my favorite artist and a book I had never read and our most pressing social issue converged in a way I never could have imagined.

ART

When I was in the third grade in Lubbock, Texas, I was asked what I most liked doing in school. My choices were art, spelling, and reading. When asked

what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said, “Be an artist.” To be an artist was thinkable for me because I had watched my next-door neighbor, Mona Pierce, making art in her studio every day.

I never took an art or art history course in school, but while I was a graduate student in New York, I spent countless hours in museums. I remember being enchanted that the Metropolitan Museum of Art spent more to acquire Rembrandt’s “Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer” than the cost of a new wing. Those visits to the Met also introduced me to Vincent Van Gogh. Irises are still my favorite flowers. I came upon “Starry Night” at the Museum of Modern Art.

In 1964, I was somehow included in an invitation to the preview opening of the Van Gogh exhibition at the Guggenheim. The spiral design of the Museum was perfect for seeing the progression of Van Gogh’s work in thirty-three paintings from the dark “Potato Eaters” to the bright colors of Provence. “What color is in a picture,” Van Gogh said, “enthusiasm is in a life.” Recently I was able to buy the only available remaining brochure printed for that exhibit.

While still in graduate school I travelled alone in the summer of 1966 to Europe, partly to visit the vast Van Gogh collection at the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands. I recall walking from the nearest public bus stop nearly an hour through a beautiful park to the Museum.

Helene Kröller-Müller loved art as a young woman and was able to buy her first Van Gogh in 1908. With her family's financial resources and good advice, she was able to accumulate 90 Van Gogh paintings and 185 drawings. Eventually she created a foundation and a museum for her collection. The Kröller-Müller Museum opened in 1938. [The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam was opened in 1973 with a slightly larger collection of his works.]

During my 1966 visit, I must have seen the painting of Madame Ginoux with her books—the crux of my story here--but the piece I remember best is Van Gogh's drawing of "Old Man Reading." I bought a print of it as a gift for my father, also a farmer who loved to read.

When I could afford it with my first job, I subscribed to the *Time-Life Library of Art*, twenty-six famous painters each in their own slip case. Now I had a whole book of my own about Van Gogh. During this time, I started reading Van Gogh's letters, nearly 900 of them, equaling the number of his paintings and drawings in his brief ten years as a painter.

After forty happy years of teaching, learning, and writing about Latin and Greek literature, I started taking studio art classes, mostly with Charles Brindley. I painted almost full-time for fifteen years, using acrylics because they dry quickly. I had a nice sunlit studio in our condo near Vanderbilt.

Five of my paintings were inspired by Van Gogh. My favorite of those is “The Sower,” but I also was commissioned to provide a book cover with the improbable request that I paint “the Texas Panhandle in the style of Van Gogh.” I was able to do that in part by transposing, as Van Gogh did, the colors of fields and sky. The sky is a bright yellow, the plowed fields are shades of blue. Van Gogh would call my paintings “translations,” and he affirmed such translations. In letter #607 to his brother, he wrote:

Let me try to explain what I am looking for and why it seems to me worthwhile to be copying these things. People always say that we artists should compose our own works and be composers only. Very well; but in music it is not like that. If someone plays Beethoven, he adds his own personal interpretation.... I take the black and white of Delacroix or Millet, or a black-and-white copy, as my motif. And then I improvise in color. Do not misunderstand me—this is not all together my own, I am trying to preserve memories of their pictures--the remembering and the approximate harmony of emotionally registered colors (even if they are not quite the right ones) are my own interpretation.

RACISM

The second thread of this journey to convergence also began for me in elementary school. When I was eleven in 1952, my mother decided to invite two

of her friends for tea. Both were elementary school principals who did not know each other, and my mother thought they would enjoy meeting. I don't know if my mother mentioned to either of them that Mae Simmons was the principal of the segregated Black elementary school across town and Ivy Savage was the principal of the equally segregated white school I attended. But I do know what I saw that afternoon around our fireplace. Mrs. Simmons was charming and conversational. Mrs. Savage sat in great anxiety, so distraught she could not speak. I did not understand at the time why this was, but I knew for sure that something was very wrong.

I enrolled at the University of Texas in Austin at the time when racial tensions were at their height. My involvement in desegregation activities was through the student YWCA, which drew some negative notice from my father, my grandmother, and the *Dallas Morning News*. One particular occasion in April, 1962, changed my sense of my place in the world. As an officer in the YWCA, it fell to me to present our annual request for funding to the Campus Chest allocation committee. When I stood to face that group, composed mostly of fraternity boys, I saw hatred in their faces because of the Y's efforts to end segregation. Until that moment, shaped by my childhood piety, I had thought if you were nice and polite and had good ideas, people would like you. I was wrong.

In my four years in graduate school at Columbia, I mostly kept my head down and did the work, except for those shining hours in museums. But when I finished in 1967, I was fortunate to be hired as an Assistant Professor of Classics at the University of Illinois. I resumed involvement with the YWCA, which was moving at that time towards its national “one imperative” of eliminating racism. At a national meeting of the YWCA, I met Helen Claytor, who was then its first African-American president. She and I liked each other, spent some time together, and looked a little alike as we were both tall and wore our hair the same way. When someone asked if we were mother and daughter, Helen laughed and said, “Well, that shows that some people are color-blind.”

In Champaign-Urbana, it was fascinating to teach students both from the rural south of the state, which had practiced slavery before the Civil War, and from the tough South Side of Chicago. While there, I took a humanities class to Chicago to visit Jesse Jackson’s Operation Breadbasket. Jackson was skillful and impressive; I especially admired how he could switch instantly between dialects. It was also at Illinois that I met James Baldwin. A colleague invited me to a small class Baldwin was teaching before his evening lecture. I was standing afterwards to speak with him when his host led him away. Baldwin must have sensed my disappointment, because when he got to the door, he stopped, turned around, looked at me, smiled his big smile, and blew me a kiss. I was smitten.

Two years later I resigned from Illinois and came to Nashville without a job. Soon, however, I was hired by Fisk University as Director of the Honors Program and Assistant Professor of English. That was the most important event of my professional life, because without it, I would never have been able to continue an academic career.

My reason for being at a historically Black university was clarified early on when an angry student confronted me. “Why are you here?” she demanded. “Are you here to help us?” “No,” I replied, “I’m here because this was the best job in Nashville available to me, and I was lucky to get it.” “Oh,” she said. “In that case, I guess it’s okay.” Oddly, the biggest adjustment for me at Fisk was not my minority status. I had traveled in other countries and had participated in work groups in Jamaica, Haiti, and Mexico. I had been an outsider on racial issues in Texas and as a southern female who talked funny in my cohort of graduate students at Columbia. My greatest revelations at Fisk were intellectual, political, and historical.

I realized my education had been severely stunted, and I was angry about it. I had never read *Things Fall Apart* or *Manchild in the Promised Land* or *Invisible Man* or *Their Eyes were Watching God* or even heard of their authors. I had never heard of W.E.B. duBois, even though he was a Fisk graduate with a PhD from Harvard, one of the founders of the NAACP, and the author of the hugely

influential *The Souls of Black Folk*. When the Honors Program (now named for him) hosted Herbert Aptheker, DuBois's literary executor, Aptheker called DuBois a genius, "like Lenin or Tolstoy."

If my introduction to Nashville had not been through Fisk, I might have heard of the Sit-ins that ended segregation of public facilities in the city, but I would not have become friends with people who knew and supported the participants just a few years earlier. I would not have heard from someone who was there what happened at a pray-in demonstration at Morrison's Cafeteria on West End, when an angry counter-protester leaned over and spit on Rev. James Lawson's face. Lawson looked up and asked the man if he had a handkerchief. The man was so surprised he reached in his pocket and handed him one. Lawson wiped his face, handed back the handkerchief, and said "Thank you."

It was also at Fisk that I began my recovery from the Southern version of American history instilled in me from birth. I had to learn from scratch that the Civil War was fought over slavery, not states' rights; that Robert E. Lee betrayed his oath to support the U.S. Constitution; that Ulysses S. Grant saved the Union; or that the South could be said to have won the War after all by means of Jim Crow laws and virulent segregation. My re-education continues to this day.

Fisk also gave me another new form of education. In 1970, several students from the Honors Program asked if I would be the faculty sponsor for a January term course on the Black church. I explained that I didn't know anything about the Black church except for the small interracial church I attended. "That's all right," they said. "We'll do it together." So, we did. Our text was James Cone's *Black Power and Black Theology*, which had come out the previous year. During the week we read, studied, and discussed. Each Sunday we visited a different church. We invited speakers to join us when they could. At the end of the course, the students combined their papers into a booklet which we had copied and bound. It was learning at its best.

In 1971 I was offered a tenure-track position as Assistant Professor of Classics at Vanderbilt--1.8 miles south and a world away from Fisk. This was not an easy decision. I was on tenure-track at Fisk, and I enjoyed my job. I believed then and still do that racism is the most critical issue in America, but I decided to go to Vanderbilt because I missed my chosen field of Classics, always the foundation and reference point of my various interests.

The Vanderbilt campus was quiet at the time, and teaching, as always, was a joy. Then something came up outside the classroom that needed attention. In 1978, Vanderbilt agreed to host a tennis championship for the Davis Cup between the U.S. and South Africa, which prominent universities across the country had refused

to sponsor because of South Africa's policy of apartheid. After learning how the South African regime was using sports to propagate its racist policies, I chose to help a colleague from the Divinity School organize a Faculty March Against Apartheid.

My relationships at Fisk, Meharry Medical College, and Tennessee State University helped us gather 130 faculty members from seven Nashville colleges and universities. We marched in cap and gown from the Law School to the administration building to present our request that the match be cancelled. Rev. Lawson came back to the campus to speak in support. The Chancellor used the excuse of "free expression" and allowed the match to proceed. The crowd at the game was at 13% capacity. After this event at Vanderbilt, South Africa under apartheid was permanently banned from the Davis Cup worldwide.

In 2007, Vanderbilt sponsored a bus trip from Nashville to Birmingham and Montgomery memorializing the historic Freedom Ride over forty-five years earlier. Each of the four buses was accompanied by one or two of the original planners and participants, including Rev. Lawson, Congressman John Lewis, Rev. Bernard Lafayette, Rev. C.T. Vivian, and Rev. Jim Zwerg.

Zwerg had come to Fisk as an exchange student from Beloit College. He soon became good friends with John Lewis, attended Rev. Lawson's classes in

non-violence, and chose to participate in the Freedom Ride. When the bus reached Montgomery, he volunteered to be the first off the bus. As the only white male in the group, Zwerg was the object of special rage from the mob and was beaten repeatedly. He remained unconscious for two days and was hospitalized for a total of five.

Just after he regained consciousness, a battered Zwerg in his hospital room gave a filmed interview shown nationwide:

Segregation must be stopped. It must be broken down. Those of us who are on the Freedom Ride are dedicated to this. We'll take hitting, we'll take beating, we're willing to accept death, but we are going to keep coming until we can ride from anywhere in the South to anyplace else in the South without anybody making any comments, just as American citizens.

During Vanderbilt's 2007 journey to Montgomery, a riveted group of young people gathered around a video clip of that interview. They had no idea that Rev. Zwerg was standing quietly behind them. As I watched him watching them, I felt a Presence in that room. It was like church.

Zwerg always insists that there was nothing particularly heroic about what he did that day, that he was simply doing what he knew he

should be doing. “My faith,” he reflects, “was never so strong as during that time.”

In that instant, I had the most incredible religious experience of my life. I felt a presence with me. A peace. A calmness. It was just like I was surrounded by kindness and love. I knew in that instant that whether I lived or died, I would be okay.

A BOOK

Over seven decades after that disturbing scene around my Texas fireplace and six decades after seeing the Van Gogh exhibit in New York, I made a stunning discovery: That one of Vincent Van Gogh’s favorite books was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Two of his paintings, the one in the Kröller-Müller Museum and another in Sao Paulo, depict his friend Madame Ginoux with two books on her table. The one on top is *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the title clearly visible.

My discovery came, appropriately, from a book, *Vincent’s Books*, by Mariella Guzzoni (Chicago, 2020). Guzzoni gives a thorough account of Van Gogh’s voracious reading habits in four languages, his love of books themselves (twenty-five of his drawings and paintings feature books or readers), and a timeline of what he was reading in what year of his life.

But how could that be, I asked myself in wonderment? How did he come across that particular book and why was it so important to him? I had not read it myself. It certainly did not appear in the curriculum of Southern schools.

Now I know it would have been easier for Van Gogh to come upon *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than for me, because it sold a million copies in Europe the year it was published in 1852, the year before Van Gogh was born. In the United States, it sold 300,000 the same year and became the best-selling novel of the entire Nineteenth Century. In 2018, the BBC interviewed writers and readers all over the world to come up with a list of the 100 most influential stories in history. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* comes second on that list, following only Homer's *Odyssey*.

Stowe said that for many years she avoided confronting slavery in her writing because the subject was so painful for her. Then, with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, she realized she had no choice.

The Fugitive Slave Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in September, 1850, to appease the South, provided that slave catchers were free to capture escaping slaves in any state, including those in the North, and return them for a fee to their former owners. Further, the law required that residents of free states who provided any kind of support for fugitive slaves would themselves be considered criminals, subject to a \$1000 fine, six months in prison, and possible charges of treason.

This Act nationalized what many had seen as only a Southern problem and made every Northerner officially complicit with enforcing the institution of slavery. An 1851 broadside cautioned all “Colored People of Boston” to avoid in every possible way all city watchmen and police officers, since by “the recent order of the mayor and aldermen, they are empowered to act as kidnappers and slave catchers.”

Stowe was already well acquainted with abolitionism through her religious convictions and her family, who had provided sanctuary for fugitive slaves in their Cincinnati home as part of the Underground Railroad. In addition, she had spent a great deal of time talking with those who had crossed the Ohio River to freedom, bringing their stories with them; she had read many slave accounts and had visited slaveholding areas in Kentucky. Later, she was to write that the conditions of slavery she had actually seen were worse than those she wrote about.

Upon publication of the book in 1852, the South raged with furious rebuttals. Abolitionist forces everywhere, on the other hand, took heart and worked even harder. Abraham Lincoln said to Stowe when she visited the White House in 1862, “Why, Mrs. Stowe, right glad to see you. So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.”

Lincoln's remark to Stowe is often quoted without attribution and is sometimes thought to be apocryphal. But W.E.B. duBois, in answer to a question from a colleague at Oglethorpe University, wrote in a letter of October 25, 1935:

“Uncle Tom’s Cabin” did have a good deal to do with the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. My authority for this is none other than Abraham Lincoln. When Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe for the first time in November, 1862, he said: “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.” You will find this on page 203 of “The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe” by Charles Edward Stowe and Lyman Beecher Stowe published in 1911. The book was not allowed to be sold in the South.

It was in 1879 that Van Gogh read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for the first time. He was trying desperately to be an evangelist in the Borinage in Belgium, sharing the grim poverty of the lives of coalminers. This was the lowest period of his life—he even broke off correspondence with his beloved brother Theo—as he struggled to reconcile his religious sense of mission with his passion for art. He read deeply in those months, including not only Stowe but Charles Dickens, who also wrote about the impoverished lives of the lowly, especially children.

Vincent emerged from that harrowing time in Belgium knowing not only that he was called to be an artist, but that, with his new understanding of the Gospel, in his art he would always side with the wretched and marginalized instead

of the powerful. “I want to give the wretched a brotherly message,” he later told Theo, “and when I sign my paintings ‘Vincent,’ it is as one of them.”

He would take what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the view from below.” It is no accident that the subtitle of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin is Life Among the Lowly*. In a letter to Theo on November 23, 1881, Vincent wrote, “Take Michelet and Beecher Stowe, they don’t say the Gospel is no longer valid, but they help us to understand how applicable it is in this day and age, in this life of ours, for you, for instance, and for me.”

Both Stowe and Van Gogh lived their lives out of the bedrock faith in which they were raised, but they evolved far from the stern hierarchical dogmas of their fathers. Van Gogh was even a little sly about it. His father, a grim Dutch Reformed pastor who never approved of Vincent’s art, hated novels, especially French novels. After his father’s death, Van Gogh painted as a “tribute” to him a ponderous pulpit-size Bible, but lying carelessly beside it is a small, well-thumbed French novel, “Le Joie de Vivre.”

Stowe, too, in her own way, became a theologian with her art of writing. Rev. Dr. Aaron Maurice Saari, a Biblical scholar and pastor, is writing a book *Pen as Pulpit* about Stowe as a public theologian. In his statement on the Stowe House website about his work [stowehousecincy.org], Saari writes:

In writings both personal and public, Harriet Beecher Stowe sought to reconcile her experiences of Jesus as friend with the doctrinal Calvinism into which she was born. From her first theological essay written at the age of twelve to her biography of Christ and essays about women in sacred history, Harriet rejected a Christianity focused on damnation and embraced an expansive view of God offering salvation to all of humanity, a position that often put her at odds with not only Christian leaders but also her own father. In works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Minister's Wooing*, and *Oldtown Folks*, Harriet used her pen as pulpit to support abolition, temperance, suffrage, and the Social Gospel.

By deciding to side with the lowly, both Stowe and Van Gogh chose to look at reality straight in the eye. They knew that to see things as they really are requires taking the view from below. Any view from above, whether religious or political, is hierarchical and therefore inevitably distorts the complexity of individual lives.

Uncle Tom never abandoned his faith and at the end was beaten to death on the order of Simon Legree for not revealing the whereabouts of two escaping slaves. As he lay dying, Tom asked his young friend George Shelby, who had just arrived, to give his love to everyone, “Pears like I loves ‘em all! I loves every creature everywhar!—it’s nothing but love!” Stowe writes:

He began to draw his breath with long, deep inspirations; and his broad chest rose and fell, heavily. The expression on his

face was that of a conqueror. “Who, --who,—who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” he said, in a voice that contended with mortal weakness; and with a smile, he fell asleep.

George sat fixed with solemn awe. It seemed to him that the place was holy.

When I read Stowe’s account of George Shelby’s awe in that holy place, I think of James Zwerg’s feeling of peace in the Montgomery bus station.

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So now, at last, my journeys converge. I feel joy about that, a kind of homecoming I never expected. With Stowe and Van Gogh, I feel as if I am watching two friends engage in spirited conversation. From them I am learning that books, art, and reality--when lived with deep reverence for the view from below--create together a luminous life.