

Vincent van Gogh and digitalis

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FIGURE 1 *Le docteur Paul Gachet* (Dr Paul Gachet); Vincent van Gogh, 1890; Musée d'Orsay, Paris (with permission)

During his short, stormy, and tragic life, Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) seriously suffered from episodes of depression, anxiety, seizures, and pain. He had probably a bipolar (manic-depressive) disease but epilepsy, schizophrenia, chemical intoxication, Ménière's disease, and porphyria are considered as other possible diagnoses.¹

Van Gogh portrayed his last physician, Dr Paul Gachet, with a flower of foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), a favorite homeopathic plant of the doctor (FIGURE 1). In those times, digitalis was used not only for heart diseases but also for many neurological and psychiatric disorders.² Epilepsy was a leading diagnosis during hospitalization of the artist in Arles (1888) and St. Remy de Provence (1889) when he cut off a part of his ear after the dispute with Paul Gauguin. Digitalis on the portrait of Dr Gachet symbolizes the profession of the model and probably the hope of the painter for fast relief and recovery.

The artistic way of van Gogh was a trip to the south of France in search of light and sun,



FIGURE 2 *Les pissenlits* (A Field of Yellow Flowers); Vincent van Gogh, April, 1889; Kunstmuseum Winterthur (with permission)

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FIGURE 3 *La moisson* (Wheat Field Behind Saint-Paul Hospital with a Reaper); Vincent van Gogh, 1889; Museum Folkwang, Essen (with permission)



and yellow was one of his favorite and mostly used colors. Paul Gauguin pointed that “sunlight rekindled his soul, that abhorred the fog, that needed the warmth”.¹

Looking at the works by van Gogh from the period when his medical state deteriorated and treatment was intensified, we can observe an increased use of yellow (FIGURES 2 and 3).³ Notice that not only flowers but even spring grass painted in April 1889 in Arles (Provence) are yellow (FIGURE 2). It may reflect the emotional liability of the artist but also xanthopsia (yellow vision) – an effect of digitalis overdose and intoxication.

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