



# “The Smoking Gun” Evidence in the Tragic Death of Vincent Van Gogh

**Arenberg I<sup>1\*</sup>, Kobobel EL<sup>2</sup> and Tufford A<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Director, The Killing Vincent Project, USA

<sup>2</sup>Researcher, The Killing Vincent Project, USA

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Researcher, The Killing Vincent Project, USA

**\*Corresponding author:** Irv Arenberg, Director, The Killing Vincent Project, USA, Email: irv@killingvincent.com

## Review Article

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## Abstract

It has been widely accepted in the past that Vincent Van Gogh died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in a field outside of Auvers-sur-Oise, France. However, much of the new evidence points to another theory: Van Gogh didn't kill himself but was murdered. The updated forensic research into this cold case is significant for the art community and art historians interested in the truth.

Interviews, letters, and records were compiled and reviewed in detail, including evidence regarding the potential weapon and possible persons of interest. Van Gogh's wound was described as pea sized, surrounded by discoloration with no exit wound or powder burn. The records of these details have been reviewed by a forensic pathologist, who concluded the unlikelihood of self-infliction. No potentially related gun, bullet, or other weapon were found immediately following his death. However, 60 years later a rusted and significantly damaged non-functioning Lefauchaux pinfire revolver was found in a wheat field, coincidentally and somewhat suspiciously, as the movie, LUST FOR LIFE, was being filmed on site. Whether this weapon, recently auctioned for approximately \$183,000 USD, was related to his death is debated. Further investigation by a qualified gunsmith or forensic firearms examiner needs to be undertaken to determine if this gun was actually functional when it was “dropped” in the field or placed there to create additional buzz for BIG budget Hollywood production.

Vincent van Gogh was allegedly shot in the abdomen on July 27, 1890, allegedly as critically there is no definitive evidence to support a gunshot wound. There is no smoking gun in evidence, no bullet, no suicide note, no exit wound, no black powder, no autopsy, no known crime scene, no witnesses, and no solid evidence of any kind to support a gun shot. All that is known for certain is that he sustained a penetrating wound to his abdomen. All one has to go on to make any kind of forensic analysis, or even confirm the possibility of a gunshot wound, is a description of the wound 26 years later.

**Keywords:** Suicide; Murder; Evidence; Vincent; Tragic Death

**Abbreviation:** KVP: Killing Vincent Project.

## Introduction

### The Detailed and Colorful Abdominal Wound Description

The wound was described as a “pea sized” entry with circumferential varied discoloration around it. Critically

absent in such a vivid and colorful description was the absence of any mention of a black powder burn. Black powder would substantiate the wound was caused by a gun from point-blank range or less than a foot. The only type of bullets available, in this era, utilized black powder as propellant. The presence of a black powder burn is crucial to support a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Without the black powder burn in any descriptive evidence, the entry wound could just as easily have been a knife wound or even an ice pick. There was

no exit wound, so the bullet, if it existed, would have been buried with Vincent [1].

Yet, art history scholars over the years have readily accepted that Vincent shot himself in the belly, despite nothing to support their contention. Their unsupported conclusion of the suicide narrative, a misdirection and criminal cover-up, is an ongoing attempt to avoid the Van Gogh Museum's curator warning of creating a "blasphemy" against the Vincent van Gogh legend and legacy. Covering up a murder is a crime now as it was then.

### Was the "Smoking Gun" Really Found?

A vital step in KVP's research of Vincent's death must start with any available physical evidence, most importantly the murder weapon. Where did he obtain the gun? Did someone give it to him, or did he borrow it? Did he find a gun purposely placed for him to find? Where is the gun now? Who owned that gun? Where did he shoot himself? Where exactly was Vincent's wound? If there was no exit wound, where is the bullet now? Even though these all seem like simple questions, expecting a ready set of answers, there are missing explanations or any evidence for all of these important queries. Immediately after the incident, the local police did a cursory search at one of so many of the wheatfields where Vincent was thought to have been painting. No gun, a revolver, was found at the time of the wounding by anyone. It should be emphasized [2].

Decades after the death of Vincent, a badly rusted and bent revolver was discovered by a farmer in his field in Auvers-sur-Oise. The revolver was identified as a "7.65" caliber, six round Lefauchaux pinfire pocket revolver with a folding trigger. It was manufactured around 1870 in Liege, Belgium. This type of revolver became widely popular throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and was carried for self-defense by both men and women. This early design included a case with a ball, powder, and primer, but what made it special, in terms of cartridge development, was the "firing pin" that projected ninety degrees from the side of the case (thus the term "pinfire"). It was adopted by militaries, used by civilians and police, and even sold for use during the American Civil War. It was broadly distributed, an affordable choice for most budgets. One of its most impressive features was that the folding trigger allowed it to be conveniently collapsed, so that it could easily be concealed in a pocket or small bag. It was mass produced and widely distributed. The popularity of this gun model casts reasonable doubt that this particular abandoned, discarded, and purposely placed rusted and bent revolver was the absolute definitive gun used to shoot Vincent [3].

The Van Gogh Museum, an accepted proponent of Van Gogh history, legitimized the idea that the discovered gun

was "THE" weapon used in Vincent's shooting. Based on this notion, the bent and non-functional revolver recently came off a Paris auction block, as previously mentioned, for approximately \$183,000 USD. Trying to connect a gun found 60 to 70 years after the death of Vincent without a confirmed crime scene and no other provenance, is so far out of the realm of the rules of evidence and far-fetched that it is quite humorous. No bullet casing was found in the gun, and the ejector rod was bent, making the gun unusable then as "dropped" (by Vincent?) or now. A more rational explanation is that the gun was either thrown there, after being disabled, or more likely, it was planted there for the very reason that it now has celebrity status at the time of MGM shooting the movie *Lust for Life*. Finding an old non-functioning rusted-bent example of such a common gun under such suspicious circumstances is proof of nothing [4].

### Who Owned the Lefauchaux Revolver?

There were several individuals of interest in the case who were known to have owned or possessed a firearm at the time. Some of the individuals, probable persons of interest, reported to own a gun include René Secrétan, Arthur-Gustave Ravoux, and Dr. Paul-Ferdinand Gachet and his son Paul Gachet Jr. Since the discovery of the gun, the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam has remained mum on any additional useful information about this key piece of potential evidence. As such, in addition to not knowing exactly where or when it was found, it is not known for sure who owned this firearm. Truthfully, even if it was possible to determine definitive ownership of the gun, there is still no proof of who actually fired it [5].

In 2016, the museum official, N. Bakker, stated: "The revolver with which [van Gogh] shot himself belonged to Arthur-Gustave Ravoux, owner of the lodging house where he was staying. It is not known how van Gogh came to have it."

The issue with this statement is that Adeline Ravoux had initially said her father sold his gun before the time Vincent was shot. It is also an arrogant assumption to claim that the rusted revolver found in a field after sixty years was the same one owned by M. Ravoux.

Oddly, a few years later, Adeline said that the gun was her father's revolver. No reason has ever been provided as to why she chose to change her initial, unfiltered story. Was it possible that she was coached in order to press a narrative of suicide?

As for René Secrétan, when asked about the gun in question sixty-seven years later, he claimed that the gun he owned was a .380 caliber "pea-shooter," according to a 1957 article in *Aesculape* [6].

Further confirmation of the weapon and the caliber of the bullet, when found, could help to figure out whose gun might have been used, thereby pointing to a possible suspect known to be in Auvers-sur-Oise at the time Van Gogh was wounded [7].

### **Other Alleged Lethal Weapon Owners in Auvers at the Time**

Another question in determining the cause of Vincent's death is what is known for sure about the other possible weapons that could have been used? There were at least three known gun owners connected to Vincent in Auvers-sur-Oise around the time of his death.

The conclusion of the above analysis is that Secrétan and Ravoux are unlikely to be connected with Vincent's death. There is no evidence to show that the gun owned by Gustave Ravoux and the gun found rusted in the field some sixty years later are one and the same. There are conflicting stories as to the ownership of Ravoux's gun. If René's gun was indeed a .380 revolver, the gun found in the field could not possibly have been his. That leaves one known gun owner, Dr. Paul Ferdinand Gachet.

The doctor was also known to have possessed at least one gun, which he kept in a cabinet in his home. His daughter, son, and housekeeper, all stated Dr. Gachet's gun was still in the cabinet at the time of Vincent's death. Unfortunately, the police never validated anyone's stories. And we are unsure what model gun he had.

### **The Non-Functioning Status of the Found Revolver**

A fatal flaw with the theory that the discovered Lefauchaux revolver was the gun used to shoot Vincent van Gogh, is the rusted gun's functional condition. The "experts" argue that the revolver was discarded intact and in working order. Yet, upon a cursory examination, the gun does not appear to have been functional at discard placement [8].

The ejector rod has been purposefully bent over, rendering the weapon useless. Moreover, an unidentified embedded orange material was preventing the rotation of the cylinder. Furthermore, the revolver chamber does not contain a spent cartridge. The bent rod would prevent a cartridge from being removed as well.

How can this gun with a bent ejector rod and no spent cartridge be the gun used to shoot Vincent van Gogh and dropped at the time? These curiosities have led to the conclusion that the discovered gun is not the weapon that possibly shot Vincent. After further research into this

subject, it is a contention of this analysis that this weapon was intentionally placed in a field to purposely be "found" in order to drum up interest and buzz for the movie, *Lust For Life!* This film, about Vincent van Gogh, was being produced, coincidentally, at the same time and location as the surprise discovery of the gun.

### **The Need for a Modern Forensic Analysis of the Gun**

Though this Lefauchaux revolver has proven unlikely to be the gun, it should still be subjected to a modern forensic analysis by a qualified gunsmith familiar with vintage revolvers to correctly place it historically in the context of Van Gogh's death.

They need to extensively examine the gun itself, not photos, to determine if it was possible to fire the last chambered bullet. Then, if still present, extract the empty copper casing, providing answers as to the possible bullet's caliber in order to get closer to answering the questions above. It also needs to be determined if the Van Gogh Museum's claim that they have forensically examined the gun is viable.

### **The Analysis of the "Magic Bullet"**

One of the most important keys to solving the mystery of Vincent's death lies with the missing bullet. Its reported final resting place within Vincent's body has led this analysis to dubbing it the "Magic Bullet." Given that Vincent was right-handed, the most likely expected trajectory for the bullet from the entry wound would be to exit the left flank. However, as reported by Dr. Gachet and his son, the bullet settled in the midline. This would be, in itself, impossible unless the bullet made an amazing and magical internal deflection from the point of entry.

Sadly, without the existence of a bullet in hand or in the crime scene investigators' evidence bag, there is no proof that a gun was even used in this unsolved crime, further putting the museum's provenance of the Lefauchaux revolver into serious question and the claims made in the auction brochure.

### **Dr. Di Maio's Report**

After examining the extremely limited available and time-limited wound information, world renowned forensic pathologist, Dr. Vincent J.M. Di Maio, concluded that it was not possible for Vincent to shoot himself in the abdomen. His findings were primarily based on the colorful description of Vincent's wound, lacking any notation or awareness of a definite black powder burn. This would be a critical indicator

of the gun's proximity to the body and a necessary finding to corroborate a self-inflicted wound.

### The Killing Vincent Project Forensic Study

In a peer-reviewed study (Arenberg, IK, Di Maio, VJM, and Baden, M. American J. Forensic Medicine Pathology, 2020), the Killing Vincent Project (KVP) team presented results from firing the same model revolver that allegedly killed Vincent from various distances [9]. The resulting conclusion was that Vincent could not have shot himself within a reasonable degree of medical probability (greater than fifty percent) an accepted criteria today in most any criminal court by an expert. These were the first studies of their kind, and they corroborated the theoretical findings by Dr. Di Maio. This new study conducted in 2017 by the KVP team showed the importance of the presence or absence of a black powder burn surrounding the entry wound. This study solidified Dr. Di Maio's assertion that it was highly unlikely that Vincent shot himself [10,11].

### Conclusion

The assertion that a Lefauchaux seven-millimeter black powder revolver was the weapon that killed van Gogh remains little more than blatant speculation. The weapon, the smoking gun, as described, leaves more questions than answers. And the premise that Vincent was shot at all is still up for debate. The Lefauchaux revolver, whoever possessed it, is still the most likely contender as the gun used to kill van Gogh as it is the touchstone of this controversy and in effect it is the "smoking gun" in this cold case.

### Discussion

This presentation is an effort to create an evidence-based dialogue with the "deniers" of the murder of Vincent van Gogh. This forensic analysis focuses on a scientifically developed perspective and a challenge to those opinions based on gratuitous hearsay.

### Key Questions

- Why do the "deniers" keep repeating the same reasons for suicide, when they are easily undermined in the 'court of public opinion' or dismissed in a judicial setting?
- What would have to change in the presentation of Van Gogh's life and art if murder was accepted as the cause of Van Gogh's death?
- (For example, the ongoing exhibition by the Van Gogh Museum or other exhibitions by famous museums, like The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Exhibit: "Van Gogh's Cypresses" 5/22/23 - 8/27/23) or the Chicago Art Institute (Exhibit: "Van Gogh and The Avant-Garde:

The Modern Landscape") 5/14/23- 9/4/23 or Musee d'Orsay (Exhibit: "Van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise") 10/3/23 - 2/4/24.

- Given how heavily invested the "Van Gogh Business" is in the suicide narrative, for example, "martyr for his art," "mad genius," what would be the repercussions for this "ongoing and lucrative business" if it had to accept and adjust to the forensic conclusion of murder? Remember the curator told the biographers not to publish the murder theory as it would be a "blasphemy" to Vincent's legend implying damage to the museum's bottom line regarding Vincent memorabilia, book sales and even possibly attendance!
- How would Van Gogh enthusiasts change their understanding of Van Gogh, as a person and their interpretation of his art, if the cause of death was now generally accepted to be his murder?

### Conclusions: How and where to Attempt to Resolve these Persistent KEY Questions?

This is an Open Challenge to Martin Bailey's Ten Reasons (cf. References et alia) and all those deniers of Vincent's murder in the art world, to provide substantive evidence admissible in court by following the rules of evidence, especially a new forensic analysis, peer reviewed, either supporting the suicide theory, or alternatively confronting and directly eliminating the murder theory. Therefore, every statement in Martin Bailey's Ten Reasons needs to have evidence to support all the unsupported statements. It would be greatly appreciated if they would exclude all misleading and false, unproven comments and hearsay, speculation, and unverified statements from years later, from questionable and unreliable sources, particularly persons of interest. An open discussion of these issues would be welcome at an international media event.

The Killing Vincent Team would also look forward to a live meeting with Martin Bailey with an unbiased moderator to discuss openly and publicly "Martin Bailey's Ten Reasons for Van Gogh's Suicide" and his unsupported statement that murder is only a "myth." A great reprise venue on 60 Minutes, or any similar competitive opportunity in print (TIME), or any other interactive media is likewise welcomed. The Killing Vincent Team welcomes and commends all feedback to this article in LETTERS TO THE EDITOR or directly on the KILLING VINCENT website ([www.KillingVincent.com](http://www.KillingVincent.com)).

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