



Vincent van Gogh
(1853-1890)

The Langlois Drawbridge
(Le Pont de Langlois)

May 1888

no signature or date

oil on canvas

h 49.5 cm x b 64.5 cm

WRM 1197





Brief Report

The Langlois drawbridge, named after its attendant, was one of Van Gogh's favourite motifs in Arles; he depicted it in the spring of 1888 in a series of ten works using various techniques and from various perspectives. The Drawbridge in Cologne was painted on a white pre-primed canvas of the standard P 15 size (fig. 2). The fine, netlike cloth resembles the commercially available *toile étude* or *toile pochade* routinely used for studies at the time (fig. 11). Particularly noteworthy in this painting is the detailed planning of the motif, which is structured in three stages: infra-red reflectography reveals pencil lines which create a framework in the form of a "Union-Jack pattern" (figs. 6, 7). This in fact lays down the contours of a known van-Gogh aid, which he himself described as a "perspective frame" (fig. 15). What this framework looked like precisely, and how the artist used it, is known from drawings and descriptions in letters to his brother Theo: "So on the shore or in the meadow or in the fields one can look through it as through a window, the vertical lines and the perpendicular line of the frame and the diagonal lines and the point of intersection, or else the division in squares, certainly give a few basic markers, with the help of which one can make firm drawing, from the indication of the main lines and proportions - at least for those who have some instinct for perspective [...] Without this the instrument is of little or no use at all, and it makes one dizzy to look through it." [LT 223, 5/6 August 1882]. Once the artist had found a suitable view, he evidently placed the frame directly on the primed canvas and outlined its contours in pencil.

During the painting process, the frame itself was, according to a sketch by van Gogh, placed between the artist and the motif with the help of a couple of posts stuck in the ground [LT 222/254] (fig. 15). In this sense, the proof of the use of the frame can also be taken as an indication that the painting was executed *en plein air*. The use of this instrument could only be proved hitherto for twelve of his paintings in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, which all date from the spring and summer of 1887 [Hendriks 2005, p. 473]. The description "perspective frame" is misleading, at least for its deployment for the picture in Cologne, because in the composition no strict perspective rules were applied which are in any way oriented to the lines of the frame. Rather, the instrument served as a method for transferring the subsequent pencil drawing, in which he sketchily captured the contours of the bridge, the houses and a few figures. There then followed a very detailed India-ink drawing of the motif, which in many places was incorporated into the effect of the final picture (figs. 8, 13). In their manner and extent, the India-ink drawing resembles the subsequent drawing of the painting, also in India ink, which van Gogh enclosed in a letter to his artist friend Émile Bernard in July 1888 [F 1471, Van Gogh 2005, p. 250] (fig. 14). The subsequent application of paint was executed briskly and largely wet-in-wet, so that we can presume just one or at the most two sittings. The dynamic brushstrokes and the use of the brush handle or ferrule as a scratching instrument created, in a virtuoso manner, structure and plasticity, including some highly impasto areas.



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Picture support canvas

Standard format	P 15 (65.0 x 50.0 cm) horizontal; stencilled “15” on the canvas verso, left-hand bay, text from top to bottom (recognizable on a b/w photograph dating from 1961, today hidden by the lining, fig. 2)
Weave	tabby weave
Canvas characteristics	vertical 12, horizontal 13 threads per cm; very fine, open, almost net-like weave, pale in colour (fig. 11)
Stretching	original stretching not preserved; no stretch marks discernible
Stretcher	original stretcher with vertical centre bar
Stretcher depth	2.0 cm
Traces left by manufacture/processing	–
Manufacturer’s/dealer’s marks	none present

Ground

Sizing	undetermined
Colour	off-white
Application	primed before cutting to size and stretching; one coat or two at most, similar to <i>à grain</i>
Binding medium	presumably oil
Texture	the canvas structure remains dominant as a result of the thin ground (fig. 9); even coating; no trace of any application instrument; homogeneous layer with occasional embedded particles of black and transparent pale red particles (red lake?)



Composition planning/Underpainting/Underdrawing

Medium/technique

three stages in the planning of the picture are recognizable:

- 1) transfer of the contours of the “perspective frame” in pencil;
- 2) pencil drawing;
- 3) pen drawing in dark-brown ink, presumably carbon or iron gall ink (evidence: increasing transparency of the lines as IR wavelength increases) (figs. 6, 7, 8, 9, 13)

Extent/character

1) “perspective frame”: the outer and inner edges as well as the verticals, horizontals and diagonals of the frame were sketched in pencil on the ground; the outline of the frame was placed in the centre of the lower edge of the picture; the horizontal line represents the boundary between the bridge wall and the sky; the vertical line indicates the centre line of the picture and runs through one of the piers of the bridge; dimensions of the frame: h 45 cm x b 50 cm;

2) pencil: sketchy freehand drawing of the contours of the bridge, houses and some figures;

3) pen and dark-brown ink: detailed drawing of the contours of the bridge, houses, cypresses, figures and individual stones in the bridge walls; these lines are strongly integrated into the final effect of the picture and remain in many places as contours of the individual motifs, in the case of the carriage horse no paint at all was subsequently applied (fig. 8)

Pentimenti

directly adjacent to the right hand bank there are a number of pencil lines of the underdrawing which cannot be assigned with certainty to any motif, but there is probably a jetty or a boat which was not included in the subsequent painting (figs. 6, 7)



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Paint layer

Paint application/technique and artist's own revision

predominantly one or two layers of paint, mostly wet-in-wet or wet-on-dry with heavy impasto and dynamic brush-strokes (fig. 12); altogether very brisk and in places open painting with clearly visible areas of the ground which were left unpainted (fig. 4); the brushstrokes are oriented according to the motif in question, e.g. short impasto strokes for the depiction of the cypresses and grass, short linear scratches in the fresh paint to imitate the structure of the masonry (fig. 9); the sky and water surface were laid-in first, the figures, cypresses and bridge being left unpainted, only the woman with a parasol in the centre of the picture was painted on to a highly impasto light-blue area of the picture, and as a result comes across in particular relief (fig. 10)

Painting tools

flat bristle brushes of varying width, brush handles or ferrules

Surface structure

alternately smooth and highly impasto, in places in high relief (fig. 3)

Palette

visual microscopic inspection reveals: pale yellow, medium yellow, medium orange, medium red, medium blue, dark blue, pale green, dark green, dark bluish-green, white and black only in blends, all in all pure colours were rarely used, blends are the norm
VIS spectrometry: chrome yellow(?), cadmium yellow(?), chrome orange(?) or iron-oxide red(?), vermillion, emerald green, chromic oxide green, viridian, Prussian blue, ultramarine

Binding mediums

presumably oil

Surface finish

Authenticity/condition

the painting is varnished, originally presumably unvarnished



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Signature/Mark

When? no signature present

Autograph signature –

Serial –

Frame

Authenticity uncertain; frame is historical; clues to van Gogh's intentions as to framing a picture in the Langlois-drawbridge series [F 397] can be found in a letter to Theo dated 2. April 1888 [LT 473, Hoenigswald 1988, pp. 368-370]

State of preservation

The painting was restored in 1949 and 1961, and in 1961 given a wax-resin lining; the remains of an old brown varnish can be found in the depths of impasto areas; a clear age-related craquelure; in the region of the cypresses and on the left-hand riverbank there are areas of visible ground which have been selectively overpainted; larger losses of paint in the cypresses and the left-hand riverbank; some crumbling impasto regions and pressure marks; the chalk-white ground contains red transparent pigment particles (lake?), so that it is possible that the ground was originally pale pink and some bleaching has occurred.

Additional remarks

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Literature

The Drawbridge series comprises the following works: oil paintings F 400, F 397, F 571, F 570, F 544 (today a fragment); watercolour: F 1480; drawings: letter B2, F 1416v, F 1470, F 1471;

The perspective frame is mentioned or referred to in the following letters and drawings: B7, LT 219, LT 222, LT 223, LT 469, LT 500, F 1637v

- De la Faille 1970: Jacob-Baart de la Faille, The works of Vincent Van Gogh, his paintings and drawings, Amsterdam 1970
- Erpel 1967: Erpel, Fritz (Hg.): Sämtliche Briefe von Vincent van Gogh, 2 Bd., Zürich 1967
- Hendriks/Geldorf 2005: Ella Hendriks, Muriel Geldorf, Van Goghs Antwerp and Paris picture supports (1885-1888): reconstructing choices, in: Art Matters 2 (2005), pp 39-75
- Hendriks 2005: Ella Hendriks, Van Gogh's use of the perspective frame in his Paris paintings, in: The 14th triennial meeting The Hague 2005, Preprints, Vol. 1, pp 473-479
- Hoenigswald 1988: Ann Hoenigswald, Vincent van Gogh, His frames and the presentation of paintings, in: The Burlington Magazine, Vol. 130, Nr. 1022 (1988), pp 367-372
- Pickvance 1984: Ronald Pickvance, Van Gogh in Arles, New York 1984
- Van Gogh 2005: Ausstellungskatalog Vincent van Gogh, The drawings, New York 2005
- Van Tilborgh/Hendriks 2006 I: Louis van Tilbourgh, Ella Hendriks, Van Gogh paintings, Antwerp and Paris 1885-1888, Vol. 2, Amsterdam 2006
- Van Tilborgh/Hendriks 2006 II: Hendriks, Ella, Tilborgh, Louis van: New views on Van Gogh's development in Antwerp and Paris. An integrated art historical and technical study on his paintings in the Van Gogh Museum = Nieuwe visies op Van Goghs ontwikkeling in Antwerpen en Parijs. Een geïntegreerde technische en kunsthistorische studie van zijn schilderijen in het Van Gogh Museum, 2 Bde., Diss., Amsterdam 2006
- Von Saint-George/Schaefer 2008: Caroline von Saint-George, Iris Schaefer, Bildplanung und Unterzeichnung von Gemälden der Impressionisten und Postimpressionisten aus der Sammlung des Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, in: Zeitschrift für Kunsttechnologie und Konservierung, no. 2 (2008), pp 261-273

Source of illustrations

Figs. 14 + 15: www.vggallery.com

All further illustrations and figures Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud



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Examination methods used

- | | |
|--|--|
| ✓ Incident light | ✓ VIS spectrometry |
| ✓ Raking light | – Wood identification |
| ✓ Reflected light | – FTIR (Fourier transform spectroscopy) |
| ✓ Transmitted light | – EDX (Energy Dispersive X-ray analysis) |
| ✓ Ultraviolet fluorescence | – Microchemical analysis |
| ✓ Infrared reflectography | |
| ✓ False-colour infrared reflectography | |
| ✓ X-ray | |
| ✓ Stereomicroscopy | |

Author of examination:	Caroline von Saint-George
Author of brief report:	Caroline von Saint-George

Date: 08/2005
Date: 09/2007



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Fig. 1
Recto



Fig. 2
Verso, collage of the
condition before the 1961
lining (top) and after
(bottom)



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Fig. 3
Raking light

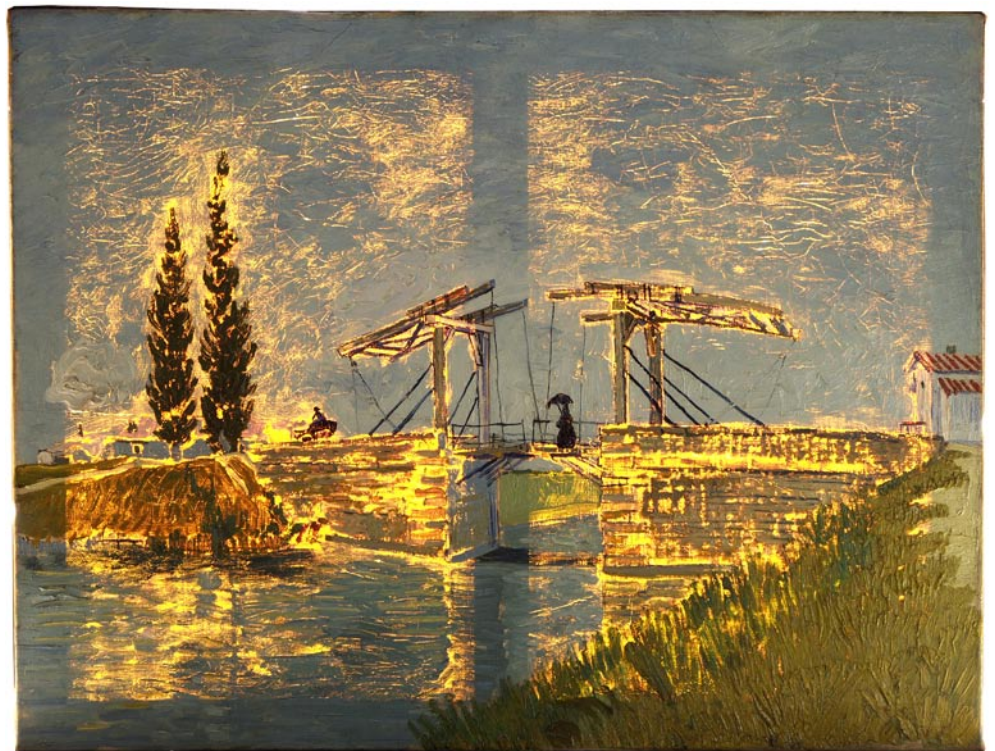


Fig. 4
Transmitted light



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Fig. 5
X-ray picture

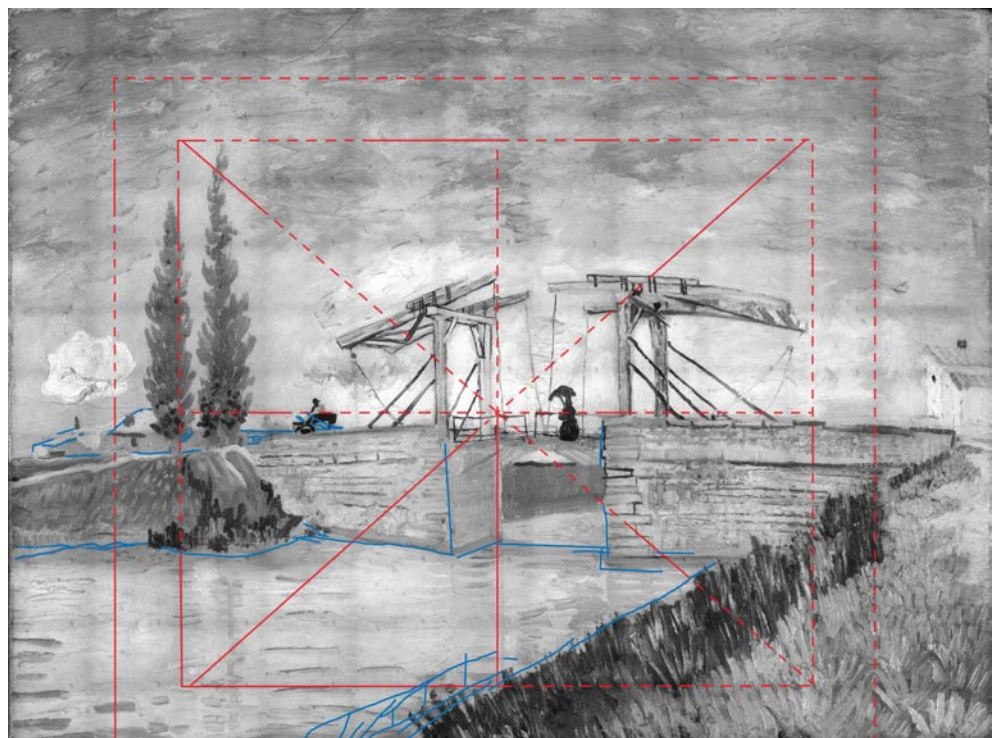


Fig. 6
IR reflectogram with
mapping of the
perspective frame (red)
and the subsequent
pencil underdrawing
(blue)



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Fig. 7
IR reflectogram: detail
of bottom left corner,
clearly visible pencil lines
of the perspective frame



Fig. 8
Detail of the horse-
drawn carriage, brown
India ink drawing
visible in the absence of
overpainting



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Fig. 9
Raking-light detail,
brushstrokes imitate the
surface structure of the
bridge masonry



Fig. 10
Detail of woman with
parasol, heavy impasto
and scratches in the
fresh paint, presumably
applied with the brush
ferrule at the same time
as the paint





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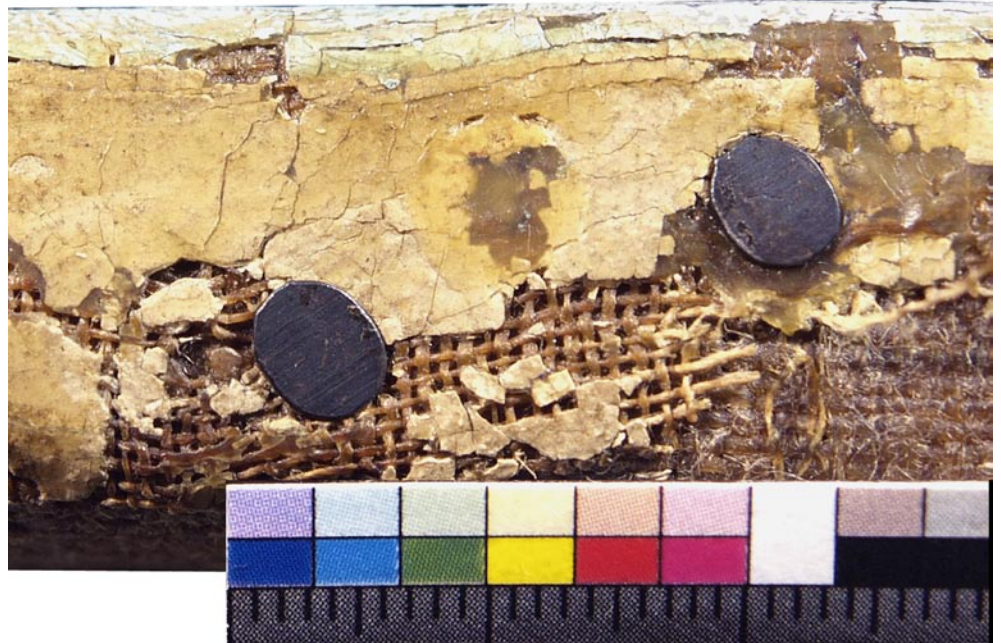


Fig. 11
Detail of the turnover
edge, net-like canvas

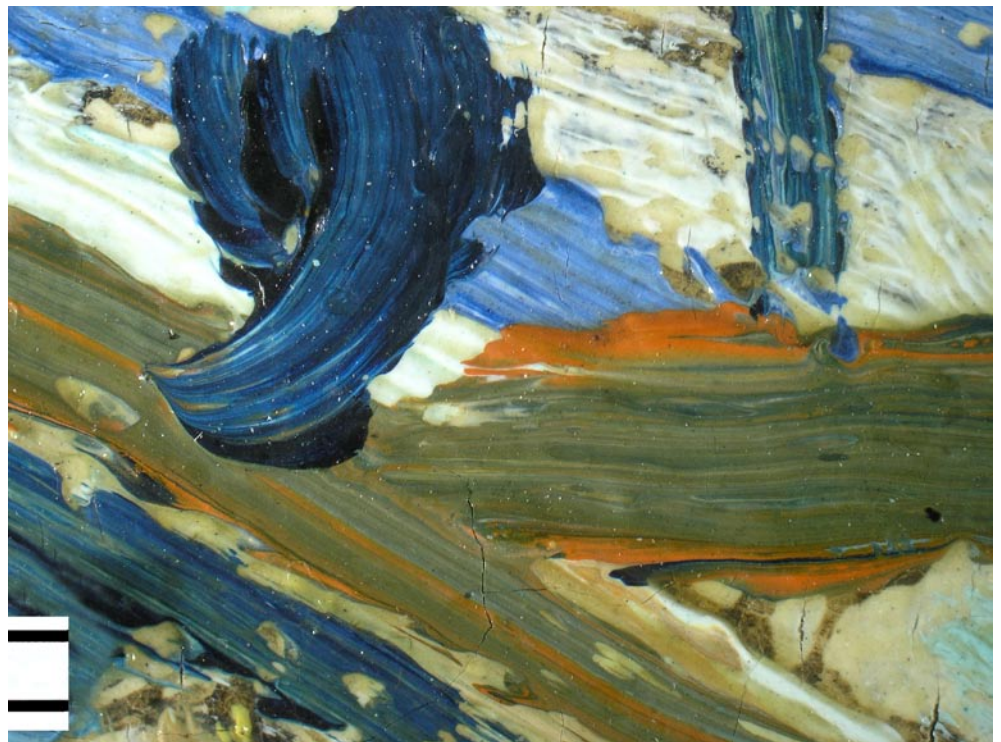


Fig. 12
Of the bridge structure,
paint applied wet-in-wet,
microscopic photograph
(M = 1 mm)



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Fig. 13
Brown India ink drawing
and traces of pencil,
microscopic photograph
(M = 1 mm)

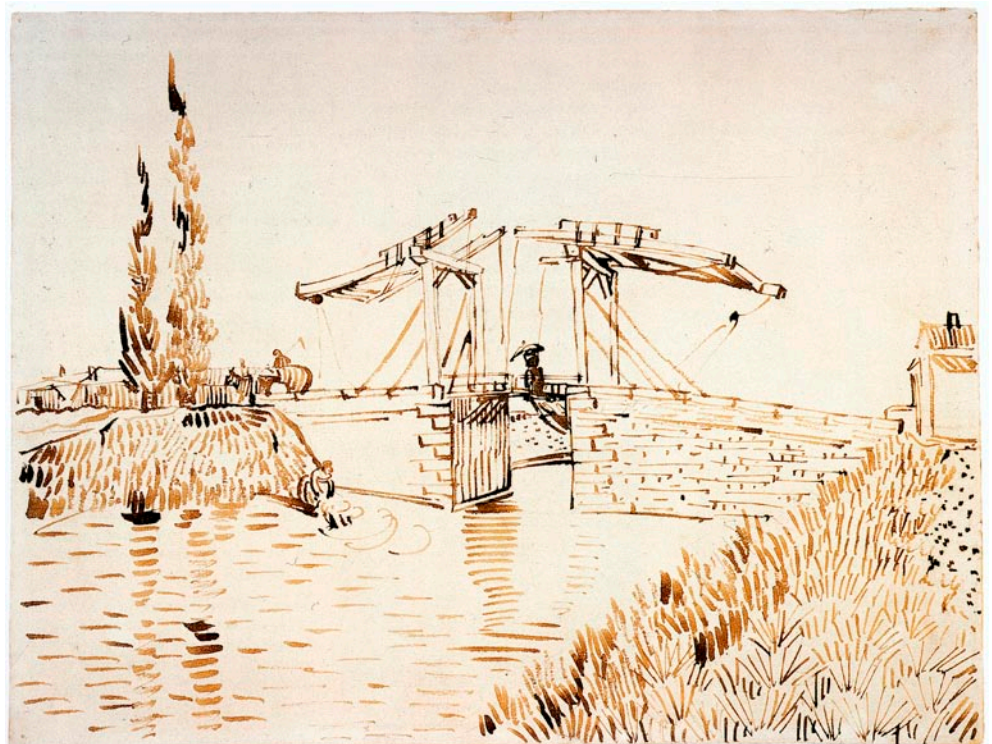


Fig. 14
Van Gogh, the Langlois
Drawbridge, July 1888,
24.2 x 31.8 cm, F 1471, Los
Angeles County Museum
of Art



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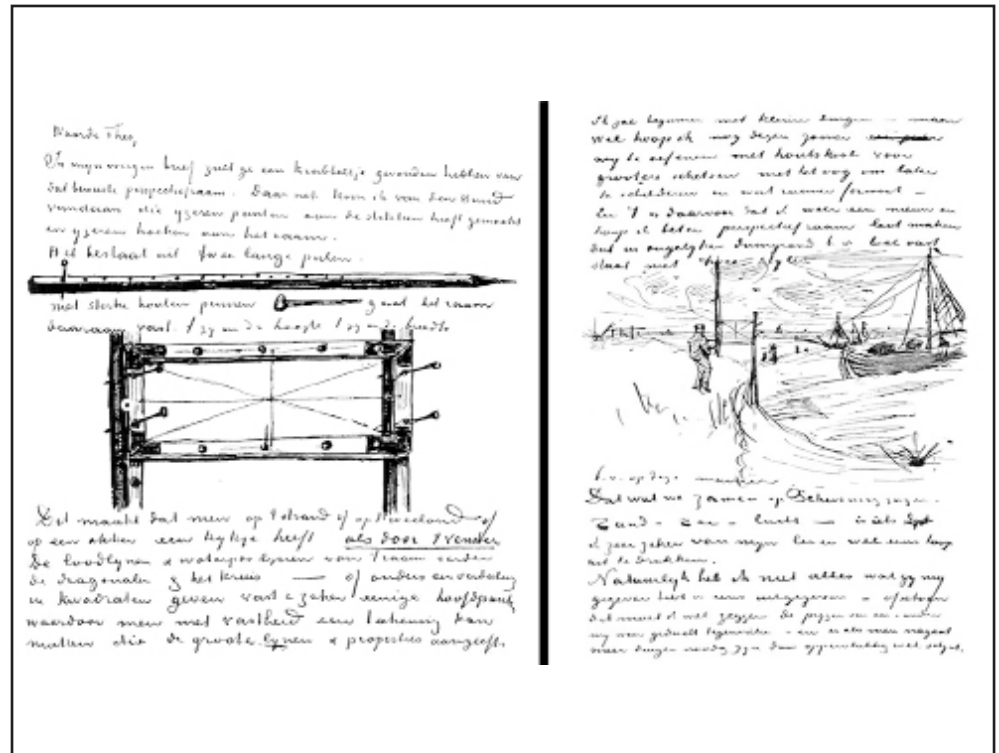


Fig.15
Sketches relating to the perspective frame in letters from van Gogh to his brother Theo, 1882, LT 222/254 and LT 255/ 223