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**Vincent van Gogh depicts a wide range of laborers and
peasants who gather to participate in a fixture of his
culture: the state-run lottery.**

Gathered by the Lottery

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

The group of people depicted in Vincent van Gogh's *The State Lottery* is entering a public lottery municipal building (identified by the sign to the left of the door) presumably to participate in the lottery. By the time the artist painted this image, the state lottery was a fixture in the culture of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The first documented European lottery occurred in the Low Countries and was associated with an Old Master painter. According to the Bruges town archives, the widow of the Netherlandish painter Jan van Eyck was paid two *livres* for the lottery distribution of her late husband's paintings on February 24, 1446.¹ During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries lotteries were held in Belgium to build chapels, canals, and ports, and in Genoa, Italy, to select six senators. By 1726 the Dutch had established the oldest state lottery that is still in operation today; they were the first to offer monetary prizes on odds.² It is argued whether the English word "lottery" comes from the Italian *lotto* or the Dutch *loterij*. Both of these words mean "fate."

Vincent van Gogh's *The State Lottery* is one of about 1000 watercolors, drawings, and sketches, and 1250 paintings that he produced during his brief ten-year artistic career. His works are surrounded by the legend that he was a tormented artist, only understood by his brother Theo who corresponded with him often. In his early life Van Gogh was trained in the professions of his family: clergy (his father) and art dealer (his uncle). He spent a short period of employment in an art dealership where he learned much about the Old Masters. There was a conflict between his religious beliefs and the commercial interests of the art dealership, and he was fired in 1876. We know that he enjoyed reading and worked in a London bookstore the following year. He studied to be an evangelist in Brussels and was a lay preacher, mostly for miners in a poor area of Belgium, until a life-altering trip to northern France began in 1879-1880.³

During that pilgrimage Van Gogh became very interested in the plight of European peasants after he visited Jules Breton and encountered the work of Jean-François Millet, two painters who were widely known for their sympathetic depictions of peasant life. Van Gogh started a collection of clothes worn by fisherman, peasants, and laborers. His works from this early period, which are considered dark and realist, are quite different from the later, more famous, expressionistic paintings.

While Van Gogh lived in The Hague after 1881, studying the work of such painters as Jozef Israëls and his cousin Anton Mauve, the Dutch state lotteries primarily appealed to the poor. This may help to explain Van Gogh's interest in the subject matter of *The State Lottery*.

Van Gogh uses a dark palette and tone in this composition. He depicts the majority of people in the large group with their backs to viewers. Our attention is drawn to the only faces that we can see, of a couple with their infant child and of three adults who are standing in line to the right. The juxtaposition of the infant and the white-bearded man indicate the wide range of ages in the group.

These individuals have come together not for fellowship and perhaps not for the common good, but to enter the building and participate in the state lottery. Given that the Netherlands has the oldest established lottery system, Van Gogh is probably not questioning whether a state lottery is an appropriate use of public funds (as asked by Julia Fleming in this issue). Instead he is depicting a slice of life, a common scene. From their appearance, however, this 1890s crowd may represent the "relatively small group of hard-core participants [who] purchase most tickets, so that five percent of the players account for over half of the revenues" and the poor who "spend a higher percentage of their income upon tickets than their affluent neighbors" that Fleming describes.⁴

NOTES

1 John Ashton, *A History of English Lotteries: Now for the First Time Written* ([New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893] reprinted Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2010), 4.

2 On the history of lotteries, see "Lottery History," North American Association of State and Provincial Lotteries (accessed June 3, 2011), www.naspl.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=content&PageID=12&PageCategory=11.

3 Biographical information on Vincent van Gogh is from Evert van Uitert, "Gogh, Vincent (Willem) van," *Grove Art Online (Oxford Art Online)*, accessed June 2, 2011, www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T033020.

4 Julia Fleming, "State Lotteries: Gambling With the Common Good," *Gambling Culture, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 40 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2011), 32.



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