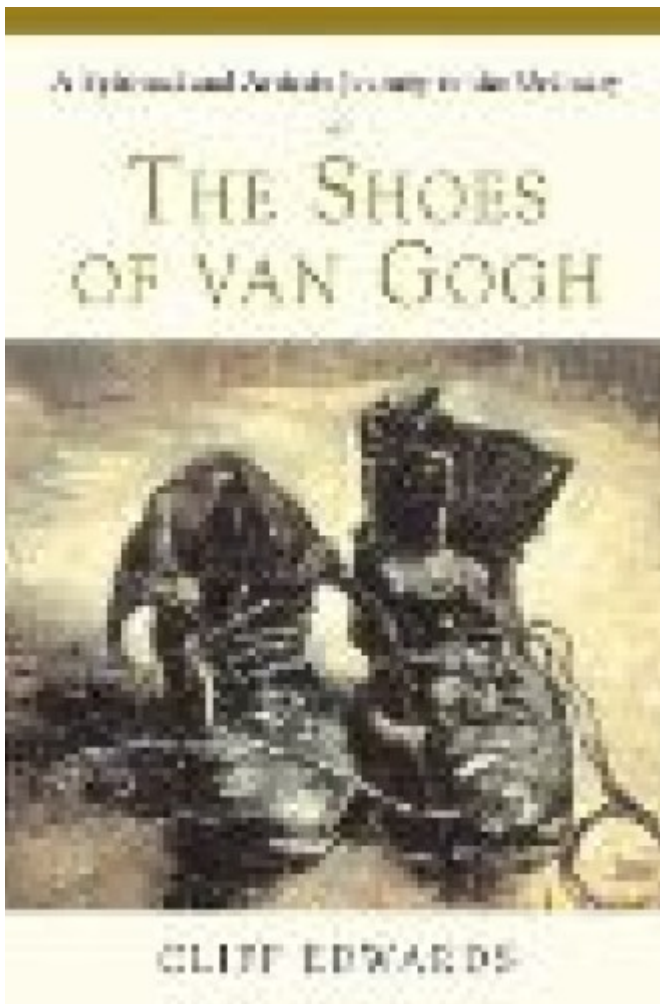


The Shoes of van Gogh

reviewed by [Suzanne E. Hoferkamp](#) in the [November 30, 2004](#) issue

In Review



The Shoes of van Gogh

Cliff Edwards

Crossroad

With Henri Nouwen serving as spiritual guide, Cliff Edwards offers a provocative and thoughtful reflection on Vincent van Gogh's religious sensitivity. He shows how the

painter captured a sense of the sacred in the most ordinary scenes.

The book is organized around Edwards's own spiritual journey with van Gogh, beginning with a trip to Japan, where he discovers the influence that Asian religious art had on van Gogh as well as other Western artists, especially the impressionists. His interest in this aspect of van Gogh moves him to study the artist's letters.

Through an exchange with Henri Nouwen, Edwards learns about the powerful impact van Gogh had on Nouwen's theology and spirituality, and is invited to look through Nouwen's collection of van Gogh materials at the Abbey of the Genesee in upstate New York. After Nouwen's death, Edwards makes a journey to the abbey, where he has the opportunity to read Nouwen's own volumes of van Gogh's writings with the theologian's comments in the margins. Edwards comes to see his own journey with van Gogh as a continuation of Nouwen's theological exploration.

As Edwards discloses hitherto unexplored areas of van Gogh's life, he recasts the artist as one of the noteworthy spiritual figures of the 19th century. Born in a line of Dutch Reformed clergymen, van Gogh originally intended to be a minister. Art was his second choice.

Rather than preach the gospel to the poor, as he had hoped to do, he resolved by means of painting to devote his attention to the ordinary, to the ignored and vulnerable people in his midst, and to the underside of life. After van Gogh picked up pencil and brush, his mission in life became a spiritual means of deliverance, of comfort and healing for others—a mission Edwards identifies with that of Isaiah's Suffering Servant.