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## Vincent Van Gogh

### Introduction

Born in Groot-Zundert, Holland, in 1853, Vincent van Gogh was a prolific painter whose iconic style is recognized by many. His devotion to art resulted in completion of over six hundred paintings, for which he compromised his physical well being to create. His artistic career began at the age of twenty-seven, and lasted only ten years before he died in 1890. His close relationship with his younger brother Theo aided the artist in his work, as he could rely on his brother for emotional support and encouragement, as well as financial assistance. Theo remained a fixture throughout his life, and were it not for him, Van Gogh would never have been able to produce art in the way that he did. Van Gogh wrote over 800 letters to family and friends, which provide tremendous insight into his life. Although people often refer to his psychological condition, it did not affect the quality of his work- Van Gogh was resilient and remained positive despite adversity.

### Earlier Work

Vincent van Gogh's love for humanity is reflected in his art and an initial dedication to the poor through religion. His religious fervor drove him to become a preacher, but he was dismissed from the missionary society for living a life in squalor like those he was preaching to. Van Gogh devoted himself to painting after other unsuccessful endeavors. His earlier works depict workers in the field immersed in manual labor. Instead of representing the workers as individuals, Van Gogh focuses on the collective. He shows them in their working attire to convey the human condition (Wallace, pg 23) and believed that their clothing reflected their character. He expresses the strains on their bodies and the action of labor. His colors consist of dark, earthen tones at this time.

During this period he created one of his more elaborate pieces, *the Potato Eaters* (1885), a painting depicting a group of peasants gathered to eat. The subjects are a composite of the peasants that he had met and painted, and so he depicts both a scene and a portrait of a group. Van Gogh writes of the piece, "I have tried to emphasize that these people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor, and how they have honestly earned their food. I wanted to give the impression of a way of life quite different from that of us civilized people" (Wallace, pg 38). The oil lamp illuminates the dark figures and allows the viewers to connect with the weary and melancholy faces of the subjects. He uses earthen colors to remind the viewers of the world outside and shows their worn and tough hands (Art Classics, pg 72). His fascination with "primitive" people is a theme in his work. Van Gogh was interested in the idea of roles of people, and while he made many individual portraits, he often focused on the group (Wallace, pg 23). Van Gogh returns to

this theme many times over the course of his lifetime, but *the Potato Eaters* is an illustrious example of his skill as an artist and his talent for evoking emotion.

## Paris

Van Gogh moved to Paris in 1886. It was here that he encountered the Impressionist painters who had a profound impact on his work. His paintings lightened considerably from the dark, brown hues of his output in Holland and Antwerp. Van Gogh became friends with Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Signac, Camille Pissarro, and notably, Paul Gauguin. Impressionists often worked together outside and utilized color, atmosphere, and short, divided brush strokes to represent light. Van Gogh's friends were supportive of his works, and many stood up for him at times when other colleagues and the public ridiculed or dismissed his paintings. Van Gogh was impressed with Gauguin's vibrant colors, but he was also influenced by Seurat, who employed a pointillist (or more accurately, divisionist) technique. Pointillism involved placing separated dabs of color side-by-side to create a blended effect when viewed from a distance. Adjacent complementary colors gave the appearance of light. In Paris, Van Gogh's colors transformed into the vibrant hues that classify his style. The term 'post-impressionist' is often applied to Van Gogh, who moved away from Impressionism's objective naturalistic approach and instead favored emotional expression. The term may be a matter of convenience more than anything. While he was influenced by the Impressionists, he maintained a style that remained uniquely his own.

## Japan's Influence

In the mid-nineteenth century, the bold colors and lines of Japanese prints inspired European artists. Van Gogh copied these prints and incorporated their style into his own work. He drew from their use of complementary colors and black (Art Classics, pg 84) and their two-dimensional composition, which portrayed subjects in flattened space and form and with attention to line quality (Art Classics, pg 102). Van Gogh was attracted to the exoticism and primitivism of Japan. He collected prints, and they made appearances in many paintings- through form, color, line, or even in portraits as illustrations of the prints themselves. In his *Self-portrait as Bonze* (1888), Van Gogh depicts himself with features of a Japanese Buddhist monk (Kodera, pg 198). Van Gogh used his self-portrait as an outlet for creative investigation. His unique representation of his self as someone else (and as a role) of is a form of self-exploration (West, pg 180). He rendered his eyes as narrower, and his head as rounder. In giving himself features of a bonze he also assigns himself a different personality (Kodera, pg 198). At the time of its conception, Van Gogh was imagining founding a community of artists. Van Gogh looks pensive, and in representing himself as a bonze, he "painted himself as an inhabitant of his ideal community" (Kodera, pg 203).

*Self Portrait with Easel* (1888) is another example of the progress of Van Gogh's work. His troubled face, painted in shadow evokes an emotive response from the viewer. The orange of his beard and the blue tones of his jacket are complementary colors which

could represent a contrast in personality (Shapiro, pg 48). Pointillist techniques are apparent in the complementary, short strokes of paint on his jacket, and the alternating direction of brush strokes adds to a restless feeling (Shapiro, pg 48). As Van Gogh depicts himself behind the easel, he solidifies his identity as a painter. However, exploration of roles is a theme in his work. In his *Self-Portrait with Grey Hat* (1887), he shows himself with a felt hat. In other self-portraits, he wears a straw hat, an item of clothing worn while working in the field. His depiction of himself in different items of clothing was an examination of societal roles. In dressing up in garments specific to a group, he removed himself from his natural context and became a character. Van Gogh's paintings in Paris evolved dramatically from his earlier work, and he would continue to strengthen the power of his brush strokes and style throughout his painting career.

## Arles

In 1888 Van Gogh moved from Paris to the South of France, a lighter and warmer atmosphere. He envisioned Arles as his Japan. However, his relations with the townspeople were strained. Due to Van Gogh's poor reputation in Arles as an eccentric, there was a lack of people who would sit for him. This thirst for subjects may partially explain Van Gogh's extensive use of self-portraiture. Van Gogh felt a constant compulsion to paint, and so he depicted what was around him. This did not hamper his creativity, however, and it was not uncommon for Van Gogh to make several versions of a painting, sometimes as many as six or more. Van Gogh may have also copied his own work to improve on a previous painting. He also may have had strong affection for the original, and therefore wanted to reproduce the image so that he could give paintings away (Hulsker).

Van Gogh befriended Joseph Roulin, a postman, in Arles. Roulin posed many times for Van Gogh and even offered his family. In the *Portrait of the Postman Joseph Roulin* (1888), Joseph Roulin is shown in full uniform. Inspired by Japanese prints, Van Gogh experimented with strong, dark outlines against flat surfaces (Art Classics, pg 100). Van Gogh conveys a straightforward and unstylized expression (Shapiro, pg 60) and also entertains the notion of roles. In a *Portrait of Armand Roulin* (1888), Van Gogh employs playful lines, analogous colors of green and yellow. With *Mother Roulin and her Baby* (1888), Van Gogh creates a simple portrait, with an interesting composition of a mother whose figure is only partially shown. The baby is the central figure, and it already shows signs of being affected by life, apparent in its furrowed brow (Shapiro, pg 86).

In his piece, *La Mousmé* (1888), Van Gogh painted a girl from Arles and gave her the nickname *la mousmé* after a character in *Madame Chrysanthème*. He highlighted her mousy features as a nod to affectionate term for Japanese girls (Kodera, pg 199). She holds an almond blossom, a delicate image and a connection to Japan's relationship with nature. The design of her jacket and skirt create a strong contrast against the monochrome jade background, and is a prime example of Van Gogh's strength with patterns and color.

While Japan was something new and exotic to Van Gogh in Paris, his *japonisme* took on a new meaning in Arles. Japan began to reflect a utopian ideal (Kodera, pg 189). Van Gogh rejected formal art institutions and instead he dreamed of opening up a "school

of the south”, an artistic commune, with Paul Gauguin as an instructor. Gauguin agreed and the two worked together from October to December in the Yellow House in Arles. Van Gogh had great respect for his friend and looked to him as a teacher. Van Gogh even adapted a drawing created by Gauguin with *L’Arlésienne- Madame Ginoux* (1888 or 1889). Van Gogh admired Gauguin’s work, and his reproduction was a reflection of his respect for Gauguin as an artist as well as a desire for new subjects. At the time, copying another artist’s work was not a matter of unoriginality or lack of skill. Rather, artists copied existing works for exercise and also because they admired the work (Homburg, pg 136). Van Gogh painted several versions of the café owner and he took some liberties but mostly stayed true to the original drawing.

However, in December collaboration had been too much for the pair. Tension had been building, and Van Gogh’s mental condition was unsteady. Following a breakdown involving Gauguin, Van Gogh infamously cut off a piece of his right ear lobe. As a result, Gauguin left Arles, signifying an end to their partnership. However, the two remained in contact and Van Gogh never lost sight of the idea of an artistic community. After the incident, Van Gogh painted two self-portraits, *Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889) and *Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe* (1889). These portraits show his strength as an artist through the control of composition and reflection of the situation. Van Gogh was aware of his illness, but he was lucid and very much in control when he painted. He was able to take something from a painful situation and translate use that emotion in his work. He is composed, and even somewhat detached from the situation, making the piece a “masterpiece of objectivity” (Shapiro, pg 168).

## Saint-Remy

In 1889, Van Gogh elected himself into a mental hospital, although he still made a considerable amount of paintings. His mobility was limited but he painted many landscapes and self-portraits during this time. *Self Portrait with Palette* (1889) and other self-portraits done in 1889 are comprised of very cool colors. The strokes in the background appear fast and anxious, adding to the emotional tone. Van Gogh’s face is controlled, but still expresses a sense of emotional complexity. His last self-portraits display a mastery of his techniques in his proficient ability to express feeling through color and brush strokes.

## Conclusion

Theo Van Gogh said of his brother, “It is as if he had two persons in him- one marvelously gifted, delicate and tender, the other egotistical and hard hearted.... It is a pity that he is his own enemy” (Shapiro, pg 79). Vincent Van Gogh’s illness eventually drove him to commit suicide in 1890. Despite his condition, his varying mental states had no affect on the quality (or quantity) of his work. His deliberate and remarkable pieces are evidence of his lucidity while he painted. Van Gogh’s story is the unfortunate tale of an artist unappreciated by his contemporaries. Van Gogh believed that art could be “not a tool but an agent of transformation for society and, at even a more basic level, of one’s experience in the world” (Art Classics, pg 10). He questioned how reality could be

portrayed and communicated ideas and subjective emotions through masterly use of color, form, and brush strokes.

### Annotated Bibliography

Art Classics: Van Gogh, 2005, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.

This book is one from a series on noted artists. It provides descriptions for selected works written by art historians along with an essay on his life and art.

Grisham, Esther E. "Instructional Resources: Four Self-Portraits." Art Education, 1993, National Art Education Association.

This is a brief guideline from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, written to aid the instructor in teaching students about Van Gogh. It uses one self-portrait of the artist as an illustration of the emotional aspects of his work.

Homburg, Cornelia. "Affirming Modernity: van Gogh's "Arlesienne"." Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art, 1992, Stichting voor Nederlandse Kunsthistorisches Publicaties.

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House, John. "Van Gogh's Portraits. Detroit, Boston and Philadelphia." The Burlington Magazine, 2000, The Burlington Magazine Publications, Ltd.

This article reviews an exhibition (*Van Gogh Face to Face*) of Van Gogh's portraits. While it critiques aspects of the installation, it also provides an overlook of his career.

Hulsker, Jan, "Van Gogh, Roulin and the Two Arlesiennes: Part I." The Burlington Magazine, 1992, The Burlington Magazine Publications, Ltd.

This the first of an installment that focuses on models that Van Gogh had painted multiple times, the Roulin Family.

Hulsker, Jan. "Van Gogh, Roulin and the Two Arlesiennes, a Re-Examination: Part II." The Burlington Magazine, 1992, The Burlington Magazine Publications, Ltd.

This is a continuation of the article listed above, with attention to the postman Roulin and Madame Ginoux.

Kodera, Tsukasa. "Japan as Primitive Utopia: Van Gogh's Japonisme Portraits." Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art, 1984, Stichting voor Nederlandse Kunsthistorisches Publicaties.

The author reflects on Van Gogh's work in Paris and argues that several portraits reflect his dream of an utopian artist society through imagery inspired by Japanese art.

Schapiro, Meyer, Vincent van Gogh, 1950, Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

This text provides an overview of Van Gogh's life as well as explanations and insights to a range of paintings.

West, Shearer. Portraiture. 2004, Oxford University Press.

This book explores the history of portraiture in the context of Europe and North America. West addresses functions and conventions of portraiture, as well as trends.