

## July 27, 1890

On July 27, 1890, a red haired young man of 37 had walked out into a grassy field with his canvas, easel and oil paints. Within minutes, the crack of a revolver was heard though out the seemingly empty countryside. The birds flew up from the wheat fields and scattered, then settled back down to the stalks. Life went on just as before.

Born in 1853, Van Gogh wrote approximately 847 written letters and prolifically painted throughout his life. What is relevant is the correlation in the simplest of observations of specific paintings to specific excerpts from his letter that give insight into the cycling state of his mental health. Dr. Jan Hulsker, one of the world's foremost authorities on the letters of Vincent van Gogh, once wrote of them, " [His letters] enable us to know more about Van Gogh's life and mentality than we do of any other artist. The letters form a running commentary on his work, and a human document without parallel."

Those letters correlated with the psychodynamics as seen in his renderings and paintings point to often blending of ground and boundary lines through his use of color and imagery ( sans clear image boundaries) with depression and sometime verbalized suicidal ideation in his letters. Boundaries of depicted images are define as the viewer being able to see quite definitively the image as separate to the surrounding images. For example, if one paints green faces and green background, but does not define which is which than the boundaries become lost and the images are no longer discernable for whatever they were meant to be and the statement becomes lost. That is to say once the painter does this he may have well painted a 2 dimensional surface in one flat color. This

too has definition in the psychoanalytic world of psychodynamics, but is not within the scope of this paper.

More precisely, most interestingly observed are 1.) the time frames between depressive episodes were basically consistent, 2.) with the deterioration of his mental state in his paintings that can be correlated with the 3.) depressed thoughts revealed in Van Gogh's letters to his brother during that time. The reminder can be left open to interpretation and further exploration through reading in the bibliography used for this report for the reader.

Example #1: Rosebush in Blossom, Arles, April 1889 (reveals diffused ego boundaries by the lack of definitive objects painted). Essentially one must look closely to determine one shape from another. This in psychiatric terminology suggests that the painter was losing his ability to differentiate his reality from his fantasy, with his possible preoccupations around death. In his correspondence to Theo his brother Van Gogh says, "If I were without your friendship, they would drive me remorselessly to suicide, and coward that I am, I should end by committing it." Example #2: In a letter to Theo June 9 1889, "It is queer that every time I try to reason with myself to get a clear idea of things, why I came here and that after all it is only an accident like any other, a terrible dismay and horror seizes me and prevents me from thinking." One of his paintings which exemplify his depression in the previous month was "Corner in the Garden of Saint-Paul Hospital, A" and in June 1889 "Starry Night", which makes use of the cypress as does several other paintings during this time frame. There has lapsed a time frame of approximately 2 months. Bi-polar disorder cycles in a typical idiosyncratic pattern in an individual, though is lodged within a consistent time frame. If one follows this thought

through the next two months in Van Gogh's behavior fluctuations in behavior may be observed, example #3 is noted in a September painting, "Wheat Field with Cypresses" correlated with an excerpt in a September letter to Theo, "And I can already see myself one day in the future enjoying some small success, and missing the solitude and the anguish as I watched the reaper in the field below through the iron bars of my cell. It's an ill wind . . .

Dr. Humberto Nagera, in his book Vincent Van Gogh, A Psychological Study, states that there is unconscious symbolism that is revealed in Van Gogh's work through the cypress tree "He became obsessed with his paintings of Cypresses, well known symbols of death", suggesting "art is both the conscious and the unconscious at work." Art, like, dreams give way to both the manifest and the latent symbolism. H. Nagera, M.D. states "Even more clearly, the reaper heralds his own destruction and represent a transposition on canvas of his innermost conflicts about death." There seem to be approximately two-month intervals of suicidal ideation and depression that can contrast these examples and correlate to extreme mood swings suggesting bi-polar disorder. The length of cycles varies and then stabilizes, however finds a pattern that is consistent for sequential time frames. In the DSM IV- TR there are six separate criteria for the diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder based on the initial episode, however, from this point on, they seem to be separated by duration, severity, recurrence. Within each of these criteria, bipolar disorder is consistently defined as "mood symptoms cause significant distress or impairment in social occupational or other areas of important functioning". Recurrence is defined as either a change in polarity from depression or interval of at least 2 month intervals without manic symptoms." There are innumerable examples that can be examined,

however, I do not pretend to have even on the minutest scale, have addressed the enormity of this subject, but have only hoped to pique an interest in it. Any further evaluation can be supported by additional paintings correlated with letters and time intervals between depressive and manic episodes. These intervals do, also, seem to vary and this is logical based on the nature and the potential severity of the untreated biological mental disorder of bipolar behavior. Such changes be they longer in duration or shorter, still are consistent with this diagnosis due to the stresses he repeatedly refers to in terms of his financial stress, his inability to maintain stable relationships with anyone outside his brother, which even that was at times strained. The nature of his psychodynamics appears to be in part dependent on the biological rhythms of biochemistry and also on the situation that may have exacerbated them. It is true that it is still unknown by the psychiatric community which comes first, the disease and dysfunction within society or the environment and how we psychologically experience it at all levels, spiritual, emotional, social and physical that triggers the behavior and the disease itself. When these indicators fail to give us very important information to gain insight into unseemly behavior, it helps to then look at the non-verbal expression of the individual, that being the artwork. It is a powerful tool and in the case of Van Gogh had we had developed this expertise, he might have lived to paint longer into his shortened life, as he once stated” ah...I wonder how many more paintings there might be in me before I die.”

## **Bibliography**

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