

**Question 2: Describe the development of the impressionist movement from Van Gogh to Kandinsky and Klee.**

If you look at Van Gogh's work, such as the famous 'Van Gogh's Sun Flower' and look at Kandinsky's abstract work like 'Black Strokes', you will not imagine that these two works of the two artists do actually have connections. This essay will explain clearly the stages of development from Van Gogh to Kandinsky and Klee. We will first discuss the style of Van Gogh's art and how he inspired the next generation and how the next generation then influenced the next next generation.

Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) was called a 'Post-Impressionist' even though he was in the same generation as the Impressionists. He was painting at the same time with the Impressionists but his works were completely new styles. He believed that that Impressionism did not provide with enough freedom to express his emotions. Since this was his main concern, he is later called an 'Expressionist'. The purpose of Van Gogh was to paint about how you feel, not what the eyes see, in another word, to paint to express his emotions. Let us have a look at some of Van Gogh's work to see how he expresses his emotions in his paintings.



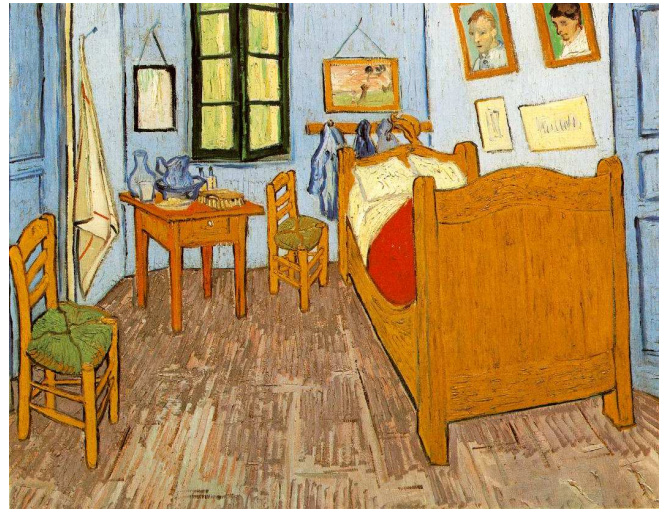
*Figure 1 Wheat Field and Cypress Tree by Van Gogh*

In "Wheat Field and Cypress Tree" (*Figure 1*), everything is distorted. Everything looks like it has powerful movement in them. The wheat field is like a stormy sea. The trees look like the flame of candlelight burning wildly. The hills and cloud all have movements of strong waves. Altogether, it makes the picture look very expressive but it is not only the form that makes it expressive but also the colours that express the content of his picture. "Yellow, for example, meant faith or triumph or love to Van Gogh, while carmine was a spiritual colour and cobalt was divine one. Red and green, on the other hand, stood for the terrible human passions"<sup>1</sup>. In my opinion, this painting reflects Van Gogh's confused or perhaps his angry feelings, according to my knowledge that Van Gogh is a very sad person.

Nevertheless, there are paintings that Van Gogh expressed brightness and happiness. For example, 'Sun Flower', 'The Room', 'Café Terrace at night' and 'Sower with setting sun'.



**Figure 2** *Sun Flower by Van Gogh*



**Figure 3** *The Room by Van Gogh*

'Sun Flower' (Figure 2) shows a bright, happy-looking flower which is the most expensive of today's art. Because of the bright colour of the flower, it makes the flower look lively. We can sense the feeling of the joyfulness, blissfulness and the beauty of the happy emotion. I think it is because of this happy expression of Van Gogh in the 'Sun Flower' that makes many people today would like to have this painting in their house. This painting expresses happiness whenever you look at it. Van Gogh again uses the bright colours to paint his bedroom in Arles (Figure 3), South of France. He made this very simple because he painted this with mainly primary colours. The room looks very cheerful and very cartoon-like. It shows that he was in a bright mood when he painted it and it also shows that he likes his room in Arles.

**Figure 4** *Café Terrace at night by Van Gogh*







*Figure 5 Sower with Setting Sun by Van Gogh*

Both 'Café Terrace at Night' and 'Sower with Setting Sun' were painted when Gauguin was living with him which was a happy period of his life. In 'Café Terrace at Night' (*Figure 4*), he went out to paint at night which we can say that he was the first to paint at the night time outdoor. The lights from the café are very bright and he painted the stars in the sky very big. The stars look unnatural but he totally expressed his happiness here. There are people in the café. We do not often see people in Van Gogh's paints as he focused mainly on landscape painting. But here, we see people in the café enjoying their time. This makes it even clearer that he was extremely happy. Another happy and warm painting, 'Sower with Setting Sun' (*Figure 5*), was very popular. He expressed happiness in different way this time. He switched the colour of the cornfield and the sky. The cornfield is blue and the sky is bright golden. Again it is unnatural but it makes the viewers feel the warmth and the joyful feeling when looking at it because the sky is so bright golden. The sun is so bright even it is setting. It seems as if he has been having such a good day that he wants it to last forever.

*Figure 6 Starry Night by Van Gogh*



‘Starry Night’ (*Figure 6*) is my favorite work of Van Gogh and it is also one of the last few works of Van Gogh’s life. In my opinion, ‘Starry Night’ is the most expressive of all. He painted this after all his suffering in life; for example, the sadness after Gauguin left him and the loneliness in the psychiatric hospital. In ‘Starry Night’, he painted the little village he was living in after he left the hospital. Everything looks peaceful in the village but up above in the sky, things are going out of control. He expresses here that he wants to be peaceful but then there is something in his head that is completely out of his control. His mind is beyond his reach. I believe that after all the suffering in his life, it made him understand life and his own mind more and so he made Starry Night optimistic and beautiful indeed.



*Figure 7 Wheat Field with Crows by Van Gogh*

The last work of Van Gogh was ‘Wheat Field with Crows, July 1890’ (*Figure 7*), “Van Gogh himself offered no clue to the private meaning of this picture – if it indeed had one – other than sadness and extreme loneliness”<sup>2</sup>. The black colour in the stormy dark cloud represents death. He expresses all the feelings he had of himself in this painting. We can see that this painting is no longer optimistic like Starry Night. Sadly, Van Gogh was so lonely that he committed suicide.

None of Van Gogh’s paintings were sold and his talent was not noticed during his lifetime. After his death, a German artist called ‘Munch’ (1863-1944) was interested and influenced by Van Gogh’s expressive style. However, Munch’s style differs a little from Van Gogh’s. Munch’s paintings are like caricatures. Caricatures are cartoon version of things and they usually look funny but Munch painted caricatures in unpleasant way to express extreme emotions.





**Figure 8** *The Scream by Munch*

‘The Scream’ (*Figure 8*) was his most famous work. It shows a person who looks like a skull screaming on the bridge and she/he is expressing a very clear emotion of fear. It is like the very terrifying fear that we sometimes feel in nightmare. Munch expresses the ugliness of this emotion as we can see by her/his face with mouth open wide. “The rhythm of the long, wavy lines seems to carry the echo of the scream into every corner of the picture, making of earth and sky one great sounding board of fear”<sup>3</sup>

Most of Munch’s paintings are unpleasant. This may be because he himself is a sad character which we can sense this from his ‘Self-Portrait with burning cigarettes’ (*Figure 9*). In his self-portrait, the smoke of the cigarette is burning almost everywhere. The smoke and fire seems to represent hell and it shows that he is having an internal pain. It is like the burning hell is inside his mind.

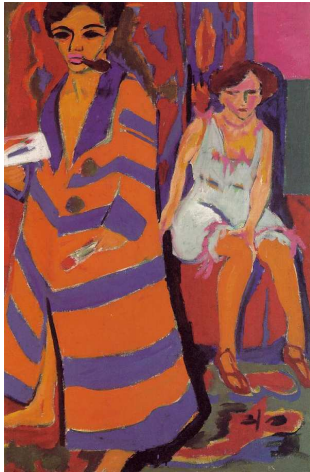


**Figure 9** *Self Portrait with burning cigarettes by Munch*

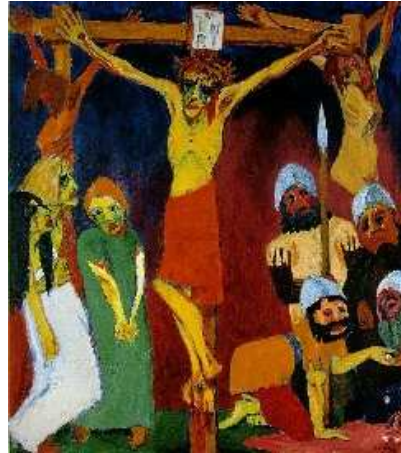


**Figure 10** *Puberty by Munch*

In the work 'Puberty' (*Figure 10*), a girl just discovered her body for the first time. Munch expressed uncertainty on her face and painted the shadow to show the girl's fear of growing up. Maybe when Munch was growing up himself, he had to go through many suffering so he painted this.



**Figure 11** *Self Portrait with a model by Kirchner*



**Figure 12** *Crucifixion by Nolde*

Although some of the viewers feel that Munch's painting were horrible, unpleasant and scary because they were still used to beautiful arts, Munch inspired a group of German painters. They were called 'Die Brücke' or 'The Bridge' (1906). They took up his ideas and take expressionism a step further. They would not paint with their eyes but their heart. In Kirchner's 'Self portrait with a model' (*Figure 11*) and in Nolde's 'Crucifixion' (*Figure 12*), the way they express are similar. They use bright colour like Van Gogh but they don't paint with eyes, but with the heart so that means they just paint what they feel. If you look at Van Gogh's work again, you will see that Van Gogh's expressive styles are much neater than that of the Bridge. Van Gogh's work are expressive and at the time beautiful. The Bridge did not care about beauty in their paintings; they only focused on expressing what they feel.

We are now going to move on to discuss the most important group of the expressionist painters, which was founded at about the same time as the Bridge. "The most daring and original step was taken in Germany by a Russian, Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)"<sup>4</sup>. He was the leading member of a group of Munich artists called 'Der Blaue Reiter' or 'The Blue Rider' in English. It is mentioned earlier that he is the one who took the most important and most daring step further from expressionism. His painting purpose was, similar to the other expressionists, to express emotions but Kandinsky said why must we draw an image in order to express in paintings. He believed that painting colour and shape could already express emotions. He was the first to move towards abstract arts.

In 1910, it was his important year. He got with other artists and formed 'The Blue Rider' and produced a book called 'Concerning the Spiritual in art'. It expresses his new revolutionary theory for art. He said music still sounds good without lyrics in them so it should be the same with art. Art can still be beautiful without visual images. In 'Black strokes, 1913' (*Figure 13*), it is completely abstracted. There is no visual image. He just used pure paint with black ink in front of the paint. Although we are not so sure of the meaning of this but we can sense that it really can express feelings as well as the paintings with images.



*Figure 13 Black Strokes by Kandinsky*



*Figure 14 Gorge Improvisation by Kandinsky*

'Gorge Improvisation' (*Figure 14*) is a complete abstract expressionism. If you look above, you can see that 'Gorge Improvisation' is more abstracted than the 'Black Strokes' and is also more complex in form and style. It can be interpreted to be many things. It really depends on the viewer's imagination. There are boats and rivers all over but we don't know what this really means. However, we sense that this is a happy painting because of the fantastic use of colours. For me, when I look at it, I feel something fun in it and something very joyful. Below (*Figure 15*) is another abstract composition of Kandinsky but this one does not seem to be a very happy one. It looks rather confusing and somewhat very chaotic in my opinion. This is Kandinsky's excellent ability's to express his emotions through abstract art.

*Figure 15 Composition IV by Kandinsky*





During the years 1921 to 1933, Kandinsky was at an architecture school, the Bauhaus, teaching art. After a couple of year in the Bauhaus, he style became geometrical, which was influenced by the Bauhaus. As we can see in 'The Red Oval' (*Figure 16*), the shapes become clearer and he used fewer colours now, not so many colours like in the 'Gorge Improvisation'. The geometrical shapes can represent whatever you want it to. Kandinsky's geometrical style is more obvious in 'Several Circles' (*Figure 17*). There are just simply few circles but he managed to create harmony in the painting and there is balance of light and colour too.



**Figure 16** *The Red Oval by Kandinsky*



**Figure 17** *Several Circles by Kandinsky*

Another important artist in 'The Blue Rider' was Klee (1879-1940). His friendship with the painters Kandinsky and Macke influenced him to join Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider). A turning point in Klee's career was his visit to Tunisia with Macke in 1914. He was so overwhelmed by the intense light there that he wrote:

"Color has taken possession of me; no longer do I have to chase after it, I know that it has hold of me forever. That is the significance of this blessed moment. Color and I are one. I am a painter."<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 18** *The Red and White Domes by Klee*

This is what he painted from the trip to Tunisia. 'The Red and White Dome' (*Figure 18*) is totally abstracted but Klee's style is different



from Kandinsky. He painted squares with colours like jigsaws. In this painting, Klee managed to create harmony in it even we can't see what picture he is trying to paint because they are all in puzzles.

Klee's later works are usually painted with heavy black lines which represent death and war. In the painting 'Revolt of the Viaduct' (*Figure 19*), the viaduct is separated from each other and came walking. This is because in 1937, the Nazi became powerful so Klee shows his feelings as an artist. Artists should not be controlled by government but should be individualistic to express own ideas. This painting protests against the Nazi control of art.



*Figure 19 The Revolt of the Viaduct by Klee*

Now as you can see the development over decades of expressionism, it is amazing and wonderful in the way that artists influence each other and how they take steps further. I can see that artists take up the idea of other artist and then add their own ideas in and they produce their style of art. Expressionism started with Van Gogh, the father of modern art who influenced expressionism, because he came up with a totally new style of art by himself. Then it was picked up by Munch who used Van Gogh's ideas to express unpleasant emotions through caricature. Then it was taken a step further by the Bridge who painted with their heart. Then Kandinsky who took the most daring step, he expressed emotions in paintings without using images but only shapes and colour which then led to abstract expressionism. I believe that this is not the end of the development of expressionism. There are many artists in later periods that took up these ideas that led to today's art style. As mentioned in the beginning, the work of the two artists, Van Gogh and Kandinsky, seem to have no connections but they actually do. I think that even though the development of expressionism changed in styles over the decades but one thing that always stayed there was the fantastic use of bright colours. If you notice, you can see that almost all use bright colours and all of their paintings are just very expressive.

## **Reference**

- 1) *H.W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, History of Art, sixth edition, United Kingdom, Thames and Husdon Ltd, 2001*
- 2) *Richard Kendall, Van Gogh's Van Goghs, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, p. 140*
- 3) *H.W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, History of Art, sixth edition, United Kingdom, Thames and Husdon Ltd, 2001*
- 4) *H.W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, History of Art, sixth edition, United Kingdom, Thames and Husdon Ltd, 2001*
- 5) *<http://www.oir.ucf.edu/wm/paint/auth/kee/>*

## ***Lecture notes***

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### **Word Count:**

***2,646 words***

