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Art Appreciation

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Starry Night at St. Rémy

Vincent van Gogh's Starry Night at St. Rémy of June 1889, expresses the comforting power and spirituality of the infinite night sky over the humbler, earthly brand of nature through a synthesis of exceptional visual power, elements of religious allegory, and of modern spiritualism. This work is the product of van Gogh's refusal to depict the purely imaginary, but willful manipulation of what is real in order to achieve a more powerful work, both visually and through symbolism and allegory. Starry Night is more powerful than van Gogh's literal Agony of Christ would have been because, in separating itself from imagery that is strictly religious in its connotations, he was able to saturate the work with cultural and literary meanings that could appeal to a society no longer confined to the rhetoric of organized religion. Moreover, the work is so visually effective in its depiction of a reassuring yet euphoric mood that it need not rely on subject matter for audience response. Starry Night is the product of a long and intensive thought process, and is a carefully constructed synthesis of culture, religion, science, aesthetics, and compositional elements.

What does van Gogh attempt to define in his painting, Starry Night at St. Rémy – through my interpretation it reveals a complex view of real world essentials, manipulated to communicate a sense of calm within the universe. In doing so, van Gogh drew upon cultural, and biblical

sources to enable himself to present a scene that is composed of facts synthesized and altered to enhance mood and meaning.

Starry Night at St. Rémy is an oil-on-canvas, (29 x 36 1/4" (73.7 x 92.1 cm)) depiction of an unusual, chaotic, star-studded night sky above a hilly landscape upon which stand the bony architectural forms of a small town. In the left foreground, pressed close to the picture plane, is a dark, flame-like cypress that twists upwards into the sky, dividing the heavens. Below and to the right, a spindly church tower just barely pierces the horizon like a tiny needle, dwarfed by the vastness of the rolling sky. Van Gogh paints the tree and the sky with overlapping, rapid, and curving strokes that create a great sense of vibrant, swirling motion. The hills and olive trees that line the town he executes with a similar but more restrained, thinner brush stroke that subjugates them to the sky and the suggestive tree in the foreground. Meanwhile, van Gogh paints the town in straight, relatively meager diagonals and horizontals, paying little attention to detail and surrounding the buildings with heavy black outlines. The church is the only building that deviates from this approach, containing actual planes of color and evidencing a fairly complex outer structure. These features make the church the most motionless building of all by denying it the motion of the brush strokes and giving it the solidity of a definite form.

Calming blue and purple dominate the painting's color scheme, with moonlight, starlight and a band of colored light close to the horizon containing mostly yellows, along with points of red and orange. The moon itself is a yellow-orange, while the two spiraling bands in the sky are greenish-blue in hue. Green tints highlight the glows of all the celestial features and tint the plant life on the ground. Greys and reds are characteristic of the houses, with orange indicating houselights, and powder blue filling in the lines of the church tower. Finally, the writhing lines

that define the dark green cypress' lines are a rich reddish brown and near-olive green, causing it to emerge as a sharply defined profile against the vivid colors of the sky and purple-greens of the landscape below.

Van Gogh was a naturalist who committed to representing the real. He refused to paint the imaginary; however, he was willing to challenge realistic depiction in order to express a mood or his attitude toward a subject. While he usually applied his imagination to only formal elements, stylizing or exaggerating color, space, or brush stroke and not to the specific presence or absence of major elements within the composition. Van Gogh did alter such major components in order to achieve maximal effect in his Starry Night. Because of this departure from his normal standards of naturalism, the degree to which the artist transformed the night sky in this painting has been the source of considerable confusion and difference of opinion in the literature on Starry Night.

This unusually synthetic quality, coupled with van Gogh's own statement that when he has "...a terrible need of...religion.... Then I go out at night to paint the stars" (Van Gogh, Complete Letters, vol. 3, 56) has opened the doors to biblical interpretations based largely upon the inclusion of certain celestial objects in the painting. Myer Schapiro's interpretation of the moon and its aureole as a moon-sun combination related to the apocalyptic vision "...of the woman in pain of birth, girded with the sun and moon and crowned with the stars, whose newborn child is threatened by the dragon" (Schapiro, Van Gogh, 33), which van Gogh supposedly symbolizes in the coiling aurora.

The contrast between the chaos of the heavens and the quiet order of the village below is incredible. The Cyprus tree, known as the tree of death for its traditional associations with

graveyards and mourning, creates a flame-like connection between the earth and sky. But for van Gogh, a man of strong Christian faith, death was not ominous; it was the path to heaven. In a letter to his brother Theo, van Gogh writes:

...Looking at the stars always makes me dream, as simply as I dream over the black dots representing towns and villages on a map. Why, I ask myself, shouldn't the shining dots be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France? Just as we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star. One thing undoubtedly true in this reasoning is that we cannot get to a star while we are alive, any more than we can take the train when we are dead.

So to me it seems possible that cholera, gravel, tuberculosis and cancer are the celestial means of locomotion, just as steamboats, buses and railways are the terrestrial means. To die quietly of old age would be to go there on foot (Van Gogh, 605).

It is van Gogh's unselfishness toward his art that has allowed me to honor Starry Night at St. Rémy. Through his unrelenting determination, van Gogh was able to capture one night in a history of millions and have it live for eternity.

Current Location: The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest.

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