

Vincent van Gogh

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Once, Vincent van Gogh said, “Everything that is really good and beautiful, of inward moral, spiritual and sublime beauty in human beings and in their works come from God” (2, Peter). Throughout his life, Vincent van Gogh felt trapped in a world even though he didn’t know what it was. He tried very hard to escape this barrier by believing in God, helping others and putting his devotion to his paintings.

Vincent Willem van Gogh was born on March 30, 1853 in Groot Zundert, in the Dutch province of Brabant, near the Belgian border. Vincent’s father was Theodorus van Gogh, who was a preacher in the Dutch Reformed (Calvinist) Church. Vincent’s mother was Anna Cornelia Carbentus, who was the daughter of a bookbinder from The Hague. They were both very faithful members of the Church and never refused to give help to those in need. These traits affected Vincent greatly and caused his strong belief in God. As a result, the two themes – the commandment to work for the good of others and the pleasure of expressing his artistic vision by means of pencil and brush, remained with Vincent until he died.

Before the great artist was born, Anna had a son, the first Vincent Willem, but he was dead at birth. Often, Anna would take little Vincent with her to visit his brother’s grave. This was one of the ways thoughts of death came to him. He would wonder about the meaning of death and influenced a lot of his later art works. Vincent was the eldest out of all his brothers and sisters. His brother, Theodorus, was the closest sibling to Vincent and he often sent his brother letters regarding his thoughts and philosophies of life. As a young boy, Vincent would take many long walks in the country side, instead of playing with his siblings. He was a good observer and colours of nature fascinated him the most. Also, Vincent regarded his father’s sermons seriously and later the Christian religion became part of his theme for artworks. At school, he did not take his studies seriously and his family withdrew him from school. However, Vincent turned out to be a bright and intelligent teenager whose interests were on books and drawings. Luckily, his parents supported him and encouraged him to continue drawing.

On October 1st, 1864, Vincent went to the city of Zevenbergen to attend an art school directed by Jean Provily who was a painter. He stayed there to study art for four years and learned three languages; English, French and German. He improved his sketching techniques and did models of nature in classes. However, due to his family’s

financial problems and his poor grades, Vincent was forced to go back to Groot Zundert. As a result, his father suggested to Vincent to go into the art dealing business.

On July 30th, 1869, he left for The Hague to begin his apprenticeship with the art gallery of Goupil's in Paris. There, he worked happily because he was surrounded by the sculptures and paintings made by the world's most famous artists. These artworks attracted his attention and his curiosity. Once, writing to his brother, he said, "[his] life is going smoothly and is very quiet. [He] find[s] [his] job fulfilling, even if it's hard. Sometimes it's difficult not to feel envious, working around all those paintings by famous painters....[he] is happy" (21, Burdett). At the same time, the van Gogh family moved to Helvoirt due to financial problems. When Vincent returned for a brief vacation in 1872, he asked Theo to join him in The Hague. Their father would not approve it because Theo was needed to lessen the debt in the family. By now, Vincent's apprenticeship had ended and was promoted to a better position in the London gallery.

In London, Vincent visited all the well-known museums and started to collect engravings. He also liked paintings from Constable, Reynolds, Gainsborough and Turner. Everything was perfect for Vincent until he was rejected by his love, Ursula Loyer. She was engaged already and Vincent felt embarrassed and wounded. He returned home in June, 1874 for another brief vacation. When he returned to work later on, he was no longer enthusiastic about his career and began to display poor attitude. As a result, his Uncle Cent helped transfer him to the main Goupil gallery in Rue Chaptal, Paris.

In Paris, Vincent met Harry Gladwell, who also worked with him at Goupil's. Together, they would discuss about God and religion and soon, Vincent forgot about Ursula. It was also because of God, Vincent wanted more freedom and as a result, he quitted his job on April 1st, 1876 to go to England. In Ramsgate, Vincent became an assistant instructor in the Reverend Mr. Stoke's school and later helped Reverend Mr. Jones in Isleworth. In July 1878, Vincent traveled to Brussels and went to Flemish Evangelical School to earn a license as a lay preacher. However, to his disappointment, he did not complete the course and left. In 1879, Vincent was given a job as a lay preacher in Wasmes in the mining region of Mons. He stayed there for six months where he continued to improve his drawings by sketching miners and explored new art ideas.

In July of 1880, Theo sent money to Vincent and he enrolled into the Academy of Fine Arts. A year later, Vincent spent some time vacationing with Ridder Anton van Rappard, a Dutch painter. Later, Vincent fell in love with his widowed cousin, Kee who refused his love again. Van Gogh returned to The Hague in January 1882 to take lessons in painting from Anton Mauve. In 1883, Vincent's family moved again to Neunen and he joined them shortly afterwards. There, he stayed for two years and produced over a hundred paintings, watercolours and drawings. On March 26th, 1885, Vincent's father died and the artist once again fell into a depression. During April and May of the same year, Vincent painted *The Potato Eater*. In the fall of the same year, he left his home to move to Antwerp in hope to learn more about the past artists. He came across Fernand Cormon's name and decided to go to Paris to study with him. In Paris, he met his brother Theo, who by then had own a small gallery with nearby restaurants filled with young Impressionists. During the year 1886, Vincent met Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Seurat, Sisley and Signac. These young artists impressed Vincent with their radical theories and the bright colours they used. In the winter of 1886 to the year 1887, Vincent met Paul Gauguin and they became good friends immediately.

In 1888, Vincent settled in Arles, in the south of France and continued his paintings. In October, Vincent invited Gauguin to join him at his Yellow House. However, the two friends have trouble living together. After a tensed argument, Gauguin left Vincent who later cut off one of his ears. However, this event helped Vincent produce another masterpiece. Vincent was hospitalized several times afterwards due to his mental problems. In May of 1889, Vincent volunteered to enter an asylum in Saint Remy where he continued his career as a painter. However, a year afterwards, Vincent insisted returning to Paris, where Theo lived. There, he was treated by Doctor Paul – Ferdinand Gachet and painted a portrait of him.

Vincent always blamed himself for putting so much burden on his brother and on July 27th, 1890, he shot himself in the abdomen and died two days later.

“The Potato-Eaters” was painted in April 1885 and one of the most famous painting during his lifetime. Due to his desire to help others, one of his most focused themes revolved around peasants. In this painting, Vincent made lower class family seem more poor by only painting one light source in the middle where the whole family

crowded in the middle in order to see the dinner table. Also, notice how wrinkled and weary the peasants' faces appear. This adds to the whole dark and dirty atmosphere, suggesting that the family does not have enough to keep them nourished. They only have potatoes to eat. Vincent used small brushstrokes to produce these potatoes. This technique made the potatoes look tinier and dirty as if they had just dug them out of the ground. The background contributed significantly as well. Vincent used dark blue, green and brown to create the dusty background. Many critics believed that this scene was inspired by what Vincent had seen from the period he was preaching in the mining regions. When I looked at his painting, I suddenly felt depressed when I saw the mood of the painting overall. The scarce source of food on the table is not enough for that many members of the family. When I saw the lady pouring the tea out, however, I felt a sense of warmth because even though the family is poor, they still stick to each other and there is no sight of arguments or complaints.

"Portrait of Dr. Gachet" was painted in 1890 on oil on canvas. The person in the canvas was Dr. Gachet and he was the specialist who took care of Vincent when he was ill mentally. Here, the Doctor seems tired and exhausted, as if he has been through a rough day. There are wrinkles and a deep frown surfaced on his face. The position of his hand put his body in a leaning pose, as if the hand is holding him from falling down. Vincent used the colour blue a lot in this painting. His jacket, the flowers his left hand is holding onto, and the background are all blue. This brings out the pale complexion of the Doctor's face and attracts the viewers' attention the most. The little dashes in the background blend in together to form waves, confusing the eyes because they go in different directions. I believe that Vincent must have been influenced by his friends, who were impressionists. Although the details of the Doctor's coat resemble the style of realism, the background do not look like anything in particular. When I looked at this painting, the first thing I saw was the Doctor's eyes. They seemed to be staring out into space yet at the same time when I looked elsewhere, the eyes seemed to be glaring at me. This made me very uncomfortable and I did not wish to look at the painting for a long time.

"Starry Night" was painted in June, 1889 and it was representation of the night sky. Vincent had always been a religious man and this painting could be related to his

beliefs. In this painting, many critics stated that van Gogh “mixed the landscape of Saint-Remy with the Dutch villages of his youth” (107 DK). These tall steeples which are common in the plains of the north, but are rarely seen in the Mediterranean landscape. This led many people to believe that Vincent was growing nostalgic for his homeland. Notice in the background, there is a moon/sun combined object in the right top corner? Another critic described this transformation as a “vague symbol of a human striving” (102, Schapiro). Here, Vincent concentrated more on the sky than on the foreground, which is the town. In proportion, the sky took up more than two – thirds of the space while the town only took up one-third of the canvas. The town is drawn with short and thin brushstrokes whereas the sky is filled with circular and colourful lines. When I looked at this painting, I first took notice of the moon/sun because it contrasted well against the blue background. Then, my eyes went to the wave – like curves in the center. The atmosphere made the overall painting cold and windy especially the light blue, snow covered mountain behind the town.

“Self Portrait With Bandaged Ear” is perhaps the most well known Van Gogh painting. Painted near his death in January, 1889, it was thought to be the result of the fight between Vincent and his friend, Gauguin. Here, Vincent tried to paint himself after he cut his ear off. The red background seems to represent the rage and passion Vincent experienced during his argument. The pipe in his mouth is also significant. The pipe was thought to be Vincent’s most cherished possessions and this painting verified it. His green jacket contrasts with the bright red background, making Vincent stand out in the painting. When I looked at the painting, I found myself staring into a pair of depressed eyes. He seems to be tired and in pain. The bandage told us that he was injured and he may be smoking to ease the pain.

Through out his life, Vincent van Gogh experienced stages of depression, rejection and poverty. These tough periods of time helped improve Vincent’s styles and techniques. Inspirations from his religion and morals produced many fine masterpieces such as “The Potato – Eaters” and “Starry Night”. Although Vincent died at an early age, his excellent artwork will live forever.

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