

Vincent Van Gogh: The Archetypical Tortured Artist

By Kathy McShane

March 30th is Vincent Van Gogh's birthday, so my piece for this month celebrates the life and work of this hugely talented and prolific artist whose life ended so tragically.

Van Gogh was born in 1853 in Groot-Zundert, Netherlands, the son of an austere country minister and an artistic mother. He was the eldest of six living children (another son, also named Vincent, had been stillborn precisely one year earlier). He left school for unknown reasons at age 15, after which his uncle found him employment as a trainee (the youngest) at an international art dealer (Goupil & Cie) in the Hague. While in the Hague, Van Gogh started corresponding with his younger brother, Theo. Their correspondence forms a large part of what we know about the life of Van Gogh. Theo joined Goupil & Cie in 1873 in Brussels; Vincent was transferred to London the same year at the age of 20. From his correspondence with Theo, we know that, in London, Vincent became increasingly religious; he was appalled by the poverty he witnessed; he was inspired by British art and literature; and he had little confidence in his artistic talent.

At age 22, Van Gogh was transferred to Paris, where he became less enamored with his job and more religious. When Goupil & Cie dismissed him, Vincent returned to England, where he taught and preached briefly, and then returned to the Netherlands, where he decided to study theology. Unfortunately, he lacked the discipline to study and abandoned his plan. However, he wanted to serve God, moving to Belgium to become a lay minister. Although he was dedicated to his role, living among the miners he served, he could not establish a close connection with the community. Theo encouraged Vincent to concentrate on his drawing, having seen sketches in the letters Vincent wrote. Vincent did so, moving to Brussels in 1880, surviving on funds that Theo sent him. At the age of 27, Vincent decided he could both serve God and be an artist.

In 1881, Vincent moved back in with his parents, who were sorely disappointed with his career choice and no less disappointed that he had fallen in love with his cousin (a widow who wanted nothing to do with him). After a family argument, Vincent left the family home, writing to Theo that living with his parents would suffocate him. He moved to The Hague, where he studied with the artist Anton Mauve, a cousin-in-law, a leading member of The Hague School, and considered a master colorist.



Anton Mauve, *Morning Ride Along the Beach*, 1876, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

While in The Hague, Van Gogh fell in love with Sien Hoornik, a former prostitute, pregnant and the mother of a five-year-old girl, shocking his brother and his mentor. Despite his disapproval of Vincent's choice of lover (and model), Theo continued to send him financial aid. The affair lasted 18 months, at the end of which Vincent told Theo, "I knew from the outset that her character is a ruined character, but I had hopes of her finding her feet, and now, precisely when I don't see her any more and think about the things I saw in her, I increasingly come to realize that she was already too far gone to find her feet." During his time with Sien, Van Gogh drew a series of works using her as his model. His chalk drawing, *Sorrow*, is considered a masterpiece of draftsmanship. Note that the work's title is in English, which was not uncommon for Van Gogh, who thought his work might sell better if it were titled in English.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Sorrow*, 1882, The New Art Gallery, Walsall, United Kingdom

After his split with Sien, Van Gogh briefly moved to Drenthe in the Netherlands, but the cold and isolation drove him away. He returned to his parent's home in Nuenen, and the painting below was rendered during his less than three-month stay.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Women on the Peat Moor*, 1883, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Having moved back home with his parents, Van Gogh began working on what would become one of his masterpieces, *The Potato Eaters* (1885), now in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.



In the same year, Van Gogh decided to enroll in the Academy of Art in Antwerp but found the drawings he saw far too traditional and “hopelessly bad.” While there, he painted *Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette* (1885-86, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), interpreted as a satirical comment on traditional conservative academic practices.



Vincent moved to Paris in 1886, and Theo was there to introduce him to other artists (Pissarro, Toulouse-Lautrec, Gauguin). Although he initially said he was not impressed with the Impressionists, his work began to veer away from the dark hues that had dominated his art and adopt techniques typical of the Impressionists and post-Impressionists.

Much of his work (some 225 paintings have been documented) from his two years in Paris represents scenes in and around Montmartre, where Vincent and Theo lived. The painting below, one of the first since he moved to Paris, is a view from his window, still quite dark in tone.



Vincent Van Gogh, *View of the Roofs of Paris*, 1886, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Van Gogh was particularly taken with the windmills of Montmartre, of which he painted an entire series.



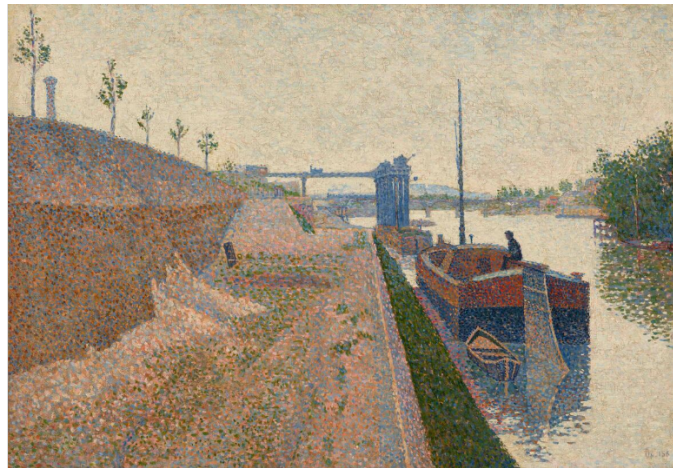
Vincent Van Gogh, *Le Moulin de la Galette*, 1886, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA

The painting below shows the influence of the Impressionists and post-Impressionists. Van Gogh's friendship with the French painter Paul Signac, with whom he sometimes painted *plein air* along the Seine, was undoubtedly a factor.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Fishing in Spring*, 1887, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

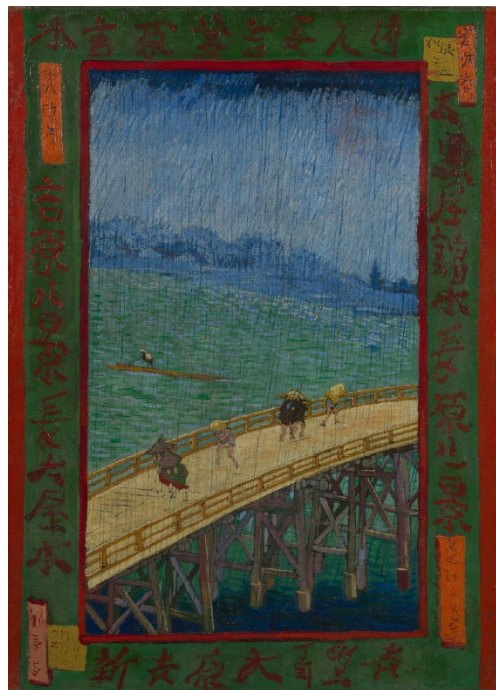
For comparison is an 1887 work by Signac entitled *Quai de Clichy, Gray Weather* (private collection).



While in Paris, Van Gogh discovered Japanese woodcuts, which he and Theo began to collect. The two photos below highlight the influence of Japanese art.

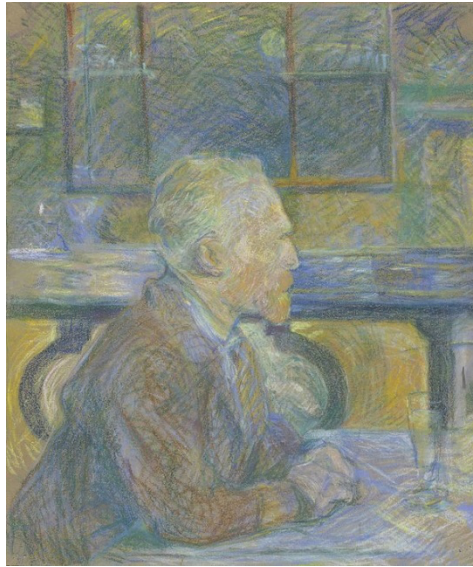


Utagawa Hiroshige, *Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi Bridge and Atake*, 1857, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Bridge in the Rain (After Hiroshige)*, 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

From Van Gogh's friendship with Toulouse-Lautrec came the latter's chalk pastel-on cardboard portrait of Vincent.



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Portrait of Vincent Van Gogh*, 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

In early 1888, Van Gogh, tired of the cold and city life, set out for Provence, hoping to establish an artists' colony. He settled in Arles, where he would create many of his masterpieces, including the one below.



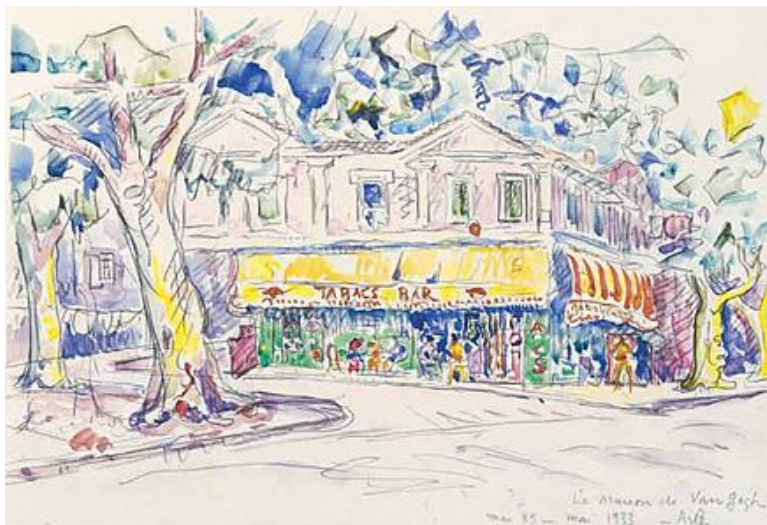
Vincent Van Gogh, *Fishing Boats on the Beach at Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Considering the artists' colony, Van Gogh rented several rooms in the "Yellow House" in Arles.



Vincent Van Gogh, *The Yellow House (or The Street)*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Many years later, Paul Signac (who visited Van Gogh when he was hospitalized...see below) painted a watercolor of Van Gogh's home.



Paul Signac, *The House of Van Gogh*, 1933, Private Collection

Soon after Van Gogh moved into the Yellow House and finished decorating, he created the first of three versions of *The Bedroom*, shown below. *The three versions are distinguishable by the different decorations on the walls.*



Vincent Van Gogh, *The Bedroom*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

The photo below is of the 1889 version of the Art Institute of Chicago collection.

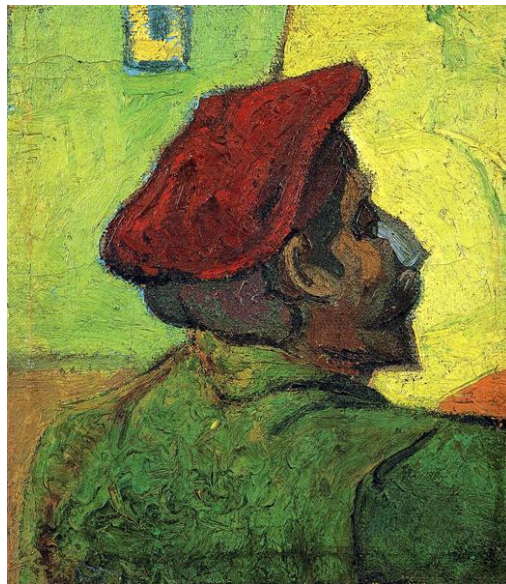


The only artist to join Van Gogh in Arles was Paul Gauguin, and only after much cajoling (and money from Theo). During the summer before Gauguin's arrival, Van Gogh furiously painted sunflowers, telling Theo, "...in the hope of living in a studio of our own with Gauguin, I'd like to decorate the studio. Nothing but large sunflowers." Van Gogh painted various versions of *Sunflowers*, including the one below.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Sunflowers*, 1888, National Gallery, London

In October 1888, Gauguin and Van Gogh would embark on a two-month tense and tumultuous collaboration. Their approaches to painting were quite different; Gauguin (according to the National Gallery of Art) was outspoken and egotistical; Van Gogh's mental health was declining. Nevertheless, both created masterful works of art during their brief time together. Among them are portraits of each other.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Paul Gauguin (Man in a Red Beret)*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



Paul Gauguin, *Vincent Van Gogh Painting Sunflowers*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

The tensions between the two artists rose to such a level that Gauguin threatened to leave, upon which Van Gogh threatened Gauguin with a razor, then, in a frantic state, sliced his ear off. Allegedly, Van Gogh wrapped up the ear and delivered it to a woman outside a brothel, telling her to keep it safe. Van Gogh is found in bed, bloodied and muddled, and taken to a hospital in Arles, where he remains for two weeks. After returning home, he resumes painting, including a portrait of the doctor who treated him, giving it to him as a keepsake.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Portrait of Dr. Felix Rey*, 1889, Pushkin Museum, Moscow

Gauguin precipitously left Arles, never to see Van Gogh again. Interestingly, they maintained a written correspondence. Some years later, Gauguin, living in Tahiti, paints a still life with sunflowers, which some view as a homage to Van Gogh.



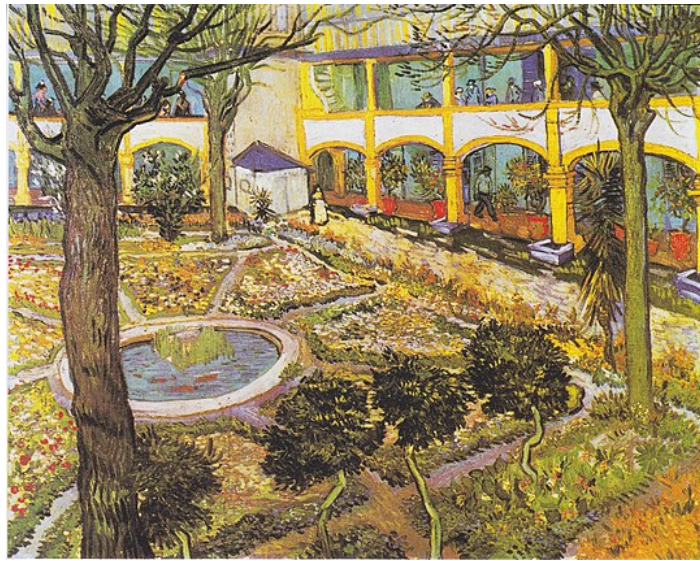
Paul Gauguin, *Still Life with Sunflowers on an Armchair*, 1901, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia

Back in Arles, Van Gogh also almost immediately painted his iconic self-portrait with his bandaged ear.



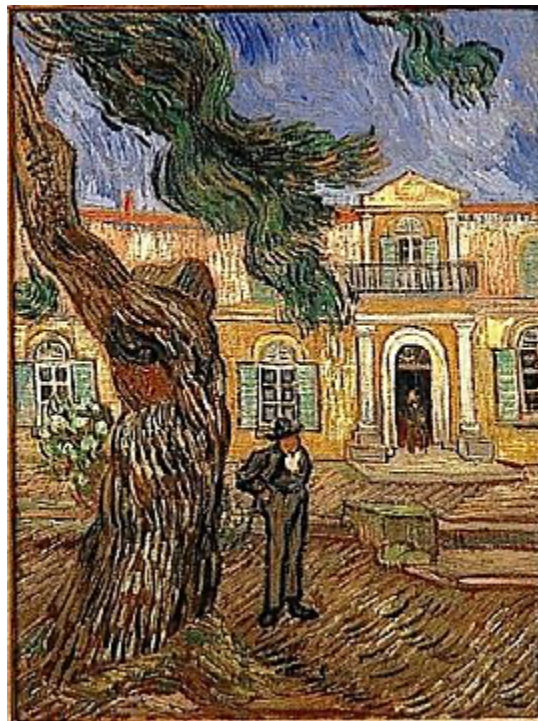
Vincent Van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, 1889, Courtauld Gallery, London, England

Van Gogh's stay at home did not last long; soon, he was back in the hospital. During his periods of clarity, he was allowed to paint outside, creating numerous landscapes, including one on the hospital grounds.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Garden of the Hospital in Arles*, 1889, Oskar Reinhart Foundation, Winterthur, Switzerland

In May 1889, Van Gogh voluntarily committed himself to the Saint Paul de Mausole Asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, where he remained for approximately a year. Despite being one of the most challenging times in the artist's life, it was also his most creative; he completed close to 150 paintings there, including *Starry Night* and *Hospital at Saint-Rémy-de -Provence*.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Hospital at Saint-Rémy-de -Provence*, 1889, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Before he left Saint Paul, he painted his final self-portrait.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1889, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

After leaving the asylum in May 1890, Van Gogh moved to the community of Auvers-sur-Oise, northwest of Paris. He worked feverishly on his art for several months, producing nearly a painting daily. Ultimately, his fragile mental health and constant financial worries took their toll. Van Gogh shot himself in the chest in July 1890, dying from his wounds several days later. He was 37.

He left a legacy of some 850 paintings and 1,300 works on paper. During his lifetime, Van Gogh is only known to have sold one painting, which sold for approximately \$20 in current terms. In 2022, one of his paintings sold for \$117 million at auction.

If you want to see Van Gogh's paintings in person, here is a list of some museums with significant Van Gogh collections:

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. This museum has the most extensive collection of Van Gogh paintings worldwide.

Musée d'Orsay, Paris. *Starry Night over the Rhone* is in its permanent collection.

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT. The art gallery owns the very recognizable *The Night Café*.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York City. *The Starry Night* is in its permanent collection.

Norton Simon Museum of Art, Pasadena, CA, has one of the largest Van Gogh collections in the United States.

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. This museum has examples of Van Gogh's work from the various phases of his artistic career.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is in New York City. The Met has the most extensive single collection of Van Gogh paintings in the United States, including *Cypresses*.

And if you want to read about him or see films about him, here are a couple of ideas:

Books:

Lust for Life, Irving Stone (1934)

Irving Stone's debut novel, *Lust for Life*, takes us from Van Gogh's desperate days in a coal mine in southern Belgium to his dazzling years in the south of France, where he knew the most brilliant artists (and the most depraved whores). Finally, it shows us Van Gogh driven mad, tragic, and triumphant at once. Based on the letters between Vincent and his brother, Theo.

The Yellow House: Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Nine Turbulent Weeks in Arles, Martin Gayford (2008)

This biography "...brings fresh insights into the personalities and work of this odd couple of art." (*L.A. Times*) The author makes a compelling case that Van Gogh was suffering from bipolar disorder.

Films:

Lust for Life (1956) is Based on Irving Stone's novel. Kirk Douglas fiercely portrays Van Gogh, an artist torn between his genius's joyous inspiration and his tortured mind's dark desperation. The film is 122 minutes long and can be rented from Amazon Prime or Apple TV.

Loving Vincent (2017) is the world's first oil-painted feature film. It brings Vincent Van Gogh's artwork to life while exploring his life. The film is 94 minutes long and can be rented from Amazon Prime or Apple TV.

At Eternity's Gate (2018), Starring Willem Dafoe is a vivid, intensely affecting portrait of Vincent van Gogh toward the end of his life. It is 111 minutes long and free on Amazon Prime with ads or rent from Apple TV.