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PAINTING

Vincent Van Gogh
How His Life Influenced His Works

by
Paula Herrin

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Vincent Van Gogh--How His Life Influenced His Works

Expressionism is a seeking of the artist to express elemental feelings that are inherent in a real world. The artist sees the conflicts in nature and in the human being and tries to express this on canvas. Vincent Van Gogh, the forerunner of this movement, strove to paint what he felt and to feel what he painted. The Expressionists after him have branched out into all directions, but all of them expressed their feelings through their art.¹

Vincent, the greatest and most revolutionary Dutch painter after Rembrandt, was born in Groot Zundert in the province of Noord Brabant on March 30, 1853. He was the first live child born to Anna Cornelia Carbentus Van Gogh and Theodorus Van Gogh. The second of the six children, Theo, was born four years later.²

The Van Gogh family history can be traced back to the sixteenth century. They were primarily preachers and artists. Van Gogh's father was a preacher, and he had three uncles who were art dealers. These two strains exerted strong, and often contradictory, influences on Vincent all of his life.³

In 1864, Vincent began his formal education at the institute at Zevenbergen. He remained there for four years until he was 16. Then

¹Betty Kaufman, "Van Gogh and Expressionism," Commonweal, 81 (Oct. 16, 1964), p. 111.

²A. M. Hammacher, Vincent Van Gogh (London, Spring Books, 1963), p. 26.

³"Gogh, Vincent van," Encyclopedia Americana, (1960 ed.), vol. 13, p. 7.

Vincent was apprenticed to an art dealer, Goupil and Co., in The Hague. In 1873, he was transferred to their London branch where his first inner crisis took place. Vincent had a one-sided love affair with Ursula Loyer, the daughter of his landlord. After he was rejected by her, Vincent was possessed by a feeling of gloom and loneliness that rarely left him the rest of his life.⁴

Vincent returned to Paris in 1874 and became interested in literature, art, and religion. Contact with his immediate environment became more difficult, so Vincent turned more and more into himself. In 1876, Vincent was dismissed from Goupil's for incompetence.⁵

Vincent made studying the Bible his main purpose. He tried to serve society in several capacities, but he could not find fulfillment in any of them. For a short time, he was an assistant language teacher at Mr. Stoke's boarding school. He was an assistant at a Dordrecht bookshop until 1877. Vincent tried to learn Greek and Latin so he could enter the University of Amsterdam to study theology, but he found this rigorous, academic work beyond his reach.⁶ After this failure, Vincent entered an evangelical school in Brussels and became a temporary missionary preacher in Borinage, a mining district near Mons, Belgium. Trying to follow the dictates of the Gospel, Vincent lived among the miners for three years. He shared their poverty, gave away his clothes and food, but he was unable to communicate to them his religious convictions. When his temporary

⁴Hammacher, p. 26.

⁵"Van Gogh, Vincent," Collier's Encyclopedia, (1968 ed.), vol. 23, p. 40.

⁶Hammacher, p. 26.

assignment was completed, he did not receive a permanent appointment.⁷

Though Vincent lost his religious faith, he found another way of expression--art. In the charcoal drawings of the poor people around him, he found the possibility of a new career.⁸ He became aware of his creative powers in the extremes of his inner need. He felt deserted by everything, but the calling of art broke through. Now, through art, Vincent sought to bring beauty and consolation to humanity as he was unable to do in his preaching.⁹

Vincent spent the period of 1880-1881 in Brussels studying. This first part of his ten-year art career was a striving for technical proficiency. Vincent's work of this time was almost entirely drawings and water colors.¹⁰ Vincent wanted to learn everything. He sought first to learn perspective, then anatomy, then drawing, and finally color. He had great respect for the older craftsmen but rebelled against the loss of character that was involved in conforming to academic and social standards.¹¹

While Vincent was in Brussels, his younger brother, Theo entered Goupil's in Paris. Vincent got a small allowance and much encouragement from Theo despite their frequent differences in opinion.¹²

⁷Josephine Herbst, "A Van Gogh Comprehensive," Arts Magazine, 36 (Dec., 1961), p. 56.

⁸Collier's Encyclopedia, vol. 23, p. 40.

⁹Encyclopedia Americana, vol. 13, p. 7.

¹⁰"Gogh, Vincent Willem van," Encyclopedia Britannica, (1965 ed.), vol. 10, p. 529.

¹¹Hammacher, p. 27.

¹²Collier's Encyclopedia, vol. 23, p. 41.

While in Brussels, Vincent stayed with his parents. The relationship between them became more and more difficult because of Vincent's critical and asocial attitude. Things became more impossible when he fell violently in love with a widow and her small child, Kee Vos.¹³ After a bitter quarrel with his father, Vincent left Brussels in 1881 and settled in The Hague. He became an artist without means.

In the period of 1881-1883, Vincent broke intellectually from his father's ideas on church and religion. He had problems at The Hague School. He wanted to learn but would not abandon his own opinions.¹⁴ He studied with Anton Mauve, an eminent landscape painter and a relative by marriage.¹⁵ His excentric behavior, the screen of arrogance he put up to hide his insecurity, and his contempt for middle-class moral standards alienated him from all who would like to help him. During the time he was there, he was never accepted into the painters' circle.¹⁶

While in The Hague, Vincent lived with a lower-class woman, Christine Hoornik, who was pregnant. The house and home life meant a great deal to him. Christine of 'Sien' appeared in some works of this time.¹⁷ After she broke off the relation in 1883, Vincent left for the province of Drenthe. Never again did he have a close relationship of any significance with a woman. His need for affection and companionship were never met.

Vincent went to Drenthe to be alone with nature and the simple peasants who lived with nature. Shortly afterwards, Vincent went to live

¹³Hammacher, p. 27.

¹⁴Ibid., P. 27.

¹⁵Colliers Encyclopedia, vol. 23, p. 41.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 41.

with his parents in the parsonage at Nuenen (Noord Brabant). There were three main subjects of this time: still lifes, landscapes, and human figures. All of these were interrelated to the peasants' daily lives, their hardships, and the countryside they farmed. Vincent was very much impressed by Emile Zola's Germinal. Many pictures of this time have sociological criticism.¹⁸

Vincent painted many dark landscapes and scenes of peasant life. He stressed the character and expression rather than perspective and anatomical accuracy.¹⁹ At Nuenen, Vincent's individuality began to appear. His subjects were still dark and drab, but the drawing and color communicated his sympathy for the peasants and their hard lives. Vincent stressed the human figure as the central part of his work. There are many sketches of peasants. He drew men working and landscapes with people, but the people were the most important thing. Vincent had a profound vision of working and suffering. He painted not the beautiful, but rather the ugly, the hard, and the angular. He painted them with a deep understanding of their lives that were marked with pain and suffering.²⁰

During this period, Vincent painted "Three Birds' Nests," "Still Life with Clogs," "The Tower at Nuenen," and "The Weaver." The culminating work and Vincent's first major painting was "The Potato Eaters." It is

¹⁸Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. 10, p. 530.

¹⁹Hammacher, p. 28.

²⁰Herbst, Arts Magazine, p. 58.

a large, sombre composition of peasants at their evening meal.²¹ Vincent made a sketch, two versions, and a lithograph as well as many sketches of many individuals before the finished version. It was painted in dark colors--blue, green, and brown--that led to the colors found outside in nature. There was a strong expression of social and moral feelings. Vincent was a painter of the poor people whose lives were filled with care. They lived in close community, worked together, and shared the fruits of their labors.²²

Vincent had this to say about "The Potato Eaters"

I have tried to make it clear how those people, eating their potatoes under the lamplight, dug and how they have honestly earned their food. I wanted to give the impression of quite a different way of living than that of us civilized people. Therefore, I am not at all anxious for everyone to like it or admire it at once.²³

Vincent's father died in 1885. Shortly afterwards, he painted a still life of his father's empty chair with his pipe and pouch.²⁴

Vincent wanted to acquire a less laborious technique of painting. With this in mind, he spent the winter of 1885-1886 in Antwerp at the Academy, but his attendance was sporadic. Here he was introduced to Rubens and the Japanese woodcuts. Vincent was approaching physical and mental exhaustion because he lived on little except bread and water and alcohol.²⁵

²¹Collier's Encyclopedia, vol. 23, p. 41.

²²Meyer Schapiro, Vincent Van Gogh (New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1950), p. 40.

²³Vincent Van Gogh, Dear Theo, ed. by Irvine Stone (New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1937), p. 290.

²⁴Schapiro, p. 40.

²⁵Collier's Encyclopedia, vol. 23, p. 41.

In May of 1886, Vincent went to Theo in Paris. Though Theo was not able to afford it, he found Vincent a room in which he could paint and enrolled him in the studio of the academic painter, Fernand Cormon. In Paris, Vincent's colors became brighter and the subject matter less sentimental. He came to know many of the younger artists: Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Emile Bernard, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat, Guillaumin, Laval, Anquetin, and the Pissarros.²⁶

For awhile Vincent adopted Seurat's divisionist technique. Through these artists, Vincent learned to admire Japanese prints with their linear patterns, flat washes of color, and a lack of modeling. Though Vincent never left Europe, he felt that he could learn a lot from artists of the East. They taught that one should study not the distance to the moon but rather a blade of grass, which led to the study of every plant, which led to a study of the seasons, which led to a study of the countryside, which led to a study of animals, which led finally to the study of man. Life was too short to do the whole.²⁷ Vincent's feelings and techniques that he got from the East were exhibited in several of his paintings. One, the portrait of a paint and picture dealer, Le Père Tanguy, was surrounded by Japanese woodcuts.

Paris was an exciting city to Vincent. His subject were lighter in the trend of the Impressionists. He painted still lifes, flower pieces, restaurant interiors and exteriors, portraits, the banks of the Seine, gardens, and twenty-two small self-portraits.

²⁶Hammacher, p. 28.

²⁷Alfred Werner, "Artists Who Write," Art Journal, 24no4 (Summer, 1965), p. 346.

Each of Vincent's self-portraits were different from all the others. In this way, he expressed how he felt at that time. Vincent had this to say about portraits:

I always find photographs abominable, and I don't like to have them about me, particularly of those persons I know and love. Those photographic portraits fade much sooner than we ourselves, whereas the painted portrait lasts for generations. And besides, a painted portrait is a thing that is felt, done with love or respect for the human being who is portrayed.²⁸

Because Vincent was living near Theo in Paris, we don't have letters to tell us what Vincent was working on and what he felt. Some of his better known works of this time were: "Le Moulin de la Galette" (a mill); several still lifes of flowers; "Le Père Tanguy" "Restaurant de la Sirene, Joinville;" "Montmartre;" and numerous self-portraits.²⁹

Suddenly, in February, 1888, Vincent left Paris for Arles, a provincial town of southern France. It is not known why, but he left both the gay city and his brother for a small town and the countryside.³⁰ Perhaps the artistic tensions in Paris were too much for him. He may have been seeking a milder climate, a less expensive way of life, or the rural subjects he liked best to paint.³¹

Some of Vincent's most serene masterpieces were painted in his new enthusiasm for southern France's scenery and people. He seemed held in a magic spell. A large number of Vincent's works were done at this time, one of his happiest.

²⁸Vincent Van Gogh, "My Dear Sister. . .," Art News, 54 (Apr., 1955), p. 25.

²⁹Schapiro, p. 42

³⁰Hammacher, p. 28.

³¹Collier's Encyclopedia, vol. 23, p. 41.

Vincent found friends and companionship in the family Roulin. Roulin was a postman and was painted in his uniform several times by Vincent. Vincent also painted two portraits of his son, Armand, "La Berceuse" of his wife, and "Mother Roulin and Her Baby." He painted his "Bedroom at Arles" as well as his own "House at Arles." He did several sunflower still lifes, including his most famous one. He tried to stress the splendor of the Impressionists and the visual and tonal distortions of Japanese prints. Vincent wrote to Theo, "I am trying now to exaggerate the essential and purposefully leave the obvious things vague."³²

Some other works of this time were: "Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries," "Peach Trees in Blossom," "Drawbridge at Arles," "Orchard at Arles," and "Sidewalk Café at Night."

Though this was a time of happiness, Vincent still had moods of loneliness and despair. At one time, he wrote to his sister, "Many painters die, or go mad with despair or become paralyzed in their work, simply because nobody loves them personally."³³ It must have been at a time like that when Vincent painted "Night Café." It portrayed a human condition of homeless despair. Vincent writes:

I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, run mad, or commit a crime. I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green. The room is blood-red and dark yellow, with a green billiard table in the middle; there are four lemon-yellow lamps with a glow of orange and green. Everywhere there is a clash and contrast of the most alien reds and greens in the figures of little sleeping hooligans in the empty dreary room, in violet and blue. The white coat of the patron, on vigil in a corner, turns lemon-yellow, or pale luminous green.³⁴

³² Collier's Encyclopedia, vol. 23, p. 41.

³³ Van Gogh, Art News, p. 23.

³⁴ Vincent Van Gogh, Dear Theo, ed. by Irvine Stone (New York, Doubleday & Co., 1937), p. 383

Vincent wanted to establish an artists' center--La Maison Jaune-- in Arles that would consist primarily of himself, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Bernard, and Anquetin. He rented a yellow house for his working community he would call the "Impressionists of the South."³⁵

Finally, after he received traveling money from Theo, Gauguin came to Arles in October, 1888. Gauguin had a very dominating nature and Vincent found this restricting. Gauguin's philosophy was incomprehensible to Vincent. Their friendship began to deteriorate. Finally near Christmas, Vincent reached the breaking point and attacked Gauguin. In the process, he mutilates his own ear; Gauguin flees to Paris.³⁶

During his convalescence, Vincent painted "Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear" and his "Chair" which was part of a pair. He painted his chair with his pipe and Gauguin's chair with a lighted candle and two books.³⁷ During his convalescence, Vincent realized that he was subject to insanity and voluntarily entered the mental hospital in the convent at Saint-Rémy in 1889. In April before he enters the asylum, Vincent writes to Theo,

I have had four great crises in which I did not know the least what I was doing. And in addition, before that I had three fainting fits without any plausible reason, and without retaining the slightest remembrance of what I felt.

I cannot describe exactly what is the matter with me; now and then I have horrible fits of anxiety, without apparent cause, or else a feeling of intenseness and fatigue in the heat.

³⁵Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. 10, p. 531.

³⁶Hammacher, p. 29.

³⁷Schapiro, p. 90.

I look upon the whole thing as simply an accident. There can be no doubt that this is my own fault, and at times I have attacks of melancholy and atrocious remorse.³⁸

While Vincent was at Saint-Rémy, Theo married Joanna Borger on April 12, 1889.

While at Saint-Rémy, Vincent shifted from clarity and artistic effort to depression and inertia. He painted many familiar landscapes of cypresses; still lifes of flowers; copies of favorite painters such as Delacroix, Millet, and Rembrandt; and olive trees. Olive trees and the olive harvest came to be a religious theme that united the most distant antiquity with modern times in Vincent's mind.³⁹

Vincent feared losing touch with reality, and he often was possessed by sadness. He writes, "It is wonderful weather conditions, however, for a long time, two months to be exact, I have not left my room. I do not know why. What I need is courage, and this I often lack."⁴⁰

Vincent found life difficult but resigned to it. His painting went back to its earlier greyness, while the lines became even more turbulent. The sun declined as a major symbol and was replaced by the moon and stars.⁴¹

Vincent's fascination with the moon and stars, as well as the state of his mind, is seen in the "Starry Night." He had to work fast to capture

³⁸Van Gogh, Art News, p. 24.

³⁹Hammacher, p. 21.

⁴⁰Van Gogh, Art News, p. 24.

⁴¹Hammacher, p. 21.

the effect and mood. He found expression in the vivid exaggerations and intense use of color. The night seems to swirl around one.⁴²

Some other of his works of this period are: "Garden of Saint-Paul's hospital at Sanit-Remy," "Cypresses with Two Figures," "The Road with Cypresses and Star," "Prisoner's Round," "Garden of the Asylum," "Olive Trees," "Pieta and "Good Samaritan" (after Delacroix), and his last "Self-portrait."

In 1890, while Vincent was still in the asylum, a young poet, Albert Aurier, who understood the symbolic significance of Vincent's work wrote the first published study of it in Mercur de France.⁴³

Towards the end of his stay at Saint-Remy, Vincent writes, "The doctor has gone to Paris to see Theo; he told me that he did not consider me a lunatic, but these crises which I have are of an epileptic nature."⁴⁴

Vincent had a longing for the North again. The South seemed to have lost its magical spell. In May, Vincent went to Paris to meet Theo's wife and their baby son, his namesake.

Theo sent Vincent to Auvers-sur-Oise where he lived at the Cafè Ravoux. He was looked after and encouraged by Dr. Gachet, an amateur etcher and painter who befriended artists. There was a strong link between these two because of their interest in art. Gachet appreciated Vincent's work. But Vincent grew irritable and quarrelsome because of his illness.⁴⁵

⁴²Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. 10, p. 531.

⁴³Hammacher, p. 30.

⁴⁴Van Gogh, Art News, p. 24.

⁴⁵John Rewald, "Gachet's Unknown Gems Emerge," Art News, 51 Mar., 1952), p. 62.

Vincent's loneliness was increased by Theo's new life with his family. He knew he was a financial burden on them and felt guilty.⁴⁶ His work in Auvers was uneven. His condition became even more unbalanced. He went from the extremes of sadness and loneliness back to normality. The sense of space in his pictures changed and became uncertain. He found little rest in his work.⁴⁷

The pictures of this time are mainly of endless fields, but he also painted two portraits of Dr. Gachet, the "Church at Auvers," and "Stairway at Auvers," and "Mlle. Ravoux" the daughter of his landlord.

During this time, Vincent struggled constantly with his feelings. He could find little peace. He writes, "And it is also a fact that since my illness, a feeling of loneliness takes hold of me when I am in the fields, it is such a terrible degree that I am afraid of going out. It is only when I stand before my easel, painting, that I feel a little life."⁴⁸

The last picture of Vincent's was "Crows over the Wheatfield." In it there is endless wheat with three paths--all end or run off the canvas. There are large areas of separate color--sky, wheat, and the paths. Finally there are the crows, perhaps figures of fate, and their dreadful approach.⁴⁹

Vincent shot himself while he was in the wheatfields. He was brought back to Gachet's but refused medical care. Vincent said, "It's useless--the sadness will last all my life." Theo came from Paris.

⁴⁶Collier's Encyclopedia, vol. 23, p. 41

⁴⁷Hammacher, p. 30.

⁴⁸Van Gogh, Art News, p. 24.

⁴⁹Schapiro, p. 130.

Vincent died two days later on July 29, 1890. He was buried behind the church at Auvers, close to the wall as a suicide. Theo died shortly thereafter in Holland, but his remains were moved to Auvers where he now rests beside his brother.⁵⁰

Though Vincent was mentally tormented through his life, he was able to leave a legacy of over 700 paintings and drawings. He spent his life searching for something that always seemed to elude him. But, he made a great contribution to art. As he told his sister, Wilhemina,

It is not a bad idea for you to try to be an artist, because where there is fire and soul in one, it can not be quenched--better to burn than to choke. What is inside has to come out. Me, for instance, it gives me air to make a painting and without that I would be unhappier than I am.⁵¹

⁵⁰Rewald, Art News, p. 65.

⁵¹"I am seeking something more: letter to his sister, Paris, 1887," Vogue, 124 (Dec., 1954), p. 177.

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