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H. 757
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GOGH, VINCENT VAN
1916

FORCES INFLUENCING THE ART OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

by

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December 15, 1971

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FORCES INFLUENCING THE ART OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

The violence and brilliance of the canvases of Vincent van Gogh remain as mute reminders of a short and tragic life. A misfit in a world that could not appreciate his genius until after his death, Van Gogh lived passionately and impulsively, reaching out for vague, unattainable goals and trusting his innermost thoughts to strangers. Suffering rejection and indifference from those around him, he stands today as the archtype of the neglected genius.

At Groot-Zundert in the North Brabant district of Holland, Vincent van Gogh was born on March 30, 1853. The district was a bleak region, in which the plight of the peasant was one of his earliest and strongest impressions. In so many ways his childhood was normal and uneventful. The eldest of six children, Van Gogh was born into a warm and affectionate household.¹ His grandfather and father had been members of the clergy; three of his father's brothers were art dealers. Vincent and Theo, his younger brother, were greatly influenced by their godfather and uncle, Vincent, who kept an art shop of European reputation in which both brothers started their

¹Gerald E. Finley, Van Gogh (New York, 1966), pp. 5-6.

careers. Whereas Theodore rose to wealth and esteem in the Paris branch, Vincent gave up his position as art dealer after six years of activity in The Hague.²

In April of 1876 he was discharged from Goupil's. He left immediately to accept a teaching post on the south coast of England where he was given his keep but earned no salary. A short time later, feeling the need for a salary, Van Gogh left for another teaching position in a school run by a clergyman. It was here that he came to the realization that he could serve society better as a missionary or preacher than as a teacher and, at Christmas, returned to the home of his parents. Working for a short time in a bookshop, Vincent spent long hours in the evenings reading theology and philosophy in the hope of preparing himself for a career in the ministry. He decided to take the divinity entrance examinations in Amsterdam and studied continuously for fourteen months, wrestling with Greek, Latin, and Calvin's philosophy, which he could not seem to master. In July, 1878, he gave up. He felt that his abilities lay, not in scholarship, but in his practical application of the Gospel.³

Later, though, he decided to try again and was admitted

²Hermann Jeddig, Van Gogh (New York, 1965), p. 3.

³Finley, p. 6.

to a lay evangelical school in Brussels. Here the curriculum was designed to give the fundamentals of the Gospel and preaching to laymen, who would take the word of Christ to the forgotten miners, factory workers, and peasants. Permitted to seek out his own congregation, Van Gogh chose the poor district of the Borinage, south of Mons, near the French border, where he preached to the local miners. Immediately he identified with his congregation. He occupied a mere hut, slept on bare boards and refused to wash in order to be one of them and to endure the deprivations and indignations his congregation endured. Filled with compassion he rushed about the villages of the region tending the sick and reading the Bible at every opportunity. But this unwashed, wild-looking character only alarmed and aroused the suspicions of the simple folk. After a probationary period at Wasmes, Van Gogh was dismissed from the organization in Brussels. For this he was completely unprepared and was utterly shattered by the blow.⁴

Vincent began to have serious doubts about his profession. Dejected, he withdrew from society and began to sketch the countryside and its inhabitants. His ability to draw had developed at an early age, and he had shown a great interest in art. For a year he traveled and sketched but ceased his

⁴Ibid., p. 8.

wanderings in 1880. His mind cleared—he would be an artist. Vincent van Gogh was twenty-seven when he found his profession; he was thirty-seven when he died. In those ten years between, he painted over 800 canvases and sold only one.⁵

To add to Vincent's failures in previous professions are his failures at love. This searcher was to find but little happiness in life. Where he sought it with the greatest desire—with woman—he was not to find it. He experienced his first tragic love affair in London. When he finally found the courage to ask his landlady's daughter to marry him, he was immediately rebuffed and informed that she was already engaged. Then he returned to Holland thin and depressed; his first encounter with a woman had left him utterly defeated.⁶

At the end of August, in 1881, he fell in love again, this time with his cousin Kee. The young widow did not return his affection, and Vincent left home again, filled with a sense of frustration.⁷

When neither the landlady's daughter nor his widowed cousin responded to his love, out of compassion he took in a prostitute, ill, starving, and pregnant, and made a home

⁵"Promise Redeemed," Time, LXXII (October 27, 1958), 80-81.

⁶Jedding, p. 3.

⁷Finley, pp. 8-9.

for her and her children. For this relationship, which proved inconstant, he sacrificed friends and social position. The thought of a home and family delighted him, but it became apparent that this happiness could not last. He left The Hague and the memories of Sien in December of 1883, forlorn and stunned.⁸

The one thing he retained until the end was the love of his brother Theo, who had great understanding for Vincent and a readiness to help at all times. Vincent would never have succeeded in his work without the help of Theo, who sent him money regularly, though the close spiritual contact between the two brothers was more important than the material help the younger brother was able to offer the elder. Vincent communicated to his brother anything that concerned him. His personal confessions give proof of Vincent's constant striving for creative expression and are of the greatest importance in understanding his work, because in his case the creative will was often expressed in words before it was transmuted into figurative composition by pencil and brush. Vincent sought reassurance and companionship in a correspondence with Theo -- a correspondence that was to continue until his death.⁹

An extremely sensitive boy, Vincent was a victim of fre-

⁸Ibid., p. 9.

⁹Ibid., pp. 5-6.

quent moods of depression. Fortunately, his family provided a good measure of the stability, affection, and understanding that he so desperately needed. Strange and obstinate from the start, he was frustrated by unsuccessful attempts at being an art dealer, a teacher, a missionary and was anguished by his failures at love. When at twenty-seven he finally settled on painting as a career, he was already racked by the peculiar psychopathic disease (neither epilepsy nor schizophrenia as it has often been claimed) that plagued him with incapacitating attacks. He found his salvation in painting—his hold on life, his devout testament. Unquestionably his morbid condition fired the fierce intensity with which he saw and felt. But despite the romantic Hollywood myth, he painted during his periods of health and control. The transformation of his emotion into art was always an arduous, disciplined, and complex process. He clung to an unswerving belief in his work, although he was tormented by anxieties, fears, guilts, rebuffs and torrents of self-reproaches and was isolated from the world by an outer boorishness and an inner tenderness.¹⁰

Soon after his affair with Sien, Van Gogh returned to his parents' home, then in North Brabant at Nuenen. For two years he worked vigorously, sympathetically painting the peasants in the sullen colors of the earth from which they

¹⁰A. Saarinen, "White Roses," McCalls, XCIV (July, 1967), 132-135.

drew their meager living. (Many of these early paintings were based on themes similar to Millét's.) During this period he shaped the brooding canvas, the "Potato Eaters". This was his first important painting. The colors and forms of the painting are dull and heavy like the people; the whole painting is dipped in a dull earth color, hardly relieved by a few yellow or green tones. It typifies the deep understanding Van Gogh had for the weary monotony and despair of the peasants' lives. In the painting, the peasants' hands are gnarled and seemingly incapable of fine gestures, yet their dignity is caught in the gloom of the poorly-lit hovel. Women dominate the composition. Throughout his life woman was dominant. He was a Utopian who, in a society dominated by women, wished to concentrate order around the hearth.¹¹ Of the "Potato Eaters" Van Gogh says:

It would be wrong to give a peasant picture a certain conventional smoothness. If a peasant picture smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam--all right, that's not unhealthy... I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor and how they have honestly earned their food...

This extra measure of humanity set Van Gogh's work apart from all other modern painters even when it did or did not dip over

¹¹A.M. Hammacher, Van Gogh (London, 1964), p. 9.

into madness.¹²

While the paintings of this period were dark and heavy, Van Gogh was clearly showing an interest in color theory. He became interested in complementary colors used by Eugene Delacroix. During this Nuenen period Vincent first began to realize, at least in theory, the expressive potential of color: "Color expresses something in itself, one cannot do without this, one must use it."¹³

This period is distinguished by two contradictory tendencies which he was never able to reconcile and which reasserted themselves in the South in another form. The art of the Dutch interior in which he began was moderately Impressionistic and entirely in conformity with the liberal, bourgeois atmosphere of the period—restrained, intimate, sensitive, and without any feeling for revolt. Although Van Gogh disliked the bourgeoisie he did not reject this art so long as its themes centered around the people and the simple rural life. But diametrically opposed to this was his need to express himself in color and his refusal, following Delacroix's example, to use contours as a point of departure. The expressionist rendering of the "Potato Eaters" is a compromise. The painter, on the one hand, shows signs of an expressive realism close

¹²"Furiously Intense," Newsweek, LII (October 13, 1958), 89.

¹³Finley, pp. 9-10.

to distortion and based primarily on color while, on the other hand, he preserves the epic interior motifs in the style of De Groix --- not in the soft atmosphere of The Hague School but in its primitive depiction of an almost animal existence.¹⁴ Van Gogh gradually arrived at saving from nature only a certain sequence, a correctness in his color tonality without great concern that his colors exactly copied nature. He thought it important "that they have the same effect on canvas as in nature". His most important scheme was "the feeling for the endless nuances of colors of the same family." He was still at Nuenen when he realized the importance of color.¹⁵

In Antwerp Vincent became very interested in portrait painting. So that he might trace the individual characteristics in faces, he used to carry on long conversations with his models while he was painting. However, he was unable to get the few commissions for portraits which might have helped him out financially. At Antwerp he enrolled in the academy there, but, oppressed by inner solitudes, he found very little understanding for his self-centered character. Becoming dissatisfied with the teaching and desiring to be near his beloved brother, he left for Paris in March 1886. While at Antwerp,

¹⁴Hammacher, p. 9.

¹⁵Jedding, p. 5.

though, Vincent experienced rich color effects of the paintings of Rubens and Japanese woodblock prints. These led him to reject the deep, gloomy hues of the Nuenen period.¹⁶ The forcefulness of the style of the Far East affected Van Gogh's work greatly. He decorated his room with Japanese prints; the Nuenen gloomy hues were replaced by large solid areas of flat color characteristic of the Japanese. Some of his paintings have a "scalloped edge" effect and employ free brushwork which indicates the skeletal structure of Japanese prints. Van Gogh also used over-balance to one side---this asymmetrical organization of the composition is typical of the Far East. These characteristics reoccur throughout his painting life. While in the preparatory class at the Academy Van Gogh studied Rubens, the great Flemish painter. From Rubens he learned how to brighten the colors of his own portraits.¹⁷

Van Gogh moved into his brother's home in Paris in 1886 and attended the Cormon studio for awhile. But life in the streets, parks, and restaurants was more to his taste. He painted many still-lives during this period---fruits, books, flowers. Among these, the decorative beauty of the sunflower began to appear. For a time he used the brush technique of the Pointillists, putting unmixed colors on in "points". His

¹⁶Thomas W. Earp, Van Gogh (London, 1934), 14-16.

¹⁷W.J.H.B. Sandberg and others, Vincent Van Gogh (Baltimore, 1962), 9.

palette was greatly influenced by their color, and he adopted certain qualities of their style of painting. Van Gogh's "The Restaurant" is constructed of tiny dots of complementary hues. Fusion of graphic and pictorial elements in his technique enabled him to work in a style that was more agile and nervous -- less heavy than before. Paris was a great period of expansion for Vincent; avidly he collected influences without losing himself in them. Throughout this period he persisted in single themes. The opposition of the two forces which gave the Nuenen work such a tense, laborious character disappear in Paris in both his themes and his treatment of them.¹⁸

Even Paris could not hold Vincent van Gogh so he moved south to a hotter sun where he could capture a background of the Far East. From Arles he wrote to Theo: "Here everywhere, is a color like sulfur, the sun intoxicates. One's sight changes, one sees with a Japanese eye, one feels color quite differently." Still it was color he sought. His chief desire was discovery of a "suggestive color", and he came closer to his aim. Feverishly he painted "with the clearsightedness and the blindness of a man in love". In this environment his palette took on a new splendor. Here he found true emotional release through brilliant color. He was particularly attracted by

¹⁸Hammacher, pp. 10-11.

yellow and thought it the dominant color of the South. But while he was concerned with the sunlight he was not so concerned, as were the Impressionists, in the way it affected the appearance of things. He was more interested with the sun itself--as a personal symbol. Thus, yellow played a prominent role, if not as the sun as a sunflower, lantern, or burning star. Here his paint was applied in great patches of intense color. "No stippling, no hatching, nothing, only flat colors in harmony."¹⁹

Wishing to establish a colony for artists at Arles, he begged Paul Gauguin to make his home with him. It soon became apparent that the two were incompatible. When Gauguin made up his mind to leave, Van Gogh followed him and meant to attack him with a razor. Fleeing to his room, Van Gogh took a fit, sliced off his own ear lobe, and took it to a brothel that he frequented. It is said that in 1935 a practical joker, Hugh Troy, carved a shriveled ear from cornbeef, smuggled it (boxed and labeled) into the Museum of Modern Art's first Van Gogh showing and caused a near mob scene.²⁰

His stay in the South was one of constant misery and want. A few close friends he had made in Arles were willing to sit for portraits, like the family of the postman Roulin

¹⁹Finley, pp. 11-12.

²⁰"Promise Redeemed," p. 80.

who proved a true friend. In a letter to Theo Vincent spoke of his painting "The Postman Roulin":

I want to do figures, figures, and more figures. I cannot resist that series of bipeds from the baby to Socrates... I have just done a portrait of a postman... A Socratic type, none the less Socratic for being somewhat addicted to liquor and having a high color as a result. His wife had just had a child, and the fellow was aglow with satisfaction.²¹

While in Arles the Brabant tendencies came into their own again. For the first time Van Gogh achieved a synthesis of his former contradictory tendencies. At Arles, where the little provincial town's atmosphere reminded him of the past, the vigor of his color regained the upper hand. His sense of form and perspective were mastered — temporarily. His expressionist sense of color and excitable temperament never let him construct his spatial vision from any one fixed point. Here, in Arles, he delightedly saw himself acquiring assurance and equilibrium. Does this mean that Vincent van Gogh was becoming classical? Yes — to some degree. He became classical only temporarily though in appearance, not reality, for he lacked that instinctive objectivity that separates a really classical artist from the thing observed. Van Gogh, on the other hand, makes absolutely no distinction between subject and artist. His lines are too charged with inner tensions, his use of color too intense so that all distance is done

²¹"Furiously Intense," p. 89.

away with. In his painting "Le Pont de l'Anglois" he does not see only the Pont de l'Anglois but is himself this little bridge as he is also the blue sky behind it and the blue water beneath it. This picture represents not only the little bridge but also the painter himself. Van Gogh is this bridge. He wishes to fill a gap, an isolation, which dreams of uniting on earth the towns with the country, the earth with the stars.²²

Also in Arles his great olive tree theme appears. The theme of olives and the olive harvest is thought to be in Van Gogh's eyes a religious theme which unites modern times with antiquity.²³

The townpeople of Arles, fearing for their safety, petitioned the mayor to have Van Gogh committed. So he voluntarily went to Saint-Rémy, an asylum for the insane, in May of 1889. In spite of three severe attacks, he painted over one hundred canvases and made several hundred drawings. When allowed outside he observed nature with the eye of a painter, the sensitivity of a poet, and the acuteness of a botanist. When forced to remain indoors he copied paintings of the masters, particularly Rembrandt, Millet, and Delacroix. It was at Saint-Rémy that he became so attracted to the cypress tree. It was here also that his style changed.

²²Hammacher, pp. 11-12.

²³Ibid., pp. 20-21.

While less brilliant than those executed in Arles, the colors of his canvases introduced a new expressive force. His landscape's forms became contorted, the cloud forms and topography began to writhe and trees took on a flame-like appearance. His painting became an emotional substitute for normal human relations.²⁴

"White Roses" is one of the last pictures he painted at Saint-Rémy. Housed in an old monastery, the asylum inmates wandered about in melancholy idleness. It is poignant that out of the dreary surroundings Van Gogh could isolate the fresh loveliness of the white roses that grew in the cloister garden and make a painting so joyous and full of life. It is as if he was expressing his very own springtime hope. It is this dignity and purposeful strength and dedication to work that made Vincent van Gogh a tragic and triumphant figure rather than a pitiful one.²⁵

At Theo's urging Vincent, in May, 1890, moved to Auvers-sur-Oise. He became a patient of Dr. Gachet, who was an amateur painter and friend of Pissarro and Cézanne. The good doctor encouraged Vincent to paint and talk about art. In better spirits the artist began enthusiastically working on landscapes and did several portraits of Dr. Gachet and his

²⁴Saarinen, p. 134.

²⁵"White Roses," Ladies Home Journal, LXXVII (April, 1960), 50.

daughter. An explosive force is seen in Van Gogh's "Portrait of Dr. Gachet". There is a formal control of the explosive elements of color and line. The eyes of the doctor are seen by Van Gogh looking at him — "so embodied is the creator in the created image." Van Gogh succeeded to a greater degree than any other Expressionist in putting the artist in the picture.²⁶

The Auvers period reveals a series of works which have this in common: that their points of departure and of perspective have become uncertain. His intense colorings now become grayish and are no longer for their spatial effects but for expressiveness.²⁷ In this last period Vincent again sought inspiration from Millet. The peasants that were subjects of his early canvases appear again, but now in an environment of ~~some~~ somewhat brighter color.

Called by the French poet Antonin Artaud "the man suicided by society", Vincent van Gogh obtained a revolver and on Sunday, the twenty-seventh of July, stood in a field and shot a bullet into his chest. He survived two days. A letter found on his body after his suicide read:

²⁶Betty Kaufman, "Van Gogh and Expressionism," Commonweal, LXXXI (October 16, 1964), 110-111.

²⁷Hammacher, p. 24.

Well my own work, I am risking my life for it and my reason was half foundered owing to it--- that's all right... But what's the use?

Less than six months later Theo joined him in death.²⁸

The artist's last work was "Wheatfield with Crows", which was painted not far from the spot where he shot himself. Despairing for his life, Van Gogh ventured into this field near Auvers to paint a picture of a road seeming to end abruptly in the middle of a field. Crows rise suddenly from the waves of grain, as if in a panic. This is one of his most emotionally-charged landscapes.²⁹

Eighty-one years after his death he is seen as a startlingly modern artist. Psychologists continue to delight in analyzing the psychoses betrayed by his tormented whorls. His chaotic blotches of color make an undulating impression due to the spirals and the dazzling lightening strokes. A savage chop of cross-hatching and rapid visible brush strokes give Van Gogh's watercolor as much urgency as one done in heavy oil impasto. He was an "action painter". He made the very act of painting his means of expression. The way he "laid on" the pigment (it took his paintings a month to dry), the way he placed the objects, the tortuous journeys of the brush, the clash and harmony of colors were exposed and boldly stated to

²⁸"Sweet and Powerful," Newsweek, LXIII (April 13, 1964), 56.

²⁹Sandberg, p. 12.

make the most direct communication of moods and hopes, desires and emotions, and a direct assault upon the spectator.³⁰

Van Gogh was in more than one respect a nineteenth century man. While today's artists see their paintings as objects in themselves and delight in elaborate techniques, Van Gogh used the simplest medium he could find to convey his own intense response to the world around him.

Art (Van Gogh wrote) is something not created by hands, but something that wells up from a deeper source out of our soul, and in the cleverness and technical knowledge with regard to art, I find something that reminds me of what in religion one would call self-righteousness.³¹

Some years ago an unfinished self-portrait of Van Gogh's was found. A great dispute arose as to whether the portrait was real. Dr. J.B. de la Faille, acknowledged to be the world's leading authority on Van Gogh, said that it was an original. It was unusual, but genuine. Nevertheless the controversy continued. However, not long ago one of Van Gogh's letters was discovered describing to his sister a self-portrait he had begun in which he had assumed the air of a Japanese --- thus, acclaiming the portrait to be genuine.³²

Van Gogh's Dr. Gachet decorated his coffin with a bunch

³⁰Saarinen, pp. 132-133.

³¹"Electricity in Water," Time, XC (November 10, 1967), 78-79.

³²H. Berman, "Case of the Mysterious Portrait," American Artist, XXI (June, 1957), 3.

of sunflowers, since the artist had always loved them. These late summer flowers, symbols of the sun, will always remain connected with Vincent's name as will the cypress and olive trees. The portraits to which he gave more than just a likeness are living masterpieces today. This unparalleled record of one man's sorrows has shown his turbulent and dramatic search for self-fulfillment.³³ Intense, difficult, and unhappy, Van Gogh spent his life searching for an emotional relief, which he never really found. This Dutch painter's tragic life and brilliant canvases have made him almost a legend.

³³S. Cheney, "Sorrowful Yet Always Rejoicing," Saturday Review, XLI (October 11, 1958), 22-23.

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