

Vincent Van Gogh

(Vin-CENT Van-GOKT?? [see page 2])

Post-Impressionist Painter

Post-Impressionism Period/Style of Art

B: 30 March 1853, Zundert, Netherlands

D 29 July, 1890. Auvers-sur-Oise, France

Van Gogh was the oldest surviving son born into a family of preacher and art dealers.

When Vincent was young, he went to school, but, unhappy with the quality of education he received, his parents hired a governess for all six of their children. Scotswoman Anna Birnie was the daughter of an artist and was likely Van Gogh's first formal art tutor. Some of our earliest sketches of Van Gogh's come from this time.

After school, Vincent wanted to be a preacher, like his father and grandfather. He studied for seminary with an uncle, Reverend Stricker, but failed the entrance exam. Later, he also proposed marriage to Uncle Stricker's daughter...she refused ("No, nay, never!")

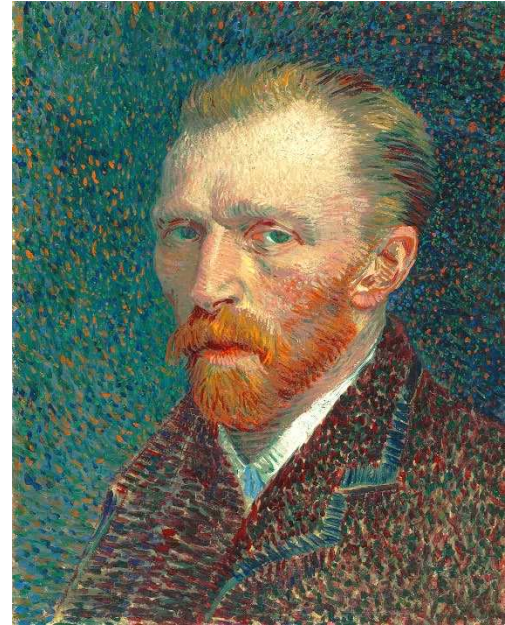
Next, as a missionary, Van Gogh was sent to a mining community, where he was appalled at the desperate condition these families lived in. He gave away most of the things he owned (including food and most of his clothes) to help them. His bosses said he was "over-zealous" for doing this, and ultimately fired him because he was not eloquent enough when he preached!

Then, he tried being an art dealer under another uncle, Uncle Vincent (known as "Cent" in the family.) Vincent worked in Uncle Cent's dealership for four years, until he seemed to lose interest, and left.

Through it all, Vincent wrote to his younger brother, Theo (Tey-yoh). Theo admired his brother, and, when Vincent despaired of ever finding his calling in life, Theo reminded his brother of all the sketches and drawings Vincent had mailed throughout their correspondence. Vincent should paint, and Theo, now the youngest of the dealers at Uncle Cent's shop, would help support Vincent until his paintings sold well.

Vincent Van Gogh only painted for the last 10 years of his life (1880 -1890). During that time, he produced over 900 oil paintings and 1,100 drawings. When he started, he realized he didn't know how to draw, and purchased drawing books and took classes to learn. He drew for hours at a time, then painted furiously, sometimes several canvases a day, always pushing himself to do better than the last.

Despite everything, Vincent struggled with depression. Few of his paintings sold in the dealership, though he traded some in lieu of paying bills. Theo had to pay most of Vincent's expenses, which frustrated Vincent. Vincent tried many things to support himself and others, including trying to found an artist's colony in Arles, France. Only Paul Gauguin came, (and only after Theo promised to pay his bills too!) and Van Gogh and Gauguin fought a lot until Gauguin left! Ultimately, Vincent and Theo died only 6 months apart, and only after they died, did Van Gogh's art start to become popular. Today, he's one of the most famous artists in the world.



Vincent

Pronouncing Van Gogh's name “Properly”

The Van Gogh family was Dutch, and, like many languages, the Dutch language has some sounds which are not necessarily found in all other languages.

In **Dutch**, Van Gogh's native language, the “Gogh” in “Van Gogh” has a very guttural, almost “coughing” sound. A close approximation might be written:

vun -KHOKHT or fun-KHOKHT

That “KH-” sound is a back-of-throat sound, similar to the Scottish pronunciation of “Loch” (Lake)

But English, French, and several other languages don't really have that back-of-throat guttural sound, and, as a result, the name is pronounced a number of different ways around the globe:

- In America, it is often pronounced, “**Van-GOH**”
- In Britain, it is usually pronounced: “**Van-GOFF**” or “**Van-GOKT**”
- In France, it is often pronounced: “**Van-GOG**”
- In Japan, it is often pronounced: “**Van -GOH-ho**”

Surprisingly, the Van Gogh brothers apparently had this problem themselves. In a letter to his brother Theo, written on Sunday, 25 March 1888, Vincent, writing about the publicity and catalogs for a show his works are about to be in, writes...

“And again, many thanks for all the initiatives you’ve taken for the Independents’ exhibition...But — although this time it makes no difference at all — in future my name must be put in the catalogue the way I sign it on the canvases, i.e. Vincent and not Vangogh, for the excellent reason that people here [in France] wouldn’t be able to pronounce that name.”

This shows how, even during their lifetimes, Vincent Van Gogh was perfectly aware that non-Dutch speakers had great difficulty pronouncing the family name. He'd lived in England when he was an art dealer and then France for many years (this letter is, in fact, written in French, not Dutch), and probably heard his name mangled many ways.

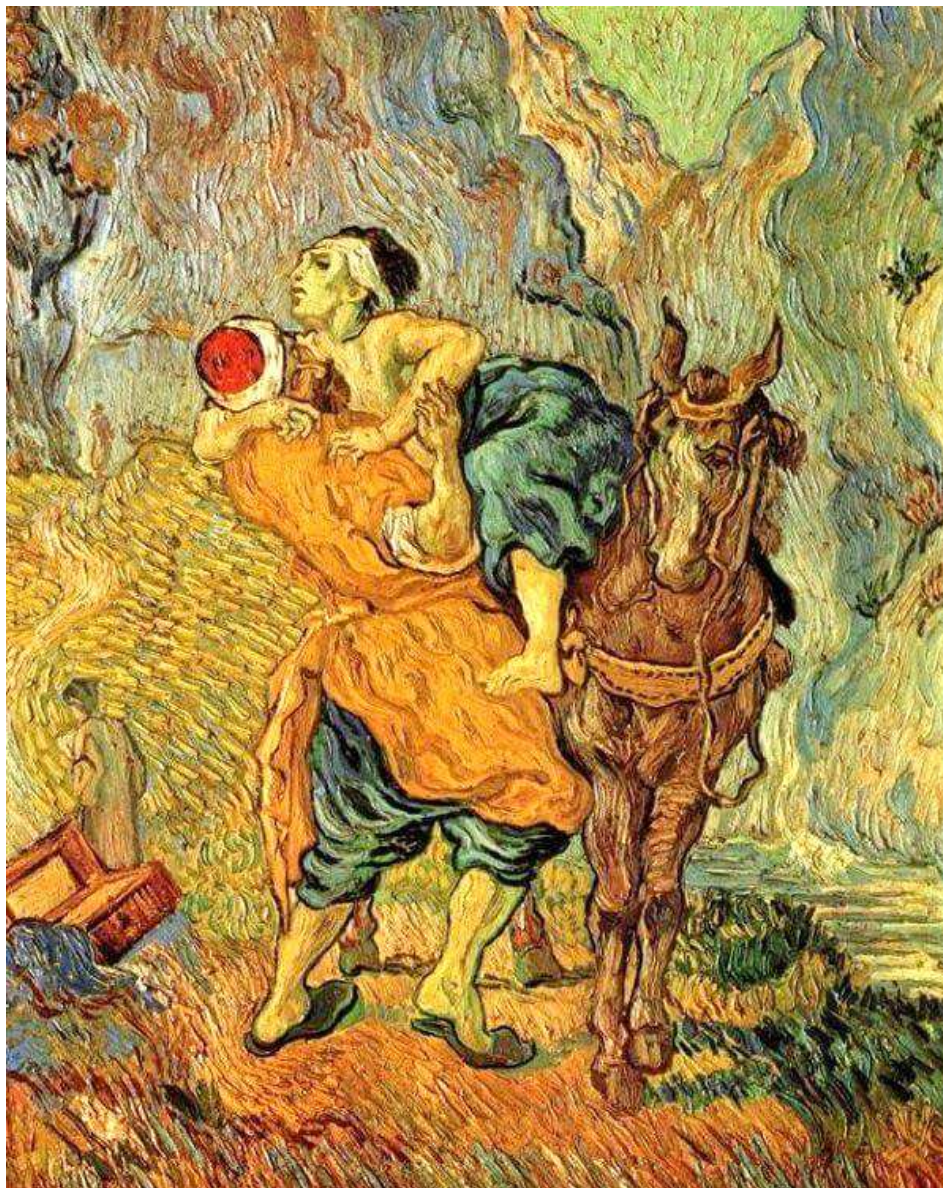
It was so bad, he apparently took to signing everything with the name people COULD pronounce: his first. For an artist, that wasn't a bad thing: Michelangelo, Raphael, Rembrandt, are known by their first names, and some (Rembrandt) signed their works that way. Not a bad precedent...

Van Gogh Quotes

“Love many things, for therein lies the true strength, and whosoever loves much performs much, and can accomplish much, and what is done in love is done well”

“If you hear a voice within you say, ‘you cannot paint,’ then by all means paint and that voice will be silenced.”

“Great things are not done by impulse, but by a series of small things brought together.”



“The Good Samaritan”

*Vincent Van Gogh;
1890*

*Oil on Canvas
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam, The
Netherlands*

Van Gogh created several Biblical paintings in his last 12 months of life. Notice the details, even among the thick brush strokes: the Pharisee and Levite are still in view as they walk away; so is the emptied money box of the beaten victim.

This painting is thought to be inspired, in part, by Rembrandt's work.

Vocabulary:

Post-Impressionism (1890s – 1910s)

“Post Impressionism,” which simply means “After Impressionism,” is a term coined in 1906 by British art critic Roger Fry. Post-Impressionists used some similar techniques to Impressionists, like loose brush strokes, vibrant colors, and intense contrasts. But there were several differences:

| Impressionism (ca. 1870 – 1890s) | Post-Impressionism (ca. 1890s – 1910s) |
|---|---|
| Key Difference: Impressionists tried to capture the everyday scenes of the world realistically through the prism of light and color—like a candid shot from a color camera (which didn’t yet exist). | Key Difference: Post-Impressionists more often drew out of their imagination, using the world as a “mirror.” Rather than capture reality, they tried to capture each artist’s individual emotional reaction to the world around them. |
| A reaction against the academic paintings which preferred the tight brushstrokes and polished finish of the Romantic and Neo-Classical movements, as well as the subjects of ancient history, mythology, and political portraits. | Post-Impressionism was a reaction against the subject matter of the Impressionist movements, but not necessarily the techniques used to get there. They had a larger emphasis on symbolic color (rather than realistic) and formal structure. |
| “Impressionism” was a term the Impressionist artists adopted for themselves, and they exhibited together under that term. | “Post-Impressionism” was a term coined by someone else after most of the “Post-Impressionist” artists died. |
| The Impressionist artists knew each other, often worked together, provided feedback for their works, and supported each other’s careers. | Many Post-Impressionist artists had contacts in the art world, but by and large painted in their individual techniques independent of the other “Post-Impressionist” artists. |

In the end, “Post-Impressionism” became an umbrella term to categorize late 19th century art which didn’t fit in elsewhere: it wasn’t part of the Impressionist movement, even though it used similar brush techniques. It was too realistic to be part of the cubist or abstract movements and too abstract to be part of the realism movement. Four artists are considered the “core” Post-Impressionists: Georges Seurat ((1859 – 1891), Paul Gauguin (1848 – 1903), Paul Cezanne (1839 – 1906) and Vincent Van Gogh (1853 – 1895). This emotion and reaction-focused art laid the foundation for the Modern Art movements. **This period ran concurrently with the Romantic Period of Music.**

Impasto:

(Im-PAH-stoh) From the Italian word “Impasto” meaning “dough” and “Impastare” meaning, “to knead.” Interestingly, the term “pasta” also descends from “Impastare.”

In painting, Impasto is a technique where the paint is laid on the surface so thickly, the paint stands up against the painting, providing touchable texture to a painting (not that you should touch it!) Impasto allows the artist to play with more techniques of highlights and shadows of the light bouncing off the actual paint strokes.

Impasto is an old technique; Baroque painters Rembrandt and Diego de Velasquez used it, and the Impressionist painters were famous for it. Vincent Van Gogh is well-known for his thick impasto work.



“The Starry Night” 1889



FUN FACT: Astronomers believe the bottom most star to the right of the towering cypress is actually the planet Venus.

73 cm x 92 cm (28.7 in x 36.2 in)

Oil on Canvas

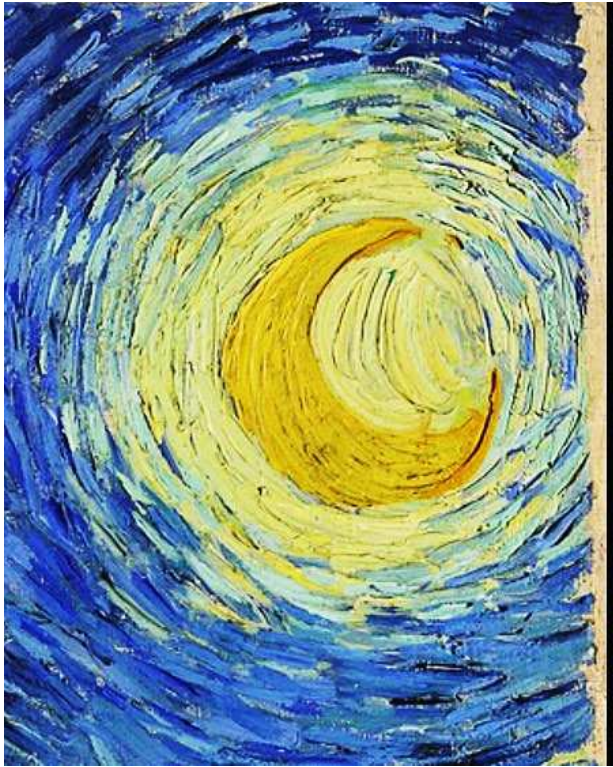
Museum of Modern Art, New York City, USA

“For my part, I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream” -Vincent

This is, ironically, one of the most famous of Van Gogh’s works. It’s ironic because Van Gogh himself probably considered it a failure; he left it largely unfinished and unsigned. When writing to his brother Theo around the time he painted this, he said:

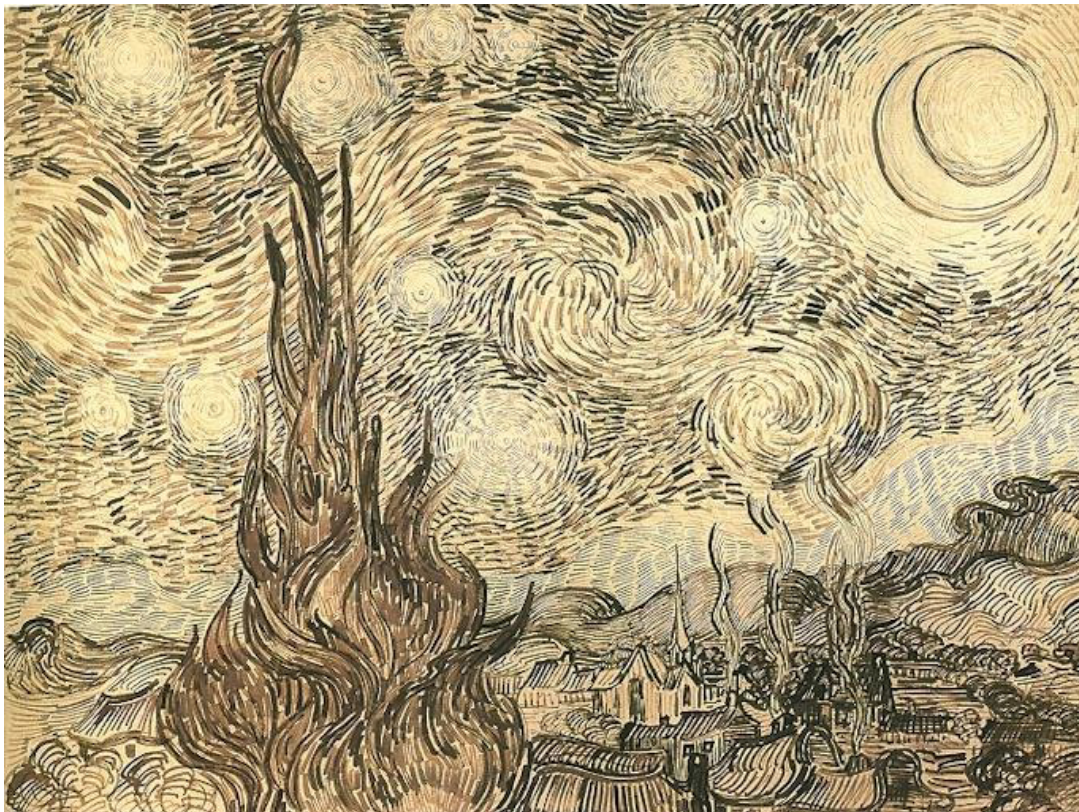
“All in all, the only things I consider a little good in it [his current works] are the Wheatfield, The Mountain, the Orchard, the Olive Trees with the blue hills, and the Portrait, and the Entrance to the Quarry, and the rest says NOTHING to me.”

He certainly never finished the borders of Starry Night (you can still see the blank canvas peeking through the left and right edges) nor did he sign it as a completed work. Starry Night was among Van Gogh’s works when he died and Theo and his wife Johanna inherited it. It was purchased by American art collector Lillie P Bliss, who donated it to The Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1941-the first Van Gogh in their collection. It remains to this day, and is a centerpiece of their collection.



Details from Starry Night. Due to the multiple diagonal and swirling lines, Van Gogh's paint strokes give the painting a feeling of movement and restlessness. On page 6, note the drawing he made before starting. He is not an Impressionist, capturing a real moment. He planned his pieces ahead of time.



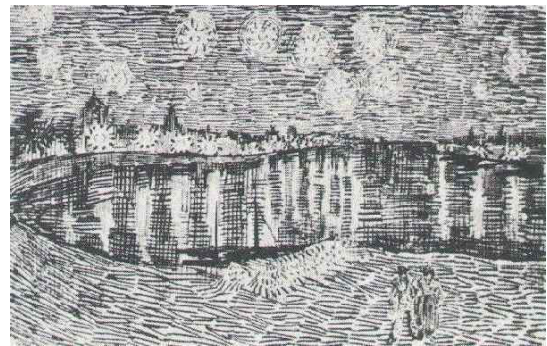


Starry Night over the Rhone River; 1888



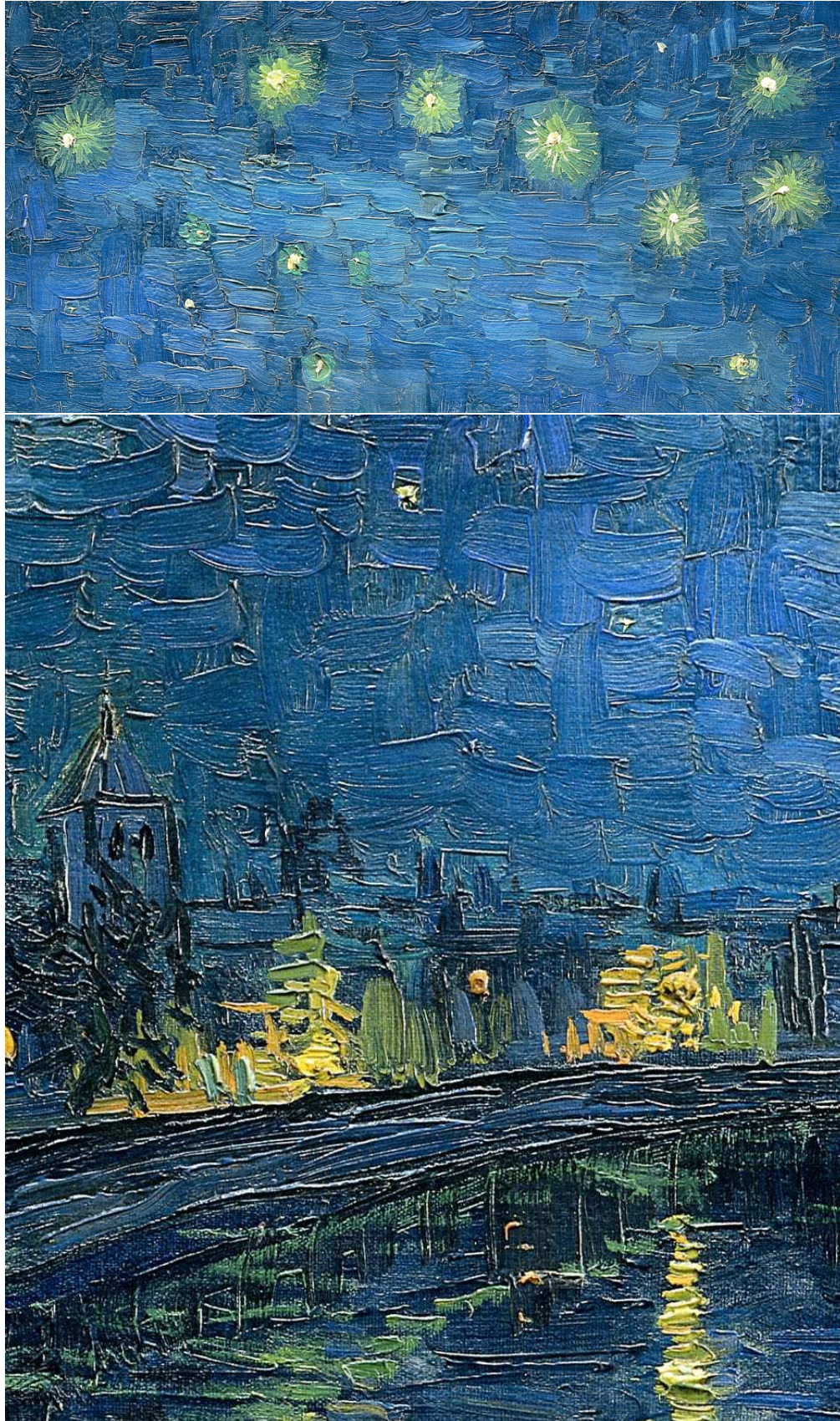
Oil on Canvas
72.5 cm x 92 cm (28.5 in x 36.2 in)
Musee D'Orsay, Paris, France

This was painted during Van Gogh's time in Arles, France, one of his most well-known periods of work. Here, he lived with Gauguin before the latter left for Tahiti, here he painted the Sunflower series. And here, he famously cut his ear off in a fit of despair. The site for this painting was less than two minutes walk from his house in Arles, and he wrote about this painting to his brother:



"Included...the starry sky painted by night, actually under a gas jet. The sky is aquamarine, the water is rooyal blue, and the ground in mauve. The town is blue and purple. The gas is yellow and the reflections are Russet Gold descending down to green bronze. On the aquamarine field of the sky the Great Bear is sparkling green and pink. Two color figures of lovers [are] in the foreground.

Vincent was playing with the color contrast of the natural light of the night and the new gas lights in the town.



Details from
“Starry Night
Over the
Rhone”.
Notice the
difference
between
these stars
and the stars
of “Starry
Night”
(1890).
Here, Van
Gogh
created tiny
flicks of the
brush to
create
“sparkle”
around the
stars. Notice
too how he
changed the
brush
strokes of
the night sky
from the
planned
parallel
strokes (in
the sketch
on page 7)
and the checker-
board or
basketweave
technique he
used in the
final
painting.

Almond Blossom; February 1890



Oil on Canvas
73.3 cm x 92.4 cm (28.8 in x 36.6 in)
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Early in 1890, Theo Van Gogh wrote to his brother announcing the birth of Theo's first (and, as it turned out, only) child:

"As we told you, we will name him after you, and I'm making the wish that he may be as determined and as courageous as you."

In return, Vincent sent this painting to Theo, a painting which Theo and Joanna hung over Vincent Jr.'s cradle. This painting was always a favorite of Theo Van Gogh's family, and was always on display even after hundreds of canvases landed in the home following Vincent Van Gogh's death! (There were so many paintings, the family had to rotate the ones on display, and stuff the unused ones in attics and unheated back rooms!) Vincent Jr. gave it to his three sons in turn, and it hung in their bedroom throughout their childhood. Vincent Jr.'s grandsons remember this painting in their room (surviving their pillow fights!) and realizing its value only when they were much older!



In this detail of “Almond Blossoms,” look and see how Van Gogh layered paint very thickly in some places (like the sky just below the branch). In other places, he blended colors on the canvas while the paint was wet (look at the sky below the bottom blossom bunch or the descending branch in the lower-left-hand corner)

Additionally, he left some of the canvas unpainted. Look carefully at the bottom edge of the horizontal branch on the left side of this photo: what should be shadow is sometimes bare canvas, whose creamy oatmeal color is easily seen. To the right along the same branch, the paint was laid so lightly, the weave of the linen still peeks through.

The style of “Almond Blossom,” was inspired in part by Japanese prints by artists like **Utagawa Hiroshige** (oo-tah-GAH-wah Hero-SHE-gae) (1797 – 1858) and **Kahsushika Hokusai** (KAH-soo-SHE-kah Hoh-KOO-sigh) (1760 – 1849). Van Gogh loved these newly-imported Japanese art prints and collected over 600 during his life.

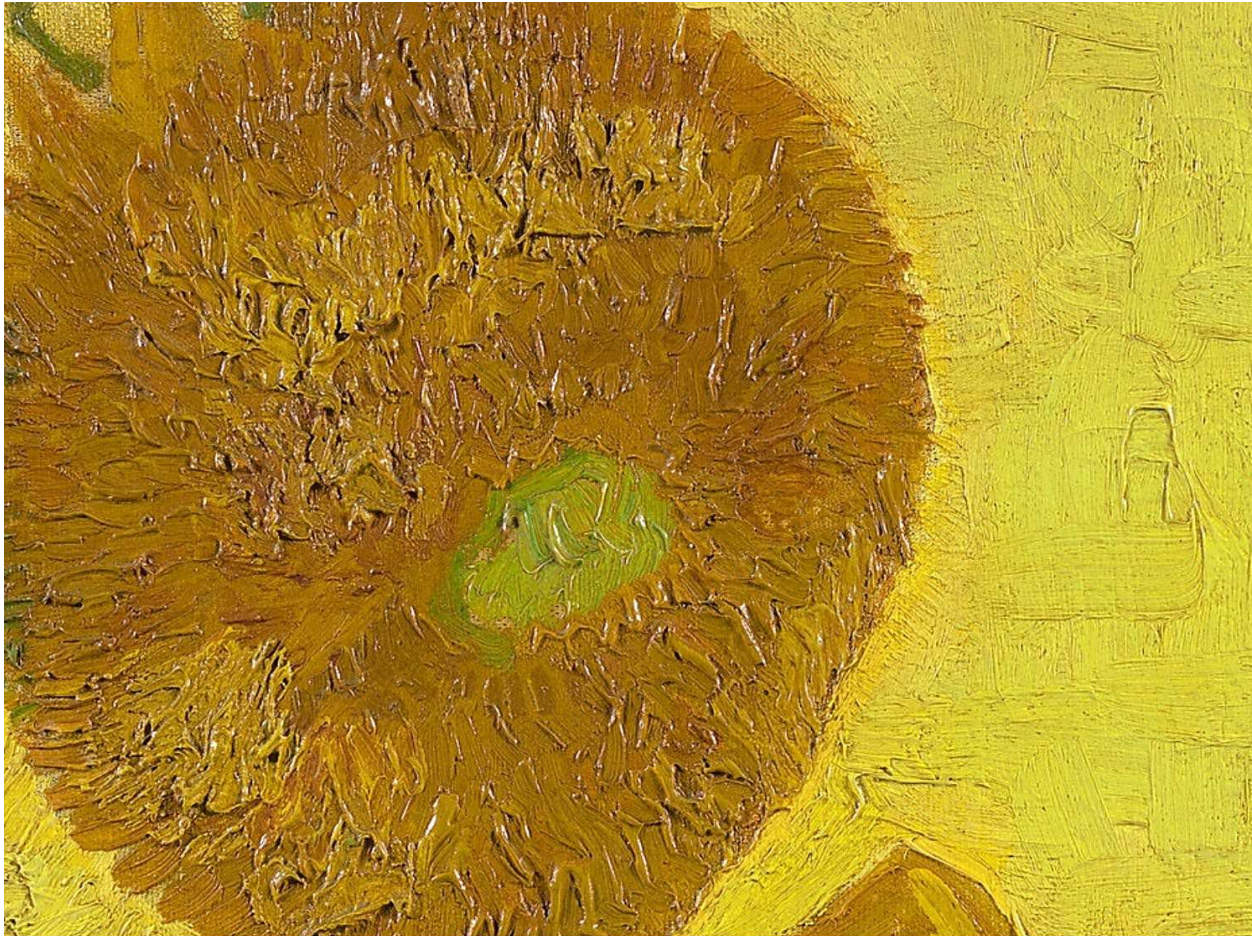
Sunflowers; January 1889



Oil on canvas

95 cm x 73 cm

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands



Detail of "Sunflowers; January 1889" showing the thick impasto work on the topmost right-hand flower. Some of the impasto work was so thick, it could take several months to a couple of years to fully dry.

"Sunflowers" is a very famous series of paintings which Van Gogh completed. He decorated his rental house in Arles with them, including hanging two in Paul Gauguin's room. Gauguin was impressed, and said the paintings were "completely Vincent." (He also wanted to take one-Vincent said, "no")

Van Gogh loved sunflowers and hoped they would become his "signature" flower-which they are.

This particular composition was created using mainly shades of yellow, and some art historians point to this painting as proof that Van Gogh was trying to prove he could create a successful painting using mainly one color. The yellows in this composition were mostly new, products of synthetic pigments born out of the Industrial Revolution: Chrome Yellow and Zinc Yellow. These intense yellow pigments were new to the market and could be bright sunny yellow, to a deep yellow, to nearly orange yellow. Van Gogh embraced this color enthusiastically, and it is all through his paintings.

However, modern analysis shows that some molecular forms of Zinc and Chrome Yellow darken to greenish-brown as they age. Thus far, Sunflowers, one of the most yellow of Van Gogh's works, has not changed enough to be visible, but in time, the vibrant flowers will darken. Already, most museums are taking precautionary measures, and thanks to Van Gogh's extensive letters to his brother, (which tell us which paints he used on his paintings), plus modern X-ray and Spectroscopy testing, we can help track and prevent some fading of Post-Impressionist paintings.

Take Home:

Be advised, there are two well-known incidents in Vincent Van Gogh's life which may be difficult to deal with for younger children, or children whose families have been through some trauma. In December 1888, Van Gogh severed his left ear in a fit of despair. 19 months later, in July 1890, he died following a shotgun wound. Traditionally, Van Gogh attempted, and ultimately succeeded, in committing suicide, but contemporary research suggests he may also have been shot accidentally by some teenagers.

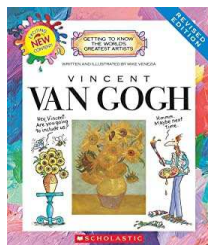
Video:

Art with Mati and Dada: Van Gogh. YouTube Channel: Mati and Dada. A cute little 4 minute cartoon about how Van Gogh created his paintings with swirl of color and how those created a sense of movement. Since we "meet" Van Gogh, there is no mention of his death at all.

Vincent Van Gogh for Children: Biography for Kids by YouTube Channel FreeSchool. This little 4-minute biography shows a variety of paintings while discussing Van Gogh's life. The first thing we see is a European map, showing the countries he lived in (so ties in with Geography). No mention of the manner of Van Gogh's death, or the ear.

The Unexpected Math Behind Van Gogh's Starry Night by YouTube channel Ted-ed. This interesting, 4:38 video explores the science of turbulence and how we see that in Van Gogh's Starry Night. A great intersection of Art and Mathematics! (Death and ear not referenced)

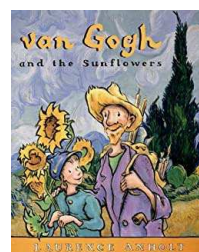
PBS: The Secrets of Dead, Season 16, Episode 2: "Van Gogh's Ear"; Available on PBS Passport, and Hoopla, this documentary explores what really happened the night Van Gogh famously cut off his ear. Explores Van Gogh's life and environment in depth. Recommend for adults and older children, as it discusses prostitution, depression, and self-mutilation, but also explores what happens when one person decides to answer a question and learn all she can, just like any classical scholar should be encouraged to do. Also known as "BBC The Mystery of Van Gogh's Ear."



Books:

Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists: Van Gogh by Mike Venezia. This was the first Venezia book I ever read as a child, and I literally read my copy to pieces. I loved the combination of art and cartoons in this biography, and still do. This book does touch on both the ear incident and the suicide, but it is simply stated, and not dwelt upon.

Van Gogh and the Sunflowers by Laurence Anholt. Written by the same author who wrote "Degas and the Little Dancer" this book follows a little French boy named Camille as he watches Van Gogh paint in Arles. While the main story itself doesn't cover the ear or death of Vincent Van Gogh, the two paragraph biography on the last page does.



Katie and the Starry Sky: A fun little book about a little girl who "plays" with the characters and scenery in Van Gogh's paintings in a museum one sleepy afternoon. No biography about Vincent, but children will enjoy seeing these paintings through the eyes of a little girl.