

Seeing with Holy Eyes: The Life and Art of Vincent Van Gogh

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Everyone has heard of Vincent Van Gogh and seen his work. His is one of the most authentic, original and recognizable artistic styles, and his paintings now bring among the highest prices of any art. As an artist, he undoubtedly was a creative genius, but his career as an artist lasted only 10 years and he sold only one piece of art in his lifetime. And, when he died he felt that he was a failure. What is perhaps less known is that Vincent's was a devoutly religious spirit who considered all that he did to be an expression of his love of God and a way to teach the Gospel of Christ. In particular, he felt a deep compassion for the downtrodden and drew and painted their lives in solidarity with them and to bring them comfort. He suffered many rejections and failures in his life and didn't get over them – they wounded him deeply and he remained wounded. It was the fact that he so suffered that allowed him to be compassionate to others. A hereditary mental illness, along with his sense of personal failure, led him to suicide at the age of 37. Today, I will discuss his life, his view of religion and the meaning he says that he intended for some of his paintings.

Vincent Van Gogh was born on March 30, 1853 in the village of Groot Zundert in the Netherlands. His parents were Rev. Theodorus Van Gogh a Calvinist Dutch Reform minister, and his wife Anna Cornelia Carpentus. He was later joined by siblings Anna, Theodorus, Elizabeth and Cornelius. His closest relationship in his family was to his brother Theodorus, or Theo, a relationship which remained very close for his whole life. Vincent spent the first 16 years of his life in Groot Zundert, where he attended the village school, studied under the family governess and at a secondary school where he left without graduating at the age of 15. He spent a year at home before deciding to enter the art trade.

He is described as a solitary, moody and intensely religious child with a difficult, obstinate nature. His struggles with religion strained his relationship with his minister father. Even as a child, he was drawn to the

poor, downtrodden, dirty corners of life. Of his early years, his sister Elizabeth described him as looking old for his age and said, “He was remarkable at such an early age because of the profoundness that was expressed in his whole being...” He was an avid reader and eventually learned fluent French, German and English, in addition to his native Dutch.

In 1869 he moved to The Hague, where he worked for four years for his uncle as a clerk for the art dealers Goupil and Co. Here he began an almost inexhaustible appetite for looking at pictures and learning about their creators. He was much influenced by Rembrandt and from him learned that it was possible to convey the Gospel through art. Rembrandt’s dark paintings were often lit with an ethereal, spiritual light, something that Van Gogh was to later imitate in his first masterpiece *The Potato Eaters*. Working for Goupil, he learned that the art that sold was neo-classical in style approved by the academy, which took upon itself to dictate what “art” was. Along with other young artists of the era, Vincent came to feel that such art was meaningless.

In 1873, 20-year-old Van Gogh arrived in England, having been promoted to Goupil’s London branch with a comfortable salary. There he fell in love with his landlady’s daughter, Eugenie Loyer, who, unfortunately, was already secretly engaged to be married. Her rejection of him as a suitor was something that he never got over and contributed to his alienation from his profession and his eventual dismissal from Goupil’s.

After leaving Goupil’s, he cut himself off completely from others and sought solace in religion. He identified with the sorrows and losses recounted in the Bible. He felt that to identify with Jesus was to make his own sufferings acceptable. His father’s words, “Sadness does no harm, but makes us see things with holier eyes,” consoled him and remained with his soul all of his life. He was to suffer many rejections.

In England, after working briefly as an assistant teacher and abandoning it, he met a Methodist minister, the Rev. Thomas Slade-Jones, who offered him a job as a curate, which he held for six months before returning to Holland to work in a book shop and study subjects such as Greek and Latin for entrance examinations for theological studies. In 1878 he realized that his studies were a failure and abandoned his plans for entering a theological school. He returned to his parent’s home and prepared for admission to a mission school in Brussels, which he entered on a trial basis in August of 1878. In November of 1878, he failed at this trial period and returned home to his parents, rejected again.

He now decided to take his ministry career into his own hands and set out on his own to preach the Gospel to miners in a very poor area of Belgium called the Borinage. The Committee of the Evangelical Belgian Society was impressed with his commitment and supported him on a six-month trial basis. At the Borinage, he found the place that was perfectly suited to his Christian fervor to bring the Gospel to the lowest of the low and translate his words and feelings into deeds. He was shocked at what he found – filth and hopelessness, emaciated miners trapped in something inhuman called the mine, the pit of hell. Here he could finally break

out of that constricting prison of loneliness where he found himself so misunderstood and unloved, and on his own terms pledge solidarity with the people he was serving.

His compulsion to be of service and to act from his feelings had finally found an outlet – he was his own master, dedicated only to Christ. His extreme overwork and neglect of himself left him ill and near death. After six months, when the Committee saw the state he was in they didn't renew his position and he was dismissed. Believing his work to be vitally important, Vincent remained on his own as an evangelist in the Borinage for another six months in 1880. It is at this time that Vincent began to draw.

He called his stay in the Borinage a “time of molting like a bird” – a time of transformation. He felt that just as a bird emerges renewed out of the molting stage, he too was coming out of his time of desolation a transformed man. The year of serving the lowest of the low had brought him into such close contact with the most basic human suffering that he had been able to gain access to the depths of his own despair, of his own nature. With his drawings, he had discovered that the Gospel could also be preached through visual images. Rembrandt had succeeded in making art a spiritual language. Rembrandt was the bridge to being able to combine his two passions – preaching the Gospel and art.

Vincent now started sharpening his skills of observation and artistic expression. His subjects remain the people of the land, drawing the nameless, the humble, the ignorant, the overlooked in order to record their lives and give them their true place and, if possible, to transform them by love. His paradoxical view of ugliness as a special kind of beauty was manifested in his work and his words: “I do not want the beauty to come from the material, but from within myself, from within the soul.”

He began a time of intense sketching, drawing, observing nature, people and trees. It is called his Dark, or Dutch Period. His theme during this period is solidarity with the people he drew. He began to see imagery in nature, in the cyclical activities of men who live close to the earth. His art started to emerge in form, if not yet in color. He moved back to his parents' home, now in Etten. While there, he developed an intense and unrequited love for his widowed cousin, Kee Stricker Vos. When she rejected him and moved to Amsterdam, he followed her, only to suffer further rejection and humiliation. He moved to The Hague and for a time lived with a pregnant prostitute named Sien Hoornik, setting up house, intending to marry and reform her. Their tempestuous relationship ended in failure in 1883.

In September of 1883, he left The Hague and moved to the northern fenland of Drenthe. There he spent hours wandering the countryside, making sketches of the landscape and the people who lived and worked there. After three months, he returned to live with his parents once again, this time in Nuenen. Here he drew weavers and peasants. He worked as hard as the lack of studio and shortage of materials would allow. The art he created was charged with movement, energy and emotion. He learned to work rapidly, changing reality

where necessary in order to get at the truth. It was at this time that he painted his first masterpiece, *The Potato Eaters*.

After the death of his father in 1885, Vincent was supported almost entirely by his brother Theo. Vincent continually struggled to find some other means of support to relieve Theo of this burden but was never successful.

Again trying to become an artist, Vincent went to Antwerp in 1886 and studied at the Art Academy there. He quickly rejected the academic style, keeping the rapid, bold methods of his own devising. The Academy responded by downgrading him to the beginner's class. This is the man who had already painted *The Potato Eaters*! He withdrew from the Academy and left for Paris to live with Theo.

In Paris, Van Gogh was introduced to the art of the Impressionists who were just starting at this time to create a distinctive artistic style. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Emile Bernard became his best painter friends. Here he discovered color and his palette brightened, beginning what is called his Light period. He worked at the studio of Fernand Cormon for several months, and then worked by himself for almost two years of experimentation to find his own style. Vincent and Theo lived together but often quarreled. In Paris he also began drinking absinthe, a practice that was to aggravate the hereditary seizures he was to develop later in his life.

In early 1888, he became disillusioned with city life and felt the need to get back to nature. He moved to Arles in the South of France. This began a period of furious work – 200 paintings and 100 drawings in 444 days. These are some of his best known masterpieces. His friend Paul Gauguin joined him in late October 1888. For a time, his hopes were high and he dreamed of setting up a permanent artist's colony there. However, these two high-strung, difficult people found it impossible to paint in peace. Gauguin felt he was the more enlightened artist and mocked Van Gogh's style. Van Gogh felt that Gauguin was pressuring him to be something that he wasn't, and they frequently quarreled, especially after drinking.

In December 1888, after their final quarrel, Gauguin said he was leaving Arles. Vincent was in so much despair at this rejection of him and his dream of an art colony that he responded by cutting off part of his own ear, presenting it to a local prostitute. Many have remarked at how bizarre this cutting behavior was, but I can testify from my work with the mentally ill that it is not uncommon for people to have the strong desire to cut themselves, thinking that they might be able to relieve their mental anguish with physical pain.

This episode was Vincent's first mental breakdown, and he was to thereafter suffer from a repeated cycle of acute nervous distress and delusions, followed by exhaustion and a subsequent period of well-being and lucidity. At the time, epilepsy was diagnosed, but modern-day medical opinion is that he had a condition called Acute Intermittent Porphyria, a hereditary illness with symptoms of bouts of seizures, hallucinations,

pain and delusions of persecution, which was aggravated by his use of alcohol and poor nutrition. After another nervous crisis at Arles some residents petitioned the mayor to have him committed to an asylum and he was eventually again hospitalized. Later, after another attack, he became a voluntary patient in the asylum at St. Remy, where he stayed for a year.

It is remarkable how productive Vincent was during the last 19 months of his life, given that he was debilitated by his illness for one-third of that time. While at St. Remy, he averaged two paintings a week, most of them masterpieces of his style. After St. Remy, he moved north to Auvers-sur-Oise and produced 70 paintings and drawings in the last 70 days of his life. Most of his paintings were sent to his brother Theo in Paris, who managed to place several of them in art shows. He sold just one while Vincent was alive. Vincent was touched that his art had sold and wrote to Theo, telling him to thank the buyer warmly.

In despair about the way he felt his life was going, he shot himself on July 27, 1890 and died two days later in Theo's arms. Theo was devastated by Vincent's suicide and went into a steep mental and physical decline with symptoms similar to Vincent's, dying just six months later. Their younger brother Cornelius committed suicide in 1900, lending credence to the theory of a hereditary link in their mental illnesses. Theo's wife Joanna played an important role in preserving and promoting Vincent's art. It was only shortly after his death that Vincent's genius began to be recognized by others.

Over the course of his life Vincent wrote over 800 letters – 632 to Theo, the last of which was in his pocket when he died. His letters are also a work of written art and express in great detail what he was thinking artistically and religiously, and what he was trying to depict in his paintings and drawings. This is how we know what his symbolism meant to him. Here are some of the symbols he used most often:

- He was particularly interested in the symbolism of men sowing and reaping and digging, closely relating these activities to the cycle of life. Sowing meant planting seeds for a new life beyond this one. A field of wheat meant living life. And reaping meant death, the end of life.
- Couples represent the companionship that he yearned for.
- Cypress trees were to him a symbol of the eternal. They would often reach beyond the edge of the painting, as if reaching for God.
- Contorted tree trunks expressed suffering, the agony of Christ.
- Swirls expressed emotion and maybe what he actually saw in his hallucinations.
- The sun was an expression of the divine. In Vincent's copy of Rembrandt's Lazarus, the sun takes the place of Christ.
- The moon and sun in the sky together represented twilight, the most mystical time of day, when God's presence can be felt most clearly.
- Nature was an expression of the holy. Thus, drawing something from nature symbolized being at one with God.

- The star-filled sky is symbolic of infinity, ecstatic and mystical.
- He experienced the divine in the most mundane settings. One didn't speak and paint about Jesus directly, one just felt. One can only paint about what one feels and knows.

We can put these symbols together to interpret some of his paintings:

Potato Eaters

- These are hard workers who have honestly earned their food.
- There is a child, or stranger, who we cannot see. Some believe that this represents the Christ child or the unknown stranger we should make room for.
- The light seems to come not only from the lamp, but also from the potatoes, themselves – a mystical light as used by Rembrandt.

Starry Night

- A star-filled sky dominates the painting. It is pulsating, radiant, symbolic of infinity, ecstasy, mysticism. Recent research has shown that some of the most prominent stars were actually in those positions on the night he painted this picture.
- A cypress to express the search for the eternal
The church is dark, but the houses have lights – symbolic of the empty preaching of the clergy. True religion is in the hearts of the people and communion with nature.

A Wheatfield

- This shows a cypress and a wheat field, symbolizing living life in a search for the infinite. The sky is swirling, showing emotion involved in the search.

Pictures of Nature

- There were irises and sunflowers in abundance around Arles. To Vincent, depicting nature was one way of drawing the holy.

Vincent Van Gogh's vocation, one might call it his ministry, was to touch people by artistically expressing his solidarity with the human condition, especially for those who were the lowest of the low, the downtrodden. He wanted to console people, not by avoiding pain, but by a deepening of the pain to a level where it was shared. He had learned to feel a deep solidarity with the poor and the oppressed in the Borinage, and this solidarity became the basis for his ability to console. He said he wanted to comfort people with his painting. He comforted by discovering the inner beauty of people and their world, and by drawing out of the dirtiest corners of life a ray of light. All would recognize this light and realize that all light comes from the same sun,

which he regarded as the Divine. His compassion for humanity and how he expressed it led to many of his rejections and failures, but it also led to the beauty that he created and the consolation and comfort people feel when they see it and are drawn to it. Vincent truly saw with holy eyes.