

Vincent Van Gogh

Dutch Artist
1853 - 1890



Vocabulary

Impressionism Expressionism impasto still life tonal texture mood

Background

- Vincent Van Gogh was born in the Netherlands in 1853. He was a lonesome and sad person. He tried many jobs before he decided to be an artist - art dealer, preacher, teacher, and book seller, but he didn't like any of the jobs. In 1880 he became an artist, which made him happy.
- He was very close to his younger brother, Theo. They wrote a lot of letters to each other where Vincent expressed many of his feelings. The letters tell us a lot about Van Gogh's art.
- He tried to express his thoughts and emotions in his paintings. He worked hard at painting, working days without stopping, forgetting to eat and spending all of his money on paints.
- At first his paintings were dark and sad. They were of poor people he had tried to help when he was a preacher. Then he saw some Japanese artwork and he liked the bright colors, lines and shapes. This influence showed up in his paintings.
- Theo was an art dealer in Paris and encouraged Vincent to come to Paris to meet the many artists that he knew. In 1886 Vincent moved to Paris. He liked the light and colors of the **Impressionism** paintings.
- He painted with heavy brushstrokes of thick paint, called **impasto**, and used quick brushstrokes. His favorite subjects were landscapes, portraits and still lifes. He often worked very quickly, finishing paintings in a few days or less.
- In 1888 he moved to Arles, in the south of France in search of more light. He often painted outdoors to be in the light. His friend, Paul Gauguin, came to Arles to stay with him for a while in "the yellow house." Vincent liked the color yellow. In Arles, Vincent began to use the swirling brushstrokes and intense colors. He got to be friends with the Postman Roulin and he painted him and his family many times.
- In 1890, Vincent was not happy and not well, so he moved to Auvers, near Paris, to try to get better. He continued to paint, mostly landscapes and portraits, and he painted over 80 paintings. It was here that he began painting the cypress trees and painted one of his most famous paintings, *Starry Night*. He died in Auvers in July, 1890.
- Vincent only painted for 10 years, but he painted over 800 paintings and many more drawings. He was not famous in his lifetime and only sold one painting. After his death, people began to realize how good his paintings were and they sold for a lot of money.

Resources

Children's books - fiction - *Camille and the Sunflowers*, Laurence Anholt; *The Starry Night*, Neil Waldman; *Painting the Wind*, Michelle Dionetti

Children's books - non-fiction - *Vincent Van Gogh*, Adeline Peter & Ernest Raboff; *Masters of Art, Van Gogh*, Enrica Crispino; *What Makes a Van Gogh a Van Gogh?*, Richard Mühlberger; *Famous Artists, Van Gogh*, Andrew Hughes; *A Weekend with Van Gogh*, Rosabianca Skira-Venturi; *Vincent Van Gogh*, Eileen Lucas; *The Yellow House - Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin*, Susan Goldman Rubin; *Vincent Van Gogh*, Mike Venezia

Magazine - Smithsonian, "Strange Bedfellows", Joseph Harriss

Web sites - www.vangoghgallery.com

Viewing Art Locally

National Gallery of Art (DC) - *La Mousmé, Farmhouse in Provence*

The Phillips Collection (DC) - *Entrance to the Park, The Road Menders*

Baltimore Museum of Art - *A Pair of Shoes*

Museum of Modern Art (New York) - *The Starry Night*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) - *Cypresses, Still Life with Irises, Sunflowers, Self-Portrait with Straw Hat, Irises, The Arlesian, Portrait of Madame Ginoux*

The Philadelphia Museum of Art - *Sunflowers*

VINCENT VAN GOGH

INVENTORY

PORTFOLIO: 19 posters

BOOKS:

- "Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists: Van Gogh"; Venezia, Mike
- "Masters of Art: Van Gogh"; Crispino, Enrica
- "My Brother Vincent van Gogh"; de Bie, Ceciel
- "Painting the Wind"; Dionetti, Michelle
- "Van Gogh"; Huyghe, Rene
- "Van Gogh"; Uhde, W.
- "Van Gogh"; Schapiro, Meyer
- "Vincent van Gogh: Portrait of an Artist"; Greenberg, J. and Jordan, S.
- "Vincent van Gogh"; Copplestone, Trewin
- "What Makes a Van Gogh a Van Gogh?"; Muhlberger, Richard
- "The Yellow House"; Goldman Rubin, Susan

SUPPLIES:

- Impasto paint (tempera and corn starch mixed in covered containers)
- Construction paper: dark colors, 12"x18"
- Paint brushes
- Craft sticks
- Water cups
- Paper plates
- Newspaper
- Measuring cup
- Spoons

VINCENT VAN GOGH

PROJECT: Impasto Painting in the manner of *Starry Night*: Create a starry night sky on dark paper using pale colors

MATERIALS:

Impasto (tempera paints with corn starch)

Paints will be in covered bowls; docents will need to check before each class to determine if additional impasto mix is needed. Mixture is $\frac{1}{2}$ cup tempera paint to 1 tablespoon cornstarch (two plastic spoonfuls). Please cover bowls tightly at the end of your class.

Covered bowls for paint, spoons for transferring paint

Painting implements: brushes and craft sticks, water cups

Paper plates

Large construction paper, 12"x18", dark colors

PROCESS:

- Docents should give each group a paper plate with a small amount of each paint (we will be using a limited palette).
- Children should use dots, dabs, streaks, quick strokes in Impressionistic/Expressionistic/van Gogh style - not traditional painting style
- Apply paint with craft sticks or paint brushes
- Impasto will give extra texture. Painting will need to dry overnight.
- Have children look at *Starry Night*:
 - Look at all the lines and brushstrokes. Can you find curves and dashes and straight lines? What patterns do you see?
 - Notice the colors. How many different kinds of blues do you see? What mood do the colors create?
 - Think about the way the sky usually looks. What in van Gogh's painting looks make-believe?
 - Do you think this scene looks warm or cold? Why?
 - Which area of the painting seems most quiet? Why?
 - Which area seems most active? Why?
 - Pretend you have a paint brush in your hand and show how you think the artist painted the sky.

VINCENT VAN GOGH

March 30, 1853 - July 29, 1890



BACKGROUND:

- born in Netherlands, oldest of 6 children; brother Theo was four years younger, most faithful supporter and closest friend throughout Vincent's life
- father and grandfather were Protestant ministers; gained respect for humanity and deep religious beliefs that lasted entire life even though became disillusioned with and left church
- mother passed on her love of art and nature
- early appreciation of art; three uncles were art dealers; distant relative Anton Mauve was the leader of The Hague School of Painting (Dutch artists, realistic style)
- 11 years old: went away to boarding school; sad to leave home, average student but worked very hard
- 13 years old: studied 4 languages, arithmetic, history, geography, botany, zoology, calligraphy, gymnastics and took drawing lessons
- 15 years old: left home to work

JOBS:

- assistant to his uncle in an art gallery, The Hague
- assistant to an art dealer in London and Paris
- schoolteacher
- minister: preached to and helped sick and poor in a mining district in Belgium; lived in extreme poverty; found peace making drawings and paintings of miners and their families; after 2 years, at the age of 27, decided he was meant to serve humanity through art

1882--1885

- lived and painted at The Hague for a year
- next two years lived with his parents and produced hundreds of drawings and paintings of the local peasant community
- van Gogh's father died in 1885; in November of that year he moved to Antwerp, Belgium for three months; never returned to Holland

- visited museums to study the work of Rubens and discovered Japanese prints (strong colors, simplicity of flat shapes)
- enrolled in the Art Academy to improve his skills; teachers not impressed, judged unsuitable; left school

Van Gogh was always very poor

- earned almost no money; dependent on an allowance from his brother Theo throughout his life
- over the years, Vincent wrote hundreds of letters to Theo, many with drawings
- a lot of what is known about van Gogh and his art is taken from his letters

THE POTATO EATERS, 1885 (see "Vincent van Gogh" by Copplestone)

- first masterpiece; worked on final version for several months
- spent months sketching and painting studies of heads and hands
- depicts somber, simple and hard life led by these farmers whom van Gogh greatly respected
- Tonal colors: colors of the earth; lighting reminiscent of traditional Dutch masters
- felt that painting should be more concerned with conveying mood and expressing inner feelings of subjects than with representing meticulous outward detail

1886--1887: PARIS

- 33 years old, moved to Paris to live with Theo
- studied the work and style of the Impressionists who broke from academic traditions both in technical practice and subject matter (used dabs, strokes and dots of pure color; spontaneous, unplanned; idea of capturing fleeting impressions; worked rapidly and on the spot; non-traditional subjects: French landscape and common people)
- met many important contemporary artists, including Pissarro, Gauguin, Cezanne, Seurat, Signac
- Impressionists were holding the last of their 8 exhibitions, variety of art styles increasing
- van Gogh began painting outdoors like the Impressionists; painted same subjects and places, used rapid brush strokes
- changed palette to brighter, lighter colors

POSTER 13 -- SELF PORTRAITS

- van Gogh painted over 20 self portraits (could not afford models); only two are composed of "earth colors", others are filled with lively colors and patterns
- met Paul Signac and Seurat who used pointillism: technique of using regular dots of pure color, different colors are separated
- van Gogh adapted pointillism to his own style: turned dots into dashes with heavy brushstrokes and thick paint --IMPASTO -- brush strokes seem to stand up from the flat surface
- covered entire canvas with paint, no white space
- ?? How do these portraits look up close?? (You can see all the dashes.)
- ?? How about from a distance??
- ?? How did van Gogh feel about himself?? Happy? Sad? Why?

POSTER 7 -- SUNFLOWERS AND IRISES

- 1887: Left Paris for Arles in the south of France; tired of life in Paris; wanted to see nature under a brighter sky, to draw by the clarity of light in southern France.
- lived here for 15 months; very productive --did much of his famous work, including 200 paintings and over 100 drawings
- painted landscapes, flowering trees, haystacks, anything that caught his eye
- used strong, pure color; expressed self more forcefully; yellow and blue dominant colors
- lived in the Yellow House across from public garden
- many sunflowers grew in the area; completed a series of paintings of sunflowers to decorate his house before his friend Gauguin arrived: contrasting shades of yellow, "a symphony of blue and yellow", small sunbursts which represented the sun -- van Gogh was thankful for the sun's light and warmth which made him happy
- yellow was van Gogh's favorite color

POSTER 14 -- SCENES OF THE HARVEST IN ARLES

POSTER 4 -- FARMER IN FIELD

POSTER 5 -- THE BRIDGE AT ARLES and FARMHOUSE IN PROVENCE

- bridge reminiscent of Japanese art; strong, simple outlines and bright colors
- many wheat fields in this area; van Gogh wrote "how beautifully nature combines blue of sky with yellow of fields"; used many blues and yellows during this time.

POSTER 6 -- BEDROOM IN ARLES

- Simple furniture in his bedroom; chose fancier pieces for the guest room -- hopeful that friends would come live with him.
- Picked colors for this painting to "rest the brain"
- Simple -- large areas of flat colors, no shadows, outlined each piece in black, Japanese influence
- ?? Why do you think he painted objects in pairs ?? (Lonely, wished for someone to live with him)

POSTERS 9 & 2 -- PORTRAITS

- During the winter the fields were dormant, so Van Gogh painted portraits
- Painted 40 neighbors
- Postmaster Joseph Roulin; Van Gogh was very fond of him and his family and was often invited over to their house for dinner; painted many portraits of the family members
- Local peasant, gardener
- Roulin' s wife and son
- Pere Tanguy, "his best friend in Paris"; owned art supply shop; exchanged portrait for art material; backdrop Japanese prints

POSTER 8 -- ST. PAUL'S HOSPITAL

- Van Gogh became ill; "ear incident"
- He was admitted to a mental hospital in Saint Remy where he stayed for a year
- had periods of hyperactivity and deep depression
- allowed to paint outside

- energy in painting now expressed not in color but in lines: twisted, turning, flamed, swirling -- inner turmoil projected onto canvas

POSTER 11 -- ROAD WITH CYPRESS, LANDSCAPE WITH OLIVE TREES, DRAWING FOR STARRY NIGHT

- painted the terrain of Saint Remy
- fascinated with cypress trees, wrote: "I constantly think about cypresses. I would like to do something with them as I did with the pictures of sunflowers, for I am amazed that they have not been done in the way I see them. The line and proportions of a cypress resemble those of an Egyptian obelisk."
- used blended colors, not as bright
- very moody paintings, reflect van Gogh's state of mind
- lines give feeling of motion; brush strokes create undulating movement across the whole canvas

POSTER 10 -- STARRY NIGHT

- 11 versions of this painting
- probably a combination of real and imaginary, Provençal and northern elements
- calm, peaceful town; turbulent sky
- many interpretations

MAY, 1890: van Gogh left Saint Remy for Auvers, near Paris

- consulted with Paul Gachet, a physician, amateur artist and collector
- painted portrait of Gachet that fetched \$82.5 million in 1990; at the time the highest price ever paid at auction for a painting (see "Masters of Art: van Gogh")
- painted 1 canvas per day
- seemed to try to keep emotions under control: twisting, swirling lines disappeared, calmer, more reflective, desire for order and tranquility

POSTER 1 -- FIRST STEPS

- example of calmer style

- modeled after painting by Millet
- painted for Theo and his wife Jo after the birth of their son, Vincent, who was born while van Gogh was in the hospital

CROWS OVER THE WHEATFIELD (see "Vincent van Gogh" by Copplestone)

- last painting by van Gogh (painted on July 27, the day van Gogh shot himself in the chest; he died two days later)
- endless plateau of wheatfields spreading to horizon; to capture the vastness, used canvas 2X wide as high (20 x 40 inches)
- tension and turbulence, agitated brush strokes
- do the three paths symbolize too many impossible decisions?
- crows, storm: omens of death?

Van Gogh produced approximately 800 paintings and over 1000 drawings during his brief career; he sold only 1 painting in his lifetime: The Red Vineyard (sold in 1890)

Despondent over his sense of failure and the debilitating effects of his ill health (epilepsy? manic-depression?) van Gogh committed suicide; he died with his brother Theo at his side. Theo, in ill health and devastated by Vincent's death, died six months later. They are buried next to each other in Auvers. Theo's wife Jo and son Vincent spent their lives promoting van Gogh's work.

?? Can you see the different periods in Van Gogh's life in his paintings?? ?? Can you see when he was happy/sad??

CHARACTERISTICS OF VAN GOGH

- one of the greatest Post-Impressionist artists, followed by the Expressionists
- used COLOR: put complementary colors next to one another
- used thick layers of paint, IMPASTO
- created shadows with a combination of colors, not just black
- brushstrokes were quick, vigorous, formed strong patterns
- outlined his figures to make them stand out