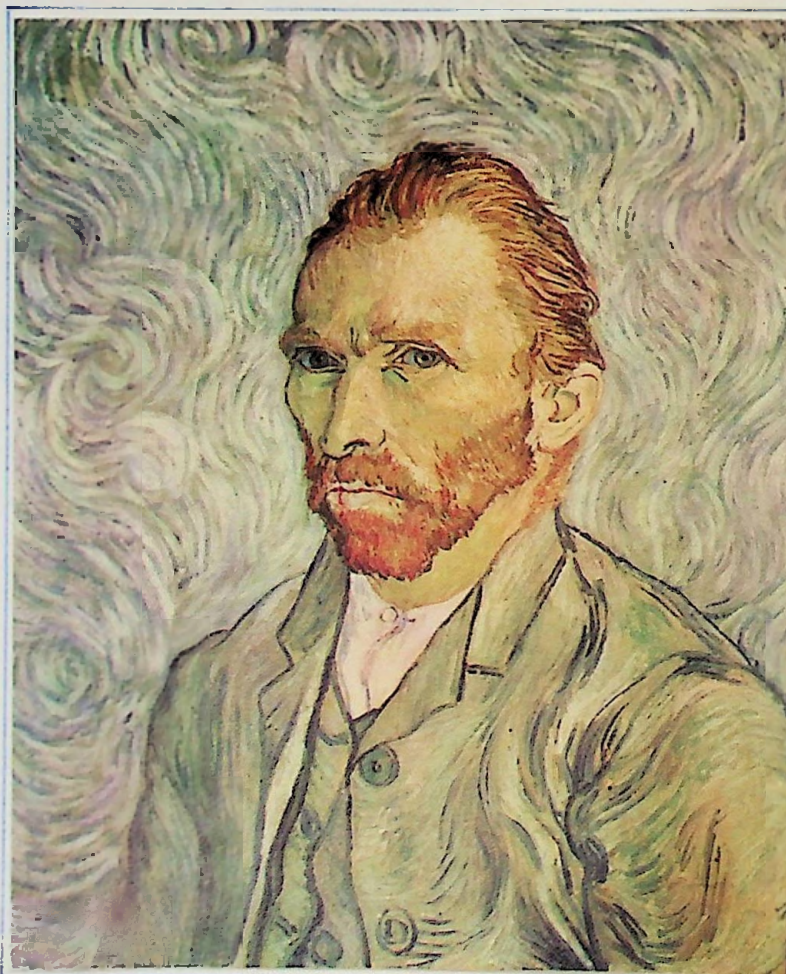


Thesis
No
143

VINCENT VAN GOGH,



A THESIS;

BY

JOE Mc DERMOTT.

(1979)

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vincent,

Starry, starry night,
 Paint your palette blue and grey,
 Look out on a summer's day,
 With eyes that know the darkness in my soul. In colours on a snowy linen land.



2.

Starry, starry night,
 Flaming flowers that brightly blaze,
 Swirling clouds in violet haze,
 Reflecting Vincent's eyes of china blue.

Colours changing hue,
 Morning fields of amber grain,
 Weathered faces lined in pain,
 Are soothed beneath the artist's loving hand.

And now I understand,
 What you tried to say to me,
 How you suffered for your sanity,
 How you tried to set them free.

They would not listen,
 They're not listening still,
 Perhaps they never will.

Don't leave 'Vincent', from the United Artists Album, 'American Pie' ELP. VAS 29285

Intoduction;

"..... The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to talk, mad to saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn burn like fabulous yellow roman candles*"

Vincent Van Gogh is such a person.

Vincent with several other artists, namely, songwriters Don Mc Lean, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Neil Diamond, novelists John Steinbeck and Jack Kerouac, all form a group of which I relate to and hold close to my heart. The element that binds them together for me , is simply that they are all very 'real' people. With prolific talent they express how they feel, with virtuous simplicity, compassion and truth. Being inwardly personal, they become outwardly universal.

In this essay, I felt it important to try to project at least a side, or an aspect of myself. I hope I have done this by telling the life story of Vincent Van Gogh, who I feel is the foremost figure I relate to. I have brought foreword the relevant points I thought important and supported them, in turn, with relative quotes or attitudes. I have tried with all sincerity, to relay to the reader a fair reflection of myself and at least some of my attitudes.

The illustrations I have included are an attempt to give an overall impression of Van Gogh's work. Work from the main periods of his life are represented.

At the outset I have included the words of 'Vincent' a song by Don Mc Lean. His human and intensely sensitive tribute to the artist is the best I have read.

* From 'on the road', a novel by Jack Kerovac.



Vincent had just started painting at this time. He studied under his cousin, the painter Anton Mauve. He wanted to learn the basics of painting. But the outset, the environment he wished to paint showed him it 'would have its way, and that practical painting was not always easy.' All during the week we had a great deal of wind, storm and rain and I went to Scheveningen several times to see it. I brought two small sea scenes home from there. One of them is sprinkled with sand - but the second, made during a real storm, during which the sea came quite close to the dunes, was so covered with a thick layer of sand that I was obliged to scrape it off twice. The wind blew so hard that I could scarcely stay on my feet and could hardly see for the sand that was flying around. However, I tried to get it fixed by going to a little inn behind the dunes, and there scraped it off, immediately painted it again, returning to the beach now then for a fresh impression*.

* (letter to Theo. no. 226.)

Prefix,

Peoples values are based on what they have not got, the more unavailable - the higher the value. They need to adore things that are far away, otherwise they create things that are; in other words a 'myth'.

Vincent Van Gogh has become a myth, a mystical hero of the taboo ideal of the 'mad', temper~~mental~~^{mental} and struggling artist. Art for me, simply means 'truth'. It is ordinary everyday life, reality, nature. It is not something like a magical haze far above the Earth. Practical art is an individual expression of his or her truth. That is all - and no more.

Vincent said himself, "I can find no better definition of art than this; art is a man added to nature, nature reality truth, but with a significance, a character which the arts brings out into which he gives expression which he sets free and interprets¹". I agree with Vincent, and Vincent agrees with me. To me, most things in life are paradoxical, so it is no surprise that such a pure example and awareness of reality, such as Vincent has become the reverse of what he was; a myth. So, if misjudged today in full perspective, it is easy to appreciate the horrific difficulties he had to encounter, when he actually lived.

Van Gogh analysts have tried through historical and psychological studies (some of which I find amusing) have tried to construct the reasons for his genius and tragic life. Thus creating an even deeper cloud around the truth. The truth being, that while circumstance is an important factor in any life, it is the individual soul born into that body that counts. There are no 'reasons' why we are a certain way, we just are. His tragic life is quite clear. He was too pure and loving for a world who prefers to hide in the temporal comfort of the lie. Afraid of his love and sincerity, they rebuffed him.

This may seem a very moralistic line of thought, but just look

1. Letter to Theo, Wasmers, June, 1879.

at how many people around you, and indeed you yourself, have offered up your innocence and got repaid with scorn. Its then you will realise that this is a very realistic and sad problem and what Vincent Van Gogh tried to say.

His early years and his life as a preacher;

1.

Vincent Van Gogh, could have been born anytime anywhere, and like any other genius would have made the same impact regardless. Indeed we have, not using the word lightly, several geni living in the world today. But alas, "a prophet is never without honour except in his own land"² and just because we know, or know of them we tend to ignore their talent; firstly because they are different, and we are afraid they may undermine our own impression on the world. Or secondly, we think that anybody of any real genius surely must live in the past, in the future, but certainly not today and next door. This is probably the main reason for Van Gogh's unhappiness on this earth, he wasn't recognised nor understood. Nobody can be blamed individually, it is just the way people are. And especially in the case of a simple Dutch family like the Van Gogh's in Groot-Zundert, Holland to whom Vincent was born on the 30th of March 1853.

"Idols are best when they're made of stone,
- a saviour's a nuisance to live with at home,
(a savage gift on a wayward bus
you stepped down and you sang to us)³"

This was a sentiment shared by the Van Goghs in relation to their eldest son Vincent, who, from the very beginning of his life was a stranger on this earth. His sister Elisabeth said of him, "Despite this unprepossing exterior, the unmistakable suggestion of inviolate depths gave a kind of strangeness to his whole person. Not only was he a stranger to his brothers and sisters, but he was a stranger to himself as well"⁴. To me, understandable in the case of genius for "I, is another" wrote Arthur Rimbaud, and this statement is certainly demonstrated in the life of Vincent.

2. The Bible.

3. "Winds of the old days" by Joan Baez from the A&M album "Diamonds and Rust" A&M SLP.

4. Elisabeth Duquene-Van Gogh, Vincent Van Gogh (Baarn, 1910).

He was a problem child. Strong willed and secretive, he did not want any fuss made of him, "at the age of eight he once modelled a little clay elephant but he destroyed it at once when according to his notion such a fuss was made about it"⁵ He tried, as he did everyone, to love his family, and they him, but when his attempts failed he would be upset for days.

He once wrote to Theo, "There may be a great fire in the soul, yet no one ever comes to warm himself at it, the passers by only see a wisp of smoke coming through"⁶ This he felt and held from a young age. I think this is demonstrated considerably in his work, particularly in 'self portrait with pipe' (1889) and 'view of Auvers' (1890). Such simplicity of philosophy and execution I greatly admire.

To be an artist, one does not have to be a genius, but when an artist is a genius, then he is able to relate to the most ordinary of people. A genius to me, is a person who does simple things extraordinary and extraordinary things simply. Through this simplicity Van Gogh's letters, like his work have supreme importance in their facination for people in the ordinary way, with no particular interest in the arts. The secret of their wide attraction is the human spirit, they are straightforward and true.

Love, by it's very nature is something that occurs between one and something else. Vincents correspondence with his brother Theo is indeed a practical evidence of the love between them. It is the one reliable documented commentry of his yearn for love in life, and show the crazy balance and unselfishness of true love. The letters started in 1872 when Vincent was wmployed by Goupil and Co. in the Hague.

In a particular letter, Vincent wrote to his brother commenting on a book he was reading by the writer Michelet. "Such a book teaches

5. Memoir of Vincent Van Gogh, by his sister-in-law, J. Van Gogh-Bonger December 1913.

6. To Theo, July 1880.



4. All life has movement, it is by this that we know something is alive. Vincent in studying real life thought it essential that the element of movement should be present. In this drawing he shows us how he has merged his objective and subjective vision. While the drawing is relatively accurate, the personal impact of the artist does not suffer.

us that there is much more in love than people generally suppose, and that man and wife can be one, that is to say one whole and not two halves! He believes in the complete joining of two people, as in the blessed Trinity, and with love we can live forever regardless of physical age. He took the example of a woman, "that is not to say that there are no old women, but that a woman is not old as long as she loves and is loved" ? Vincent sought this key to eternal happiness in his landlady's daughter, Ursula Loyer, in London where he was sent by his firm in June 1873.

At first he did not speak of his feelings towards her. He did not ask for anything. He was just contented to sit by the fire with her in the evenings, reading the support of his beliefs - the bible. Vincent thought of her as innocent, his road to the fruitfull life of having children and creating in nature; an angel surrounded by babies like in Botticelli. But it was Vincent who was innocent, he even had plans for setting up house and spoke to her of his intentions. She laughed into his face and admitted she had led him on, she said she would never be attached to such a grewsome spectical. The pains of first love cut deep with severity. He was broken. He did not blame the girl, as many would, but rather, reproached himself, thinking God must be punishing him for something evil that was within himself.

This was his first rejection in love of which there would be many more. He left London for Paris and the bible which he would study with great zeal as a base to correct his faults. His reading effected his attention at work and caused friction with the recently new owners. Enlightened, he disagreed with the art dealers policy of profiteering and usurpation, he spoke out calling it 'organised fraud'. He was dismissed.

Here, the revolutionary artist made his break with organised society and convention; as history proves many brilliant people do - with feelings on a parallel with

7. To Theo, London, July 1874.

Bob Dylans figure in "Maggiesfarm".....

"No I ain't gonna' work on maggie's farm no more,
Well I wake up in the mornin', hold my hands and pray for rain,
I got a head full of ideas that are drivin' me insane,
It's a shame the way she makes me scrub the floor⁸...."

Disengaged from it, Vincent was frowned on, by a society who's idea of so called 'respectability' was holding down a steady job. Ironically, people like Van Gogh for the self same reason are later looked to as a form of truthfull reference. Refusing to "gorgle in the rat race choir"⁹ as it were, they can commentate with an unpolluted mind on societies failings and achievements. He had lost 'their' respect, but for more important he found himself. Vincent now, almost alone, resolved to transmute his ostracism and withdrawal into spiritual riches. This was the beginning of his evangelistic life, which even after it appeared outwardly to dissolve, its concept of principals of love, truth remained the same. It seemed now he had found a place. (One of the basic needs in human nature - the need to be needed). He would now preach love and truth for which he saw the grave lack of all around him. He had hope, "Wings over life, wings over grave and death, this is what we want, I am beginning to understand that we can get them"¹⁰, he wrote to Theo.

In the spring of 1876, he returned to bleak London teaching German and French in a poor area. There was no salary but at least he had a place to stay, and food. His aesthetic eye was evident. He wrote to Theo "last Wednesday we (his pupils and himself) took a long walk to the village one hours distance from here. The road led through meadows and fields, along hedges of hawthorn, full of black berries and clematis and here and there a large elm. It was so beautiful when the sun set behind the grey clouds, and the shadows were long".¹¹

8. Bob Dylan, "Maggies farm" from the CBS album "Bringing it all back home", CBS SLP.

9. Bob Dylan, "It's all right ma' (I'm only bleeding)" from the same album as 8.

10. September 1875.



5.

"I have tried to emphasize that those people eating their potatoes in the lamplight have dug the earth with those very hands they put into the dish, and so it speaks of manual labour, and how they have honestly earned their food.*"

Van Gogh's gravity to the earth is exhibited profoundly in this picture. I love this painting because its subject, vision and execution are all coherent. It almost seems the people of the soil are painted with the earth itself. In his direct involvement with the situation, he achieves a truthfulness that cannot be refused by the eye. His realism intensifies the expression in a manner bordering on the grotesque, but with aestheticism and sympathy forms the beauty of truth.

*(letter to Theo no. 404, 20th of April 1885)

That was an hours distance away, but where he lived it was dismal and grey. The sky gave little contrast to the dark slums. They reminded him of Dickens, but in reality, it was more elaborate. Having been asked to collect the fees from the working class homes, he had not the heart, and had to refuse. His supervisors were not impressed and dismissed him. It seemed he was too kind for the actual world. But this was not exactly another failure, for the brutal revelation of the working class wretchedness made up his mind for him. He would become a London missionary, he thought, and as training would study the scriptures. He became an assistant preacher and threw himself whole heartedly into his profession. His efforts were over zealous and went out of bounds to the point of becoming an embaressment. He roared from the pulpit and even threw his goldwatch into the collection box. Again, he was dismissed. His head hung heavily as he returned home to spend christmas with his bewildered family. He had given himself totally, and yet it seemed it was not enough.

However, his uncle offered him a poisition in a bookshop in Dorelreach - things were not that bad. Here in the shop, he read as a kind of theory period for his evangelical career. He soon became a point of amusing ridicule for his fellow assistants.

Many people in particular 'roles' or professions in life, feel that they would like to be held in esteem by their peers, but fear that if they do not follow a direct line it will be considered a weakness. This farce deters people from being their true selves. The esteem sought in the first place is lowered by the peers who sense the insincerity. Vincent did not seccumb to such a lie, he was himself at all costs. Vincent's religious reading caused his brother to question him on it. Theo, knowing his brother's avid interest in painting, thought he should be persuing it, rather than religion. Vincent adamantly replied on the weak boundaries that lie between one profession and another, particularly in the arts

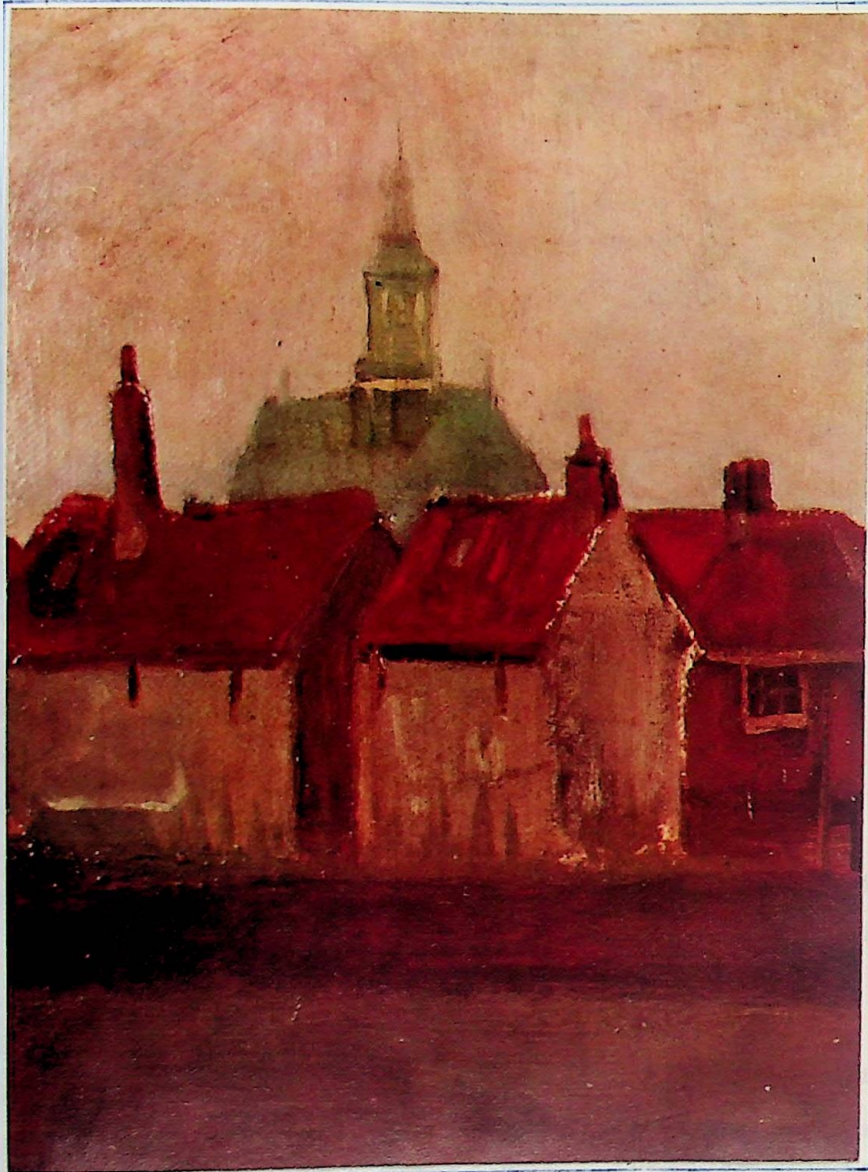
11. Isleworth, England, October 1876.

"So you would be wrong in persisting in the belief that, for instance I should now be less enthusiastic for Rembrandt or Millet or Delacroix, or whoever it may be, for the contrary is true. But you see there are many things that one must believe and love. There is something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare, and of Corregio in Michelet, and of Delacroix in Victor Hugo, and then there is something of Rembrandt in the gospel, something of the gospel in Rembrandt, as you like it - it comes to the same if only one understands the thing in the right way, without misinterpreting it assuming the equivalence of the comparisons, which do not pretend to lessen the merits of the original personalities!"¹²

vincent left the shop to take up his religious studies. After fifteen months in Amsterdam and three months in Brussels he hoped to receive a pastoral post. Over enthusiastic as usual the evangelical committee did not approve of him. He was not granted a post, but this brought about a clearer way of thinking for him. He gradually began to comprehend what was on hand. "Some men at the head of affairs dispose positions, and by a bureaucratic system they try to keep their proteges in their places. I have other ideas than the gentlemen who give the places to men who think like they do, it is not merely a question of the dress over which they have hypocritically reproached me, it is much more a serious question, I assure you!"¹³

The blatant hypocrisy of men in high places with power, is all too well known. Aware of this, most would subside, but it did not deter him - the reverse; it fueled his fire of human compassion in the face of it. He stormed to a poverty ridden mining district in South Belgium aided financially, only by Theo. In the Dorinage he would now help the sick, the poor and preach against the madness of evil he saw all around him. His 'fire' of courage, despite all the opposing elements is rare. It has a power, a power like Bob Dylan's character in

12 & 13. Cuesmes, Belgium July, 1880 (To Theo).



6

In attempting to grasp the fundamentals of picture making von Gogh soon realised the importance of overall pattern and structure on a limited surface. In Antwerp, he discovered Japanese art, and its treatment of flat planes and perspective. Influenced by this, he used it to arrive at an ordered, balanced whole. The energy of direction is mostly horizontal and vertical with complementary diagonals.

"a hard rain's a-gonna-fall".

"I'll walk to the depths of the deepest black forest,
 where the people are many and their hands are all empty,
 where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters,
 where the home in the valley meets the damp dirty prison,
 where the executioners face is always well hidden,
 where hunger is ugly, where souls are forgotten,
 where black is the colour where none is the number
 And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it,
 And reflect from the mountain so all souls can see it,
 Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin' " ¹⁴

This he did, and more. Vincent really lived amongst the miners. He gave away all his clothes, and his meagre salary as well. He even found the room he had too luxurious and moved to a delapidated hut, where he slept on straw, on the ground. He neglected to wash, and though his face was not covered with a layer of coal dust, his face was usually more grimy than the miners. Like a true saint, he became more humble than the humble. This, it was thought was going too far. It puzzled the miners and aroused their suspicion. The effect on the evangelical committee was equally unfavourable. When he took the part of the men during a strike, Vincent was sharply criticized. The pastor there, advised him to be less extreme. He complied for a time, but his zeal refused to be checked; he was really God's madman; 'St. Francis of the mining villages', as some put it, carried out of himself by faith. Characteristically, in Vincents life, it was this faith that caused the hypocritical committee to dismiss him. He worked for a while in another area, but without money or shelter he could do little but share in the poverty he had seen.

Alone, shattered he walked the grimy landscape, feeling utterly powerless. What he had to say, it appeared was not acceptable. He watched the chunky, dark people as they toiled. He made sketches and

14. Bob Dylan; 'a hard rain's a-gonna-fall' from the CBS album
 'the free-wheelin' Bob Dylan. CBS SLP 62193.

drawings of everything he saw. As his hopes of practical involvement faded, a new flame began to kindle. The flame of drawing and painting. Through this he would stand back and reflect his personal vision, through the universal medium of art. He would be an artist!



7.

Vincent was now reasonably confident about his work. He could clearly respond to relative influences. One of these influences was without doubt, Japanese art. He found their use of clear, flat colour, full planes, inspiring in his attempts to abstract reality with clarity and ease. "Come now, isn't it almost a revelation which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers? And you cannot study Japanese art, it seems to me, without coming much gay^{er} and happier, and we must return to nature in our education and in our work in a world of convention I envy the Japanese the extreme clearness which everything has in their work. Their work is as simple as breathing."

* (letter to Theo. no. 542.)

His life as an artist;

2.



8
 Van Gogh's paintings taken individually are unique, but taken together they are all part of the one family. It is interesting to compare the last illustration with this one. Both are of the same subject and period of time. Both unique, yet in a big way, ... different. The important point is his immediate adhering to the instant he lives in, and paints the next moment quite differently. His awareness of reality is evident - he lives in the present, as the past and future do not exist. He makes no effort to respond to any time or thing other than what he is currently experiencing.

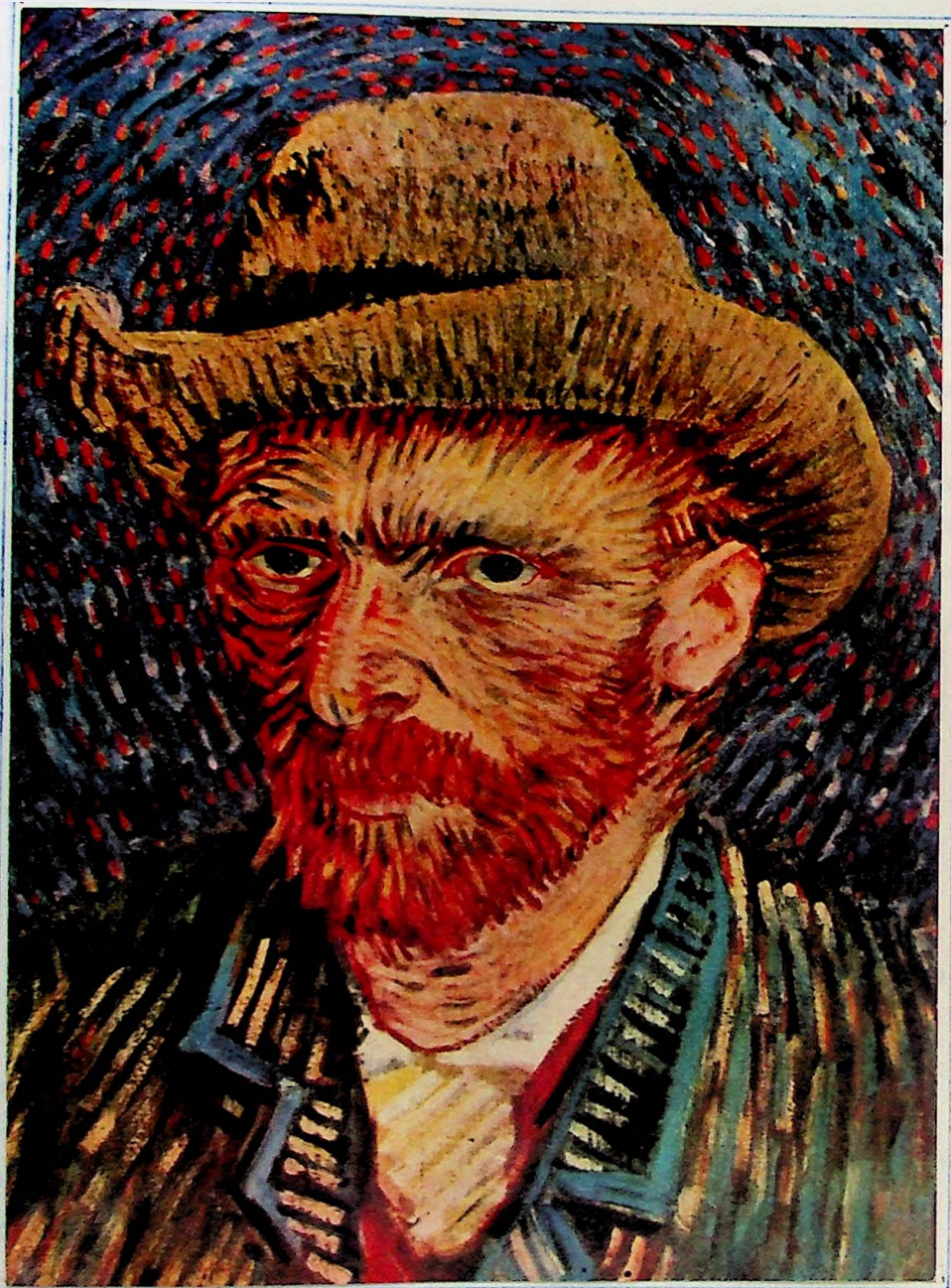
The man who thinks he knows everything, has no faculty for learning. Particularly in Art, I fear for people who think they have achieved ultimates as soon as they begin. Any artist I admire, I find began with an unassuming but determined attitude. Vincent's initial approach to art began this way, declaring "one cannot do right away what one wants. It will come gradually!"¹⁵

He wanted to learn as much as he could. He took lessons from the painter Anthon Von Rappord. He observed the work of other artists. Vincent was full of enthusiasm returning to his family in Etten delighted to prove to his family a firm occupation. While he was here, the household was visited by a cousin Kee Voss. Open hearted Vincent fell immediately in love with her. In her, he hoped for love, peace and marriage. But alas he was repelled again, after stating his intentions towards her. This time rejected Vincent had just a little more experience. Although she preoccupied his thoughts, he held the trinity key to survival - faith, hope and love. He hoped, and held her in his heart, but still she made herself scarce to his company. He also took lessons from his cousin Mauve. A painter with at least the right attitude towards a student, offering criticism but at the same time suggesting alternative solutions.

There is a death and rebirth in Van Gogh's work, like that of the poet Rimbaud, it burns itself out at one stage for the next. Similarly, if love is within, one love will die and be born again in another constantly enriching the soul.

While in the Haage Vincent met and took into live with him, a whore Clasina Hoornik. Her name is not important but what is, is that she introduced him to love that has a wider bearing on life. It benefited him. She enabled him to see Kee in a clearer light. That of a product of her father's ecclesiastic and small minded background.

15. Etten, May 1881.



9.

Faces, are important. We remember people by their faces. We watch a face like we do a t.v. or cinema screen, for an instant reading of reaction to events, or ourselves. But looking at one's own face and its reaction to itself, proves difficult. In this self portrait, Vincent tackles this problem with dashing strokes of pure colour. Creating an overall picture of the head and surrounding areas, with his eyes as centre. The eye is led around in circles. The elements within the boundaries, that is, face, hat coat background, ect are painted in different sets of colour, yet all lend to a unified whole depicting the artist and his immediate surroundings.

A background in love with the idle ideals of religion, rather than in love with real life and people.

This death and rebirth helped Vincent to come to a firm belief in himself. It aided his work. Clasina gave him emotional security enabling him to work hard and direct in peace.

The importance of this, to me, lies in the fruit of the situation in relation to humanity. Many great artists such as the poets and writers Vellaines, Rimbaud, Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan and Neil Diamond, have dwelled considerably on the significance of prostitutes. Bob Dylan for example in one whole album of songs depicts a day with a woman. It could be the story of a complete lifetime, or a night with a whore. The situations are extreme, yet the feelings in both cases are the same, and it makes me wonder.

"In a world of steel-eyed death and men,
who are fighting to be warm
come in she said I'll give ya',
shelter from the storm!"¹⁶

This point is given further consideration, if we look at the cases of two great humanitarians, Christ and Vincent; where ironically a whore was the only one to give the shelter so desperately needed. At a time when the weight of the storm trounced upon their door.

Death and Rebirth as in it's very nature was to recur. Clasina neglected her children, and squandered Vincent's small allowance from Theo on drink and cigars. He made numerous excuses for her but eventually had to leave for his survival, and hers. Yeates wrote

"Being young you have not known,
the fools triumph nor yet
love lost, as soon as won!"¹⁷

His family worried about their strange offspring. Lonely after a

16. Bob Dylan, 'shelter from the storm' from the CBS album 'blood on the tracks' CBS SEP 69097.

17. W. B. Yeates, 'To a child dancing in the wind'.



10

Vincent was now becoming himself. In Paris he had absorbed all the techniques of his contemporaries and shaped them to his own personality. He often produced sets of pictures to satisfy his hunger for observation of the subject. Both pictures individually are structurally held together by the use of complementary colours and broad flat planes. He exaggerates the colour in order to reflect the sun-drenched landscape.

11



short spell in Drenth he returned home to them in Nuenen. He anticipated their uneasy attitude towards him. He felt he would be received like "a big rough dog, running into the room with wet paws".¹⁸ This was to prove true. He fitted up a studio for himself in the sacristy of the Catholic church, which did not improve his standing with his family or the community which were mostly protestant. He became friendly with a spinster, Margot Begmeman. The narrow minded town did not approve of the match. Their antipathy became extreme towards him when Margot attempted suicide. They deterred people to sit as models for him. This insane lack of injustice he found everywhere and yet they called him 'mad'. Vincent carried on regardless, leaving their tags of stigma and dirision, in the wake of his free and humble soul. He worked like a madman.

Van Gogh soared to great aesthetic and productive heights, with power, fire and energy. His painting excelled, his drawing flourished. Nothing could hold him back from pouring out his soul. He painted the landscape, humble people, interiors, still lifes everything he saw. His work from Nuenen was strong, consistant and true. He was regaining himself. Perhaps no other artist in the entire history of painting worked harder than Van Gogh at Nuenen. He produced a staggering total of 180 paintings and 240 drawings.

At the time in relation to contemporary painting, he was equalling if not surpassing the work of the Dutch school. Starting so late, this was an achievement in itself. If more adamant Vincent could have been recognised as the foremost painter depicting peasant life. For unlike most artists with the same theme, he actually lived among the peasants. But he shrugged vain glorification and praise. "I have painted constantly here to earn painting, to get firm notions about colour, etc.; without having much room in my head for other else."¹⁹ This constant modest attitude of Van Gogh was pinnacled shortly before he died, when journalist Albert Aurier wrote an article commending

18. 15th December, 1883. (To Theo).

19. & 20. October-November, 1885 (To Theo).



12

Through pure colour the artist leads our eye from the foreground to the skyline without labour and with excitement. Vincent felt that a picture should be restful on eye and the imagination. In this canvas he achieved both. He shows us his imagination, creativity, originality and mastery in the use of paint.

Vincent's work. (The only article doing so, while the artist lived). Vincent replied, and humbly thanked Aurier, but advised him to praise artists of merit, taking Gauguin as an example, and not him as he was of little importance.

Van Gogh's humility allowed him to take stock of himself. When on terms with himself he could have a firm idea as to where he was going. When his stay at Nuenen came to an end he wrote "just now my palette is thawing, the barrenness of the early time is over, I have clearly in mind what must follow and how to get life into it" ²⁰

Commonly held in many spheres today, is the romantic notion that Van Gogh's work came from flurrying impulsive outbursts. Anyone seriously involved in painting, studying Vincent's art will know that this is not true. While the subconscious is an important aspect of coherent painting; it is a practical necessity to consciously develop one's technique (or physical involvement) in order to progress. His work was expressive and free, for which the artisan did not suffer.

To Vincent, an artist²¹ was a person who was "always seeking without absolutely finding". Primarily, he sought himself. To do so, he felt it vital to emerge and gauge himself against the atmosphere and method of a completely different environment. In November 1885 he moved from the countryside of Nuenen to the contrasting City of Antwerp. In the countryside the forms and colour were generally murky and harmonious. But in the bright airy city he found "the queerest surroundings, everything fantastic, and at all moments interesting contrasts present themselves"²². Although his colours were relatively tone, his reflection of the city caused his palette to lighten and his tonal planes become much flatter.

He found the academic principals of the Antwerp academy too cold and limiting for his energetic approach. The pupils there were

21. May 1882 (To Theo).

22. November-December, 1885.



13

So dedicated to his work, Vincent painted at all times, even at night. Firstly, he was a colourist - and for him colour never disappeared.

"The problem of painting night scenes and its affects on the spot and actually by night interests me enormously ... for three nights running I sat up to paint and went to bed during the day. I often think that the night is more alive and richly coloured than the day."

¶ (letter to Theo, Arles, 1888.)

fascinated with Van Gogh the Dutchman, using a lid of a packing case for a palette, and his paint dropping down in lumps on the floor.

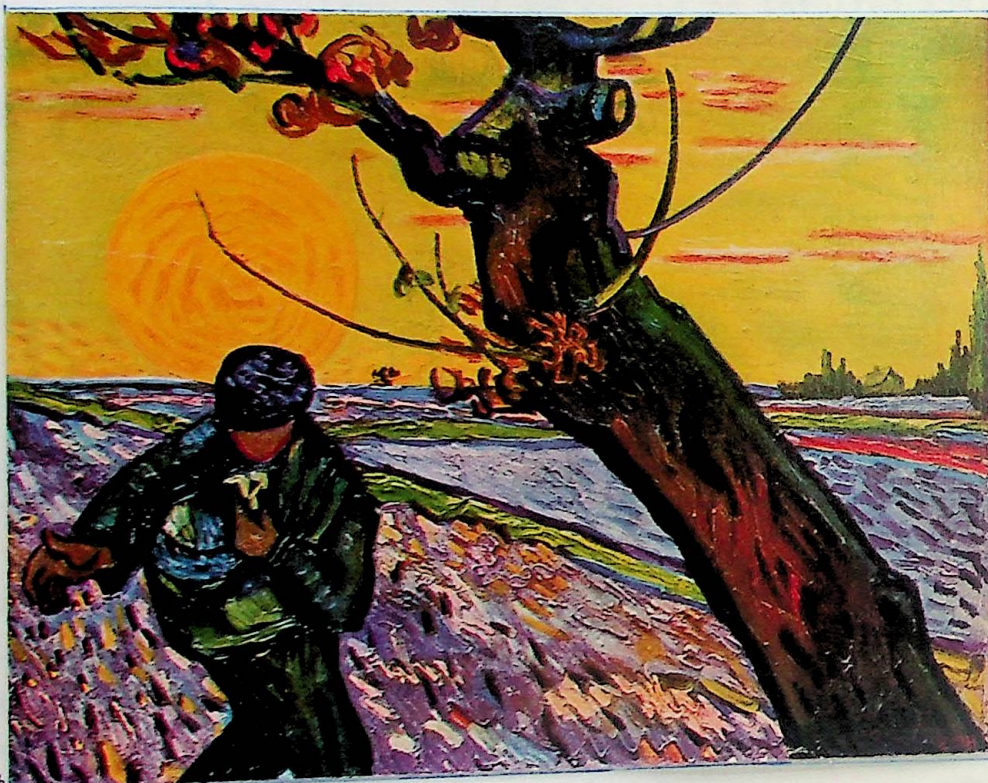
Theo, now living in Paris, was dubious of his brothers wishes to join him there. But on a bright February evening Vincent arrived on his doorstep. Although he loved him, Theo knew how hard it was to live with his fiery, eccentric brother, Still, they would make the best of it.

Vincent joined "the salon" a school ran by the painter Fernand Corran. Here he met Toulouse Lautrec and Emile Bernard and the became good friends.

Theo working in an art dealers, supported a movement known as 'impressionism'. Although Vincent's brother had often urged him to see their work, by circumstance up to this, he had never received the opportunity. The "impressionists", were led mainly by the painters Cezanne, Pissarro, Manet, Monet, Degas, Signac and Seurat; standing for the victory of light colour and life, over accademicism favoured in official circles and by the public. Vincent had always wanted to put life and colour into his work, the impressionists naturally excited his interest. Theo introduced many of them to him. He was overcome and extremely impressed with these men. He scanned their canvases with a child's amazement in his eyes. Emphatically, he left Cormen's salon, convinced it's principals were dead and cold; devoid of real life and its power. Lautrec and Bernard followed him as he joined the impressionists.

He mixed and exchanged views with the lively Parisian artists, in the cafes and Inns. At last he had a place where his ideas were not met with derision and ridicule, in fact, he was encouraged and in turn²³ encouraged others. Cezanne said "you certainly paint like a madman" and Pissaro said that "he would go mad or leave the impressionists far behind"²³ Although he doubted it he was right.

23. M. Osborn, Der Bunte Spiegel (1890-1933) NEW YORK 1945.



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This painting has religious and social connotations. Vincent all his life was enthralled by the theme of the sower. For him the sower was a symbol of life and its recreation. The old tree will fall to find rot to fertilize the seed the sower spreads. The seed will grow and the cycle will continue. The sower, or man, must give and plant in order to live. Through the brilliance of the colour he pays homage to the sun, sky and Earth which make the entire cycle, and living, - all possible.

Vincent would not rest. He regarded impressionism as a stage to pass through, not as an end in itself. His yearn for research carried him beyond it. He experimented with Signae's use of colour, Lautrec's realism, but he fully assimilated these trends in his work. He exhibited with many impressionist painters. But he became so involved and high spirited that his meetings with his counterparts ended in violent and heated arguments. **Paris at first**, fascinated him, but later its disconcerting subtleties wearied him. But Paris benefited him. He painted over 200 paintings. They all seem to give a retrospective exhibition of all the techniques adopted by his immediate forerunners and contemporaries, which he absorbed and then shaped to his own personality. He came to an amazing synthesis between the traditional style of figure painting and his own language of colour and form. He had nothing more to learn from Paris. Again he moved on, this time the south; Arles, where he did not want to paint the sun's rays, but the sun itself. It was now February, 1880 he had two years to live.

In nature, creatures rely on instinct, whereas civilization relies more on intellect and reason. This consequently results in a conflict between mind and body. Offering a solution, D. H. Lawrence said "men should become more invironmental" with a greater response to nature. Like Lawrence, many profound artist such as Keats, G. M. Hopkins, Paul Gauguin have advocated the return to nature in order to obtain the sanity and natural balance lacking in modern society.

Vincent sought nature. Intensely sensitive to the elements, his life paralleled that of his reaction to the seasons. In winter, he would be depressed and gloomy (his early years; Holland); in spring he would begin to kindle (Paris); and in mid-summer he would burst into flame (Arles) like the sun. He went to the sun to fulfill himself to live. But the nearer he came to it, the more it would burn him out, like a leaf in Autumn.

At Arles everything palpitated and flamed beneath his brush, to reflect the brilliance of the scorched countryside. "One must exaggerate the colour still more" he declared. He even painted at night sensitive to colour at all times, he wrote "I often think that the night is more



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Vincent had a strong inclination toward symbolism (e.g. The sower, Gauguin's chair, *Grises*). Vincent held the sunflower as a symbol of nature, sun and life. They excited him.....

"I am hard at it painting with enthusiasm of Marseillais eating bouillabaisse, which won't surprise you when you know that I am painting some big sunflowers. If I carry out this idea I will have a dozen panels. So the whole thing will be a symphony in blue and yellow.^{ix}

(Letter to Theo no 526.)

alive and more richly coloured than the day²⁴! He painted swirling impressions of the night sky 'starry night', 'cafe terrace' at night' and 'the sower', 1888. During the day under a blazing sun he painted rapidly, but, as he said himself "quick work does not mean less²⁵ serious work, it depends on ones self confidence and experience". He now had an abundance of both. Nothwithstanding, in all his excitement he remained lucid and logical towards his work.

Vincent however was lonely. He hoped other artists would follow him to the south. But none would follow this eccentric man, painting in the lethel mid-day sun. None would, except Paul Gauguin who he had met in Paris. Van Gogh held great admiration for him. He persuaded Theo to urge Gauguin to come to Arles. Gauguin was in bad health and was broke. He came to Arles in October, only because Theo reassured him of financial support.

Both men were of opposite character. Gauguin was domineering and calculating, while Van Gogh was humbly submissive. Both were intoxicated by the bleaching sun. After a while, heated arguments followed. Both drank hard and heavy. Following one particular incident, Van Gogh hurled a beer glass at Gauguin's head. Vincent regretted the incident. He cut off his ear lobe in a gesture to show his sorrow. Gauguin left for Paris, and exaggerated the tale to Theo, declaring Vincent insane. The town, like so many others he visited deemed him dangerous and severed their frail contact with him. They thought him 'mad' and petitioned Vincent to be locked up.

The dilemma led Vincent to a series of mental breakdowns which recured to the time of his death. He was a simple over-anxious man and his enthusiasm and gestures were not understood. Vincents attacks or fits were in their nature, epileptic. He went on for periods of time without food which made him weak. The mid-day sun in the south

24. September, 1888 (To Theo).

25. June, 1888 (To Theo).



16

Vincent at St Remy was confined to his cell for periods of time during which he often repeated previous themes from memory. One such theme was his bedroom at the 'yellow house' at Arles. Forgetting the bitter memories he re-instated them with the happier ones of Gauguin's company. Here in a controlled picture he reconstructs his old bedroom with calm and balance. The symbolism is as strong as the colour. Vincent hoped for companionship and revered art through this picture. There are dual pictures on the wall of himself and Paul Gauguin. There are also two pillars - one bed, two chairs one mirror - One can go on a great deal further in detecting relative symbols - but the conclusion will always lead to Van Gogh's yearn for friendship.

of France acted as a catalyst in his condition. He was epileptic, but not mad. Madness is a permanent condition. Between attacks Vincent returned to a perfectly normal state. His work would be calm, lucid and coherent. Being lonely he was inwardly perturbed causing his brush strokes to be swirling, but nevertheless intertwining and stringent.

After several months in hospital he admitted himself into the lunatic asylum at St. Remy to be nearer to Theo. Theo had recently married and Vincent did not want to burden his brother anymore than he had to. Besides he wanted to be looked after properly for sometimes he knew he could not be responsible for himself. He found his fits come at regular times in between which he was allowed to paint. He worked quickly and became inclined more towards symbolism than ever. In symbolism clarity and simplicity are vital. 'Prisoners at Exercise', painted at St. Remy proves he achieved this. He summed up, in this canvas, his conditions and situation in a matchbox.

He knew he had very little time left. His physical constitution began to weaken. At this time Theo and his wife Johanna were expecting their first child. Vincent wrote to Theo and told him he now wanted to leave the asylum. At first Theo thought of sending him to Gauguin but afterwards considered it best he should go to Auvers. There he would be looked after by a friend of many artists Dr. Gachet. Dr. Gachet agreed to take care of Vincent. On his way to Auvers Vincent paid a visit to Theo in Paris. Theo's wife had just given birth to a baby boy which they called 'Vincent'. Of course, the artist was overjoyed at his brother's happiness in love and marriage, but it also reminded him how more alone he was. The two men cried as Vincent left for the province.

Now, in Auvers there was not anything left but painting for him. His thirst for love and companionship was never to be quenched. Especially now he channelled everything into painting. Theo did not

Vincent at this stage was totally alone. He knew his end was near. But he still had to keep going — there were still goals to be attained. One such goal is perhaps culminated in this canvas. He wanted to arrive at a point, whereby the surface would be covered with flat colour in a definite order, with which the painting would give a feeling of life and movement. It would be totally abstracted from the subject. For example he said of a future canvas, "There are the greens of a different quality but of the same value, so as to form a whole of green tones, which by its vibration will make you think of the gentle rush of two ears swaying in the breeze; it is not at all an easy colour scheme^{*}". This picture is a perfect slice of reality — abstracted.



*/letter to Gauguin, No 643

summer, 1890.

know Gachet only spent a few days a week in Auvers. Vincent in his delicate condition was left for periods completely alone.

Summer came with it's blazing sun, he painted everything with energy, fire and courage. Some of his best movement and emotional pictures came from his time at Auver. That sun he worshipped was to prove lethal.

Under the blazing sun in the cornfields, he painted in every season, like the basic symbol of his life, to the point of distorting them in the violence of his inner loneliness and ferment, he shot himself fatally in the chest. He died two days later. From his very earliest years as an evangelist and after through his work, Vincent Van Gogh tried to tell the world of the evils that one day would destroy mankind. Like Jesus Christ it was that very world that murdered him.

Conclusion;

3.

Van Gogh's only real madness, the madness which helped him to put up with the other 'madnesses', that of the doctors who understood nothing of the torments he suffered, the madness of the men who cast him out of society, tricked him, despised him and betrayed him. Vincent Van Gogh a man of fire, was not cut out to soothe the conscience of society, which wanted to be reassured and flattered by the bastardized forms of beauty in which fashionable artists and men of 'Taste', unite in sordid complicity, took pleasure. The inevitable breach which exists is between genius and society existed in the case of Van Gogh in its most dramatic and impassioned form. People often fail to realize at what cost a work of art is born. By admiring, and praising its merits (having during his lifetime despised, insulted and cast out its creator), by granting them a place of honour in their museums, they think they are 'rehabilitating' their victim, whereas all they are doing is condemning his executioners all the more. Society was responsible for Van Gogh's madness, just as it was responsible for the fall of Rembrandt, for Lautrec's moral decay, the morbid obsessions of Coxa.

The cry from the cross - 'why hast thou forsaken me?' - echoes through the ages, finding its most tragic expression in the Spiritual night of the man who tried to impose his private universe on the society that gave him Birth.

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