**Mary Slavkin**

**Van Gogh, Vincent Willem (1853-1890)**

Vincent van Gogh is considered one of the most important artists of Symbolism or Post-Impressionism. He was born in 1853 in Zundert, Holland, followed by five younger siblings. His father was a pastor and his uncles were art dealers. He worked for an art dealer and as a missionary before deciding to become an artist in 1880. His painting career was largely funded by his younger brother Theo, who worked at an art gallery in Paris. Van Gogh is also well-known for the many detailed letters he wrote regarding his life and painting and for his psychological issues, including the fact that he cut off part of his ear and later committed suicide. Significantly, however, despite his posthumous renown, he was not actually famous or financially successful during his life. He created a large number of works during his ten year career as a painter, depicting a wide range of subjects, including landscapes, still-lifes, and portraits. His early paintings have a darker, Realist style, although he later moved toward brighter, more expressive canvases. His mature style incorporated religious and emotional symbolism through symbolic themes and motifs and utilised a variety of techniques, including heightened colors and rhythmic brushstrokes.

From February 1886 through February 1888, Vincent van Gogh stayed in Paris. During this period, his works became brighter and more expressive, as he incorporated recent Parisian developments, such as Neo-Impressionism. Major influences on his work at this time included the use of heightened colour and visible brushstrokes for emotional symbolism, the integration of contrasting colours into a work to increase the painting’s luminosity, an emphasis on the decorative surface, and the use of Japanese sources. In February 1888, van Gogh moved to Arles (in Southern France), where he attempted to start a new Studio of the South with Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard. While Bernard never joined them, Gauguin and van Gogh did live and work together for nine weeks in The Yellow House. Letters between Vincent, Theo, Gauguin, and a variety of other painters are a significant source of information on artistic developments at this time and the interactions of these painters. The documents also reveal the complexity of the artists’ relationships and their varied motives for working together.

In his most typical works, van Gogh generally used heightened colours, visible brushstrokes—often with thick impasto, outlined forms, and distorted perspective. He often included religious elements or themes and focused on the lower classes, especially farmers. His *Night Café* (1888) features garish, exaggerated colours and distorted perspective, expressing the artist’s description of the bar as a place of madness and criminality. On the other hand, in *Starry Night* (1889), Vincent infused religious elements into nature to create a consoling painting that includes symbolic cypress trees and a central church tower.

Van Gogh was institutionalised many times throughout his life for psychotic episodes, epileptic seizures, and hallucinations. Since his death, his illness has been variously diagnosed as a variety of conditions, including: schizophrenia, epilepsy, syphilis, lead poisoning, hallucinations caused by absinthe, and acute intermittent porphyria. However, none of these illnesses accounts for all of his symptoms or their sporadic nature, as they would reoccur and disappear suddenly. Thus, researchers do not agree on the specific cause and nature of the artist’s ailment. Van Gogh is well known for having cut off part of his earlobe, which he then gave to a local prostitute, following an argument with Gauguin. This episode led to a series of institutionalisations. Later, he moved to an institution that was closer to his brother. In July 1890 he shot himself in the chest in a wheat field and he died two days later. A variety of well-known artists and writers attended the funeral, where the coffin was draped with one of van Gogh’s oft-repeated subjects, sunflowers.

**Further Reading**

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IMAGE SUGGESTION: Vincent van Gogh, *The Night Café,* 1888, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.