Jo Before van Gogh Episode 1 Script-

**Intro-**

That was Don McLean’s Vincent (Starry, Starry Night), one of the millions of tributes to Vincent van Gogh, an artist who needs no introduction, but I’m going to give him one anyways. Vincent was on this earth from March 30, 1853- July 29, 1890, a mere 37 years. He was born in the Netherlands but spent the majority of his life in France. As a child, he was sent to boarding school quite early and later, in a letter to his brother, Theo, on November 5, 1883, he referred to his childhood as, “austere, cold and sterile.” It was at this young age that what would become a lifelong struggle with mental illness would begin to pop up. After school, he began a series of jobs, going from art dealer at Goupil & Cie in Paris to supply teacher in Ramsgate to Methodist minister’s assistant in Middlesex to bookshop attendant in Dordrecht to missionary in Borenage to, at long last, artist. Over the next ten years, Vincent created more than 900 works of art. Some of his most famous include Café Terrace at Night and Bedroom in Arles in 1888, Sunflowers, Starry Night and Irises in 1888, and Almond Blossoms in 1890. Although Van Gogh may have died in relative obscurity, in the years following his death, enjoyment of his art began to grow until he eventually became world-renowned, he is credited with having contributed to the foundations of modern art and his difficult life and resiliency in the face of it has made him one of the most beloved artists of all time.

But how did he make the jump from relative anonymity to world-renown? And more importantly, how was Vincent’s legacy cemented in the world in a way that makes people not only revere him as an artist, but love him as a person? That lies in the questions- how do we know what we know about Vincent? Who has told us his story? It wasn’t his beloved brother, Theo, as he died just six months after Vincent. It wasn’t any of his other family members either, as only one of them outside of Theo was even in contact with Vincent when he died. There were no friends or partners of Vincent’s who wanted to take over his works after he’d died either. Vincent and his life’s work seemed to be slipping into the abyss of forgotten history… if not for the thirty-five-year-long battle to secure Vincent’s legacy taken up by a remarkable woman who, at the time of his death, had known Vincent for only nineteen months.

Her name was Johanna van Gogh Bonger, or ‘Jo’ as she was known to all, and she was Vincent’s sister-in-law, the wife of his brother Theo. The story of how she took Vincent’s legacy to the heights it has reached today nothing short of remarkable. For the last twenty-five years of her life, Jo organized countless exhibitions of his work, convinced influential artists to help promote Vincent, sold the works in a creatively controlled way, translated the thousands of letters that Vincent had written and much, much more. By including Vincent’s letters as a companion to his artwork, Jo ensured that his work would be appreciated within the context of his difficult existence and the astonishing insight into the world that was borne out of it.

However, until very recently, Jo’s incredible contributions to the widespread knowledge of Vincent’s work was nothing more than a minor footnote. Even today, the Wikipedia page on Vincent van Gogh refers to Jo mostly as ‘Theo’s wife’. In regards to Vincent’s reputation and legacy, the page has but one rather pathetic sentence surrounding her work. Thankfully, however, Jo’s legacy has begun to be tended to by the van Gogh Museum. In 2019, Jo’s diaries were digitized and presented to the world on a dedicated website and “Alles Voor Vincent,” or “All for Vincent,” a biography of Jo’s life, was written Senior Researcher Hans Luijten. Unfortunately for me, it has only been published in Dutch so far, but that’s nothing that a little Google translate couldn’t take care of for a mere… four hundred and eighty-five pages. Nothing I couldn’t handle. And so, this podcast is another attempt to share with the world the remarkable legacy of Jo.

For us fully understand the extraordinary story of Jo’s selfless dedication to her brother-in-law, however, we first must understand who Jo was in the first half of her life. These first twenty-six years offer a window into how Jo became the industrious, altruistic, generous, introspective, ingenious, determined, and serious woman who gave her life for her two Vincents- her son and her brother-in-law. More importantly, though, Jo’s life needs to be celebrated outside of the context of her connection to the van Goghs, as she is luminous and exceptional in her own right. Before the van Goghs, Jo was an extremely talented translator who published her translations in Dutch, German and English and was also a much-loved English teacher. She kept a diary from age seventeen to thirty-five that chronicled her remarkable beginnings, and they offer an intimate look inside the mind of a young woman struggling to discover her place in the world. She more than deserves to be celebrated as much as an individual as she does in her connection to the van Goghs.

That’s where we come in! Together, I’d like to take a look into the early years of Jo, before van Gogh. We’re going to explore her life largely through the lens of her four diaries, spanning 1880-1897, but will also bring in insights from other sources, including All For Vincent. I’m your host, Jackie Mahoney, a public historian and museum theatre artist currently creating an interactive performance about Jo’s life for my Master’s thesis at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Without further ado, let’s dive into the life and legacy of Johanna Gezina van Gogh Bonger.