



◀ Visitors to the Musée d'Orsay (Paris, France) take photos of one of Vincent van Gogh's self-portraits. He often used himself as a model, producing over forty-three self-portraits, paintings, or drawings in ten years.

Van Gogh's World

- 1 Starry nights and sunflowers, self-portraits and café settings—all painted in bold, intense colors. Today, people around the world immediately recognize these as the work of
- 5 Vincent van Gogh, the Dutch painter. Probably no other artist, at any time in any culture, has achieved such popularity. But who was this man exactly, and why, even today, do his art and life have such an ability to move us?

10 An artist is born

- Vincent van Gogh was born on March 30, 1853, in a small village in southern Holland. As a child, he was **serious** and **sensitive**. He loved to draw, and his work showed talent, but
- 15 no one encouraged him to become an artist. Instead, his father thought he should take a “**sensible**” job—something like a salesclerk or carpenter. As a young adult, he wandered from job to job with little success and very little
- 20 money, becoming more depressed with each failure.

- In March 1880, however, just before his 27th birthday, something changed inside van Gogh. He realized that he was meant to be a painter, and he began to study art, receiving a subsidy
- 25 from his brother Theo, which helped him to live.

Discovering color

- In 1886, van Gogh moved from Holland to Paris, hoping to learn more about color techniques being used by Impressionist artists there.
- 30 Instead of grays and browns, his work began to emphasize blue and red, and then yellow and orange. Soon he began to see life differently: Go slow. Stop thinking. Look around. You'll see something beautiful if you open yourself. These
- 35 were the principles that guided his art. With his **innovative** color combinations, van Gogh wanted to show his viewers how to better **appreciate** a flower, the night sky, or a person's face.

40 Descent into madness

- Few who lived in van Gogh's time appreciated his work, however. Many laughed when they saw his paintings, which hurt the sensitive artist terribly. In February 1888, he moved away
- 45 from Paris to Arles, a town in southern France. Often he could not eat or sleep, and stayed up into the early morning hours painting.

- Days passed, and he spoke to no one. Following an argument with fellow artist Paul Gauguin, van Gogh took a razor and cut off his
- 50 own earlobe.¹ He never explained why, but by now, many were convinced that van Gogh was crazy, and indeed, his mental health started to decline. He began to have attacks during which

55 he would hear strange sounds and think people were trying to hurt him. In the spring of 1889, he was sent to a mental hospital in St. Remy, a town near Arles.

What exactly was van Gogh suffering from?

60 No one knows for sure, but some now think it may have been a form of manic depression.² Whatever his condition, van Gogh's illness both inhibited and inspired his creativity. When his attacks came, he could not paint. 65 But during his periods of calm, he was able to complete more than a hundred masterpieces, including the classic *Starry Night*. "Working on my pictures," he wrote, "is almost a necessity for my recovery."

70 Final days

Following his release from hospital in May 1890, van Gogh took a room in a town just north of Paris. For the 70 days that he lived there, he produced, on average, a painting a day. 75 Until his death, however, he was unable to sell a single one; today those paintings would be worth more than a billion U.S. dollars.

It was at this time that van Gogh either 80 borrowed or stole a gun. On the afternoon of July 27, 1890, he went out to the country and shot himself in the stomach. Two days later, Vincent van Gogh died at age 37.



▲ "The Starry Night," June 1889

What caused him to take his own life—his 85 lack of financial success, mental illness, his loneliness? The question, like so many others in van Gogh's life, remains unanswered.

Van Gogh's legacy

Over a century after his death, van Gogh still 90 remains extremely popular. His story—of a man who resisted materialism³ and greed, who was alone and unappreciated—gives people something they need. We find pieces of ourselves in him. This may also explain the 95 high prices paid for van Gogh's work. His *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* sold in 1990 for more than \$80 million to a Japanese businessman, breaking the world record for art pieces. Many of his other works have also sold for millions. 100 Of course, people are buying great art when they purchase one of van Gogh's paintings. But they are also buying a piece of his story, which, like his work, will live on forever.

¹ Your **earlobe** is the soft part at the bottom of your ear.

² **Manic depression** is a medical condition in which someone sometimes feels excited and confident and at other times very depressed.

³ **Materialism** is attaching a lot of importance to money and having a lot of things.

◀ Showing a view that inspired van Gogh, a window lights an art room in the mental hospital at St. Remy to which the artist retreated.

