Vincent van Gogh (pronounced Vincent vun-KHOKH)  
(1853–1890)

Dutch Post-impressionist painter. Considered one of the greatest Dutch painters, although he remained poor and virtually unknown throughout his life. (van Gogh is my personal favorite Artist, so much so I have a shelf dedicated to him in my family room.)

As a Literature student in college, I was fortunate enough to do a semester abroad. I had no interest in art and have no idea what made me walk into the Van Gogh Museum while backpacking in Amsterdam, but it changed the way I viewed the world around me. I spent 6 hours that day enamored by the thick brush strokes and vivid colors of Van Gogh’s art and have studied his body of work ever since. I find the chaos of his brush strokes and the honest depictions of real life fascinatingly complex while at the same time awkwardly comforting.

It is no secret that van Gogh struggled with mental illness, but what I find so incredible is that he only spent the last 10 years of his life practicing art. He was totally a dysfunctional part of society and somehow I get that. Moreover, I am always humbled and saddened by the fact that one of the greatest artists of the modern era never knew success while he was living. Van Gogh only sold one painting during his lifetime *The Red Vineyard*, which sold in Brussels for 400 Francs only a few months before his death.
In his lifetime, Vincent van Gogh completed more than 2,100 works of art, consisting of 860 oil paintings and more than 1,300 watercolors, drawings and sketches. Several of his paintings now rank among the most expensive in the world.

"Irises" sold for a record $53.9 million, and his "Portrait of Dr. Gachet" sold for $82.5 million.

Van Gogh Fast Fun Facts

Vincent is the oldest child of 6, but was not the first born. On exactly the same day one year earlier his parents gave birth to a stillborn son they named Vincent. YES, Vincent was also named the same one year later. His name and birthdate already etched on his dead brother's headstone.
• He failed at multiple jobs before becoming an artist; art dealer, pastor, school teacher, clerk at a bookstore.
• He never married or had children.
• Van Gogh was a self-taught artist without any formal training, because of this he often doubted his abilities, as his his parents. It was his brother Theo that believed in him and continued to push Vincent forward and even supported him financially.
• In the ten years van Gogh painted he created nearly 900 paintings. If you do the math on that it works out to be like a new artwork every 36 hours.
• Typical colors in Van Gogh's palette included yellow ocher, chrome yellow, cadmium yellow, chrome orange, vermilion, Prussian blue, ultramarine, lead white and zinc white, emerald green, red lake, red ocher, raw sienna, and black.
• He used complementary colors to make his colors seem brighter, using yellows and oranges with blues and reds with greens. His choice of colors varied with his moods and occasionally he deliberately restricted his palette, such as with the sunflowers, which are almost entirely yellows.
• Van Gogh painted very rapidly, with a sense of urgency, using the paint straight from the tube in thick, graphic brush strokes called impasto.
• Van Gogh suffered frequent episodes of depression, paralyzing anxiety and, according to some accounts, the symptoms of bipolar disorder.
• He was addicted to drinking absinthe, however, he was additionally known to have sipped turpentine and eat paint. He would paint and stick the paintbrush in his mouth, not a good choice since the paints then contained lead.
• One theory about Van Gogh cutting off his ear is that during an epileptic seizure he attempted to attack his friend Paul Gauguin with an open razor and that he accidentally cut off a large piece of his ear.
• Van Gogh went out to paint one morning carrying a loaded pistol and shot himself in the chest, but the bullet did not kill him. He was found bleeding in his room. Van Gogh was taken to a nearby hospital and his doctors sent for Theo, who arrived to find his brother sitting up in bed and smoking a pipe. Vincent van Gogh died in the arms of his brother. He was 37 years old.
• His brother Theo died six months after Vincent and is buried next to him in Auvers, France.
• Van Gogh's brother Theo's wife, Johanna, collected as many of van Gogh's paintings as she could when he died, but discovered that many had been destroyed or lost, van Gogh's own mother having thrown away crates full of his art.
• In spite of his lack of success during his lifetime, van Gogh's legacy lives on having left a lasting impact on the world of art. Van Gogh is now viewed as one of the most influential artists having helped lay the foundations of modern art.

Most everything we know about van Gogh is from the correspondence he kept with his family and more importantly his brother Theo. Almost daily, in almost 800 letters, van Gogh wrote and bared his tortured soul in his letters to his brother Theo. He not only writes about his daily life, the inspirations and the stories behind some of his most revered masterpieces. Over the years I have read dozens of books on van Gogh and although some have written different theories about his madness the one thing that cannot be disputed are the words handwritten by van Gogh himself in his letters.
It is incredibly fascinating to learn more about the artist in his own words. I am including a few of my favorite and better known paintings and a little snippet about each below. Some of the descriptions are pulled directly from van Gogh’s letters to Theo.

**Starry Night**

*The Starry Night, 1889 | Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY*

- Van Gogh painted *The Starry Night* while in an asylum in France. He was given paints and a studio while hospitalized. He suffered from paranoia and fits it seemed his mental health was recovering while there.
- However soon after being released, he began to suffer hallucination and have thoughts of suicide as he plunged into depression. This marks a tonal shift in his work. He returned to incorporating the darker colors from the beginning of his career and Starry Night is a wonderful example of that shift.
- In a letter to Theo he describes his inspiration, “This morning I saw the countryside from my window a long time before sunrise, with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big,”
- Van Gogh painted this from a combination of imagination, memory, emotion and observation, depicts an expressive swirling night sky and a sleeping village, with a large flame-like cypress, thought to represent the bridge between life and death, looming in the foreground.
- I have seen this in person and the thick brush strokes of oil paint are incredible! I was surprised to see that it was quite a bit smaller than I had imagined measuring only 29 x 36” (72x92cm).

**Sunflowers**
- He painted a total of twelve paintings within his series of sunflowers.
- Vincent himself never actually stated why he liked the sunflowers in particular; however, references to them are made in his letters. In a letter to his sister he writes about his friend Gauguin coming to live with him in Arles. Then goes on to say that he intends to decorate the whole studio with nothing but sunflowers. On the same day, he also wrote this in a letter to Theo, “Now that I hope to live with Gauguin in a studio of our own, I want to make decorations for the studio. Nothing but big flowers. Next door to your shop, in the restaurant, you know there is a lovely decoration of flowers; I always remember the big sunflowers in the window there.”
- The colors are vibrant and express emotions associated with the life of sunflowers: there are bright yellows of the full bloom and browns of a wilting flower dying. The colors tell a story rather than depict a still life.

Self-Portraits

Over the course of 10 years, van Gogh created more than 43 self-portraits as both paintings and drawings. He used himself as the subject because he could not afford live models to sit for him. (Which could also lend itself to why he chose to paint peasants and real life scenarios in the fields.) There are also not many actual photographs of van Gogh and we rely on his self-portraits to document his life and physical changes. He wrote this to his sister Wilhelmina,

“Of my own work I think that the picture of peasants eating potatoes I did in Nuenen is après tout the best I’ve done. But since then I’ve had no chance of getting models, though on the other hand I did have the chance to study the colour question. And if I should find models again for my figures later, then I would hope to be able to show that I am after something other than little green landscapes or flowers.”
Van Gogh used portrait painting as a way to develop his skills as an artist.

**Something to think about**: van Gogh’s self-portraits are depicting the face as it appeared in the mirror; therefore, his right side in the image is in reality the left side of his face.

Van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* was painted just weeks after a portion of Van Gogh’s ear was cut off. His right ear is bandaged in the portrait though in reality the wound was to his left ear; the discrepancy is due to his painting while looking at a mirror image.

  o I have read many different accounts of what took place on the night van Gogh cut off his ear. Whatever the exact circumstances, we do know that it happened during an argument with his roommate Paul Gauguin. Gauguin boarded the train to Paris the next day.

A private collector bought *Self-Portrait without Beard* in 1998 at a cost of $71.5 million. It was the last self-portrait ever painted by the van Gogh and is the only portrait without his beard.

He wrote in a letter to his sister, "I am looking for a deeper likeness than that obtained by a photographer.” And later to his brother, “People say, and I am willing to believe it, that it is hard to know yourself. But it is not easy to paint yourself, either. The portraits painted by Rembrandt are more than a view of nature, they are more like a revelation.”

> > > [Here is a link](#) to a really cool video to watch morphing his portraits together.

**The Story of a Chair**

I often refer to my painting process as “telling stories”; the subject, the brushwork, the colors, the shape, the size...these all share equal parts in the storytelling process of a painting. That said this always garners a few skeptical looks from the person(s) as I explain it. So I want to tell you one of my favorite van Gogh stories about a chair or chairs in this case.
Van Gogh painted two chairs and they are among the most often analyzed of his works. These chairs like a self-portrait, can tell you a lot or a story about the persons sitting in them. Van Gogh's chair is shown as simple and unpretentious, a plain straw chair on a red-tiled floor. Gauguin’s chair, on the other hand, is far more ornate. The chairs represent Van Gogh’s own perception of himself as opposed to Gauguin. Vincent’s relationship with Paul Gauguin was extremely turbulent and ended with his ear being cut off. Van Gogh perceived and painted his chair/himself sensible and humble and a far less egotistical as he did Gauguin’s chair.

These paintings are considered to be companion pieces and when hung together tell the story of each man. Taking a much closer look beyond the obvious you can totally see how van Gogh used inanimate furniture to depict each artist’s personalities.

When the paintings are placed facing toward each other, their differences and problems fade and friendlier mood is created. However, when the two paintings are positioned facing outward from each other, as they usually are, they are portraits of two very different people, not united.
My thoughts...

As an artist I am completely enamored by Van Gogh’s work. I am empowered knowing he was self-taught and that he continued on his own course that contradicted the impressionistic and more appreciated style of the time. He painted real life in his depictions of peasant or the morally questionable faces of prostitution, with a technique that grew more and more impassioned in brushstroke, in symbolic and intense color, in surface tension, and in the movement and vibration of form and line. I find van Gogh’s paintings powerful and dramatic and as I pick up my own brush I am aware of how my brushwork tells a story both imaginative and emotional.

My biggest takeaway from the years of personal fascination and professional study is that van Gogh both personally and artistically was completely absorbed with the human struggle against madness and capturing the spiritual essence of man and nature.