

Vincent van Gogh
1853-1890

Vincent Van Gogh (van GO) was born in the southern part of the Netherlands in a small village near the Belgian border. His father was a preacher and there were six children in the family. Vincent, the oldest, was a bad-tempered child. He was taught by a governess until he was 12 years old and then he was sent to a boarding school. When he left high school his uncle found him a job as a clerk at an art gallery that sold reproductions of paintings.

He became interested in religion and preached some sermons. He took a course in theology, but failed it. He was not selected for support so his parents ended up supporting him financially. The committee reconsidered and gave him a six-month trial period. He preached in a coal-mining district where he dressed like the miners. He would not bathe and his behavior became so bizarre they did not renew his contract.

He lived the life of an ascetic and gave everything away. He would punish himself by sleeping on the floor of the outhouse rather than in his bed and he walked around outside in freezing weather without an overcoat. He would eat only bread and cheese even when more luxurious food was available for him to eat. He deprived himself, but he didn't like to see animals suffer. His friend Gorlitz recalls times when Van Gogh would spend his last few coins on rolls to feed a starving dog.

When he was 27 years old, he taught himself how to paint. He returned to Brussels and continued painting. When he was admitted to the Academy of Arts his teacher viewed him as a "dunce" and demoted him to the drawing class. He didn't last very long at the Academy.

Much of what we know about Van Gogh has been learned from his correspondence with his brother Theo, who was an art dealer. Over a period of seventeen years he wrote over 800 letters to his family and friends. Most of them were written to his brother. Theo faithfully preserved the letters he received from Vincent. He recognized his brother's talent, encouraged him, and supported him financially. He introduced him to famous artists who influenced him. Vincent was almost totally dependent on Theo for money.

Some of his earlier paintings were done in watercolor. Later he started using oil paints. Sometimes he would squeeze the paint directly on the canvas and work with it there. Sometimes his paintings took weeks to dry because there was so much paint on them. He regularly painted outside. If the wind was blowing, grains of sand would stick to the paint and become a part of the picture.

One of his early paintings, *The Potato Eaters*, became one of his well-known works. He befriended a peasant family, the De Groot family, and they are the subject of the painting. The setting is almost cavelike and the colors are dark. In describing the painting himself, he wrote about how the people are eating the potatoes they planted and dug from the

earth. He appreciated the fact they had honestly earned their food. This is the only picture he ever painted with a lot of people in it.

He showed up in Paris, Theo's home city, rather unexpectedly one time much to Theo's chagrin. There were no letters during that period so little is known about that time of his

life. Other artists in Paris were impressed by his work, but it is not known whether he sold anything.

He moved to Arles in the winter of 1888. Here, Van Gogh again spent a lot of time painting outside. While the wind shook the canvas, he continued to paint. When the wind knocked the canvas down, he did not quit. He left the canvas on the ground and painted on his knees. Day after day he painted. When the sun burned the top of his red head, he put on a straw hat and kept painting. Even when it grew dark, Vincent did not stop. He just stuck candles in his hat and kept on painting. When spring came and the trees blossomed he painted 10 canvases in three weeks.

Vincent must have looked strange to the people of Arles. He carried his painting things on his back. His clothes were wrinkled and covered with paint. His red hair was likely to be standing up in all directions. He liked to run his fingers through it when he got excited. Vincent wasn't taking very good care of himself. He didn't eat well and he worked too hard. He was very tired, but he did not rest.

Sometimes he got very upset or very sad. During these times, he could not paint. But when he felt better, all he wanted to do was paint.

Sometimes his actions were violent and his neighbors were afraid of him. He had rented the Yellow House and an artist friend, named Gauguin, arrived to share the house with him. After a couple of months they began to have violent arguments. In one argument Vincent approached Gauguin with a razor, but Gauguin stared him down. After Gauguin left the house, Vincent cut off his own left ear and took it to a woman named Rachel with the note, "Keep this object carefully".

Later he painted some pictures of himself with a bandage over his ear. Interestingly though, he had cut off his left ear, but his right ear was bandaged in the pictures.

He had been in ill health for a long time and the next day after this incident, which was Christmas Eve, he was taken to a hospital. Amazingly he recovered and returned home to do some of his best work of sunflowers and self-portraits with the bandaged ear.

On February 7 he was again hospitalized after having delusions and hearing voices. He was ordered to a facility where he was isolated in a cell.

When he got out of the hospital in May, Van Gogh committed himself to an asylum.

There were beautiful gardens there. They gave him two cells, one for sleeping and one for work. In June he painted *The Starry Night*, which he sent to the Salon.

He stayed in the asylum 444 days and made 200 paintings, over 100 drawings, and wrote 200 letters while he was there.

He had attacks during which he could not work. Once when he was having such an attack he tried to swallow paint and kerosene. When he finally recovered, he moved to the country and did some remarkable landscapes there.

During his lifetime, he produced around 900 oil paintings and 1,100 drawings and sketches. He liked to paint scenes from nature, and he tried to show the lives of the common people as they worked at their jobs.

Some say that during his lifetime he only sold one painting. It is a fact though that he would trade paintings for art supplies, and the dealers sold some of those paintings. He had no idea he would become so famous, but after his death people began to appreciate his work. In 1990, one of his paintings sold for \$82.5 million dollars (that is equivalent to \$ 144 million dollars in today's economy).

His life ended sadly in 1890 at the age of 37. Only July 27 he shot himself and lingered two days before he died. Theo traveled from Paris to be with him. After Vincent's death Theo only lived for six months. Theo's wife Joanna translated Vincent's letters and made sure he would be remembered as a great artist.

Learn more about Vincent van Gogh at <http://gardenofpraise.com/art19.htm>

The Yellow House is a painting of the house that he rented in 1888 in Arles. The Bedroom is a room in this house.

The Bedroom is a simple composition done in bright colors. Each piece of furniture is outlined in black or dark brown to make it stand out. You do not see any shadows in the room from a source of light. He was so pleased with the way the painting turned out he made a copy for his sister and mother.

The *Starry Night* depicts the view outside his sanitarium room window at night, although it was painted from memory during the day.

This *Self-Portrait* hangs in the Musee d'Orsay and is one of 30 portraits the artist painted of himself.

Project

The students will use brightly colored crayons to create their own version of Starry Night. Have them use lots of different strokes and swirling, circle patterns.

When their drawing is complete, they will use a gray paint wash and cover the entire picture.