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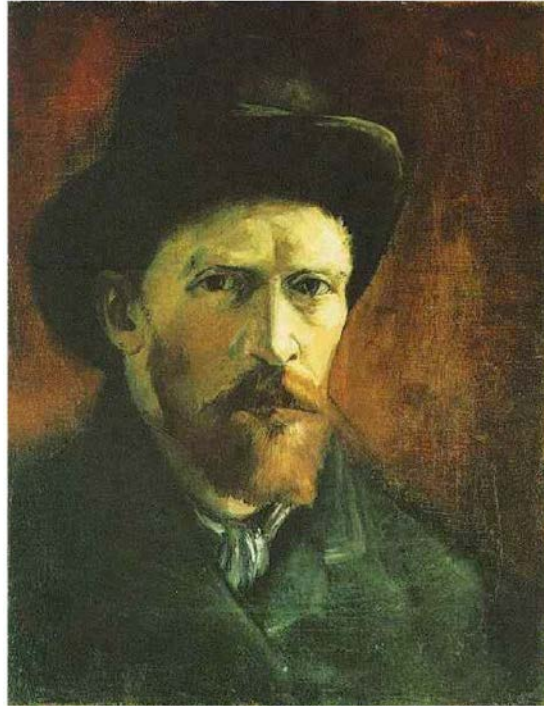
Analysis of Vincent van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) was one of the most famed artists to come out of the Netherlands and the nineteenth century. During his later years van Gogh decided to dedicate his life to art and so, his artistic ability saw significant improvement. His use of the artistic technique impasto makes his later artworks highly recognisable. Impasto is the “use of thick layer(s) of paint or pastel” (Visual Arts Cork). However, van Gogh seemed to have lived a tumultuous life and this, in time, would impact his mental health. The disintegration of his mental health is reflected in his self-portraits and in examining them it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the artistic and psychological motivations behind Vincent van Gogh’s artwork. This disintegration is evident in these three portraits from his famous self-portraits series: *Self-Portrait with Dark Felt Hat* (1886); *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889); and *Self-Portrait* (1889).

The analysis of letters from Vincent van Gogh to his brother, Theo van Gogh, are also useful when attempting to get an insight on van Gogh’s artwork. Throughout van Gogh’s life, he faced family rejection which created a changing residential situation and an increasingly difficult personality. However, support from his brother both financially and emotionally remained constant. In numerous letters, van Gogh indicates financial instability and it seems that Theo was willing to help support him. In this letter, written in 1881, this is particularly evident and it appears that Vincent is comfortable telling Theo of his issues: “I’ll then be able to make saleable drawings on a regular basis, I’m nevertheless going through a rather difficult period. The cost of models, studio, drawing and painting materials are multiplying, and there are no earnings as yet” (Van Gogh Letters). In another letter from Theo to Vincent, it implies that Theo played a

proactive role in seeking help for his brother's deteriorating mental health. In 1889, Theo writes that "if you're not averse to going to St-Remy...you would be examined by specialist doctors and probably would benefit from their advice" (Van Gogh Letters). These letters suggest that Theo had a positive, influential effect on van Gogh's life and, to an extent, helped to maintain his stability.

Having read the dialogue between the brothers, it is clear that they share a caring relationship as the letters start by asking about each other's health and current events. It is quite endearing reading these heartfelt letters as it seems to have given van Gogh a sense of security. This is demonstrated in the final words of this letter written in 1880: "Now if you'd like to write to me one of these days, my address is care of C. Decrucq, rue du Pavillon 8, Cuesmes, near Mons,³¹ and know that by writing you'll do me good" (Van Gogh Letters). These letters are also important when attempting to piece together a timeline of events that occurred in van Gogh's short life. They also provide some understanding of the reasons why van Gogh behaved and expressed himself in the way he did in his paintings.



Vincent van Gogh. *Self-Portrait with Dark Felt Hat* (1886)

The painting above is entitled *Self-Portrait with Dark Felt Hat*. This is one of the earliest known self-portraits and appropriately represents van Gogh's early artistic style. In van Gogh's early artist career he spent some time living in London, England. London is home to many renowned galleries, like the National Portrait Gallery, where van Gogh admired the works of artists like Francois Millet and Jules Breton. These painters are widely known as "peasant painters" (Van Gogh Museum) as they used a dark toned pallet to create a mysterious and shadowed painting. These artists' paintings display an accurate insight into the everyday lifestyles of real people.

It is evident that Millet and Breton's artwork played a role in influencing van Gogh's artistic choices. In fact, in 1880 van Gogh tells Theo about his attempts to imitate Millets work: "I'll tell you, then, that I've sketched the 10 sheets of Millet's Labours of the fields and that I've completely finished one of them, namely The Woodcutter" (Van Gogh Letters). There are other

features within van Gogh's art which suggest that other artists influenced him. Firstly, the colors van Gogh has used in this painting replicate Millet and Breton's color palettes. Van Gogh has chosen to place himself in front of a dark wooden wall. This immediately darkens the painting as it covers the majority of the canvas. He is also wearing a "dark felt hat" and a dark green overcoat. His facial expression and features are also significant. Van Gogh's expression is one of a somber and gaunt-looking man. His dark eyes and disheveled facial hair also exude sadness. Although the composition of this painting could be an accurate representation of reality, van Gogh could be attempting to impose a deeper and wider message. The darkness and sadness one senses from this painting could possibly mean that he was aware of his changing personality and mental state. This being said, in the self-portrait there is a halo-like ring around the artist. These lighter tones may signify that he feels alive as a result of finding his way in the artistic industry as this painting was the start of van Gogh beginning to explore new artistic technique in the hope of finding his own, unique artistic style. On the other hand, one may conclude that this painting, and other similar paintings, could be an attempt to simply imitate some of the expressions, lifestyles, and clothes of the peasants from Millet and Breton's artwork.

Throughout his life van Gogh attempted to utilize his income in an effective manner. Although he was sometimes unsuccessful and often suffered from insufficient funds, he found a way of producing some of the world's most breath-taking art. As an artist new to the industry, it could be suggested that van Gogh had a lack of wealth, both financially and in terms of artistic knowledge. This point is strengthened by his constant need of financial aid from Theo as shown in numerous letters. On 15th January 1884, Vincent wrote to Theo: "Now I have a proposal to make for the future. Let me send you my work and you take what you want from it, but I insist that I may consider the money I would receive from you after March as money I've earned"

(Van Gogh Letters). Van Gogh did not sell a single painting, other than to his brother. This meant that he made little profit from his artwork. The use of dark tones in van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Dark Felt Hat* may be a result of financial instability. Darker toned paints are significantly cheaper than more expensive, brighter, and more vivid colors. This point is supported by evidence from a contemporary art supplies stockiest Winsor and Newton, who market 37ml tubes of basic colors for less money than more vibrant colors. For example, Winsor and Newton sell their "Lamp Black" for \$12.39 whereas, more bold colors like "Cerulean Blue" are marketed at \$36.59 (Winsor & Newton).

Furthermore, using yourself as a model to complete a self-portrait and observing ordinary people to paint is cheaper than paying the expenses of hiring models. The dark green overcoat that is seen in this painting is also featured in some of Van Gogh's later self-portraits. This could imply that van Gogh faced financial strain throughout his life as he could not afford to buy a new coat. On the other hand, it is clear that van Gogh was heavily influenced by artists that also observed others and used darker colors. Thus van Gogh could have been attempting to duplicate this style simply because it was one in which he liked and admired. Overall, *Self Portrait with Dark Felt Hat* may be regarded as evidence of van Gogh's attempts to explore other artistic techniques and so this was the first steps into van Gogh finding his own artistic style.



Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*
(1889)

Although it is clear that van Gogh's artistic ability constantly evolved, all the while his psychological state quickly disintegrated. This is particularly visible in van Gogh's letter written in 1888 to Theo in which he states that "if I wasn't dreadfully, and always, tormented by that anxiety, I would say things were going well" (Van Gogh Letters). To support this, the painting above, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, depicts Vincent van Gogh's most well-known episode of mental illness in which he mutilated his ear. At the time of the event, van Gogh lived in the South of France with fellow artist Paul Gauguin in a house which famously became known as the Yellow House. The Van Gogh Museum indicates that the relationship between the artists collapsed due to differing artistic technique, styles, and their characters. This "caused the tension between them to rise steadily" to the point that one evening van Gogh threatened Gauguin with a razor (Van Gogh Museum). Later that night van Gogh cut off the bottom half of his own ear. As a result, he stayed in the care of the Saint-Paul Asylum in Saint-Remy, France, from 1899 to

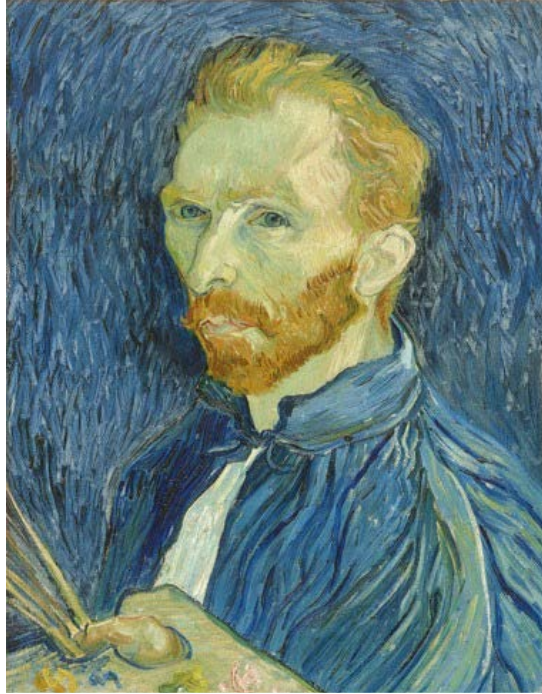
1890. In a letter to Theo in 1888, Vincent talks about his preference of painting from memory in comparison to still-life paintings. “Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use color more arbitrarily, in order to express myself, more forcefully” (National Gallery of Art). It is suggested by many that producing art provided solace and a sense of himself as it was in the asylum’s care that he produced some of his most famed work such as *Starry Night* (John Eger).

There is uncertainty surrounding the motivations behind the features of “Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear.” In the painting, the audience can see that Van Gogh is wearing a fluffy hat and the green overcoat that has been seen in previous portraits. This may concern the audience as he is wearing outside clothes in his studio and leaves the question as to why it would be cold in his studio. The author Margaret Drabble states that could be a sign “of a lack of permanence” (Drabble). This could relate to van Gogh’s lack of feelings of warmth and security in his life. Contrary to this, his facial expression is still and calm. Margaret Drabble suggests that this relates to his uncertainty of his worth as an artist (Drabble). Also his use of color, and warmer colors, contrast the prior events of darkness. This could also reflect van Gough’s matured painting style, now including color and long, controlled vertical brush-strokes. Strangely the brush-strokes used in the face and hat differ, which may suggest turmoil. In the self-portrait, above van Gough’s left shoulder is a blank canvas. This also leaves the audience questions. This could indicate that van Gough aims to produce more work or that he has finite ideas for paintings. The most likely reason van Gough chose to include a blank canvas is to show the doctors and audience that he wants to forget the past and start a new canvas.

It is highly suggested that van Gogh painted the “Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear” to persuade his doctors that he was mentally stable. The painting was completed in the weeks

following his release from hospital and could be useful in determining his mental state. An article, by Ben Pollitt, of the Khan Academy suggest that the primary reason for the self-portrait “was a plea to van Gogh’s doctors” and that he “was anxious to persuade his doctors that he was able to care for himself” (Pollitt). This is evident through the bandage, indicating that he accepts taking his medicine. Furthermore, in Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith’s book, it states that “on January 5, he led a delegation of doctors...to the Yellow House to show them his paintings...he promised to do a portrait of the dapper young intern- to prove his mental “equilibrium”...he also solemnly swore that at the first sign of a serious symptom he would...submit himself voluntarily unto Rey’s care” (Naifeh and Smith). This suggests that van Gogh was taking the doctors’ advice seriously and understood the severity of his illness. However, his attempts to persuade doctors that he was mentally stable soon failed when he admitted himself into Saint-Paul in Saint-Remy. It is also clear that van Gogh acknowledged his declining mental health in his letters to Theo. In 1889, van Gogh cynically writes that “to the local people who ask after my health I always say that I’ll begin by dying of it with them and that afterwards my sickness will be dead” (Van Gogh Letters). Overall, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* is regarded as evidence of van Gogh’s declining mental and physical state. It also presents to the audience van Gogh’s attempts to prove his health.

Van Gogh was a skeptic of his own artwork. He endeavored to improve his artistic technique, skills, and ability. This is most evident in one of his final self-portraits, simply titled *Self-Portrait* which is displayed below.



Vincent van Gogh. *Self-Portrait* (1889)

This self-portrait significantly differs from previous self-portraits and, in particular, the *Self-Portrait with Dark Felt Hat*. The first noticeable difference is the color scheme and artistic techniques van Gogh uses. As van Gogh's artistic ability begins to thrive, the colors he uses become more vivid and bold. Impasto is also evident in this painting. The next difference is van Gogh's positioning on the canvas. In *Self-Portrait* van Gogh is centralized on the blue impasto canvas whereas in *Self-Portrait with Dark Felt Hat* he is positioned on the left-hand side of a darkly painted canvas. This may indicate that van Gogh became more confident in his artistic ability.

It also seems that he is proud of his profession as an established artist. This seems evident because at the bottom left of the painting, van Gogh is seen holding a paint pallet and paint brushes. Similarly, artists like Rembrandt also present paints, pallets, and paint brushes in their own self-portraits. This provides another example of van Gogh's artistic style and aspects

of his paintings being influenced by other artists as van Gogh would have seen such self-portraits in the Louvre in Paris. Evidence of van Gogh admiration of these other artists is found in his letter to Theo which states “I spent some very pleasant days in Paris and, as you can imagine, very much enjoyed all the beautiful things I saw at the exhibition and in the Louvre and the Luxembourg” (Van Gogh Letters). It may also be noted that in aristocratic paintings they often hold objects in which they wish to be identified. By painting himself holding a paint pallet and paintbrushes it suggests that van Gogh is striving to be taken seriously as an artist. There are of course conflicting views as to why van Gogh chose to compose this painting in such a way. Van Gogh is seen wearing a blue overcoat that seems to merge into the blue background. To some this could be an indication that van Gogh does not think that he is acknowledged, by society and perhaps his family, as an artist. This view is supported by the fact that van Gogh is holding a paint pallet and could be a subtle method of showing the audience that he views himself as an artist, but society does not. There are also very few colors on the paint pallet and the colors that are on the pallet are those that are evident in the painting. Another suggestion implies that perhaps van Gogh was still unable to purchase a vast variety of colored paints. This being said, this painting displays van Gogh’s technique in its most technical and impressive form. It also captures van Gogh’s “true character” and conveys his passion as an artist (National Gallery of Art). It is also clear in his letters that he is passionate about his art simply from his vocabulary choice. In a letter to Theo, written in 1888, he discusses his new-found love of colors using figurative language: “To express the love of two lovers by a marriage of complementary colors, their mingling and opposition, the mysterious vibration of kindred tones” (National Gallery of Art). Overall, I think that *Self-Portrait* predominantly conveys van Gogh’s wish to be widely accepted as a legitimate artist.

As a result of analyzing his work, it is observable that van Gogh's artistic technique developed while his mental health disintegrated. I think that the main motivations of his artwork may have been to prove his health, prove himself as an artist, and to provide a timeline of his life. I think van Gogh's changing and developing self-image as demonstrated in the self-portrait series provides us, today, with a window he knew best- color, composition, and imagery to tell us his story and state of mind. He left a legacy of paintings for future generations to debate and discuss the emotions and circumstances that provoked him to create them.

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