



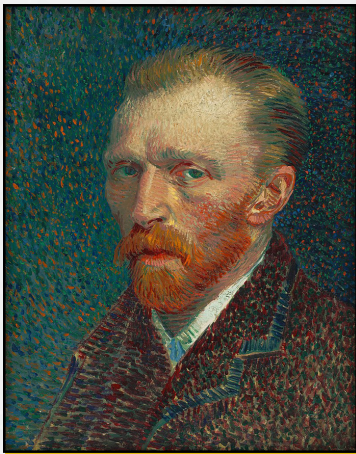
BLUMENTHAL
PERFORMING ARTS

VINCENT VAN GOGH: INSIDE AND OUT

TEEN (6TH-12TH) STUDY GUIDE AND EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

“Well, then, what can I say: does what goes on inside, show on the outside?”

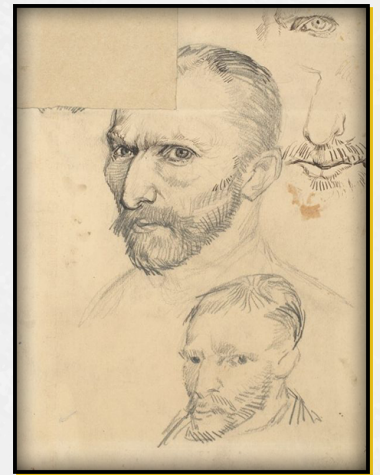
-Vincent to Theo, June 1880



Vincent van Gogh is among the world's most famous artists, known for his vibrating colors, thick, encrusted paint, exhilarating brushstrokes and very brief career. In a mere ten years he managed to create an astonishing 900 paintings and 1000 drawings! The art he suffered to create tried to answer the introspective question he put forth in a letter from 1880, “does what goes on inside, show on the outside?” Born in The Netherlands on March 30, 1853, he never knew fame for his art while he was alive. Neither did he know prosperity or much peace during his frenetic life. Vincent was known to be emotionally intense, highly intelligent and socially awkward from the time he was a young boy, and though he never married, he had a

deep and driving desire to connect with others. Unfortunately, he was unable to maintain most of his relationships due to his argumentative, obsessive nature and bouts of depression. But it was a divided temperament Vincent possessed - disagreeable, melancholy and zealous on one hand; sensitive, observant and gifted on the other. His beloved brother Theo thought that he had “two different beings in him” and that Vincent often made his life “difficult not only for others, but also for himself.” This disconnect was obviously painful to Vincent, as he once compared himself to a hearth - as someone who “has a great fire in his soul and nobody ever comes to warm themselves at it, and passers-by see

nothing but a little smoke at the top of the chimney and then go on their way.” It was this friction of selves that created a lonely lifetime of seeking - for home, family, truth, balance and acceptance, which he ultimately never found. On July 29, 1890 Vincent died, believing himself a failure in life and art, at the age of 37. Little did he know that he would serve as the roots of Modern Art, become one of the most influential artists in history and bring millions of souls to come stay and warm themselves by the fire of his creativity.



3 Things to Know About Van Gogh's Childhood

1. **His Family** - Vincent was the eldest of six siblings, though he was not the first child born of his parents. A year to the day of his own birth on March 30, 1853, Vincent's older brother, and namesake, Vincent Willem was stillborn. Though not unusual in those times, it must have been a disturbing reality for young Vincent! As a deeply religious family, all the Van Gogh children were raised with a strict schedule of duties, among them, daily reading from the Bible and gardening, which eventually became important subjects in his artwork. His father being an obscure Protestant minister in rural Netherlands meant few friends, little money and lots of family togetherness for young Vincent, despite feeling lonely and disconnected. Often his family found him wandering the fields or sketching in his notebook. Knowing your place and keeping up with appearances was very important for



his rigid parents, who valued conformity above all, which made young Vincent's difficult temperament and behaviors all the harder for his family to bear. He was such a challenge for his mother that she sent him away to a boarding school at the age of 11, which crushed his spirit and created a lifelong rift and sense of abandonment that followed Vincent through his life and to his death.

2. **His Brother Theo** - More than just a younger brother, Theo was Vincent's best friend, his art dealer, critic and strongest link to his estranged family. He was also his main support system, as he financed his older brother's journey to becoming and living as an artist, even going so far as to allow Vincent to live with him in Paris for two years. For over a decade Theo sent Vincent money with

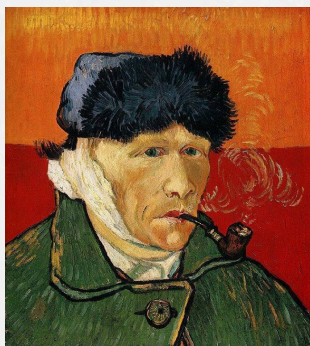


which to live - for rent, food, clothes and art supplies, in return for his completed paintings, which Theo then tried to sell to recoup his investments. This situation of being dependent on his little brother caused unbearable guilt and psychological stress for Vincent, and no doubt added to his depression and anxiety. Vincent desperately wanted his paintings to sell and become financially independent and he wrote and obsessed about it daily to the point of exhaustion. Unfortunately for both, Theo was only ever able to sell one painting for Vincent during his life (The Red Vineyard Near Arles, 1888), though he deeply believed in his brother and was one of the few people who could clearly see Vincent's potential. The brothers were so close, that Theo named his son after his brother,



and when Vincent died, he himself suffered a breakdown and died just six months later. The brothers are buried side by side in the town where Vincent died, and thanks to their deep bond, and the 658 letters he wrote to Theo, we now know Vincent's story.

3. **His Quest for Home** - Because he was marginalized in his family for his inability to keep a job and his many failed romances with inappropriate women, Vincent developed a deep need to build his own nest and create his own family. He yearned for a wife, child and home to call his own, but he settled for a new definition of family when he moved to Arles in the south of France in 1888 and set up his first and only self-created home, the Yellow House. Here he invited his friend and fellow artist Paul Gauguin to be part of Vincent's dream of a "Studio of the



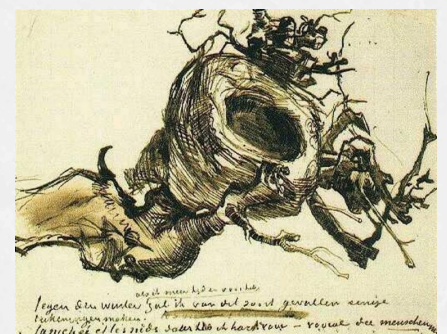
South", where they would collaborate and create the art of the future, full of light, truth and color. He had finally stopped wandering and made a quaint nest for himself, but sadly, it lasted less than a year. Though they produced many inspired paintings together, Gauguin had a difficult time living with Vincent while his mental health was deteriorating. Understandably, Gauguin moved out when Vincent had his psychotic break and was admitted to the hospital for cutting off part of his ear on December 23, 1888.

3 Things to Know About Van Gogh's Personality

1. **Vincent loved Nature** - According to Vincent, it took a "special kind of temperament and character" to truly know and love nature - "heath, grassland, fields and wood...the snow and the rain and the storm." Vincent grew up in rural Netherlands and spent his days wandering, contemplating and connecting with the natural world in ways he couldn't



with people. He found God in the perfect structure of nature, and was especially drawn to birds' nests. He collected them, sketched them and even gave one as a gift to his nephew. His time spent in the countryside made him uniquely suited to capture the beauty and truth of nature in his prolific landscape paintings, commenting "If you truly love nature, you will find beauty everywhere." And there was no better way to appreciate nature than to walk. No matter where Vincent travelled and lived, a big part of his daily routine was to walk



miles and miles, sometimes with a companion, but mostly alone. In fact, it was such an important part of his life, he mentions walking in no less than 149 different letters.

2. **Vincent loved Words** - Vincent was an avid reader and writer and to him, books were a “rich source of light to the imagination.” Beginning in his lonely boyhood, he was a voracious reader, consuming everything he could get his hands on from the Bible, magazines and newspapers to artist biographies, history textbooks, science periodicals and, his favorite, modern novels. He was as much a bibliophile as an artist and could read in three languages - Dutch, French and English. In February, 1883 he wrote: “Books and reality and art are



the same kind of thing for me.” Vincent was also a prolific letter writer, penning more than 2,000 in his lifetime and leaving 819 behind as his keys to post-mortem fame. They served as another version of a self-portrait - his thoughts, worries, dreams and plans ranging on subjects from religion, literature, politics, philosophy and art. They are truly the keys to understanding his growth as an artist, his motivations and his process. In fact, Monsieur Roulin, the local postman in Arles, would become one of his closest allies (and a favored model) due to the sheer volume of mail to and from Vincent’s home in Arles.

3. **Vincent had Mental Health Issues** - Vincent suffered from severe mental illness in the last few years of his life that resulted in suicide when he was just 37 years old. He was prey to debilitating anxiety and self-doubt, depression, hallucinations, paranoia and manic episodes that resulted in near total mental collapse and self-admittance to Saint-Paul de Mausole mental hospital from May 1889 to May 1890. It was here that, despite living in relative isolation and suffering more debilitating attacks, he managed to complete about 150 paintings, including *Almond Blossoms*, *Irises*, his series of cypress trees and olive groves, and his most famous painting of all time - the legendary *Starry Night*. As his behavior swung between extremes of excitement and despair over the years, Vincent turned to alcohol to dull his pain and mania, which only worsened his moods and behaviors. From





his hundreds of letters, many historians, psychologists and psychiatrists today hold the common belief that he likely suffered from alcohol abuse and could have suffered from bipolar disorder - which supports the observations of others (and his own) of his chronic struggle to balance his rocketing emotions, extreme behaviors and blackouts. Vincent finally accepted his growing affliction as incurable, despite believing that painting was his refuge from madness, and surrendered to it by apparently shooting himself in the chest on July 27, 1890. His brother Theo, who was with him when he passed, wrote later of Vincent's death that "He had found the rest he could not find on earth."

3 Things to Know About Van Gogh's Art

1. **He was obsessed with Color** - When Vincent moved to Paris in the spring of 1886, he had already begun experimenting with color theory in Belgium at art school and was open to the idea of lightening up his color palette. The idea that putting complementary colors (opposite sides of the color wheel) side by side could make each color more intense and expressive was not new (the first known color wheel debuted about ten years earlier), but Vincent managed to exploit it almost better than anyone else painting at the time, going so far to declare that "there is no blue without yellow and without orange." In order to discover new color combinations and relationships, he kept a box of colored yarns, playing with them and twisting them together to test the colors before using his expensive paints on canvas. In his continuous search of light and color, Vincent moved



to the south of France. There he painted the locals and the surrounding landscapes and created some of his most famous paintings - some of his bright yellow Sunflowers series, the blue and purple *The Bedroom* series; the red and green *Night Cafe*, *Cafe Terrace at Night*, *Portrait of the Postman Joseph Roulin* and more. Even while Vincent was hospitalized, he continued his investigations and observations of advanced color theory and light throughout his career, always searching for those "mysterious vibrations of kindred tones."

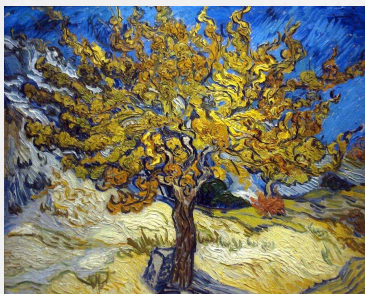
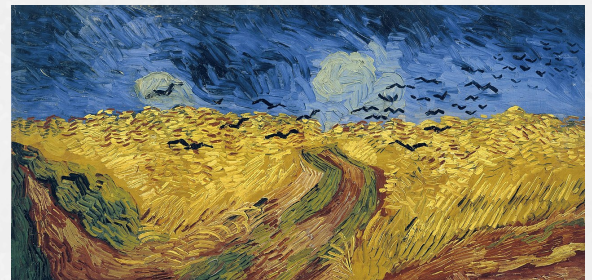
2. **Japanese Influences** - One of Vincent's most profound inspirations was his discovery of Japanese art and prints, which made their way to Europe through the World Fairs in London and Paris in the 1860s. He first mentions his interest in Japonisme in a letter to Theo in November 1885, "My studio's quite tolerable, mainly because I've pinned a set of Japanese prints on the walls that I find very diverting." Vincent, like many other artists, was enticed by the fresh, modern style of Japanese art - pure flat color, unusually angled perspectives, heavy contour lines and unexpected croppings. Vincent described the style to a fellow artist: "The



Japanese artist ignores reflected colors and puts the flat tones side by side, with characteristic lines marking off the movements and the forms." He also found inspiration in his perception of the Japanese artist's way of life - dedicated only to their art, living simply and connected to nature. In fact, Vincent once painted himself as a Japanese Buddhist monk as a tribute to both the culture and the way in which he wanted himself seen.



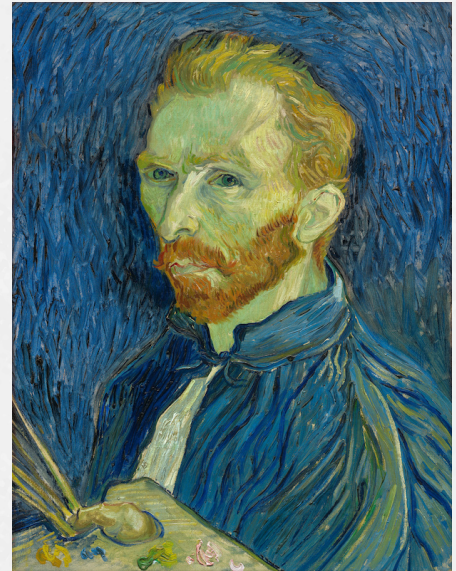
3. **Painting Style** - Vincent's signature look is nearly impossible not to recognize with his dynamic and swirling brushstrokes and his clotted and slathered-on paint like thick frosting (called impasto). His fellow artist friends and brother Theo (who paid for all of his art supplies) often complained that Vincent used far too much paint, but he loved the sensory feel of it and couldn't resist his excesses - it was a vital part of his process. He also was known, and chided, for painting too quickly. Vincent averaged a painting a day, sometimes even completing a fully realized painting



in an hour. People thought he painted as if in a breathless frenzy, not in the appropriate academic stages of studies, sketches and final paintings. And while Vincent did typically paint in one exhilarating rush, it was well thought out and planned in his mind. He complained that people should "understand that I am in the midst of a complicated calculation long beforehand" and that if they say he worked too quickly, well then "they have looked...too quickly."

3 Things to Know About Van Gogh's Impact

1. **Self-Taught Artist** - A true late bloomer, Vincent spent the first three-quarters of his life only vaguely aware of his own artistic abilities. He would sketch from nature, adding rough drawings in letters, and worked surrounded by art as a clerk in his uncle's print shop studying paintings and prints for years. He also visited museums, read biographies, treatises and textbooks about and by artists, and collected prints to satisfy his growing curiosity and interest in art. Once he decided to dedicate his life to becoming an artist, he used his collection of prints, books and museum visits as his main source of self-directed learning. He tried attending the Antwerp Academy of Art in 1885 for four weeks and spent three weeks studying with the well-regarded artist Anton Mauve, but that was the extent of any formal training. Despite his obvious intelligence and work ethic, Vincent was never a great student, bristling against rigid instruction and stifling rules. Instead, Vincent spent hours and hours obsessively analyzing and copying anything he could get his hands on and becoming a better draughtsman through practical means. Though lacking more formal training, or likely because of it, Vincent became a more intuitive artist over time, able to stay open to innovation and experimentation in a way that his formally educated peers struggled to be. This ability was what allowed him to form his intensely personal style that is world famous today.
2. **The Tortured Artist Myth** - Many would consider Vincent to be the original "tortured artist" - that his genius was born of madness. Clearly, Vincent's incredible art was a product of his own personal style, not just his mental illness, as he was creating well before his first mental breakdown in 1888, less than two years before his death. However, Vincent did suffer for his craft, persevering despite continuous bouts of illness, depression, loneliness and bleak poverty. He wrote of the physical and psychological sacrifices he made to continue being a working artist: "I myself feel, to the point of being mentally crushed and physically drained, the need to produce." Hyper-fixated by studying, observing, drawing and painting every day from sun up to sun down was both a poison, aggravating his emotional and physical wellbeing, and an antidote, believing as he did, that "work distracts me infinitely better than anything else" and "might possibly be the best remedy" for his mental illness.
3. **Art as Self-Expression** - It's inescapable that Vincent took an emotion-filled and obsessive approach to creating art, at one point writing to his sister that his "paintings are a cry of anguish." But at the time, this was considered a new and modern approach. Up until then, art had mostly been an attempt to capture a realistic likeness of something - a landscape or person or still life. But Vincent and his peers experimented





with abstraction and color in order to more fully capture the invisible essence of something, not just its outer appearance. By using his own personal way of seeing the world and symbolism to tell truths, Vincent tried to balance his imaginary “exaggerations” (which he felt left him unattached to reality) with real life observations and the truth that he thought helped keep him anchored and sane. This friction between the two philosophies is what made Vincent’s artwork so original and fresh, even to today’s modern audience. One of the few

art critics at the time who appreciated Vincent’s style wrote that he left behind “a body of work which is a part of himself.” Too late for him to know it, Vincent’s intensely personal style and emotional letters together helped spawn the movement of art as a form of expression, revealing the artist and showing on the outside “what goes on inside”.

After the Show: Classroom Project Ideas - Teens

Vincent’s Playlist

If van Gogh had earbuds or headphones while he worked, what would be on his playlist?

- Students choose one piece from the show and create a music playlist (approx 6-10 songs) that they think van Gogh would have listened to while creating that painting.
- Students should think about what they’ve learned about the artist, the times and the painting itself. They should also reflect their personal connection with the piece.
- Each song choice must have title, artist and an explanation of why it was included in the playlist.
- Bonus if a real playlist is made (radio friendly) and shared with class, or at Blumenthal social media, etc.

Writing a Letter

Vincent van Gogh was a prolific correspondent regarding his life, environments and artwork. Students will choose an image from the show and compose a letter to a real or imaginary person to describe the painting. A rubric should be created to help students compose a letter that shows knowledge of artist and art, vocabulary and grammar skills, and ability to convey personal reflection about the piece. Bonus if you provide stamps and they mail it!

Immersive Digital Self-Portrait

If a story of your life or self-portrait was designed to be an immersive digital experience, with images and sound, what would it look like? How would it sound? Where would it be? Students will design a slideshow/powerpoint/other digital platform visual project as an immersive self-portrait. A rubric should be created that will help guide students on what images, what songs, what text and what support materials to choose to help tell a self-portrait “story”.

Transformation Self-Portrait

Students will create a folding self-portrait depicting what the world sees on the outside vs. what they feel/who they are on the inside. A large piece of paper folded in thirds in a particular way will make a kind of window with shutters. On the outside of the “shutters” will be the outside depiction of what the world sees (drawing, painting, mixed media collage of their face), while on the inside students will create an image of what/who they are on the inside. This does NOT have to be their face. When displayed, the artwork can be closed for the viewer to open and discover.

Still Life Self-Portrait

Inspired by the symbolism of Vincent van Gogh's everyday items in his painting *Still Life with Plate of Onions*, students will choose the items in their lives that tell the story of who they are. Do a Visual Thinking Strategy with students about the painting, then have students write a list of five items that help describe who they are. Using that list, students will create a still life scene (drawing, painting, mixed media collage). Follow up with a Visual Thinking Strategy session during a classroom critique where students try to guess what each item is meant to convey about their peer artist.



Portrait of an Artist

Van Gogh is known not only for landscapes, but portraits of the people he encountered during his everyday life. He also completed 36 self-portraits throughout his lifetime. He wrote to his brother Theo, “They say-and I am willing to believe it- that it is difficult to know yourself- but it isn't easy to paint yourself either.”

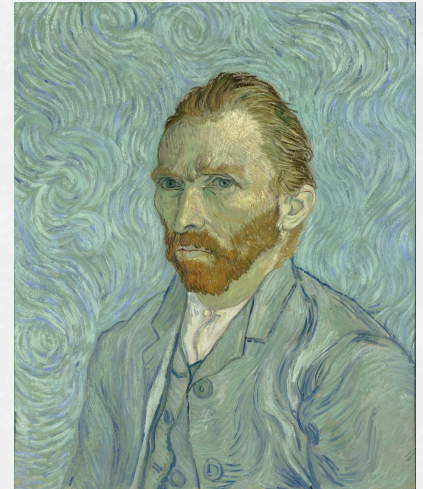
Teens will create a self-portrait by first creating a sketch, and then finishing in their chosen medium (pen, pencil, paint, oil pastel, etc). The background for the portrait will feature a Van-Gogh inspired pattern like the image below. Hand-held mirrors will be provided as well as art materials. Visual Examples of Van Gogh self-portraits will be available for discussion.

Visual Thinking Strategies:

- 1) Why do you think Van Gogh painted so many portraits throughout his life?
- 2) Why are some of his portraits so different from each other?
- 3) What is the significance of Van Gogh titling his self-portrait (and therefore himself) “an artist”?

Experimenting with Impasto

This project is inspired by Vincent van Gogh’s use of heavy impasto (thickly applied paint to canvas, so that it has a texture you can both feel and see). Set up a simple still life (think a piece of fruit or a flower). Students do a simple pencil drawing on paper. Give each student a tube of white toothpaste (or pair up, one tube per two students). They will use this as their “paint”. Have them make a palette by adding a few blobs of toothpaste to a paper plate and then add drops of food dye to make different colors. Using a plastic palette knife, have students “paint” their still life drawings. Discuss the process, the challenges, the tactile sensations. Can they see why Van Gogh used this technique?



La Chambre

In October 1888, Van Gogh moved into the “Yellow House” in Arles, France. This was an important event in the painter’s life, as it was the first time he had a home of his own. He immediately put in tremendous effort to create paintings for the walls and decorated the space to make it his own. It is also the place he entertained his friend and mentor Paul Gauguin. A month after moving, he made the first of a small series consisting of three paintings of his bedroom in the “Yellow House”. He described the paintings in a letter to his brother Theo, “It amused me enormously doing this bare interior. With a simplicity à la Seurat. In flat tints, but coarsely brushed in full impasto, the walls pale lilac, the floor in a broken and faded red, the chairs and the bed chrome yellow, the pillows and the sheet very pale lemon green, the bedspread blood-red, the dressing-table orange, the washbasin blue, the window green. I had wished to express utter repose with all these very different tones.”

Most people spent far more time in their personal spaces over the last year. Whether working from home or going to school from home, people are examining how their personal space relates to their lifestyle and personality.

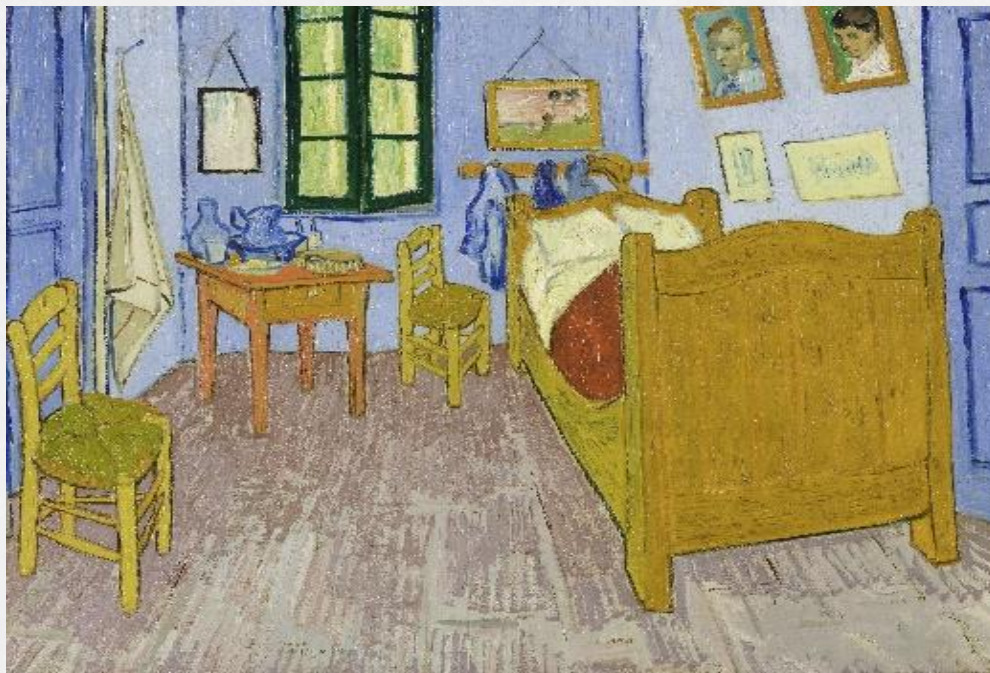
Van Gogh Self-Portraits



Students will come equipped with either printed or digital images of their bedrooms and be asked to recreate it on paper through an initial sketch, then painting. *or oil pastel, other medium if time does not allow for paint.

Visual Thinking Strategies/ Discussion Questions for participants:

- 1) What mood does Van Gogh's Style of painting (brush strokes, perspective, etc) illustrate of his personal space? How do you think he was feeling when moving to the "Yellow House?"
- 2) What possessions in Van Gogh's bedroom do you think were most important to him and why? What possessions in your bedroom are most important to you and why?



The Bedroom, Vincent van Gogh 1889

Resources and Further Reading

*(CML)-These titles are available at the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

Visual Art Reference Books:

Van Gogh and Music: A Symphony in Blue and Yellow by Natascha Veldhorst (CML)

Vincent's Portraits by Thames and Hudson (CML)

The Sunflowers are Mine: The Story of Van Gogh's Masterpiece by Martin Bailey (CML)

Japanese Prints: The Collection of Vincent Van Gogh by Thames and Hudson (CML)

Biographies and In-Depth Profiles:

Van Gogh: The Life by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith

The Yellow House: Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Nine Turbulent Weeks in Provence by Martin Gayford

Van Gogh The Asylum Year by Edwin Mullins

The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh Penguin Classics

Vincent and Theo, The Van Gogh Brothers by Deborah Heiligman

FILMS

"Loving Vincent" Amazon Video

"At Eternity's Gate" Amazon Video

WEBSITES

<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en>

<https://www.vangoghletters.org>

<https://www.vangoghroute.com>