

VINCENT VAN GOGH: INSIDE AND OUT

YOUTH (3RD-5TH) STUDY GUIDE AND EXTENSION ACTIVITIES



Vincent van Gogh is one of the most famous artists who ever lived. He is known for his colorful, thick paintings, of which he created around 900 of in just ten years! Unfortunately, even with so many paintings that are popular today, he never became famous or earned any money from his art when he was still alive. In fact, he only ever sold one painting in his lifetime, *The Red Vineyard*. At the time, his paintings were too expressive, which means they had too much emotion and did not look

very real to the audience, so people didn't like them as much. But this was Vincent's goal - not to paint things like a photograph, but to show what he saw through his eyes, with his own artistic style. He tried to balance what something actually looked like on the outside, with his interpretation, or



understanding, of it on the inside - like when he painted his bedroom. You see a bed, window and chair, but they are painted in vibrant colors and in a way that makes the objects feel more exciting and personal than they are in real life. In fact, Vincent looked for balance between what was real and what was inside his mind his whole life. He felt emotions strongly, was smart, and a gifted artist, but he was also awkward, rude and unhappy. His moods and behaviors were often at the extremes - too



gloomy, too grouchy and too low (like how he felt when he painted a self-portrait during his sad days) or too excitable, too energetic and too high (like in his joyful Sunflowers painting). Poor Vincent could never really find peace in the



middle of all of his feelings, but he said he always felt his best when he was in front of his easel painting. His brother Theo once wrote that he thought Vincent was like two different people in one body, which created lifelong problems for him and his personal life. But Vincent's emotional ups and downs helped his art become the lively, dramatic and meaningful paintings they are. Vincent van Gogh died when he was just 37 years old, never knowing his artwork would sell for millions of dollars and be admired all over the world, like his most famous painting, *Starry Night*.



3 Things to Know About Van Gogh's Childhood

1. **His Family** - Vincent was born in The Netherlands, in Europe near France, on March 30, 1853 and was the oldest of six siblings - he had two younger brothers and three younger sisters. His father was a minister in a small village, where there weren't many friends to play with or things to do except take long walks in nature or read. Even though young Vincent had his siblings to keep him company, he felt lonely and not very connected to them, which made him sad and sometimes angry. He thought his parents were too strict and cared too much about what other people thought, which often resulted in temper tantrums as a result. Often his family would find him alone, wandering the fields outside the village, reading or drawing in his notebook. His first known sketch of a local barn is from when he was just eleven years old! Because he seemed like such a difficult child, he was sent away to a boarding school, where students live at the actual school, away from their own homes and families. That crushed Vincent's spirit and made him even lonelier and more troublesome.



2. **His Brother Theo** - Vincent found it hard to get along with just about everybody except his younger brother, Theo, who became Vincent's best friend as they grew up. Theo was also his number one fan and helped Vincent become an artist by giving him money to live and buying the art supplies that Vincent needed to make his paintings. He truly believed that Vincent was going to be a great artist one day and become rich selling his paintings, but both Vincent and Theo died before that would happen. The brothers are buried side by side in a small town near Paris. Thanks to their brotherly love, and the 658 letters he wrote to Theo, we are able to know Vincent's story.



3. **His Quest for Home** - Because Vincent was so distant from his own family growing up, he very much wanted to make a home for himself and his own family. Sadly, Vincent never got married or had children of his own, but he did get his own house when he moved to the small town of Arles in the south of France. The Yellow House was where he dreamed of having an art studio where other artists could come and they would all live and paint



together. One artist did come visit him in The Yellow House, but soon left again because he had a difficult time living with Vincent and his odd behavior. Sometimes Vincent would be happy and busy, sometimes he would become angry and start fights. Vincent loved his home, but he had to move out when he was sent to the hospital for hurting himself on purpose. Vincent would get so upset that he would become dangerous and he called these times "episodes". When he cut off part of his own ear, he was hospitalized and could never live on his own again.

3 Things to Know About Van Gogh's Personality

1. **Vincent loved Nature** - According to Vincent, "If you truly love nature, you will find beauty everywhere." Ever since he was a young boy, he connected with the natural world in ways he couldn't with people. He found peace and calm in nature, and the changes of seasons, which became an important subject to him to capture in his landscape paintings, like in *Landscape at Twilight*. He especially liked birds' nests, collecting, studying and sketching them.



2. **Vincent loved Words** - Vincent loved to read and write. He would read everything he could get his hands on from the Bible, magazines and newspapers to history and science books. But



his favorite books were fictional stories called novels, which he painted as a still life in Paris. Vincent was so good with words, he could read and write in three languages - Dutch, French and



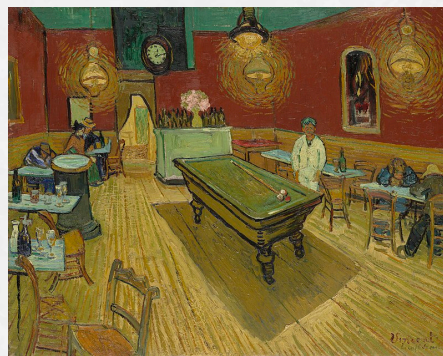
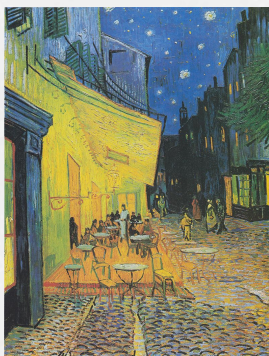
English! He wrote more than 2,000 letters in his lifetime and the 819 that are in the Van Gogh Museum today are like windows into his mind. The letters are his thoughts, worries, dreams and plans about life and art. In fact, Vincent mailed and received so many letters, the mailman became a close friend and Vincent painted several portraits of him and his family.

3. **Vincent was a Wanderer** - Vincent was a late bloomer - he didn't decide to become an artist until he was 27 years old! His first job was working for his uncle's art gallery when he was 16 years old and he was sent to work in Paris, France and London, England. This photograph of Vincent was made when he was 19 years old on his way to London and is the only known photo to exist of him. Over the next ten years he travelled through England as a teacher, through Belgium as a church preacher and an art student, and through his own home country of the Netherlands. He lived in more than 20 cities in four countries, which meant he was a very adventurous wanderer!



3 Things to Know About Van Gogh's Art

1. **He was fascinated with Color** - When Vincent first started painting in 1882, his colors were gray and dark, like in *The Potato Eaters*. But when he moved to colorful Paris and Arles in France he started using lighter and brighter colors in his paintings. He especially liked experimenting with complementary colors which are on the opposite sides of the color wheel, like green and orange or yellow and purple. Vincent kept a box of colored yarns, playing with them and twisting them together to test the colors before using his expensive paints on canvas. He would then paint the two opposite colors side by side, making each individual color more powerful and expressive, like they were vibrating. Some of the paintings that show complementary colors are the *Cafe Terrace at Night*, where he would eat his meals while living in Arles, *The Night Cafe* and *Irises*.



2. **Japanese Art Influences** - Vincent, like many other artists in Paris at the time, was very interested in the fresh, modern style of Japanese art - pure flat color, dark outlines and unexpected angles, almost like a modern day cartoon. He used these techniques in his own work and even copied Japanese prints for himself. You can see the similarities between his copy of *Flowering Plum Orchard* and his original painting of *Almond Blossoms* that he painted as a gift for his baby nephew.



3. **Painting Style** - The way Vincent added paint on the canvas - like he was frosting a cupcake is called impasto. It means the paint is so thick, it rises up off the canvas and you can see the texture it creates. His bold brushstrokes were filled with swirls, dots and dashes and he painted extremely quickly - most times finishing a painting in a day, which was very unusual at that time. Most artists made sketches, then small paintings and spent weeks or months working on their final painting. His brother Theo and other artist friends thought he painted too fast and put too much paint on the canvas, but Vincent just assured them that he had already planned the entire painting in his head before he began and that the thick paint was part of his artistic process.



After the Show:

Classroom Project Ideas K-5th

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, using what they have learned about his use of color, brushstrokes and influences. Bonus if you mail it!

Extension - students write and “post” letters to fellow classmates and play roles of writer, mail deliverer, and recipient, all opening their letters and reading them.

Design an Art Show Advertisement

Vincent van Gogh was never a commercial success while he was alive, but what if he lived long enough to have a show or exhibit? Have students design a poster to advertise an imaginary upcoming art show of Vincent van Gogh works. Who is the artist and why does he deserve to have his own exhibit? Where would the show be? What paintings would be shown? When? Students will use text, drawings and design skills to create a colorful poster.

Van Gogh's Box of Yarn

Van Gogh was said to have used scraps of different colored yarn to experiment with color theory and pairings, before he applied expensive paints to his canvas. Choose an everyday object (or provide one for each student) and, using yarn, have students try to match it with short yarn pieces. Have them try to employ the complementary colors idea that together they make each color more vibrant (i.e, a red apple would have red and some green yarns together). Once they find a combination they like, draw the object on paper, then glue the yarn pieces over it.

Extension - Students follow up with using drawing materials. Use oil pastels, soft pastels, crayons or colored pencils to achieve the same objective on another piece of paper. Displaying the yarn and crayon version together would be ideal.

Draw Your Bedroom

Inspired by Vincent van Gogh's *The Bedroom*, have students record what their bedrooms look like. Use Visual Thinking Strategies when looking at *The Bedroom*, noting the objects, color and style. What does the room tell you about Van Gogh? Is he messy, rich, does he live alone, etc.? Have students think about what their bedrooms say about them. Students will then create a picture of their own bedroom (drawing, painting, mixed media collage).



Map Your Bedroom

STEAM activity inspired by *The Bedroom*. Looking carefully at the painting, have students try to translate that into a map of the bedroom. Where is the bed, window, door, etc.? Then students will map their own bedrooms. Tie in measurements for more math work.

Impasto Experiments

STEAM activity inspired by Van Gogh's use of heavy impasto (thickly applied paint to canvas, so that it has a texture you can both feel and see). Students will predict what material makes for the best impasto finish (you can add graphing to this project). Give students white toothpaste, shaving cream and white frosting to apply on paper with plastic palette knives and paintbrushes, experimenting with strokes, amount, etc. What material gives the best, thickest impasto finish? Why? What tool was the most useful? Why? Were predictions accurate? Extension - give students food dye to add color to the mediums and have them actually create a "painting" with it.

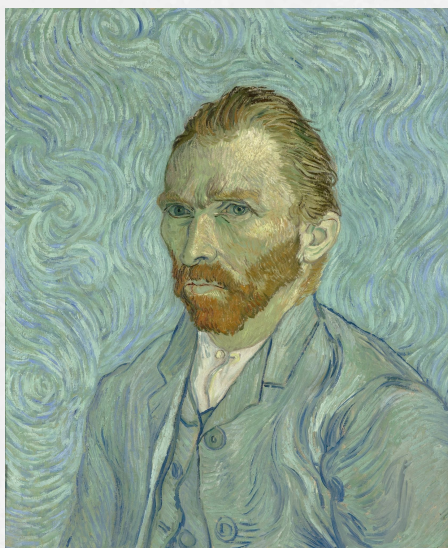
Portrait of an Artist

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."

Students will create a self-portrait by creating a sketch, and then finishing in their chosen medium (pen, pencil, paint, oil pastel, etc). Hand-held mirrors should be provided as well as art materials. Visual Examples of Van Gogh self-portraits should be available for discussion.

Visual Thinking Strategies

- 1) Why do you think Van Gogh painted so many portraits throughout his life?
- 2) How would you describe his emotions in these portraits?



Van Gogh Self-Portraits



Resources and Further Reading

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

Children's Books

In The Garden with Van Gogh, a Board Book by Julie Merberg and Suzanne Bober

Vincent, Theo, and the Fox: A Mischievous Adventure Through the Paintings of Vincent Van Gogh by Ted Macaluso (Amazon)

Vincent Can't Sleep: Van Gogh Paints the Night Sky by Barb Rosenstock and Mary GrandPre

Vincent's Colors Words and Pictures By Vincent Van Gogh. Published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Art Profiles for Kids: Vincent Van Gogh by Jim Whiting (CML) Biography

The Life and Art of Vincent Van Gogh by George Roddam (CML) Biography

Websites

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