

# Vincent van Gogh was an Outsider

By Turhan Demirel

Vincent van Gogh, who was in his lifetime misunderstood, scarcely appreciated, even scolded, took posthumously the art historian rank of an important pioneer of modern painting, gained worldwide recognition and popularity. Undoubtedly, not only his incomparable works, but also the myths and legends surrounding his life and death contributed to this.

Van Gogh was born on 30 March 1853 as the oldest son of the Protestant pastor Theodorus van Gogh and his wife Anna Cornelia in the small Dutch town of Groot-Zundert near the Belgian border. The domestic life was of the piety founded on the bible. Vincent visited the village school in Zundert until he moved to a boarding school in Zevenbergen at the age of 11, continued later in Tilburg, but he dropped out of school at the age of 16 years and returned home. Even as a child and teenager, he stood out strangely through his crude physique with asymmetrical skull and carrot hair. Family members and his school friends described him as moody, obstinate stubborn, introverted, contentious and incapable of establishing social contacts.

His willfulness, nonconformity and lack of social adjustment made him an outsider even at a young age. The dreamy boy felt alien to the family, withdrew more and more, spent most of his time outdoors, wandering alone through the fields. The parents were worried about extraordinary strange behavior of their child and looked at him with suspicion. Only Theo, his four years younger brother understood him, recognized his creative potential in early stage and gave him financial and moral support, all his life, tirelessly.

After apprenticeship in an art dealing firm at The Hague Van Gogh tried to be an art dealer at Brussels, London and Paris. Thereafter he tried to work as a supply teacher in Ramsgate, England without success. Meanwhile he simply began to draw from his innermost urge. Then he gave up this profession to study theology like his father, but he failed the entrance examination in Amsterdam. Another attempt as a lay preacher in coal mills in Belgian Borinage, failed again, because he could not speak freely.

He had already continued to draw during his wandering years. The loner undisciplined dreamer with idiosyncratic and contradictory nature was not able to settle in a profession. His parents' sorrow grew when they realized that their child had no control of his life, and that he was incapable of guiding his unsteady life into a regular path and establishing a secure bourgeois existence. The tensions between his parents and Vincent grew. Vincent himself who needed recognition and love, suffered from misunderstanding and the rejection of the parents and felt lonely. He fell increasingly into isolation in his family and felt even like an outcast. To Theo he wrote: "*Against my will, I am more or less in the family to a kind of impossible...*". Finally, he ignored all conventions, turned his back on the family and the bigoted bourgeoisie he despised. In 1881 he left home after a heated argument with his parents. "The alienation from the parents went so far that he no longer used his family name and signed his paintings simply "Vincent". *Actually, I am not a Van Gogh,*" he wrote to Theo.

Far from the bourgeois life, Van Gogh was drawn partly from his own will, partly compelled, into the position of an unfortunate outsider, felt himself among the outsiders of society. He lived in poverty, identified himself with the socially marginalized, weakest, poorest people, he shared his Clothes and Foods with them in fraternal solidarity. His generosity was not rewarded by these simple people. On the contrary: He was often ridiculed, shunned, or even mocked because of his neglected even bizarre appearance and his strange behavior.

Henceforth he lived as expelled, as embittered loner, a quirky stranger, in constant material need, half starved, in a permanent state of exception. He wrote to Theo, : "*Now for the past five years or so, I don't know how long exactly, I have been more or less without permanent employment, wandering from pillar to post*". When he decided to live with a homeless prostitute with two illegitimate children, it came to complete break with the family.

Van Gogh was certainly aware of his role as an outsider of society and suffered greatly. In a letter to Theo, he complained, "*What am I in the eyes of most people – a nonentity, an eccentric, or an unpleasant person – somebody who has no position in society and will never have; in short, the lowest of the low. Well-accepted that everything was right, then I would like to show through my work what is in the heart of such a stranger, such a*

*Nobody. This is my quest.*". He was very concerned that he had not been able to find a job and to support his livelihood. Dissatisfied with his life, he turned into anger and depression. More and more he fell into a hopeless situation. At Borinage (Cuesmes) he found finally the way he wanted to go from now on: At the age of 27, he decided to become an artist. This was his last chance. While his parents were disappointed, his brother, who recognized his creative potential at an early stage encouraged him to do it.

Van Gogh was not what one would call an innate artistic talent. His artistic career was a largely self-taught process. He lacked the craftsmanship. Apart from occasional visits of painting classes which were not particularly productive, he had to work out largely without academic training, with perseverance and hard practice, to achieve the ability to become an artist. Vincent van Gogh rejected any academism. *"In a sense I am glad not to have learned to paint."* Not to have attended an academy did not prove a hindrance. On the contrary.

He plunged into the work and driven by ambition began to produce drawings. The art became the fulcrum of his life. In it he had finally found his vocation. He was also interested theoretically in art, read a lot about art and artists, visited museums, studied drew and copied the images of old masters, who fascinated him. He eagerly collected art prints and hung them on the walls of the room. His first sketches and drawings, illustrated with motifs from landscapes and peasant life, were carried out with an immature technique of an autodidact: awkward, amateurish and clumsy, wry, and unpolished. He could be considered as a self taught artist.

Only after years of persistent, intensive work, he acquired the necessary technical skill, became more confident. *"Painting, that is my ambition ... It is an irresistible urge that drove my spirit forward in this direction,"* he wrote in one of his letters to Theo. It was this unbroken ambition that drove him from Holland to Brussels, Antwerp, Paris and Arles. With every change of location, he also changed his painting style.

When he came to Paris in 1886, he entered a new artistic territory, learning the Impressionists Pierre Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, Edgar Degas, Georges Seurat and their luminous color. His style changed rapidly; he overcame the dark-tone painting of his early creative period, his palette began to brighten. Van Gogh was also greatly enriched by Japanese color woodcuts and Ukiye

U prints. He joined the avant-garde painters, including Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Émil Bernard, whom he called "Peintres du Petit Boulevard", without belonging to the inner circle. Theo introduced him to Paul Gauguin. The stay in Paris meant the completion of the apprenticeship years. In the two years that Vincent spent in Paris, he created almost 230 paintings, including 22 self-portraits. His desire to reach a broad audience, to gain respect, appreciation and of course money, however was not fulfilled.

While most of his colleagues were able to gain a foothold in the market and make a name for themselves, he remained ignored. The longed for recognition and success was denied him. With his art he could not appeal to the Parisian public. Nevertheless he made no concessions to the taste of the public. The critics and art dealers hardly noticed his art. A few exhibitions in the *càfes* restaurants and nightclubs which he organized privately, brought him neither publicity nor money. Van Gogh's hopes for picture sales were regularly disappointed. Even Theo, an art dealer at the renown House Goupil, was shy to recommend his brother's Paintings. Constantly in financial distress Van Gogh lived on the money that Theo gave him.

The financial dependency on Theo depressed him increasingly. Plagued by feelings of guilt, he wrote to Theo: "*I can not change the fact that my paintings do not sell themselves.*" In spite of his disappointment, van Gogh did not lose his irrepressible desire in painting. The hectic drive of the metropolis overwhelmed him, he was without orientation, and was largely thrown back upon itself. In addition his state of health, which had already been damaged by syphilis, deteriorated as a result of overwork, malnutrition (he lost almost all his teeth) and excessive alcohol (absinth). consumption. He suffered from lost of control and violent outbursts under alcohol excesses.

Furthermore his idiosyncratic, stubborn behavior separated him from the community. He felt as an outsider in Paris. Disappointed, embittered and angry by lack of recognition, completely frustrated and exhausted by the hard work, but matured as an artist, he decided to leave Paris.

In February 1888, he moved to Arles in Provence. For him began the most productive time. Just arrived, he immediately plunged himself with full optimism into work, painted day and night feverishly to the brink of

physical exhaustion. "*I work like an obsessed one,*" he wrote in a letter to Theo. In Arles, he found a new pictorial expression. His palette achieved a radiant bright colorfulness. He developed his personal, inimitable style of eruptive painting with powerful short brushstrokes in heavy impasto and bright vibrant colors. Everything he painted from the very beginning referred to what he saw immediately in his surroundings. His favorite motifs included nature and urban views, interiors, still life (flowers) and (self) portraits.

At the same time however, he felt like a stranger in Arles. His outsider existence continued here as well. In addition, the Arlesians, whose provencal dialect he did not understand, made him feel more than clearly that he did not belong to them. He was unwelcome. They met the "stranger," who wandered around like a tramp with his strange and bizarre outfit, floppy hat, unkempt beard and his painting equipment, with mistrust, insults, mockery even hostility, called him "Le Fou Roux" – the red-headed madman. The boys of Arles mocked, pattered, threw stones at him and chased him away. Because of his incapacity for social adjustment and the dismissive attitude of his environment, he still remained socially isolated, suffered severely from his misfit position. His frustration grew.

As much as the lonely Van Gogh sought the closeness of the people, so little he was accepted by them. He had no talent to get on well with them. The obstinate stubborn loner got into confrontation again and again. The friendships, often forced by him, were due to his uncompromising, loud and rugged behavior, rude manners and impulsivity not long lasting, often ended with quarrel. He also argued with Theo often.

In the circle of his colleagues, he had earned the reputation of being a righteous, uncompromising, difficult, noisy and unpredictable person, a "madman".

Lonely and desperate, he pleaded with Gauguin, his self-conscious, egocentric, and haughty colleague to join him in Arles to found an artists' colony (Studio of the South) and rented the "Yellow House" for this purpose. Gauguin came, persuaded and paid for by Theo, reluctantly.

However, the living together was not harmonious. The contrasts of the characters were too great for the harmony to last for a long time. After a

short while, violent quarrels took place, which clouded the atmosphere in the yellow house. The community was broken. Gauguin was playing with the idea of leaving. Taken by the fear of abandonment and under excessive alcohol consumption, Van Gogh, presumably armed with a razor, cut off in frenzy his left ear\* on 23rd of December, 1888. After this incidence he was taken to hospital, where he stayed two weeks. The angry residents of Arles wanted to see the “dangerous madman” interned and submitted in March 1889 a petition against his release. At the beginning of May he himself entered Saint-Paul-de-Mausole mental hospital, near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence at his own request, because of repeated paranoid-hallucinatory episodes (he heard voices, was afraid to be poisoned). There he suffered three more severe attacks and several suicide attempts with poisonous paints and turpentine. Between the episodes, he fell into depression. Despite of all adversities he painted more than 200 pictures in a period of fifteen months, in which there is not the slightest hint of his desperate situation. Nevertheless, by his illness pushed him to the brink of marginalization, even totally exclusion from society.\*\*

In the middle of May 1890, Van Gogh left the Asylum after one year stay as "healed", and traveled via Paris to Auvers-sur-Oise, about 30 kilometers from Paris. There he was medically cared for by the physician, amateur painter and art collector Dr. Paul Gachet.

Although he has been free of paranoid hallucinatory Symptoms for months since his release, Van Gogh did not expect that his health would ever improve. He lived in constant fear of relapses, quarreled with his fate. He wrote to Theo that he could “*hardly expect a lasting health and did not know what kind of health he could expect*”.

His only anchor of rescue was the painting, which he pursued with boundless energy, feverish zeal almost every day and painted in ecstasy until exhaustion. His productivity reached a new climax. In the seventy days he created over 80 masterpieces in addition to 60 drawings.

Van Gogh died far too young, at the age of 37, on 29 July 1890, from the consequences of a life-threatening injury with a revolver, two days earlier.\*\*\* Thus ended the life of tireless and creative Artist.

The self-taught artist Van Gogh, suffered from madness, loneliness, poverty, lack of recognition, disappointments and frustrations,

throughout his life, remained as a despised, disparaged, largely rejected outsider until his death. Even after his death, he was treated as an outsider: The priest in Auvers refused to use the corpse carriage of the church. From an artistic point of view, too, he was an outsider who was hardly perceived by the public and the "official art,". Except for his brother, he had no influential supporter, buyer or client who supported him.

Although he created almost nine hundred paintings and about eleven hundred drawings during his short artistic career, which lasted for less than 10 years, he had only been able to sell one Painting (The red Vineyard) for 400 Francs and a few drawings during his lifetime. It was only after his death that critics, traders and collectors began to be interested in his works. In his eulogy Dr. Gachet said about him at the funeral of Van Gogh in the small cemetery of Auvers-sur-Oise, :*"... There were only two things for him: humanity and art. In the art that went above all else for him he will continue to live."* It did not take long until the prophecy came true. His art works found very soon their way into museums and private collections all over the world. They are among the most popular and expensive images in the world today, fascinating people of all ages and generating three-digit millions of Dolar on international art markets. Now he is considered, alongside Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin, as the foremost pioneer of the twentieth-century art.

### **Remarks:**

\*According to recent evidences revealed by Bernadette Murpy, Van Gogh sliced off his whole ear.

\*\* Up to now it is still unclear what illness the artist suffered from. There are many different interpretations such as temporal lobe epilepsy, depression, bipolar manic-depressiv disorder, borderline personality disorder, already schizophrenia and alcohol (Absinth) intoxication. But none of them is satisfactory.

\*\*\*Stubbornly, the legend still holds that he has hurt himself in a suicidal intent. In truth the circumstances are anything but clear. There are however convincing hints that the artist was shot by someone else. (Steven Naifeh, Gregory White Smith: Van Gogh: His Life)

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