

The paintings of the soul: between friendship and madness

(INTRODUCTION) In the last part of the XIX century, Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh were two of the most important painters. Despite they lived together, worked at the same time and used the same technique, they were characterized by different personalities. It led them to create opposed artistic masterpieces.

Who was Paul Gauguin?

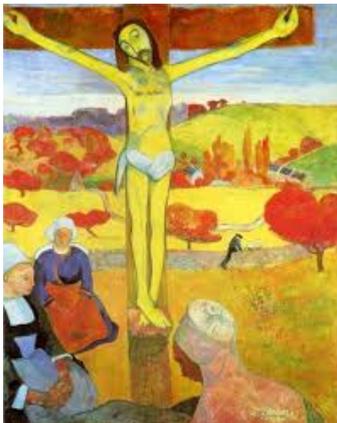
NARRATOR 1

(GAUGUIN BIOGRAFY) He was a famous French painter born in Paris who managed to create his own distinctive identity expressing it through his artworks. His art can't be experienced without linking it to his life path. His influences can be found in his travels, such as the period that he spent in Perú and Tahiti. Around this time, Gauguin borrowed from the native culture, as well as his own, to create new innovative works. In "La Orana Maria" he transformed the Christian figure of The Virgin Mary and Jesus into a Tahitian mother and child. During his French period, he gave up his job as a stockbroker to dedicate completely to painting. One of his works was accepted into the "Salon of 1876" an important art show in Paris. This exhibition presented him to the public and made him meet Pissarro, Degas, Monet and other artistic greats. Gauguin eventually contracted Syphilis. In 1888 Gauguin and Van Gogh spent several weeks together in Van Gogh's home in Arles but their time together ended after Van Gogh pulled a razor on Gauguin during an argument.

NARRATOR 2

GAUGUIN, "THE YELLOW CHRIST", 1889

Oil on canvas, 35,9 in x 28,9 in; Albright-Knox Art Gallery



One of the most important painting of Gauguin is The yellow Christ. The Yellow Christ is a painting executed by Paul Gauguin in 1889 in Port-Aven. This Painting is considered one of the key works of Symbolism. This painting shows the crucifixion of Christ taking place in nineteenth-century northern France. Gauguin used bold lines to define his figures and the principal colors of the painting are yellow, red and green. Gauguin painted Christ in a cloying yellow because he wanted to convey how he felt about the isolated life and piety of the peasants, several of whom are pictured here dressed in their distinctive regional costumes. The bold outlines and flatness of the forms in this painting are typical of the cloisonnist style, a style of post-impressionist painting really far from impressionism.

Who is Van Gogh?

NARRATORE 3

(VAN GOGH BIOGRAFY) Van Gogh's finest works were produced in less than three years in a technique that grew more and more impassioned in brushstroke, in symbolic and intense color, in surface tension, and in the movement and vibration of form and line. Van Gogh's inimitable fusion of form and content is powerful; dramatic, lyrically rhythmic, imaginative, and emotional, for the artist was completely absorbed in the effort to explain either his struggle against madness or his comprehension of the spiritual essence of man and nature.

Van Gogh shared Gauguin's desire for a simple life where art was an expression of human feelings. Gauguin called his own style "synthetism" because it synthesized observation of the subject in nature with the artist's feelings about that subject, expressed through abstracted line, shape, space and colour.

GAUGUIN

"Don't paint from nature too much. Art is abstraction. This abstraction derives from nature while dreaming before it. Think more of the creation that will result".

(NARRATOR 4)

In 1888 Van Gogh moved to Arles, searching for warm and good weather, he made the yellow house his study, his working place, his refuge. He wanted the house in Arles to become a place where artists could paint in tranquility, sharing ideas and opinions. Gauguin would have been the ideal leader for this utopic community. In the same year Theo's uncle died, leaving an inheritance to the youngest brother. The collaboration between Gauguin and Van Gogh starts from this inheritance, an huge amount of money. Theo uses it to support his brother Vincent in the yellow house, rent in Arles and he pays Gauguin to live in that house and to produce 12 paintings every year.

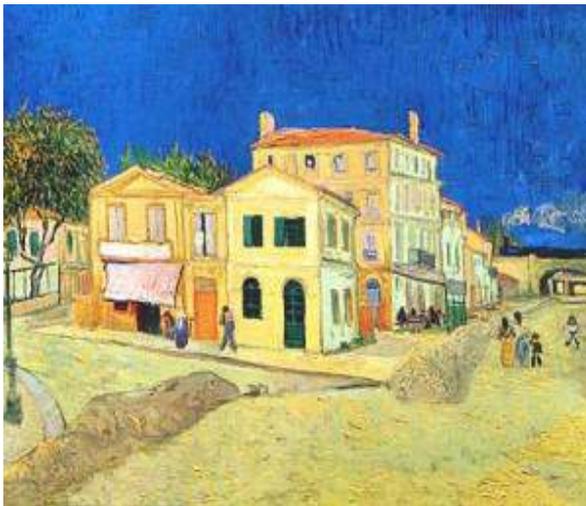
(NARRATOR 5)

VAN GOGH, "THE YELLOW HOUSE", 1888

Oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

The subject of this artwork painted by Van Gogh is the house in which he lived with Gauguin in 1888, trying to realize his dream of a community of artists. We can imagine it had an important meaning for him, because it depicts a key moment of his life. In 1887, at the beginning of their friendship, Van Gogh moved to Arles and soon his brother Theo convinced



and paid Gauguin to live with him, thinking that would have been a nice experience to share their artistic and ordinary lives. Actually, their different ideals about art and their different personalities will lead to quarrels, that will end up with the break of their friendship in 1888. Vincent, unable to get over it, will punish himself cutting his hear. In the painting, made with oil on canvas, we see the house from an unusual point of view which makes us move our gaze also to the right side of the scenery, where we notice a locomotive in the background

and few people walking in the street. But, as often happens in Van Gogh's paintings, the true protagonist of the canvas is color. Van Gogh wrote to his sister about what he felt watching that little part of the city: "My house here is painted the yellow colour of fresh butter outside with raw green shutters; it stands in the full sunlight on a square which has a green garden with plane trees, oleanders and acacias. And it is completely whitewashed inside, and the floor is made of red bricks. And over it the intensely blue sky. There I can live and breathe, think and paint."

NARRATOR 6

VAN GOGH, "BEDROOM IN ARLES", 1888

Oil on canvas, 28.3 in x 35,4 in

Musèe d'Orsay, Paris



The painting depicts van Gogh's bedroom at 2, Place Lamartine in Arles, France, known as the Yellow House. The door to the right opened on to the upper floor and the staircase; the door to the left was that of the guest room he held prepared for Gauguin; the window in the front wall looked on to Place Lamartine and its public gardens. This room was not rectangular but trapezoid with an obtuse angle in the left hand corner of the front wall and an acute angle at the right. In April 1889, van Gogh sent the initial version to his brother regretting that it had been damaged by the flood of the Rhône while he was interned at the Old Hospital in Arles. Theo proposed to have it relined and sent back to him in order to copy it. This "repetition" in original scale (Van Gogh's term was "répétition") was executed in September 1889. Both paintings were then sent back to Theo.

(NARRATOR 6) Soon it was said that Gauguin was coming to live with Vincent in the Yellow house sharing our artistic passion, Van Gogh was very excited, like a child in front of his first ice cream.

When Gauguin finally joined Van Gogh, their constant quarrel soon led to violent confrontations and Gauguin's departure.

Gauguin didn't like Arles, he dreamed to move to Bretagne. Paul disapproved van Gogh disorganization also for their financial engagement. Both were exhausted. Living together was wearing out their friendship. Their ways of painting were finally very different also in the technique choices

Van Gogh art is very tormented like his life. His paintings are produced straight off, Gauguin paintings are more thought and constructed.

VAN GOGH:

“As for me, I am rather often uneasy in my mind, because I think that my life has not been calm enough; all those bitter disappointments, adversities, changes fade me away from developing fully and naturally in my artistic career”

GAUGUIN:

“Now I understand what you tried to say to me. How you suffered for your sanity. How you tried to set them free. They would not listen, they would not know. Perhaps they’ll listen now.

(NARRATOR 6) Vincent was too fragile to make it on his own. He was inclined to madness that he set free when Paul announced his departure.

GAUGUIN:

“My friend, I remember you that night in the park when you tried to beat me with a razor. I looked into your eyes and you run away. Do you think it is normal?”

(NARRATOR 7)

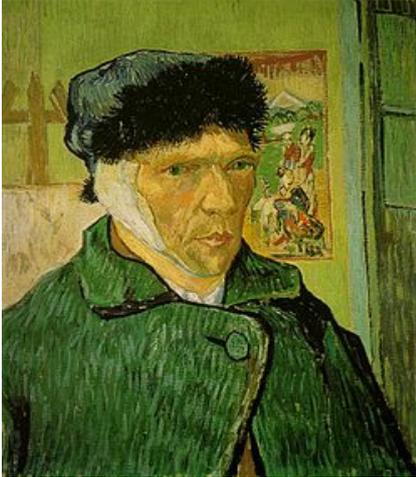
On 23 December, 1888 Vincent Van Gogh, following an argument with fellow lodger and artist Gauguin - retreated to his room, where he took a razor to his left ear; severing it, wrapping it in paper, and delivering it to a woman at a brothel both he and Gauguin used to frequent. He was found unconscious the next morning by a policeman and was taken to the hospital.

We don't know if this story is true but we know for certain that Paul Gauguin was getting ready to leave, after he spent the night in a pub, but he stopped at the yellow crowded house, and a policeman told him that Vincent had cut his ear and had brought it to a prostitute, Rachel.

VAN GOGH, “SELF-PORTRAIT WITH BANDAGED EAR”, 1889.

Oil on canvas, 24 in x 19 in, Courtauld Gallery

In this self-portrait, Van Gogh is shown wearing a blue cap with black fur and a green overcoat, with a bandage covering his ear and extending under his chin. He is in a traditional three-quarter view, and his forward gaze falls slightly to the right, out of the frame. Behind him is an open window, assumedly letting in a winter breeze, a canvas on



an easel, with a few indistinguishable marks, as well as a Japanese woodblock print. This shows an important influence of Japonism and wood block print on Van Gogh's work, which also appear in the background of other portraits he had created. The painting is composed of impasto strokes, mostly in a vertical pattern. This creates a texture, which comes up off the canvas and adds dimension to the flat surface. The skin tone is muted with green and yellowish tones. The bandage covering Van Gogh's ear in this painting alludes to his most famous conflict. Van Gogh used a mirror for his self-portraits

which is why some mistakenly think that he lost part of his right ear instead of his left.

Gauguin leaves. What is it left?

(NARRATORS TOGETHER)

Two chairs, one for him, one for Gauguin. Empty.

And, behind his chair, a box of onions, like a coffin.

(NARRATOR 8)

VAN GOGH, “VINCENT’S CHAIR WITH A PIPE”, 1888

Vincent’s Chair with a Pipe is, in a way, a self-portrait, since when Vincent Van Gogh painted it he was trying to encapsulate his own essence, in contrast to his friend/rival Paul Gauguin. The one painting cannot be understood without the other, and they were painted at the time when Van Gogh was entering an intense period of psychological crisis – the one that would lead to his infamous self-mutilation



VAN GOGH, “GAUGUIN’S CHAIR”, 1888

In the painting the dark tones prevail on warm tones and strong colors of the chair of the artist. The dark tones are diluted in the wall’s colors also with the red and the Yellow of the rug. In the chair there is a lit candle and a book, as a symbol of the culture and ambition.

GAUGUIN:

“Our chair are so empty, so human, so abandoned, and your tobacco spread all over”.

(R. Vecchioni)

They took Vincent to the Hospital, bleeding, stunned. Paul Gauguin has gone away. Van Gogh shot himself in July 1890.

Gauguin:

“Oh my sweet friend, fragile my companion, at the extinguished light of your madness. You have gone away” (Roberto Vecchioni)



(NARRATOR 9)

VAN GOGH, “STARRY NIGHT”, 1889

Oil on canvas, Museum of Modern art, New York

Starry night is an oil canvas painting (92×73 cm), made in 1889 by Vincent Van Gogh. It is conserved in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It shows a starry landscape as seen from the window sanatory above city of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence in



France; a night vision, though it had been painted during the day.

The paintings Van Gogh produced during the last year testify to his heightened emotional state

such as *The Starry Night*: the sky, blazing with exploding stars high above the quiet town, is clearly more a record of what Van Gogh felt. *The Starry Night* is the only nocturne in the series of views from his bedroom window. In early June, Vincent wrote to Theo, "This morning I saw the countryside from my window a long time before sunrise with nothing but the morning star which looked very big". Researchers have determined that Venus was indeed visible at dawn in Provence in the spring of 1889, and was at that time nearly as bright as possible. So the brightest "star" in the painting, just to the viewer's right of the cypress tree, is actually Venus. The moon is stylized as astronomical records indicate that it actually was waning gibbous at the time Van Gogh painted the picture, and even if the phase of the Moon had been its waning crescent at the time, Van Gogh's Moon would not have been astronomically correct.

VAN GOGH

“just as we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star”. I don't know anything for certain but looking at the stars I dream

GAUGUIN:

“I will look at stars, your and my half of the world. Finally the two choices: to go away or to stay away”

NARRATOR 10

DON MCLEAN, VINCENT (Starry, starry night)

Starry, starry night

paint your palette blue and gray

look out on a summer's day

with eyes that know the darkness in my soul.

Shadows on the hills

sketch the trees and the daffodils

catch the breeze and the winter chills

in colors on the snowy linen land

Now I understand what you tried to say to me

and how you suffered for your sanity

how you tried to set them free.

They would not listen, they did not know how.

Perhaps they'll listen now.

Starry, starry night

Flaming flowers that brightly blaze

Swirling clouds in violet haze

Reflect in Vincent's eyes of china blue

Colors changing hue

Morning fields of amber grain

Weathered faces lined in pain

Are soothed beneath the artist's loving hand

Now I understand what you tried to say to me

And how you suffered for your sanity

And how you tried to set them free
They would not listen, they did not know how
Perhaps they'll listen now
For they could not love you
But still your love was true
And when no hope was left in sight
On that starry, starry night
You took your life as lovers often do
But I could have told you, Vincent
This world was never meant
For one as beautiful as you
Starry, starry night
Portraits hung in empty halls
Frameless heads on nameless walls
With eyes that watch the world and can't forget
Like the strangers that you've met
The ragged men in ragged clothes
A silver thorn, a bloody rose
Lie crushed and broken on the virgin snow
Now I think I know what you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free
They would not listen, they're not listening still
Perhaps they never will

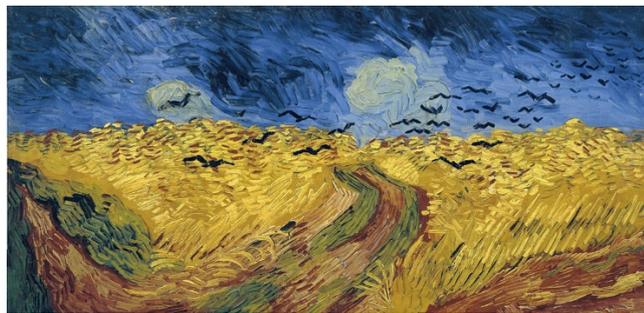
NARRATOR 11

VAN GOGH, " WHEATFIELD WITH CROWS", 1890

Oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam

"Wheatfield with Crows" is a July 1890 painting by Van Gogh. It has been cited by several critics as one of his greatest works.

It is commonly stated that this was van Gogh's final painting. However, art historians are uncertain as to which painting was van Gogh's last, as no clear historical records exist. The evidence of his letters suggests that *Wheatfield with Crows* was completed around 10 July



Wheat Field with Crows, made on a double-square canvas, depicts a dramatic, cloudy sky filled with crows over a wheat field. A sense of isolation is heightened by a central path leading nowhere and by the uncertain direction of flight of the crows. The windswept wheat field fills two-thirds of the canvas. Jules Michelet, one of van Gogh's favorite authors, wrote of crows: "They interest themselves in everything, and observe everything. The ancients, who lived far more completely than ourselves in and with nature, found it no small profit to follow, in a hundred obscure things where human experience as yet affords no light, the directions of so prudent and sage a bird." Kathleen Erickson finds the painting as expressing both sorrow and a sense of his life coming to an end. The crows are used by van Gogh as a symbol of death and rebirth, or of resurrection.