



2nd Grade: APRIL

The Starry Night

Vincent van Gogh

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About the Artist

The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

Vincent van Gogh

Vincent Willem van Gogh was born March 30, 1853, in the village of Groot-Zundert, Holland, to Anna Cornelia Carpentus and Theodorus van Gogh, a Dutch Reformed minister. The van Gogh's had two more sons and three daughters. Young van Gogh was considered a serious and quiet child. Formal education was at home and eventually an elementary boarding school twenty miles from home. Understandably, this separation from his family at an early age was hard on van Gogh and caused him great sorrow. At age thirteen, van Gogh was introduced to art by an accomplished art teacher. Two years later, van Gogh cut short his education and returned home.

A relative of van Gogh offered him a position with an art dealer in The Hague and he eventually transferred to London. This work gave van Gogh both pleasure and financial stability. It was also a time in his life when found love. Unfortunately, his romantic advances were rejected leaving him devastated. He channeled his emotions into his faith and felt his true vocation was preaching the Gospel. He eventually left the art world and became a Methodist minister's assistant. Having the financial support of his family, twenty-four year old van Gogh traveled to Amsterdam and lived with his theologian uncle. With the guidance of his uncle, van Gogh prepared for the university's theology entrance exam. However, van Gogh failed this exam and subsequent exams at other locations. A brief position as a missionary among the very poor proved difficult for van Gogh, who lived in squalid conditions and often displayed irrational and over-zealous behavior. His position as missionary was soon terminated by church authorities.

Despite his past failures, his brother Theo supported van Gogh financially as he developed his artistic skills. Van Gogh studied with a prominent artist and even attended the Royal Academy of Art in London. Subsequent years in the Netherlands were devoted to developing drawings and paintings. He began to receive interest in his work from the Paris art world and at age thirty-two he produced his first major work, *The Potato Eaters*, executed in dark somber tones. He had not yet discovered the importance of color. Again, at the encouragement of his brother Theo, van Gogh incorporated the use of light as the Impressionists did. During the next two years, van Gogh produced more than two hun-

red drawings and paintings. He moved to Antwerpen and continued to live on limited funding from brother Theo. Although Van Gogh's physical health began to deteriorate due to lack of food, excessive smoking and dependency on alcohol, he focused intensely on the advancement of his work.

A move to Paris permitted van Gogh to move in with his brother Theo. While these years were stressful at times, they permitted van Gogh time to develop friendships with significant contemporary artists Emile Bernard, Paul Gauguin, Pissarro and Georges Seurat. This was a highly productive time for van Gogh who painted another two hundred works.

Van Gogh made a final move to Arles, France, in 1888, where he was inspired to paint the local hotels, cafes, sunflowers and landscapes. His friend, Paul Gauguin, came for an extended visit which, in time, resulted in arguments about art to the point of great frustration. This tension or a seizure provoked van Gogh to cut off a portion of his ear with a razor. He was hospitalized for a few days to recover more from his mental issues than from his wounded ear. He was re-admitted to the hospital for his continued mental condition, suffering from hallucinations and paranoia. In 1889 the "redheaded madman" as he was referred to, committed himself to a mental hospital in Saint Remy where he was able to continue his painting in one small room next to his cell. It was here that van Gogh painted two of his most famous works, *The Starry Night* and *Cypresses*, which he completed on short outdoor walks among the vineyards, cornfields, and olive trees on the hospital grounds. The work produced during his confinement was highly praised by art critics. Van Gogh was considered a genius and invited to exhibit his work with other painters in Brussels.

In May of 1890, Vincent van Gogh left the mental hospital and relocated outside Paris where he painted over seventy works. However in Saint-Remy, France, van Gogh's depression deepened. On July 27, at the age of thirty-seven, Vincent van Gogh walked into the wheat fields and shot himself in the chest. With brother Theo by his side, van Gogh died two days later in his rented room. Vincent van Gogh was buried at the cemetery of Auvers-sur Oise—yellow flowers on his coffin. His brother Theo, unable to accept his brother's absence, died six months later and was buried beside Vincent.

About the Art

The Starry Night was painted in 1889, oil on canvas, 28 3/4" x 36 1/2" in size. It is in the collection at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. *The Starry Night* was painted by Vincent van Gogh from the window of his cell in the mental hospital in Saint-Remy, France.

Discipline-Based Art Education

The following components are integral to students having a complete, well rounded art experience.

Art Aesthetics

Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

Art Production

Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

Art History

Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

Art Criticism

Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

ELEMENTS OF ART

- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light.
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimalism
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

COMPOSITION

- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

ARTISTIC STYLES

- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE BOOKS

Children's literature that relate to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:

- *A Child's Introduction to the Night Sky* by Michael Driscoll
- *A Day with Vincent van Gogh* by Lynn White
- *My Brother Vincent van Gogh* by Ceciel de Bie
- *Once Upon a Starry Night* by Jacqueline Mitton
- *Vincent van Gogh: Sunflowers and Swirly Stars* by Joan Holub
- *Visiting van Gogh* by Caroline Breunese

REFERENCE/BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Janson, H.W. *History of Art*. New York. Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1999
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An evening in a quiet town is in the lower one-quarter of the painting. To the left is the top of a cypress tree. The vantage point of sitting on the hillside gives viewers a broad view of the night sky—a sky filled with glowing stars presented in a swirling, spiraling motion. Van Gogh uses a complementary color scheme of yellow/orange against violet/blue. The use of gestural lines is perhaps the most noted element in this work. Short brushstrokes are most evident and cause the eye to move around the entire work.

Van Gogh painted this scene from life as he saw it, presenting the landscape in an abstracted perspective. He used color and line, accentuating the heavens in motion, to show what he felt and believed. Van Gogh was entranced by the stars and believed one journeyed to a star after death. Perhaps van Gogh was showing the heavens filled with such life. Along the same line, cypress trees were symbolic of death and eternal life, which supports the theme as well.

Experts point to three theories as reasons for van Gogh's use of color. Seeing everything in yellow was perhaps a result of his alcoholism. Another theory is that Van Gogh might have taken medication to treat his mental condition which caused yellow-tinted vision or yellow spotted halos. One final theory involves the use of lead-based paints resulting in lead poisoning. This can cause the swelling of the retina which may cause halo effects.

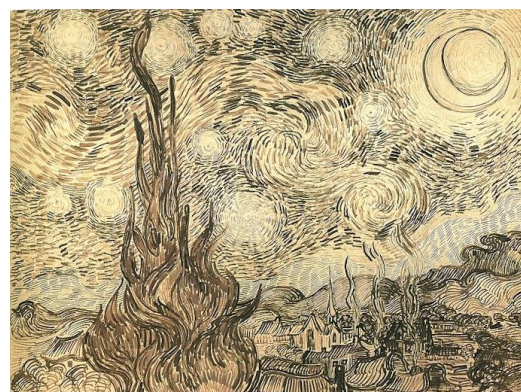
None of these theories are proven about Vincent van Gogh's unusual style of painting. Whatever the reason, van Gogh is considered a genius for his use of color, texture and movement as expressive, emotional tools. These characteristics make his work identifiable.

Directed Observation

Show students an image of *The Starry Night* and tell them it was painted with oil paint on canvas by Vincent van Gogh in 1889. Invite students to quietly study the work. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. Since *The Starry Night* shows an image of the land (at night), it is considered a landscape painting. What did van Gogh do to his painting to make an evening landscape? Image what the landscape would look like during daylight?
2. Do you like what you see? Why or why not? How does it make you feel?

3. Look at landscape paintings by other landscape artists such as Thomas Cole or Thomas Hart Benton. Describe how Vincent van Gogh's painting of *The Starry Night* is different from other landscapes.
4. When looking at *The Starry Night*, where do your eyes go first? What did van Gogh do to let you know that the sky was the most important part of this painting? (Ratio of sky to land)
5. Study how van Gogh used short lines in the sky to show movement.
6. *The Starry Night* is the landscape Van Gogh saw when he looked out his window. If you painted a picture of what you saw from your bedroom window, what would you see?
7. Compare/Contrast van Gogh's pen drawing (below) to his painting.



Things to Do

1. Using van Gogh's *The Starry Night* as inspiration, create your own version. Begin practicing van Gogh's short brush strokes on a separate piece of paper using a paint brush or Q-Tips. When ready, use dark blue construction paper for your dark sky and begin painting!
2. Discuss the use of proportion in *The Starry Night*. Notice the sky makes up 3/4 of the painting and the land makes up the bottom 1/4. How would the painting look if it were 3/4 land and 1/4 sky? Make a quick sketch to illustrate this. What if it were 1/2 land and 1/2 sky?
3. Write a story based on the town in van Gogh's painting.
4. Van Gogh painted *The Starry Night* in early autumn. Make a painting or colored pencil drawing to show the identical scene in winter, spring or summer.
5. Choose a landscape view to observe around your school. Stand in any open space to feel the air movement. Create a pencil sketch of what you see and feel.
6. Create a drawing of what you see looking out from your bedroom window. Choose a time of day or evening make the drawing.