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Vincent van Gogh’s Self-Portraits

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Individual Study Paper
ARTH 492
Instructor: Dr. Suzie Kim
Abstract

This paper analyzes the correlation of Vincent van Gogh’s mental and physical state with his application and choice of color in his self-portraits. His life before art held a heavy influence over his self-perception throughout his artistic career. Van Gogh could not escape his sense of guilt from failing his family, and constantly felt like a burden on his brother, Theo, who sponsored his artistic endeavors. Through Theo’s encouragement and work as an art dealer, van Gogh developed his own artistic style and met other popular artists from his time. His friendships along with his developing mental issues lead to an influx of development in the later half of his career, when van Gogh delved more into the realm of color. He expressed his current emotional state through his works, through the combination of colors and the application of the paint. His brush strokes and color combinations varied depending on the mood he was evoking. The analysis of his correspondences develops a better understanding of his current mental state at the time of each self-portrait. By analyzing his self-portraits, a direct comparison with his changing view of self is drawn through the comparison of his current mental state. The depiction of self varies depending on the utilization of color and brush stroke, showing the varying intensity of emotions. By developing an understanding of his use of color in representing his current perception of self, the same concepts can be applied to understand his mental state in other works of art.
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Introduction

Throughout his life, Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) suffered through many hardships that challenged his perception of self. He relied on his family for his attempted career as an art dealer and as a missionary, and then on his brother, Theo, for his life as an artist. As an art dealer he received exposure and knowledge of art, and Theo used van Gogh’s passion for art to encourage his pursuit. During his career as an art dealer he received a promotion which required him to move away from his family. Although this was intended as a promotion, he felt it as a punishment and a void began to form from the lack of familial ties. Even when he returned to his family the void remained, and an added sense of guilt formed because he felt as though his family disdained him for his failed career. Van Gogh used religion to fill the void of his family, resulting in a failed attempt as a missionary. Following his stent as a missionary Theo encouraged him to pursue his passion for art. Theo supported him throughout the entirety of his career through finances, encouragement, and introductions to other artists.

Van Gogh fathered the Post-Impressionism style which emphasized the combination of color and form to portray the emotional response of his art. He portrayed his sense of self in all of his works through the application of paint and the range of colors. Van Gogh used art as an emotional output, carefully exploring each subject despite his high output of works. In his self-portraits van Gogh would explore his sense of self and the methods of self-representation. By using himself as a sitter he became familiar with his features and explored his sense of self. Like his other works he incorporated his emotional response to the subject through his palette and use of brush strokes. Although his self-portraits are all the same subject his method of portrayal varies. His portraits develop with his artistic style, and change depending on his current circumstances. Van Gogh used painting as an emotive outlet, allowing for his portraits to change
with his self-perception. This paper examines the application of line and color in his self-portraits reflective of his current mental state through the lens of psychoanalysis.

Van Gogh painted self-portraits throughout the entirety of his life, but the later part of his career saw more stylistic and mental changes. Six portraits showing the changes key aspects of stylistic development and self-perception are included. Following his stay in Nuenen with his parents van Gogh moved to Paris. While in Paris he painted *Self-Portrait with Pipe* between September and November of 1886 (Fig. 1). This work uses a darkened palette and depicts him with an intent gaze smoking a pipe. While in Paris van Gogh received exposure to more artists through his brother Theo, resulting in van Gogh exploring different styles in his works. Between March and June of 1887, he painted *Self-Portrait*, showing the use of a brighter palette and the exploration of color (Fig. 2). The color is concentrated around his face and fades away, showing the focus on color combinations over a completed work of art. Van Gogh continues his exploration of color and of dimension through his application of paint in his *Self-Portrait with Grey Felt Hat* (September to October of 1887, Fig. 3). He depicts himself with a blue overcoat and a grey hat, and the use of color and form provide contrast against the primarily blue palette. In the winter of 1887 van Gogh painted his *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat*, showing a changed color palette (Fig. 4). The application of paint is lighter than the former work showing a more careful consideration of color placement and a softer tone of the work. Another pivotal change in his self-perception is his *Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, which he painted in Arles in January 1889 after losing part of his ear (Fig. 5). The portrait was completed during a time of emotional turmoil depicted through his downcast gaze, inclusion of a definitive setting, and inclusion of his injured ear. The last painting included is his *Self-Portrait* painted at St. Remy (August 1889, Fig. 6). This self-portrait includes a portrayal of himself as an artist by him holding a palette and
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brushes in his hand. The blue background radiates with energy providing a sense perpetual movement.

Due to his prolific career there is abundant documentation and analysis involving van Gogh. During van Gogh’s life he read Charles Blanc’s book *The Grammar of Painting and Engraving* (1874) defining the methodology of color combination.¹ Blanc emphasized the use of impasto-thick application of paint to create texture- as a method of increasing the level of dimension within a work. He also valued the capability of artist to capture the essence of the sitter within the static image of the portrait. Ingo F. Walther and Rainer Metzger’s book *Vincent Van Gogh: The Complete Paintings* (2012) draws attention to his method of creating his self-portraits.² The eyes are not focused parallel, but instead have a notable divergence resulting in a sense of ambiguity. This allows for his self-portraits to have a sense of simultaneously looking at and looking through the viewer. The unseeing gaze of the eyes implies that van Gogh is gazing into his thoughts while painting, allowing for the distant and far off look in his eye. The varying levels of confidence can be seen in his paintings through the assertion and technique of the brush strokes. The rejection of harmony serves as a reminder that van Gogh is aware of the moment which he is painting this work. He is aware of his inner turmoil and has become familiar with the way it affects him and found a way to express the turmoil onto the canvas. Kalyan Bhattacharyya and Saurabh Rai’s article "The Neuropsychiatric Ailment of Vincent Van Gogh." (2015) address the possible ailments van Gogh had during his lifespan, many of which cannot be agreed on.³ A possibility of epilepsy, Ménière's disease, and absinthe abuse are the primary

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focuses of the authors but are not the only conditions that van Gogh was believed to suffer. It was also known that he would spend extended periods of time in the sun, avoided eating meals, and painted with lead-based paint. Because of this van Gogh was also believed to additionally suffer from sun poisoning, lead poisoning, and malnourishment; creating a comorbidity that worsened his other conditions. The authors delve further into the details of each of his possible ailments, and their overlapping side-effects. It is important to acknowledge the spiraling effect of van Gogh’s health, to provide an understanding of the multi-faceted nature of his painting influences. Additionally, books describing the theory of contemporary artists and styles give awareness into the works of art which van Gogh was exposed to. For the analysis of his mental health a combination of psychology and scientific based resources provide an analysis the interaction of his health can have on his mental perception. Although no definitive cause for his mental and physical ailments cannot be determined, the symptoms he listed in his letters and recorded by his doctors determines the existence of an underlying issue. The use of his letter allows for a comprehensive understanding of his mind and thought process, allowing for a comparisons between his mental state and the application of color in his art.

This paper will begin with an early biography, color theory, the analysis of his mental ailments, and an analysis of his self-portraits. The biography provides insight into the framework of his life and perception of self, showing the gradual build up of events that lead to his pursuit of becoming an artist. Color theory will introduce the ways in which his contemporaries utilized color, and the knowledge van Gogh attained from Charles Blanc. An introduction to his mental and physical ailments and the ways in which those are interpreted offer a framework for the analysis of the works. The insight gained through the documentation of his letters allows for a
comparison between his artwork and his current situation. The analysis of the work will be last to ensure a complete background of the works and method of interpretation.

Life Before Art

Family always played a large role in Vincent van Gogh’s life and perception of self. His father, Theodorus van Gogh (1822-1885), was a clergyman and his mother, Anna Cornelia Carpentus (1819-1907), was the daughter of William Carpentus, a book binder for the king. Van Gogh was the oldest of six children, excluding his still-born brother which he was named after and was born exactly one year before him (March 30, 1852). He had two brothers - Theodorus (Theo, 1857-1891) and Cornelius Vincent (Cor, 1867-1900), and three sisters – Anna Cornelia (1855-1930), Elisabeth Huberta (1859-1936), and Willemina Jacoba (Wil, 1862-1941). Theo married Johanna van Gogh-Bonger (Jo, 1862-1925) and they had a child named Vincent Willem (1890-1978). Vincent had four uncles: Johannes (Uncle Jan), Hendrik Vincent (Uncle Hein), Cornelius Marinus (C.M.), Vincent (Uncle Cent). Uncle Jan was a vice-admiral commandant at the Navy Yard in Amsterdam, and in 1877 Vincent lived with him. Uncle Hein, C.M., and Uncle Cent were all art dealers, but it was Uncle Cent that gave Vincent and Theo their start in art dealing. Before his father Theodorus other careers in the family included: clergyman, bible teacher, goldsmith, and a sculptor. Vincent van Gogh’s family heritage originated from the town of Gogh, a German frontier, and his family crest was a bar with three roses. 4

Before van Gogh started paintings, he worked as an art dealer. When van Gogh was younger his family considered him inventive and curious, but at the same time stubborn and hot-

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headed. By the age of twelve, his father thought it necessary to send him to a boarding school in Zevenbergen, even though it was an expense the family could not truly afford. Theodorus deemed it necessary because of Vincent’s association with peasant boys making him too uncultivated.\(^5\) At the age of sixteen, in 1869, Uncle Cent assumed protection over Vincent and gave him a position as an assistant art dealer for the Goupil & Co. Uncle Cent was Vincent’s god-father and was a partner at Goupil & Co. Vincent started at the branch in Hague which was close to his brother, Theo, and the rest of his family. Van Gogh flourished as an art dealer, and in June of 1873, the same year that Theo joined the company in Brussels, van Gogh received a promotion. Van Gogh transferred to the new London branch of Goupil & Co., which he viewed as a demotion since he was away from his family. In October of 1874 van Gogh was again transferred to another branch in Paris. This transfer occurred after the landlady’s daughter, Eugenie Loyer, rejected him by refusing his marriage proposal in May of 1874.\(^6\) The transfer also occurred while van Gogh was assisting with a large sale, and he could not assist on its completion before his transfer. He again viewed the transfer because of the timing and began to assume he was unfit to deal with customers on that level. The stent at the Paris branch was short lived, and in December of 1874 he returns to the London branch, only to return to the Paris branch in May of 1875.\(^7\) During the Christmas buying season in 1875 van Gogh purposefully sabotaged his career because he dissuaded customers from buying works of art which he disapproved. In January he asked his manager if there were complaints against him, which resulted in a three-month notice of his dismissal.\(^8\) In April of 1876 van Gogh was dismissed from

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\(^6\) Walther and Metzger, *Vincent Van Gogh: The Complete Paintings*, 34.

\(^7\) *Vincent van Gogh*, 42.

the company and was no longer employed as an art dealer. Van Gogh had already turned to Protestantism after the rejection of his marriage proposal, but the loss of his job only strengthened his fascination.

Between his stint as an art dealer and missionary, he worked various other jobs. In April of 1876 he worked as a school master in England and stayed there until December of 1877. While in England he was in a state of semistarvation because he lacked funds to buy proper food and consisted primarily off of bread. When Vincent visited his parents in December, they were appalled by the state of his health, and called upon his godfather, Uncle Cent, to aid in helping Vincent. Even though Uncle Cent was gravely disappointed in Vincent he got him a job as a bookstore clerk using more of his connections. The job only lasted four months, and even while working he spent most of his time translating and reading the Bible. During this time Vincent would re-read his old books to check for pious usefulness in them, and tried to amend for lost time before his ‘un-pious’ life by walking around without a jacket in the winter and sleeping on the ground next to his bed. As he became more religious he would also become more impulsive, and felt a constant restlessness with his location and self. After this termination his family supported his decision to pursue ministry school. His family arranged for him to stay with Uncle Jan during his studies, and employed a tutor, Mendes da Costa, to provide lessons in Greek and Latin. Vincent struggled with learning Greek and would punish himself if he thought himself not devote or focused enough on his studies by locking himself out -sleeping outside on

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9 Vincent van Gogh, 42.
10 Ibid., 42.
12 Walther and Metzger, Vincent Van Gogh: The Complete Paintings, 34.
13 Ibid., 39.
the floor of the wooden shed with no blankets or by using a cudgel on his back. After a year of studying for entrance exams he decided against even attempting them. He determined the only reason he could not assist mankind by being a clergyman is because of the Greek and Latin, and at the age of twenty-five enrolled at a training school for lay preaches.

Although lay preachers were not full-fledged clergyman, they still had enough training to spread the Gospel to the poor, which is what Vincent desired. When he entered the school, he was not guaranteed a mission once he completed the course but would be considered for one depending on his performance. However, Vincent did not perform well in areas not related to religion and was not offered a mission through the school. His father, providing what little support he could, allowing van Gogh to go on an un-sponsored mission to a coal-mining region of Borinage, Belgium. His father hoped that if Vincent performed well on this mission then his future missions would become sponsored by the school despite his poor performance while there. While in the mines he wanted to mimic Christ by mimicking other Saints that spread the word of God. He neglected his appearance and lived in a tumbledown hut like Saint Francis, provided clothing to the needy when he needed it like Saint Martin, and lived off only bread and water like the strictest spiritual practices. In his efforts to perform to prove his capabilities he resulted in eliminating the possibilities of his career. Van Gogh treated those who worked in the mine equal to those who ran the mine, which cast him in an unfavorable light to those around him and who could have sponsored him in the future. He considered Thomas a Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ* and Saint Paul as his core inspirations. He identified with Saint Paul because

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15 Ibid., 13.
16 Ibid., 13-14.
he represented the inability to cope with everyday life, mainly the Christian rejection and desire to change the surrounding world. In many of van Gogh’s letters he quoted Saint Paul from the second Epistle to the Corinthians, ‘in sorrow yet ever joyful,’ and compared his time working with the miners to St Paul’s work stay in Ariba.\textsuperscript{18} Even though van Gogh reportedly even go the worst alcoholic back to the church, his ideologies resulted in his contract not being renewed and he was not reassigned to another location.\textsuperscript{19}

Van Gogh thought he found a new purpose in life through religion. Even though he had no income from staying with the miners, he still felt as though that is where he belonged. He felt as though he did not earn any of his past endeavors, and that most things had been handed to him, such as his career as an art dealer. He also lived with the guilt of failing his family, because of his inability to live up to expectations and his constant need for his help. Van Gogh’s desire to stay in Borinage stemmed from his feeling of abandonment when he was working in London and Paris. While he was in London and Paris, he wanted to find something to attach to outside of family, and that was religion. However, in the effort to prove his devotion to spreading the Gospel he exhausted his last chance of pursing religion as a career. He stayed because of the fear of disappointed his family once again, and lack of knowledge about the next stage of his life. Even Theo, sent at the request of family conference, could not reason with Vincent to leave the mines.\textsuperscript{20} There was no correspondence between Theo and Vincent between October 1879 until July 1880, when Vincent finally accepted the postal money Theo sent.\textsuperscript{21} In the first letter Vincent sent to Theo he described his remaining stay at the mines as his molting period, emerging with a

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 38-39.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{21} Walther and Metzger, \textit{Vincent Van Gogh: The Complete Paintings}, 41.
wrath against organized church and not as the religious fanatic he was prior. In the past Theo had suggested the Vincent pursue art, but it was not until his reemergence that he decided for himself to begin his pursuit of art.

**Color Theory of van Gogh’s Contemporaries**

Van Gogh was largely influenced by the impact of color. In the latter years of his career he changed his pallet to include a vibrant array of colors and wanted the colors to be as impactful as possible. He studied color theory and the ways in which other artist used color. Van Gogh had a great interest in the color theory of French artist George Seurat (1859-1891), who his brother introduced him to in 1886. George Seurat was the inventor of Neo-Imperialism - a reinvention of impressionism which pursued the improvement of the practice through emphasis on form and color - and utilized different applications of color. In the early 1880’s, Seurat practiced *Chromi-Luminarism*, also known as divisionism, finely dividing patches of color to form the illusion of other colors. In 1885-86, Seurat’s style transitioned to *Peinture au point* (pointillism), which is the use of untouching dots to produce the optical mixture central to Neo-Impressionism. One of his most impactful works is *La Grande Jatte* from 1884 (Fig. 7). This work explores pointillism

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23 *Vincent van Gogh*, 43.
25 Ibid., 63.
and the use of contrast to form color. By depicting people in a park, Seurat shows the ability to use this technique on greenery and for reflections. Even though the pointillist style faced resistance in its acceptance among contemporary French artists, it allowed greater understanding of color interactions.

Pointillism included a more defined placement of color in response to the innovations of the printing press, with its unprecedented systematic approach to the emerging techniques of color placement.\(^{27}\) Although divisionism is present in the comma-like strokes of Impressionists and color hatching of French Romantic artist Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), pointillism avoided the use of broad overlapping brush-strokes.\(^{28}\) The juxtaposition of colors allows for the eyes to blend the colors without the color existing on the canvas.\(^{29}\) When colors are placed in juxtaposition opposed to blending each color retains its individual identity. The color may keep its original identity, but the surrounding colors influence the perception. The perception of grey when placed against black results in the grey appearing brighter opposed to the darker perception of the grey when placed against white.\(^{30}\) Seurat toyed with the perception of light and shadow, particularly in *Le Noeud Noir* (1882, Fig. 8). In this painting, he uses an unrealistic distribution of light and shadow to manipulate the silhouette of the women and enhance the impact of the black bow. The contrast of color placement within a work utilizes the awareness of surrounding colors.

An important contributor to color theory that van Gogh held in high regards was Charles Blanc’s *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin* from 1874, which he accessed in 1884. Van Gogh used

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 589.


\(^{29}\) Ibid., 35.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 43.
Blanc’s theory on color to create an the most vibrancy within his colors, such as in Café Terrace at Night (1888, Fig. 9). The contrasting colors provide a distinction between the dark blue of the sky and the bright orange of the café. Contrast of color was significantly valued in Blanc’s theory. According to the theory, contrast can exist within different values of the same color, such as a light and dark red contrasting through the differing intensity and harmony.\textsuperscript{31} Additionally, contrast exists within a pure and mixed color, such as the contrast through resemblance of a blue and a blue-grey.\textsuperscript{32} There is a difference between relaying on mixing pigments to create a color opposed to relaying on an optical mixture of the color. Mixing the pigments of blue and tallow results in a green but placing adjacent blue and yellow dots provides the perception of grey.\textsuperscript{33} The law of complementary colors is when two primary colors (blue and yellow) mix to from a binary color (green) and has the maximum intensity when juxtaposed with its complement (red).\textsuperscript{34} Any color and it’s compliment are heightened by juxtaposition but destroyed by combination, resulting in achromatism, the annihilation of color.\textsuperscript{35} Opposing colors absorb and reflect different waves of light, and when opposing colors combine an absence of the ability to reflect light is present producing a black or muddied color.\textsuperscript{36} In addition to that, Blanc also discussed the utilization of oil paint and the style of portrait painting.

Blanc believed that using texture in an oil painting served to enhance both the light and shadows of the work. The light of the work should be loaded with layers of color to provide natural depth and increase the dynamics of the work, giving the sense of natural light.\textsuperscript{37} Even the

\textsuperscript{31} Blanc, \textit{The Grammar of Painting and Engraving}, 158.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 158.
\textsuperscript{33} Ratliff, \textit{Paul Signac and Color in Neo-impressionism}, 134.
\textsuperscript{34} Blanc, \textit{The Grammar of Painting and Engraving}, 150.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 150 - 153.
\textsuperscript{36} Ratliff, \textit{Paul Signac and Color in Neo-impressionism}, 142.
\textsuperscript{37} Blanc, \textit{The Grammar of Painting and Engraving}, 190.
shadows should be covered in thick layers of color to provide a relation between the artist and the subject. Additionally, Blanc believed that “if works of art ought to be measured by the degree of intellect they demand, the perfection of the portrait is the last word of painting.”

Blanc also believed that artists need the ability to capture the personality and emotion of the sitter within a static image. Every aspect of the portrait is determined by the artist in order to best display the subject, including the color, frame, proportions, angle, and most importantly the attitude. According to his theory, artists have the freedom to exaggerate any feature desired from an expression to a gesture to provide an accurate portrayal of the artist’s impression of the subject. Subtle changes within the intensity of color, light and shadows changes the perception of the sitter and can determine the mood of the work, especially when paired with the different variants on the weight of the line. The artistic interpretation of the subject may not be completely accurate, but it provides insight into the imagination and perception of the artist. An artist has no obligation to endure the limitations of the sitter’s image and is allowed any method of expression. Even though van Gogh frequently used himself as a model in his own works, he would change certain aspects within his own image, such as eye color. Throughout van Gogh’s self-portraits, he applied the knowledge of color theory in an effective way, especially in his perception of self.

Mental Health and Alcoholism

38 Ibid., 190.
39 Ibid., 230.
40 Ibid., 232.
41 Ibid., 234-238.
Van Gogh often detailed his mental state to Theo, but his state worsened as his career progressed. On December 23, 1888 he cut off part of his left ear resulting in him entering the asylum in Arles. After his first stay following his accident he returned to the Yellow House, and Gauguin had already left for Paris. However, van Gogh received another loss when his man friend in the town, postman Roulin, received a transfer and moved away with his family. This resulted in his second stay in Arles lasting only a few days, but his return to the yellow house was short and his third stay began shortly after. Although he was showing signs of improvement the citizens signed a petition to have him removed from the town and placed in a sanitarium, resulting in his forth stay at the asylum in Arles beginning February 24, 1889. While van Gogh was away from the house it had flooded damaging many of his works, which worsened his mental state. Van Gogh voluntarily went to the asylum in St. Remy because he feared living alone for fear of his neighbor’s perception and feared living with another because of his past experiences. His stay was only supposed to last four months, but he stayed a year because Doctor Peyron believed he suffered from epileptic attacks and needed treatment. Van Gogh was feeling trapped at St. Remy leaving in May 1890 transferring to Auvers under the care of

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42 Richard R. Brettell, "Van Gogh's "Bedrooms at Arles": The Problem of Priority" - *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 12, no. 2 (1986): 142. Van Gogh learned of his brother’s engagement to Jo and Theo arranged for Gauguin to stay with van Gogh at the Yellow House for monetary compensation. Van Gogh intended the Yellow House to be an inviting place where his artist friends could come and paint. However, Gauguin being a womanizer, organized, and thoughtful with his work clashed with van Gogh being impotent, disorganized, and scatterbrained. Van Gogh told Theo that he was intimidated by the arrival of Gauguin for fear of his judgement and his possible dislike of the efforts he had put into preparing the house. On December 23, 1888 van Gogh and Gauguin are believed to have gotten in a fight over a prostitute, resulting in van Gogh cutting off his ear and entering his first mental asylum.


44 Ibid., 120.


46 Ibid., 124.
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Doctor Gachet. Before he went to Auvers he visited Theo, Jo, and his new-born nephew in Paris. Van Gogh realized the unlikelihood of his mental health completely stabilizing, resolving that his attacks were eminent.

Due to his fame van Gogh has speculation surrounding the possibilities of his ailments. Regardless of whatever condition(s) he had his symptoms are well recorded within his correspondence between him and his brother Theo. Some of his speculated ailments include: schizophrenia, idiopathic epilepsy, manic depressive psychosis, syphilis, intoxication, bipolar disorder, sun poisoning, and lead poisoning. Van Gogh suffered from poor digestion, regular stomach upsets, hallucinations, nightmares, stupor, absent mindedness, anxiety, insomnia, melancholy, and impotence. This paired with his heavy consumption of alcohol and coffee, smoking, and frequent fasting only worsened whatever ailments he felt. Additionally, van Gogh would spend long periods of time outdoors, resulting in the possibility of sunstrokes, and sunstrokes combined with malnutrition could worsen his stupor. When van Gogh would paint he had the tendency to ‘nibble’ on them despite knowing the toxicity, allowing for the possibility of lead poisoning. Excessive use of absinth could result in thujone poising because of the ingredient worm wood, which could result in the worsening of his seizures. Before his first entrance into the asylum the records of van Gogh’s ailments come from his correspondences and those close to him, but after the incident with Gauguin he was admitted into the asylum at Arles.

48 Nagera, Vincent Van Gogh; a Psychological Study, 129.
51 Mollon, "Absinthe Makes the Art Grow Stronger - Vincent Van Gogh," 659
53 Ibid., 6.
54 Ibid., 7.
The hospital intern, Felix Ray, believed that van Gogh was suffering from ‘mental epilepsy’, a seizure, when he removed his ear, and he was officially diagnosed with mania and generalized delirium.55 Throughout his multiple stays in different asylums van Gogh was diagnosed with complex partial seizures, hallucinations, self-destructive episodes, and abdominal pain; and his doctors noted that his symptoms worsened upon the consumption of alcohol, fasting, infection, or insomnia.56 Although there is no way of determining his ailments beyond speculation, interpreting his symptoms can allow for a different method of interpretation for his works.

Psychoanalysis is one of the methods of art history which allows the interpretation of the artist’s state of mind during the creation of a work of art. A work of art shows the product of internal conflict and the artist’s instincts for creativity.57 Both the primary and secondary motivators are present on the canvas through artistic expression, with the primary being the form and the secondary being the emotions or meaning.58 Primary and secondary causes are equivocal to the concept of conscious and unconscious mind. The impulses of the unconscious mind differ from the conscious mind, often with causes deeply rooted in the past or in the mind.59 Additionally, aspects of the unconscious mind may not just be apparent through mannerisms or the artistic expression on a canvas but can result on a physical reaction to the embedded emotions.60 Although some of van Gogh’s symptoms may have been psychosomatic he expresses his emotional state unto his works through his passionate brush strokes. Understanding his mental state can be understood through five primary forms of evidence: Clinical opinion of

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55 Ibid., 7.
58 Ibid., 194.
59 Sigmund Freud, A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis (Horace Liveright, 1920), 178.
original doctors, van Gogh’s personal description of symptoms, historical accounts of his actions from those who interacted with him, interpretation of his artwork, and connection to family medical history. Although some criteria do not change with every work, his current or most pressing ailments may change which become apparent in his letters or in peoples accounts of his behavior. The use of his letters is an essential aspect to gain a full understanding of his thought processes during the changing periods of his life.

Van Gogh’s letters can also be used to determine the order and timeframe of his paintings. He created three works entitled of his bedroom in Arles and using his letters the original can be strongly assumed (1888, Fig. 10). Van Gogh finished the first bedroom painting residing in the Yellow House, and the second at St. Remy as a reproduction of the damaged work. The description of the work van Gogh provided to Theo and to Gauguin differ, resulting confusion over the original work. His earlier letter to Theo describes a light wash of colors. However, in a later letter to Gauguin on the same work, he describes a heavy application of color. The violet underpainting van Gogh described in his letter to Theo and the relining of the canvas implies that the original is at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Before his move to Arles he became obsessed with his self-portraits and increasingly produced more. As his self-portraits increased other subjects began to fade from his work. Although around this time, 1887, van Gogh began to solidify his individualized style, the more plausible reason for the transition is the need for a sitter. His increase of self representation resulted in an increased perception of self. He began to believe he was painting only for himself and he was the most inexpensive and

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expressive model. He could manipulate any feature to his own desire and became more familiar with himself driving his desire to further his study.

Visual Analysis

The earliest self-portrait examined is *Self-Portrait with Pipe* from 1886 (Fig. 1). During the earlier phases of van Gogh’s career he painted in heavy earth tones. He emphasized the contrast between light and shadow, a practice known as *chiaroscuro*. The heavy application of shadow on his face ages his appearance by making him seem gaunt. This self-portrait resembles the stylistic themes of his peasant portraits he painted while staying with his parents in Nuenen, such as in *Head of a Women* from 1885 (Fig. 11). Like most of his other peasant portraits the figure is depicted in a dark background and in darker values the what is present in his latter works. His black overcoat lacks contrast against the splotchy dark brown background hinted with a deep red. The darkness of his hair also serves to blend into the background, having the most contrasting aspect of the work be his pale face against all of the darkened aspects. The painting shows less impasto, heavy layers of paint creating texture, then typically associated with his works; instead the colors blend together forming a smoother texture on the canvas. He painted his usually green eyes in a dark color giving the eyes the appearance of brown. His intent stair is characteristic of most of his portraits, showing the introspective nature of self representation. Additionally, he brings in a sense of individuality in his work by depicting himself with a lit pipe, seeing as smoking was a habit he habitually engaged. This work was done close to his arrival in Paris, so he had not yet been influenced by the color forward style of Impressionism.

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He treated this portrait similar to the study of peasant portraits, focusing on conveying the form and essence of the figure.

In contrast, *Self-Portrait* from March-June 1887 shows van Gogh’s first exploration of the different uses of color (Fig. 2). He combines the traditional comma-like brush strokes associated with impressionism and the dots associated with the pointillism practice of Neo-Impressionism. The pallet is significantly lighter and shows the value of color exploration over a completed work. The coat is a mix primarily of red-brown, dark green, a watery black. The watery black shows the design of the jacket while the mixture of red-brown and green serve to form the color and texture of the short. Darker marks of blue and black set apart the collar from the jacket, with black on his right and blue on the left. The blue continues as short brush strokes which loosely radiate around his head. His face has barely a shadow on it, and even though it is painted with impasto still gives him the appearance of smoother skin. The smoother skin and lighter application of color result in him appearing younger. His hair appears lighter and his are a soft green with an intent stair. He explores the use of direction when applying paint to produce depth, allowing for the face to need less shadow and achieve the same dimensionality. Although van Gogh suffered from mental issues throughout his life, he enjoyed the earlier part of his stay in Paris. He received exposure to more art styles, and Theo introduced him to artist that he associated with through his job as an art dealer. His gaze is stern and steadfast, but the emphasis was not yet on the self and emotional expression, instead he focused primarily on the exploration of color by exploring a combination of color practices from Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism. This is the first self-portrait that begins to show the breakthrough his stylistic development through the change in palette and variation of brush strokes. This exploration shows his fascination towards art because he combines differing styles into one. Van Gogh cared more
about the exploration of his materials potential then following the standards of particular styles. This thought process resulted in him forming a style which was not widely excepted during his life.

While in Paris the exploration of color and brush stokes continue, and he frequently depicts himself wearing hats, such as in *Self-Portrait with Grey Felt Hat* (Fig. 3). Van Gogh combines long and short brush strokes to create a contrast in color and an emphasis on motion. Multiple shades of blue speckled with hints of dark orange radiate around his head forming a halo effect. The contrast of similar (blues) and complementary (orange) colors maintains a central focus on the portrait. Upon first glance the speckling of orange seems almost unnoticeable providing a subtle way to draw the attention in that direction but not directly to the colors. His exploration with color is apparent with the manner he paints his face, using the direction of the brush to provide depth while exploring unnatural colors. Van Gogh uses greens, reds, yellows, and blue to construct the depth of his portrait. The lines radiate away from the center of his face, juxtaposing the vertical lines of his hat. The lines of his hat give a sense of upward motion, allowing for a sense of depth with minimal shadows. The division between background and clothing results from the change of direction and length of brush strokes, with a primary diagonal direction. The direction of the brush strokes serves as another form of contrast, with strokes varying from vertical, circular, diagonal, and radiating outwards, showing van Gogh’s exploration of both color and the various effects brushstrokes create. The increase in color exploration again serves as a revolution to the use of color and line to convey emotion and energy in a work of art. In each aspect he varies the brush strokes and uses different forms of color contrast, so each aspect draws the attention in by a different manner. Whenever van Gogh has new materials to explore his concerns and focus on his other issues wain, allowing his full
comitial to each work. During this time his mental health temporarily stabilized through the stimulus of practicing a new artistic style and the introduction to new artists. The definitive brush strokes in a new style of art shows his increased confidence in himself as an artist.

Van Gogh carried his obsession with peasant life throughout his career, even though it was not the main focus in his later years. In his *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat* van Gogh depicts himself closer to a farmer (Fig. 4). The brown canvas is not fully covered and shines through in all aspects of the painting: the hat, clothes, face, and background. The brush strokes of the hat are primarily a vibrant yellow with streaks of green and white paint, using the natural color of the canvas as another aspect of contrast. The brush strokes follow the horizontal curve of the hat, opposing the multi-directional strokes of the background. The perspective of the painting causes his face to appear angular, enhancing the penetrating gaze of his green eyes. The pale background provides contrast for the portrait, allowing the bright yellow of the hat and the blues of his clothing to become more evident. Additionally, the brim of the hat casts a shadow upon his forehead, an aspect of reality which is usually ignored. The lines of the face radiate out from the center, but with a stronger emphasis on following the natural curves of the face. This canvas has uneven edges and is double sided demonstrating van Gogh’s urge to paint regardless of his material, emphasizing that the impulse to paint is to satisfy his own desire and not the desire of others. On the reverse is his work from 1885, *The Potato Peeler* (Fig. 12). The two works seem very dissimilar, with the reverse image showing a muted color palette before his exposure to modern Parisian art, but it was not uncommon for van Gogh to reuse canvases from different periods of his career. The brush strokes are less definitive compared to his self-portrait of him wearing a grey felt hat but show a stronger emphasis on the use of line to create realistic movement. The brush strokes of the straw hat follow a horizontal path that curves naturally with
the object; whereas the grey felt hat used vertical lines to create a sense of height and directional contrast.

In *Self-Portrait with a Bandaged Ear*, van Gogh shows himself with a distant gaze and a feasible background (1889, Fig. 5). After his quarrel with Paul Gauguin at the Yellow House on December 23, 1888, van Gogh had lost a piece of his ear and wore a bandage to let it heal. Van Gogh painted himself with the bandaged ear towards the viewer, but most of his latter self-portraits he turns his head away. The majority of van Gogh’s backgrounds consist of a movement of color. In the background of this work the yellow walls seem a solid color using impasto to provide dimension. An unpainted canvas sits on the easel behind him to the left, and a Japanese print hangs on the wall to his right next to the large blue door. Unlike the wall the door is broken by contrasting colors, with streaks of yellow and brown showing through the varying hues of blue. The blue of the door matches the blue of his black fur-lined hat, which covers the majority of the white bandage. The stoic and downcast expression contradicts his usual piercing gaze. His jacket seems oversized and only has the top button done, and barely present is a brown undershirt. The jacket follows a downward brushstroke similar to the walls, with a combination of dark green and blue. The darkness of the jacket captures the attention, and the continuation of vertical movement allows for the eye to move upwards with ease. The movement is only broken through the elements in the background. The mood of the composition is set by the incorporation of the background and downcast eyes. Although he incorporates a canvas in this work, he is not

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65 Ellis Tinios, *Japanese Prints: Ukiyo-e in Edo, 1700-1900* (Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2010), 14-15. *Japonism* was an appreciation of Japanese artifacts among Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists which involved the study of Japanese art. The French Impressionists favored the bright clear washes of color present in woodblock prints which became popularized do to the increased emphasis on color in Western art. Van Gogh was stuck by the simplicity of form and the flat washes of color, and would recreate Japanese prints as scene in this self-portrait.
using it to display himself as an artist. The canvas is blank, and his back is turned away from it, showing his opposition to except his current situation. After his first stays in a mental asylum van Gogh realized his dreamed potential of the Yellow House would never come to fruition. The downcast gaze shows his unwillingness to acknowledge his current situation and his aversion to attention. After the incident he wanted to go back uninhibited but faced social ridicule from the town of Arles. Despite the fact that van Gogh is processing the changes to his life, he shows a grounded sense of self by incorporating the background. He shows himself in the Yellow House opposed to an undiscernible background and paints himself with a bandaged ear antagonistic to his aversion to this element of self in later works.

A notable motif in self-portraits is painting oneself as a painter. In van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait* from 1889 he shows himself encased in a blue background holding a palette (Fig. 6). The strokes of the blue background radiate around him like static by seemingly following a pattern of movement which periodically changes direction. The colors contrast through the background varying in light and dark values of blue with thick impasto, laced with black paint. The blue of the overcoat is of the same blues, but the brush strokes are longer and less sporadic. To the right his contrast between the background and his clothing is almost indistinguishable, and the coat seems to blend in with the background. The pallet he is holding has colors present in this work, implying that the pallet is being used to paint the portrait. He shows his face turned to avoid the depiction of his damaged ear and incorporates a stark line of contrast separating the paleness of his skin from the darkness of the setting. The shadow of his figure is reflected through in the darkening of the background around his form. The starkness between the portrait and setting draws the attention first to the portrait and then to the pallet. His gaze is piercing yet distant, showing the intensity of his bundled emotions. The duration of August, van Gogh was in
a mental stupor and was too ill to paint, and only wrote to Theo once. Once he was out of the stupor his doctors allowed him back in his painting studio. The use of definitive brush stroke shows a newfound sense of clarity. The momentum of the background displays his frustration with his frequent relapses of mental decline and his inability to relax his mind. The smooth application of paint on his mildly distorted face is distinctive from the background showing the divergence between the way which other perceive him and his perceives himself.

**Conclusion**

Vincent van Gogh was a prolific artist who revolutionized art by fathering a new style, Post-Impressionism. He intended to create a style of art that allowed for the expression of his inner emotions through the ideals of Impressionism. His self-portraits serve as a reflection if his introspective observation of self and deepen the understanding of his self-perception. He used himself as his primary sitter in his later years, representing the increased introspection and stylistic development. Van Gogh suffered from societal exile and numerous health issues during his life, changing his manner of self representation. His sense of mental clarity shines through the line work of the paintings, with the more definitive strokes appearing at times of increased mental clarity resulting in a stronger emotional impact. The psychoanalysis of van Gogh’s self-portraits with an emphasis on application and development of color provides insight into the emotional value he assigns painting. In the latter half of his career the method of color usage would change depending on the state of mind. This understanding of color applies to the majority of his later works aside from just his self-portraits. When he felt passionate about a work the lines tend to appear with greater emotional force, and the interpretation of his mental state
coinciding with the work can be referenced back to his letters. This allows the potential to explore his perception of self in works outside of portraiture, by determining similar underlying themes corresponding to his mental status. All of Vincent van Gogh’s works incorporate his perception of self, especially his later works, with his self-portraits being the strongest form of self-inquisition showing not only the way which he perceives his surrounding but the way he perceives himself.
Fig. 1. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Pipe*, Paris, September-November 1886, oil on canvas, 46.0 cm x 38.0 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Fig. 2. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, Paris, March-June 1887, oil on cardboard, 41 cm x 33 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
Fig. 3. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Grey Felt Hat*, Paris, September-October 1887, oil on canvas, 44.5 cm x 37.2 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Fig. 4. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat*, Paris, Winter 1887, oil on canvas, 40.6 x 31.8 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Fig. 5. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, Arles, January 1889, oil on canvas, 60.5 x 50 cm, The Courtauld Gallery, London.

Fig. 6. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, Saint-Remy, August 1889, oil on canvas, 57.2 x 43.8 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Fig. 7. Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *La Grande Jatte*, 1884-86, Oil on Canvas, 207.5 x 308.1 cm, Art Institute of Chicago.

Fig. 8. Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *Le Noeud Noir*, 1882, Conté pencil on laid paper, 31.8 x 25 cm, Orsay Museum.
Fig. 9. Vincent van Gogh, *Café Terrace at Night*, 1888, Oil on Canvas, 81 x 65.5 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum.

Fig. 10. Vincent van Gogh, *The Bedroom*, Arles, October 1888, oil on canvas, 72.4 cm x 91.3 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
Fig. 11. Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Woman*, Nuenen, March 1885, oil on canvas, 42.7 x 33.5 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Fig. 12. Vincent van Gogh, *The Potato Peeler*, 1885, oil on canvas, 40.6 x 31.8 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Bibliography


