

# Vincent Van Gogh: A Tragic Genius

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“I wish they would only take me as I am.”<sup>1</sup> Vincent Van Gogh: A man who found fame only after his death. Though his life was filled with tragedy, he has made an enormous impact on the world of art. Despite his post mortem success, he spent his entire life believing he was a failure. Van Gogh suffered from mental illness, family disputes, and depression which eventually led to his death by suicide. History made Van Gogh a famous artist; but during his life, he felt ill-suited for the world around him.

Vincent Van Gogh was born in Groot Zundert, The Netherlands on March 30, 1853 to Theodorus Van Gogh and Anna Cornelia née Carpentus.<sup>2</sup> He was born a year after his mother gave birth to a stillborn child also named Vincent and was dubbed a “replacement child” by the people who would study his life years later. Van Gogh’s father was a pastor who often neglected to pay attention to him due to his work. Both parents chose to ignore him because they did not know how to deal with his outrageous behavior.<sup>3</sup> He would often act out in a violent manner and go out of his way to be disobedient.<sup>4</sup> Van Gogh had five siblings: Anna, Theo, Elizabeth, Wilhelmin, and Cornelius.<sup>5</sup> Theo was very close to his lonely sibling and Theo was his greatest supporter in his childhood and later on in his life as an artist. They spent a great deal of time together and Theo helped to cure some of the loneliness caused by his parents’ negligence.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent Van Gogh, “Vincent Van Gogh Quotes,” 2006, Brainy Quote, 24 September 2006 < [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/v/vincent\\_van\\_gogh.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/v/vincent_van_gogh.html) >.

<sup>2</sup> The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 2005. September 24 2006. < <http://www.vangoghgallery.com/> >

<sup>3</sup> Brooks, David, “Biography,” 1996-2007, The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery, 27 January 2007 < <http://vggallery.com/misc/bio.htm> >.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan, Vincent Van Gogh: Portrait of an Artist (New York: Delacorte Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Josephine Cutts and James Smith, Van Gogh (New York: Parragon Publishing, 2006), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, 9-10.

Van Gogh attended a boarding school for two years and then a secondary school for two more.<sup>7</sup> At the age of fifteen, he abandoned his studies and went to work for a firm of art dealers known as Goupil & Co. Following a tenure of seven years with this firm, Van Gogh was moved to the London branch of the company. Though he was separated from his brother Theo, the two wrote many letters to each other.<sup>8</sup> Around this time, he fell in love with a woman named Eugenie.<sup>9</sup> The relationship, however, did not last and they soon separated. Van Gogh began to grow unhappy in dealing with art in which he had no interest.<sup>10</sup> Moving to England, he began teaching at Reverend William P. Stokes' school in Ramsgate. After attempting a career at teaching, he went to the coal mining district of Borinage, Belgium to preach and follow in his father's footsteps. Van Gogh began doing sketches of the miners in his free time and his career as an artist began.

Tragedy had its roots in the early life of Vincent Van Gogh. Being the "replacement child", it is suspected that this may have had an effect on his psychological state of being. Due to his disobedient and often violent behavior, both his mother and father chose to reject him and spent very little time with the young Van Gogh. This further increased his rebellious and angry attitude towards his parents and he went out of his way to be disobedient. As he aged, his personality only became more peculiar and eccentric. Van Gogh was very passionate about art and his particular tastes; disliking it when anyone disagreed with him. When he could no longer deal with art in which he had

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Edo Tralbaut, Vincent Van Gogh, (New York: The Viking Press, 1969) 7.

<sup>8</sup> "Biography: Vincent Van Gogh," 2006, Expo-Shop.com, 24 September 2006  
< <http://www.expo-vangogh.com/2.cfm> >.

<sup>9</sup> "Vincent Van Gogh," 2006, Artquotes.net, 24 November 2006  
< [http://www.artquotes.net/masters/vangogh\\_biography.htm](http://www.artquotes.net/masters/vangogh_biography.htm) >.

<sup>10</sup> Vincent Van Gogh, "Letter 190," 1882, The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery November 2006  
< [http://vggallery.com/letters/214\\_V-T\\_190.pdf](http://vggallery.com/letters/214_V-T_190.pdf) >.

no interest, he left Goupil & Co.<sup>11</sup> Upon his departure from the firm, Van Gogh became a full-time artist and was subjected to a life of poverty. He experienced many personal relationships, all of which failed.<sup>12</sup> Throughout his entire career as an artist, he only sold one painting titled *The Red Vineyard*.<sup>13</sup>

Van Gogh lived in poverty his entire life. He wrote in a letter to Theo: "Painting is like having a bad mistress who spends and spends and it's never enough ... I tell myself that even if a tolerable study comes out of it from time to time, it would have been cheaper to buy it from somebody else."<sup>14</sup> Poverty influenced his diet and health greatly and led to poor eating habits and fatigue. He was often tired and hungry. He wrote about it often in his letters to Theo. Van Gogh often pushed himself too hard. Instead of resting or taking it easy, he insisted on continuing his work and this also contributed to his poor health. In another letter to Theo he wrote: "I am so tired at night that I no longer get up as early as I would want. But that will pass and I trust I shall be able to force myself to do it."<sup>15</sup>

The mental state of Vincent Van Gogh is something that is often debated and shrouded in mystery. It is unsure what form of mental illness he had, but it is known that he suffered some type of mental affliction. Henri Gastaut, the renowned French neurologist and former director of France's regional centre for epileptic children, believes

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<sup>11</sup> Alan Honour, *Tormented Genius: The Struggles of Vincent Van Gogh* (New York: William Morrow, 1967) 9.

<sup>12</sup> Vincent Van Gogh, "Letter 164," 1881. *The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery*, November 2006 < [http://vvgallery.com/letters/186\\_V-T\\_164.pdf](http://vvgallery.com/letters/186_V-T_164.pdf) >.

<sup>13</sup> Burnard Zurcher, "Vincent Van Gogh- Art Life and Letters," 1985, *Vincent Van Gogh*, 24 September 2006 < [http://www.mezzo-mondo.com/arts/mm/vangogh/van\\_gogh.html](http://www.mezzo-mondo.com/arts/mm/vangogh/van_gogh.html) >.

<sup>14</sup> Vincent Van Gogh, "Letter 502," 1888, *The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery*, January 2007. < [http://vvgallery.com/letters/611\\_V-T\\_502.pdf](http://vvgallery.com/letters/611_V-T_502.pdf) >.

<sup>15</sup> Vincent Van Gogh, "Letter 95," 1877, *The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery*, January 2007 < [http://vvgallery.com/letters/109\\_V-T\\_095.pdf](http://vvgallery.com/letters/109_V-T_095.pdf) >.

he may have had temporal lobe epilepsy "...precipitated by the use of absinthe in the presence of an early limbic lesion."<sup>16</sup> Temporal lobe epilepsy is a condition in which a person suffers seizures repeatedly and with no known cause.<sup>17</sup> Van Gogh may have been bipolar and was clearly depressed.<sup>18</sup> Vincent wrote to Theo: "It is only too true that a lot of artists are mentally ill - it's a life which, to put it mildly, makes one an outsider. I'm all right when I completely immerse myself in work, but I'll always remain half crazy."<sup>19</sup>

It is also possible that Van Gogh had a visual disorder caused by digitalis treatment for epilepsy. Digitalis is extracted from a purple foxglove plant and can cause side effects such as xanthopsia, a disturbance in yellow-blue vision. Glares and haloes are also side effects. Possible examples of this are shown in works such as *Starry Night* where the stars have a yellow halo around them.<sup>20</sup> Other works include a slightly yellow tint. Another possible visual disorder is glaucoma which can lead to swelling of the cornea and causes one to see colored halos around light sources. Glaucoma is an unlikely diagnosis due to the fact that it is rarely seen in people younger than forty.<sup>21</sup>

In 1888, Van Gogh and his friend Paul Gauguin entered into a heated debate over art. It reached such a level that Van Gogh lost control, attacked Gauguin with a razor, and ended up cutting off his own left ear.<sup>22</sup> An indication of his mental state surfaced when he sent his ear to a prostitute with whom he was very close. His actions caused him

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<sup>16</sup> Dietrich Blumer, M.D, "The Illness of Vincent van Gogh," [The American Journal of Psychiatry](#). (April 2002): 159:519.

<sup>17</sup> David Y. Ko, "Temporal Lobe Epilepsy," 2006 [eMedicine.com](#), 27 January 2007 < <http://www.emedicine.com/NEURO/topic365.htm> >.

<sup>18</sup> Blumer, 519.

<sup>19</sup> Kimberly Read and Marcia Purse, "Vincent Van Gogh," 2006, [About.com](#), 29 December 2006 < <http://bipolar.about.com/od/celebrities/p/vangogh.htm> >.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Kline and Marcela Salamanca, "Vincent Van Gogh," 2002, [Art, Vision, & the Disordered Eye](#), 29 December 2006. < <http://www.psych.ucalgary.ca/PACE/VA-Lab/AVDE-Website/VanGogh.html> >.

<sup>21</sup> Kline, < <http://www.psych.ucalgary.ca/PACE/VA-Lab/AVDE-Website/VanGogh.html> >.

<sup>22</sup> Brooks, David, "Biography," 1996-2007, [The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery](#), 27 January 2007 < <http://vggallery.com/misc/bio.htm> >.

to be hospitalized and during this time, he continued to suffer from breakdowns and hallucinations.<sup>23</sup> His mental state improved during his hospital stay but when he went to visit Theo he became distraught. Theo had been having financial problems and his son was ill.<sup>24</sup> Upon seeing Theo in this state, Van Gogh finally lost his sanity. He shot himself in the chest on July 27 and was taken to the hospital. Van Gogh passed away on July 29 and his coffin was covered with his favorite flower, sunflowers. He died at the young age of 37 and his brother Theo was devastated.<sup>25</sup>

Though he only sold one painting his entire life, after his death, Vincent Van Gogh had an enormous impact on art. His works were sold soon after his passing and their popularity grew quickly. His pen and ink drawing “Garden with Flowers” sold at a Christie’s auction in 1990 for \$8.36 million, the most ever paid for a drawing.<sup>26</sup> He inspired many artists such as John Peter Russell and A. S. Hartrick. The artist most influenced, however, is Stefan Duncan. Nicknamed “America’s Vincent Van Gogh”, Duncan’s work is an impressionist-based style he calls “Squiggism.”<sup>27</sup> His and several other artists’ works are influenced by impressionism and the interesting work of Vincent Van Gogh.

Van Gogh’s impact goes beyond the artists who have learned from his works. An example of this is the tribute to Van Gogh entitled the Big Easel Project. This is a series

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<sup>23</sup> Vincent Van Gogh, “Letter 328,” 1883, The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery, November 2006 < [http://vvgallery.com/letters/384\\_V-T\\_328.pdf](http://vvgallery.com/letters/384_V-T_328.pdf) >.

<sup>24</sup> Vincent Van Gogh, “Letter 648,” 1890, The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery, October 2006 < <http://www.vvgallery.com/> >.

<sup>25</sup> Theo Van Gogh, “Letter 1,” 1890, The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery, November 2006 < [http://vvgallery.com/letters/686\\_T-V\\_T01.pdf](http://vvgallery.com/letters/686_T-V_T01.pdf) >.

<sup>26</sup> Brooks, David, “Chronology,” 1996-2007, The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery, 27 January 2007 < <http://vvgallery.com/misc/chrono.htm> >.

<sup>27</sup> Stefan Duncan, “Living Spirit Art of Squiggism,” 2006, Stefan Duncan: America’s Van Gogh, 11 December 2006 < <http://www.stefanduncangallery.com/> >.

of gigantic sculptures of easels which hold reproductions of Van Gogh's famous Sunflower Paintings created by artist Cameron Cross.<sup>28</sup>

Van Gogh's works such as "Starry Night" are featured on many items such as handbags, coloring pages, and rugs. His paintings of sunflowers are also very popular. His works have been reproduced and sold all around the world.<sup>29</sup> Even 115 years after his death, Vincent Van Gogh continues to inspire, influence, and triumph in the world of art.

Vincent Van Gogh was indeed a tortured genius. His love for art, eccentric personality, and mental disorders eventually brought about his downfall. His life was a constant struggle between despair, poverty, and loneliness. Though he was not a prosperous artist in his lifetime, he is one of the most famous and well-known artists today. Van Gogh once said, "I certainly hope to sell in the course of time, but I think I shall be able to influence it most effectively by working steadily on, and that at the present moment making desperate efforts to force the work I am doing now upon the public would be pretty useless."<sup>30</sup> He knew that his life was not as others thought it should be, and yet he continued to try his best despite his illness, poverty, and depression and his impression on the art world is a lasting legacy to his passion and his eventual triumph over tragedy.

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<sup>28</sup> Cameron Cross, "The Big Easel," The Big Easel, 11 December 2006  
< <http://www.bigeasel.com/> >.

<sup>29</sup> "Van Gogh's Impact on Art," The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery, 24 September 2006  
< <http://www.vangoghgallery.com/misc/impact.htm> >.

<sup>30</sup> "Vincent Van Gogh," 2006 Artquotes.net, 24 November 2006  
< [http://www.artquotes.net/masters/vangogh\\_biography.htm](http://www.artquotes.net/masters/vangogh_biography.htm) >.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

Brooks, David. "The Letters." 1996-2007. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 24

September 2006 < <http://vggallery.com/letters/main.htm> >.

This site contained the complete collection of letters sent by Vincent Van Gogh to his brother, Theo. These can be used as a primary resource and helped me to see how his life developed.

Van Gogh, Theo. "Letter 1." 1890. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 31 October 2006

< [http://vggallery.com/letters/686\\_T-V\\_T01.pdf](http://vggallery.com/letters/686_T-V_T01.pdf) >

This is a letter from Theo to his mother. It was written after Vincent died. Theo writes about Vincent's death. And this helps me understand how Theo felt about his brother.

Van Gogh, Theo. "Letter T17." 1889. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 31 October

2006 < [http://vggallery.com/letters/768\\_T-V\\_T17.pdf](http://vggallery.com/letters/768_T-V_T17.pdf) >.

This letter was written by Theo to Vincent. Theo says that he is worried about Vincent's health and tells him to take care of himself.

Van Gogh, Vincent. "Letter 95." 1877. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 7 January

2007 < [http://vggallery.com/letters/109\\_V-T\\_095.pdf](http://vggallery.com/letters/109_V-T_095.pdf) >.

This gave me a quote and allowed me to see how Van Gogh felt while he was living in poverty. It gave me information on his work habits.

Van Gogh, Vincent. "Letter 164." 1881. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 31 October

2006 < [http://vggallery.com/letters/186\\_V-T\\_164.pdf](http://vggallery.com/letters/186_V-T_164.pdf) >.

This letter was also sent to Theo by Vincent. In it, Vincent tells Theo of his love for a woman named Kee V.

Van Gogh, Vincent. "Letter 190." 1882. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 31 October 2006 < [http://vvgallery.com/letters/214\\_V-T\\_190.pdf](http://vvgallery.com/letters/214_V-T_190.pdf) >.

This letter tells about Vincent's time in the art store The Hague. He says that it was very dull and boring.

Van Gogh, Vincent. "Letter 328." 1883. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 31 October 2006 < [http://vvgallery.com/letters/384\\_V-T\\_328.pdf](http://vvgallery.com/letters/384_V-T_328.pdf) >.

This is a letter sent by Vincent Van Gogh to his brother, Theo. It tells of his depression during his stay in Drenthe. He is beginning to become sad and unhappy.

5 November 2006 < [http://vvgallery.com/letters/Theo\\_to\\_mother1.pdf](http://vvgallery.com/letters/Theo_to_mother1.pdf) >.

Van Gogh, Vincent. "Letter 502." 1888. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 7 January 2007 < [http://vvgallery.com/letters/611\\_V-T\\_502.pdf](http://vvgallery.com/letters/611_V-T_502.pdf) >.

This letter gave me an idea about how Van Gogh felt about his career as an artist and the income of his career.

Van Gogh, Vincent. "Letter 648." 1890. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 31 October 2006 < [http://vvgallery.com/letters/833\\_V-T\\_648.pdf](http://vvgallery.com/letters/833_V-T_648.pdf) >.

This is a letter to Theo and Jo from Vincent. He discusses the well-being of his nephew and his own health issues.

## Secondary Sources

“Biography: Vincent Van Gogh.” 2006. Expo-Shop.com. 24 September 2006

< <http://www.expo-vangogh.com/2.cfm> >.

This site contained a biography of Vincent Van Gogh. It divided his life into segments according to time periods. This gave me a better idea of when things happened.

Blumer, Dietrich, M.D. “The Illness of Vincent van Gogh.” The American Journal of Psychiatry. (April 2002): 159:519-526

This article told me about the many guesses at the illnesses of Vincent Van Gogh. It gave me the information I needed for my paper.

Brooks, David. “Biography.” 1996-2007. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 27 January 2007 < <http://vggallery.com/misc/bio.htm> >

This site, which contained the complete letters, also offered a biography that I used in my paper. It gave me information on major events in his life.

Brooks, David. “Chronology.” 1996-2007. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 27 January 2007 < <http://vggallery.com/misc/chrono.htm> >

This page contained a chronology that I used to get an idea of the order of events in Van Gogh’s life. It also gave me specific dates of major events.

Cameron Cross. “The Big Easel.” The Big Easel. 11 December 2006.

< <http://www.bigeasel.com/> >

I used this site and its project as an example of art influenced by Van Gogh.

“Chronology.” 2006. The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 24 September 2006

< <http://www.vangoghgallery.com/misc/chrono.htm> >.

This was the chronology of his works and included the name of the work, the date it was completed, and the type of work it was. Using this, I could refer to works in my historical paper.

Cutts, Josephine and James Smith. Van Gogh. New York: Parragon Press, 2006.

This book contained many of Van Gogh's works and comments on each. It also gave information about what was happening in Van Gogh's life at the time of each painting. The book gave me information about Vincent's family.

Greenberg, Jan and Sandra Jordan. Vincent Van Gogh: Portrait of an Artist. New York: Delacorte Press, 2001.

This is also a biography on the life of Vincent Van Gogh. It also gives a detailed description of his life growing up and the events of his life until his death.

Honour, Alan. Tormented Genius: The Struggles of Vincent Van Gogh. New York: William Morrow, 1967.

This book is a biography on Vincent Van Gogh. It tells the story of his life in detail, including his childhood and adolescence. It gives detailed descriptions of his interactions with others and his rebellious behavior towards his parents.

Kline, Donald and Marcela Salamanca. "Vincent Van Gogh." 2002 Art, Vision, & the Disordered Eye. 29 December 2006.

< <http://www.psych.ucalgary.ca/PACE/VA-Lab/AVDE-Website/VanGogh.html> >

This site gave me theories on Van Gogh's mental condition, focusing on visual disorder. It helped me a lot.

Ko, David Y. "Temporal Lobe Epilepsy." 2006 eMedicine.com 27 January 2007.

< <http://www.emedicine.com/NEURO/topic365.htm> >

This site gave me information on temporal lobe epilepsy. It is a condition that Van Gogh is thought to have had.

Read, Kimberly and Marcia Purse. "Vincent Van Gogh." 2006 About.com 29

December 2006. < <http://bipolar.about.com/od/celebrities/p/vangogh.htm> >

This site gave me a quote from Van Gogh and gave me insight on his health and mental condition.

Stefan Duncan. "Living Spirit Art of Squiggism." 2006. Stefan Duncan:

America's Van Gogh. 11 December 2006.

< <http://www.stefanduncangallery.com/> >

This is the site of Stefan Duncan, an artist influenced by Van Gogh. I used him in my paper.

Tralbaut, Mark Edo. Vincent Van Gogh. New York: The Viking Press, 1969.

This is an extensive biography which includes details of his life and artworks. It has pictures of his artwork and includes information about each. It also has maps that show where he lived and traveled.

Van Gogh, Vincent. "Vincent Van Gogh Quotes." 2006. Brainy Quote. 24 September

2006 < [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/v/vincent\\_van\\_gogh.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/v/vincent_van_gogh.html) >.

This site had many quotes by Vincent which I could use in my historical paper.

There were several that described his emotions.

"Vincent Van Gogh." 2006 Artquotes.net. 24 November 2006

< [http://www.artquotes.net/masters/vangogh\\_biography.htm](http://www.artquotes.net/masters/vangogh_biography.htm) >

This site provided me with quotes from Vincent Van Gogh, as well as a timeline of his life.

“Van Gogh’s Impact on Art.” The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery. 24 September 2006

< <http://www.vangoghgallery.com/misc/impact.htm> >

This site gave me information on Van Gogh’s impact on art and other sites of artists influenced by Van Gogh.

Zurcher, Burnard. “Vincent Van Gogh- Art Life and Letters.” 1985. Vincent Van Gogh.

24 September 2006

< [http://www.mezzo-mondo.com/arts/mm/vangogh/van\\_gogh.html](http://www.mezzo-mondo.com/arts/mm/vangogh/van_gogh.html) >.

This article contained information about the number of works that Vincent Van Gogh produced in his lifetime. It also included a personal opinion on the life of Van Gogh by Burnard Zurcher.