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# Van Gogh: An Exploration of Disorder and Aesthetics

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### Vincent Van Gogh: An Exploration of Disorder and Aesthetics

Over the course of art history, there have been numerous figures that have eluded and enthralled the historian. These artists acted not only as representatives of the visual catharses they created, but also as those marginalized and differentiated from social order. The stigma that surrounds the artist is that of someone different or peculiar. The supposedly artist must struggle for the sake of their work. This is noted no more clearly in any other artist's life than that of Vincent Van Gogh. Van Gogh lived with a variety of impairments that affected him on a daily basis. Struggling with both mental and physical disorders that were treated less effectively in the nineteenth century than they are today, Van Gogh lived reclusively in the country and sold only one painting in his lifetime. However, as we now deem him one of the most influential and masterminded painters of not only the Post-Impressionist movement, but also in the history of art, it must be questioned whether his supposed genius is a product of a creative mastermind or a product of that from which ailed him.

Different theories exist in regards to what may have affected Van Gogh. Nearly thirty different diagnoses have been offered. (Blumer, 522) While certain aspects of his conditions are debated as indicators for different disorders, his mental conditions are most often thought to be forms of depression, schizophrenia, manic-depressiveness, and anxiety. (Blumer, Wolfe)

Physically, the artist suffered from epilepsy or Meniere's Disease. (Freedman, 722-724)

Regardless of the specification of diagnosis or the medical anomalies of the nineteenth century, these disorders indicate the trauma of Van Gogh's life. Likewise, they are potential influences on his paintings.

As one could imagine, epilepsy would have caused his hands to shake during minor seizing episodes and could have been brought on by a variety of stimuli. This would explain his reclusiveness, retiring himself to the countryside, as he may have been avoidant of such stimuli triggers. Such triggers were more apparent in urban areas, of course, as can be noted in light of Van Gogh's hatred of Paris.

Some new research, however, suggests that Van Gogh may have, instead, suffered from Meniere's disease as opposed to Epilepsy. Meniere's disease is defined as a disorder of the inner ear that causes severe sensitivity to stimuli. It causes intense vertigo, a sensation of spinning or dizziness, a ringing in the ears, inner ear pressure, and issues regarding visual perception. Light, sound, and scents can act as triggers for those who suffer from this disease. Of course, for someone with such a disorder, busy metropolitan areas, alive with crowded streets and the noisy hustle and bustle of urban life would not be preferable. This could also act as an explanation of Van Gogh's reclusion to the country. Living a quiet, seemingly lonesome life may have decreased the severity of his symptoms. This is reflected in his letters with his brother.

Both Meniere's disease and Epilepsy could have caused blurred vision. Meniere's disease in particular can cause a severe sensitivity to light, making Van Gogh's visual perception

potentially different from others. This may have affected his artwork in a direct way. Rather than choosing to portray the world around him in a way reflective of his predecessors in the Impressionist movement, it may have been that Van Gogh simply saw the world a bit differently. It has to be noted that his style did differ somewhat from that of Monet, Renoir, and even Gauguin whom Van Gogh knew personally. His brushwork indicates a more heavy-handed and rapid quality, There is an element of haste in Van Gogh's work that is not as prevalent in other Post-Impressionist artists' works. His heavy, thick strokes are enriched with vibrant colors, complimenting and overthrowing one another. It could be that Van Gogh created work during his episodes with Meniere's disease; he, having disorientation and struggling with his own vision, sought to paint so as to communicate the world as he was experiencing it in that moment. The severity of his color schematics and the linear quality of his brushwork would, then, be indicative of his own altered perception.

In his works, the color yellow is often utilized to halo and encapsulate objects. It fills his works and creates coronas around stars and objects alike. It is likely that, having been treated with the medical interventions of the nineteenth century, that the drug "digitalis" may have caused an over-exaggeration of yellow in Van Gogh's vision. It must be notes, also, that Van Gogh, suffering from mental issues as well, developed a passion for alcohol. Absinthe, which he was very fond of, has a similar affect. The drink causes the consumer to see everything in a hue of yellow when partaken in excess. (Wolf)

His liking for absinthe was, of course, not his sole mental impairment. As aforementioned, Van Gogh did suffer from a variety of mental disorders that may have affected his artworks. His brother, Theo, described his mental state in a letter to their sister, stating:

“It seems as if he were two persons: one, marvelously gifted, tender and refined, the other, egotistic and hard hearted. They present themselves in turns, so that one hears him talk first in one way, then in the other, and always with arguments on both sides. It is a pity that he is his own enemy, for he makes life hard not only for others but also for himself.”(Benson, 520)

Clearly, his state mentally was troublesome. Observations such as this indicate irrevocably a state of instability and illness. Van Gogh himself stated “I am unable to describe exactly what is the matter with me.” He admitted to his “horrible fits of anxiety, apparently without cause, or otherwise a feeling of emptiness and fatigue” (Blumer, 520) His suffering was immeasurable. Other instances, infamously documented as though derived from mythology, further indicate his “madness.” Van Gogh did, while inebriated with absinthe, cut off his own ear and gift it to a prostitute. This resulted in his relapse into hallucinations and a psychotic episode for which he was placed in solitary confinement. His suicide in 1890 also indicates the severity of his depression. The artist died two days after shooting himself that he “couldn’t stick it out any longer.” (Blumer, 521-522)

Considering these facts, did, indeed, Van Gogh’s impairments act in causation of his artistic style- a style that would one day, be as renowned as it has become? Rather, it could be that he simply embraced the ideas of the Impressionist painters that came before him and that,

in expanding upon their ideas and the style of their words; he derived a particular one of his own. Of course, the artist did keep in correspondence with other artists of his time. He was particularly close for a time to Gauguin, even. He studied the works of other artists. He spent time in Paris alongside his brother and delved into the mass that was the French art scene of the time.

While it does seem as though Van Gogh's choices aesthetically were, in certain ways, a product of his various impairments, they were also very much his own. It must be noted that Van Gogh's stylistic choices do reflect upon those of the other Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. His thick application of paint, carried with short brushstrokes of a seemingly heavy hand, and yet so carefully placed so as to make the colors play off of one another beckons to the artistic ideals of Claude Monet. To gain an impression of the world in front of oneself through the utilization of color and implied shape was to Monet the essence of painting. Van Gogh's works carried this through with a specific fluidity and motion specific to his work. Whether this was a product of his impairments in that his visual perception may have been skewed or simply his take on the techniques of other Post-Impressionist artists may not be something one could conclude.

While it may have been that Van Gogh utilized his art as an escape from his continuous struggle with his various disorders or simply the sad banality of life itself, it may be that he made interesting aesthetic choices as a derivative of both his disorders and of his own choosing. With that being said, Van Gogh developed interesting views on the human existence. He saw it as a long and arduous suffering from which "the most one could give or receive ... was

consolation for its sadness and the strength to accept it.” (Soth, 311) Given this view, Van Gogh created art with the purpose of comforting both himself and his audience. (Soth, 308) Thus, his work was given a purpose.

Van Gogh dedicated himself to his work wholeheartedly, regardless of success. He was intensely and intimately connected to his painting. This is reflected in his letters to his brother, Theo Van Gogh, to whom Vincent wrote on nearly a daily basis. The margins were often filled with sketches to recount his days and records of his experiences as a painter. (Porter, 54-55) His work, therefore, was his own obsession. Van Gogh recounts in one of his letters to his brother that he would even withstand severe weather for the sake of completing a work outdoors. He enjoyed the many things that could occur in the natural environment and the surprises, stating “Go and paint out of doors on the spot itself!” (Porter, 55)

This connection to the natural environment and painting “en plein air” would have enriched his work and fed his obsession with capturing the fleeting moments of reality. Just like the works of Renoir or Cassatt, Van Gogh’s works emphasized natural light. He sought to capture the pure spectacle of the natural environment and the way light played on his subjects. Being highly in tune with nature, Van Gogh sought to depict the fleeting moments of the world around him. Van Gogh stated that “The imagination is certainly a faculty which we must develop, one which alone can lead us to the creation of a more exalting and consoling nature than the single brief glance at reality.” This effort to capture that which was fleeting was the meaning of much of his work. (Soth, 301) It was clearly an aesthetic choice of his that was made of his own volition and outside of the influence of his ailments. He sought to create fuller

meaning for his work than simply another depiction of a natural scene. Constantly seeking out the meaning of his existence, Van Gogh's reality became that of his art. (Benson, 10) Therefore, to capture the fleeting moments of the world – how we view the stars, flowers, and even people was his way of solidifying the singularity and importance of seemingly simple things. He deemed the ordinary things of this world beautiful. Perhaps this comes from his ancestry of Dutch preachers and missionaries. He worshipped his practices in art. The artist went so far as to state in a letter regarding his work on "Starry Night" to his brother that art kept him from "having the terrible need" of religion. (Blumer, 520)

It was for this reason that Van Gogh chose his scenery for his "Starry Night." He wished to attempt what he thought nearly impossible. It preoccupied his thoughts. He saw magic in it. The ever-changing nature of the night sky fascinated him. So, Van Gogh chose to depict the night sky in what may be his best known work so as to "create a more exalting and consoling nature." (Soth, 301) the imagery of the church, trees, and grand landscape are derivatives of the landscape as well as a particular church in France. While having a basis in such imagery as the church in St. Remy, that as abandoned a morphed into the chapel that can be seen in the painting. (Soth, 305) These were all choices Van Gogh made rather than arbitrary effects of his disorders.

With his vast imagination, his fantastic grasp over color and composition, and his sheer ability to manipulate paint, Van Gogh created great and influential works. However, question as to whether Van Gogh's impairments affected his artworks more heavily than simply choices in style is difficult to fully discern. It would seem that for Van Gogh or any artist with a disability



for that matter, that the stylistic choices made and the effects of one's disability coincide. Choices made regarding aesthetics may reflect upon the disability itself or vice versa, thus creating a circular path of reasoning. For instance, Van Gogh lived alone with a variety of mental disorders and severe depressive tendencies. In his supposed madness, he thought that eating yellow paint would make him a happier man. In turn, he favored that color and it is reflected in his works. He chose it purposefully, but with reasons that may have differed from a healthier individual.

His aesthetic choices were derivatives of his world; that which had been corrupted by loneliness and illness. He had been influenced by many of the great painters of his time. He had seen the rise of artworks similar to his own only to see his works never sell. He suffered from addiction and lived with pain on a daily basis. The choices he made aesthetically were, in that manner, his own. They reflected upon his life as well as what he had learned as an artist. He sought out to use his work as a social commentary, even, making his own choices even more apparent, then. While his impairments may have had a strong effect on his works as an artist, his choices lay heavily on the minds of the art world and cannot be ignored as arbitrary side effects from an ill man. Van Gogh, then, while influenced as he must have been, by his suffering, did, indeed, make aesthetic choices of his own doing as well. Therefore, the conclusion is simply that one cannot be had without the other, even if the choices made of his own volition stand in a higher regard.

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