

*Psychoanalysis of Vincent Van Gogh* was written by a junior Psychology major for a course entitled *Contemporary Art* (ART 326), which the author took to fulfill a requirement of the Art History minor. The assignment was to “attack a contemporary art issue in an interdisciplinary manner.” In reviewing the paper, the author identifies Art History and Psychology as disciplines whose concepts, methodologies or modes of inquiry, and/or perspectives are integrated or synthesized. “This was my favorite paper that I wrote, because it combines my two loves: art and psych. I was able to take the skills that I learned in my psychology classes and apply it to my art history class. Taking a psychological approach to art is done pretty often in the art world, and it was interesting to be able to take a close look at how the two fields connect. Even though psychoanalysis isn’t a highly practiced approach in psychology, it definitely opens one’s eyes to different possibilities when used in art.”



# Contemporary Art

11:30MWF

## I. Introduction

## II. The Concept of Psychoanalysis

### A. Psychology of the Artist symposium of psychoanalysts and art historians

1. titled "Van Gogh and Gauguin: Reality and Legend"
2. Van Gogh's work and personality discussed there

### B. Psychoanalysis's development over time

1. early approaches were narrow, excluding nonpsychological factors
2. today the conclusions drawn from psychoanalysis are believed to be overdetermined
  - a. they have multiple causal factors
  - b. these can include history, tradition, representation, and unconscious motivations

### C. Connections between psychoanalysis and aesthetics

1. Kuspit's "agent provocateur": relationship between psychoanalysis and art history
2. shift in both psychoanalysis and aesthetics from a concern with content (character and unconscious drives) toward a focus on form (stylistic strategies)

3. Roger Fry's criticism on emphasizing subject matter which leads analysts to hunt for symbols and to equate art with dreams.
4. Spitz found flaws with Freud's interpretation of art
5. Spitz's psychoanalysis, dealing with conflict, offers insight that isn't available from art history alone
6. Gilbert Rose's belief that art restores feeling to thought
  - a. reunites memories that were lost due to trauma and denial
  - b. many artists have suffered from severe psychopathology

D. Ellen Spitz's three categories of psychoanalysis

1. 'Pathography: The Individual Artist and His Work' which emphasizes the artist determining the repressed libidinal and aggressive wishes
2. 'The Psychoanalysis of Autonomous Texts and Artistic Style' which emphasizes the artwork includes ego psychology's explorations of defense mechanisms
3. 'Psychoanalysis and Aesthetic Experience' which emphasizes the audience's response deals with terms of object-relations theory's conception of preoedipal fusion and symbiosis
4. Spitz found flaws with Freud's interpretation of art

E. Robert Liebert is a reliable psychoanalyst

- different goals than Freud
1. Freud decoded neurotic traits

2. Liebert looks at unconscious conflicts to gain a better understanding of the artwork
3. two ways that art history and pathography are tied together

F. Wolfenstein's mental dualisms

1. sense of helplessness coexists with fantasies of omnipotence
2. rage of abandonment vs. idealized image of parent
3. constant shifting back and forth between real and ideal

III. Van Gogh's relation with the sun

A. his sun paintings were seen as an expression of his personality

B. double bond

1. connecting Van Gogh to the sun-star and the sun-flower
2. the star is opposed to the withered flower
3. the ideal term of the ego is opposed to the real term of the ego
4. in his life: demands of art is opposes to the demand of religion

C. the ear cut off is a "sun torn out of himself"

1. he gave the ear to the prostitute as he wanted to give his painting to people in misery: an unreturnable gift of himself
2. he felt caught between the sun and the sunflower, between death and immortality

3. he saw the morning sun through his barred windows at  
St. Remy

#### IV. Van Gogh's drinking

- A. he drank for a period of time because he "didn't know  
how to do otherwise"
- B. the effects of insanity combined with genius and alcohol
  1. other insane geniuses who drank often used an  
excessive amount of yellow in their pictures
  2. this can be seen in Van Gogh's work

#### V. Art and Healing

- A. Van Gogh decided to commit all of his energy into  
painting
  1. work distracts him from life
  2. believes painting could be the remedy for his mental  
illness
  3. he speculated that art was a healing process before  
art therapy even developed
- B. Van Gogh believed himself to be melancholic
  1. resolved to not lose himself in melancholy but to  
cure himself through painting
  2. painting was an ideal balance between the self's  
affirmation and limitation, between giving and  
receiving

#### VI. Use of color

- A. relationship between the colors and the search for  
uniqueness in style
- B. Sunflower paintings with blue backgrounds

1. use of halos
  2. combination of cadmium yellow background adjacent to chrome-yellow petals
- C. "Fourteen Sunflowers in a Vase"
1. painted it with high hopes, little despair in his life at that time
  2. yellow vase, yellow background
  3. to portray harmony: yellow symbolized love' warmth, and friendship for van Gogh
  4. fifteen sunflowers despite the title
- D. he painted sunflowers while in the hospital for his ear
1. impact on artwork from his personality
  2. almost a self-portrait, not a still life
  3. he paints with color, but also with "self-denial and a broken heart"
- E. "Wheat Field and Cypresses" painting
1. the cypresses are blue combined with cinnabar, green, and a little black
  2. creates tension and contrast, which balances the verticalness of the work
- F. His "Night Cafe'" painting
1. expressing the power of darkness in a public place
  2. use of soft green and malchite, contrasting with
  3. yellow-green and blue-green
  4. compared to the devil's furnace
- G. His room at St. Remy
1. greenish-gray wallpaper, two sea-green curtains with

pale roses that had a little "blood-red" in them

2. connection between his room and how the colors affected his paintings' color

H. He copied Delacroix and Millet's

1. putting color into their black-and-white pieces
2. searching and interpreting what colors fit best

I. Portrait of Dr. Gachet

1. a sense of melancholy
2. painted a variety of blues
3. two months before his suicide

J. Using psychological symbolism to interpret the use of these certain colors in Van Gogh's artwork

VII. Comparing Van Gogh to other Schizophrenic artists

A. Copying previous artists' work

1. he felt that making copies of artwork teaches him things and gives him consolation
2. this pattern is seen in other schizophrenic artists

VIII. Composition

A. the Gachet portrait

1. the figure off-center
2. emphasizes mood of the subject
3. the weight of van Gogh's despair seems to be on the doctor

B. portrait of the Roulin

1. the figure is centered
2. a sense of a solid and strong figure
3. Roulin was like a father to Van Gogh

4. connection to wanting a better relationship with his real father

## IX. Debt

- A. Theo provided van Gogh with not only financial but emotional support
- B. He felt extreme guilt and burdened by his lack of ability to pay back Theo for all he had done
- C. led to severe depression while at St. Remy
- D. His obsession of not wanting to be in debt drove him to suicide

## X. Opposition in Van Gogh's art

- A. Meyer Schapiro's counterpart elements
  1. contrasts in art between color or direction
  2. gave Van Gogh's paintings an agonizing yet powerful quality
  3. use of self-conflicted forms (trees crossed into X-form)
  4. use of hyperactivated surfaces or textures and perspective space of unrealistic steepness
- B. Shapiro's technique of coloristic contrasts

## XI. Mental Illness

- A. He always remained sane enough to correspond with his brother
- B. On December 24, 1888, Van Gogh cut off half of his ear
  1. stemming from the tensions that were building between he and Gauguin
  2. the turning point for Van Gogh in his life and art

C. Karl Jaspers diagnosed Van Gogh as schizophrenic in 1922

D. Doctors have said his work is symptomatic of epilepsy

E. Parallels with schizophrenia and Van Gogh's work

F. Parallels with epilepsy and Van Gogh's work

1. Van Gogh knew that his symptoms were consistent with epilepsy

2. Van Gogh knew that other epileptics had committed actions similar to his during seizures, including cutting their ears

3. he chased children and grabbed women's breasts

G. Van Gogh's views on struggling with the illness

1. ranging from periods of lucidity and clarity between attacks

2. during the attacks he feels cowardly before the pain

3. trying to recover "like a man who meant to commit suicide and, finding the water too cold, tries to regain the bank"

## XII. Textural effects

A. Kuspit's analysis of van Gogh's combination of heaps of impasto and touchable line

1. turns viewing the work into an "intense touching"

2. everything (clouds, sky, stars) is made into "flesh"

## XIII. Van Gogh's Gauguin's Chair

A. erect candle sitting on the "feminine" curve of the chair

1. van Gogh's desire for Gauguin as a "phallic mother"

2. a psychologically clever portrait of Gauguin

#### XIV. Repetition

##### A. Combining genres: still life, portrait, and landscape

1. the sunflowers that he often painted also became the background for Portrait of Joseph Roulin
2. the flowers and the dots between them look like the night sky
3. the swirls in Joseph's beard seem to lead to the vortices of The Starry Night
4. Joseph's beard's pattern of swirls is also seen in the clouds in Wheat Field and Cypresses

#### XV. Letters to Theo

##### A. October 1888

1. Van Gogh felt guilty for not producing artwork that would sell
2. He was willing to put all of his physical and mental
3. abilities into creating art
4. this is a foreshadowing of his breakdown/attack that occurred in December

##### B. October 1889-depression

##### C. February 1890

##### D. May 1890

#### XVI. Conclusion

Psychoanalysis has been used to interpret both artists and their artwork since the introduction of the idea by Sigmund Freud. Though much has changed since his time, art has continued to be an important area for psychologists to examine. Vincent Van Gogh's life and work is an obvious candidate for analysis, because he had both depression and a mental illness, and meanwhile created an art that had an aesthetic of its own. Although the answers that lie buried behind his paintings may never be confirmed, psychoanalysis is a way to tie his life to his work, and expand on how they interact and overlap. To psychoanalyze Van Gogh, one must first look at the processes of past psychoanalysts, and from there form a series of steps that will link the artist's life to his use of color, technique, subject matter, and other common trends.

The overlap of art history and psychology has developed beyond the scope of Freudian interpretation and has enveloped many additional theoretical methods for psychoanalyzing art. Ellen Spitz has divided the concept of psychoanalysis into three modes of emphasis: the artist, the artwork, or the audience's response. The first category is referred to as "Pathography: the individual artist and his work" which connects artwork to the artist's personality; the second is "Psychoanalysis of autonomous texts and artistic style" which attempts to reveal the unconscious structure of the work; and the third is called "Psychoanalysis and aesthetic experience" which compares the infant's interactions with objects to the adult's enjoyment of culture. In the application of psychoanalysis, when dealing with

art, the three areas are sure to overlap (Spitz 184). To interpret Van Gogh's work, the first two areas seem to be the most significant because they look at the artist's work and the unconscious influence of the artist's life. These can contribute the most support to an analysis of Van Gogh.

The first psychoanalysis of art was attempted by Freud. His *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* contains many problematic aspects of psychoanalysis due to it being the preliminary study of a piece of artwork. Freud had a loose grip on the facts of Leonardo's life, basing his interpretation upon questionable, unsupported evidence of a single occurrence in the artist's life: Leonardo's separation from his father for the first five years of his life. In addition, Freud committed two other errors: projecting his own emotions and experiences onto the artist and turning the artist into a general psychoanalytic idea. Despite Freud's major flaws, his skillful application of intuition and use of empathy in his interpretation were noteworthy aspects and have led to improving the theory and application of psychoanalysis (Spitz 184). By reviewing Freud's attempt at psychoanalysis, it is apparent that a complete understanding of Van Gogh's life is important. The psychoanalysis should not focus on only a single event that occurred during his life, and personal emotions and beliefs of the analyzer must be kept separate from the psychoanalysis of Van Gogh.

As psychoanalysis grew, its methodology changed as it continued to develop. In Robert Liebert's *Michelangelo: a*

*psychoanalytic study of his life and images*, the use of psychoanalysis is developed much further than Freud's. Liebert thoroughly acquainted himself with the substantial literature about the artist, and he could therefore support his interpretation with many primary and secondary sources. Rather than trying to decode the neurotic traits of the artist as Freud did, Liebert focuses on Michelangelo's unconscious conflicts to gain a better understanding of the artwork (Spitz 185). This is a necessity and must be adhered to when completing a psychoanalysis of art. To bring psychoanalysis to its fullest potential of accuracy, a combination of methods should be taken into account, with an emphasis on pathography (the artist), psychoanalysis and artistic style (the artwork), and Liebert's method of heavy documentation.

To begin a psychoanalysis of Van Gogh's artwork, one must first examine and thoroughly interpret how the unfortunate circumstances of his life affected his work, sometimes unconsciously. By looking at Van Gogh's childhood, one can see how his life influenced his paintings. His mother and father were unsuited as parents. They gave him the same name as his still-born brother who was born exactly a year before Van Gogh's birthday (Hanson 18). Many psychoanalysis tie great importance to this fact, and agree that the tombstone with the name of his dead brother on it must have made a deep impression on the second Vincent, making him feel like the substitute (Hulsker 160). His parents could not deal with the trauma of losing their first son. His father built a barrier between them and allowed for no

intimacy, while his mother took her grief out on Van Gogh, who lived in the shadow of his dead brother. It was often that Van Gogh was compared to the first Vincent, who was said to be the model son. Van Gogh realized that it was useless to compete with perfection; he could never be loved as his parents loved his dead brother (Hanson 18). He came to believe that he was the symbol of everything bad and felt he could only attain the perfection of his brother by suffering and, finally, dying (Collins 57).

The use of color in Van Gogh's paintings can be psychoanalyzed to reflect his emotions and madness. Van Gogh used color to express his inner feelings, both conscious and unconscious. Persons troubled with mental disturbances are greatly affected by the significance of color and its meaning (Birren 151). These color choices can then be interpreted by looking into the psychological symbolism of color. The color that an artist uses represents his/her view of the world as well. Normal people who are or attempt to be well adjusted to the world are "outwardly integrated" and prefer warm colors, while those who have a detached, split-away attitude toward the world are "inwardly integrated" people and favor cool colors. They are emotionally cold and reserved (Birren 138). One particular warm color that Van Gogh used a tremendous amount of, prior to the onset of his mental illness, was yellow (Jirat-Wasiutynski 647). Those who have regressed to or have failed to progress beyond an infantile level prefer yellow as a color choice, as do depressed persons (Birren 171). Van Gogh surely was depressed, and he may have been in the infantile state due to the lack of a name of

his own, a lack of identity. According to George Inness's extensive study of color use in art, yellow presents an idea of something brilliant, corresponding to what is natural and external (Promey 46). This is relevant in his many depictions of a yellow sky, sun, or flower. Van Gogh found much happiness in painting all day under the hot sun; maybe he felt the happiest, and therefore sane, when with nature. Van Gogh himself believed yellow to represent love, warmth, and friendship (Phillips 40). He conveyed this by painting several sunflower paintings as a welcome for Gauguin who came to live with Van Gogh. Both the idealistic feelings and use of yellow died quickly after Van Gogh's mental breakdown, and were replaced by colors that better defined how he felt.

After his attack in December 1889 which sparked the downward slope of Van Gogh's sanity, a change to less dramatic colors such as grays, greens, and blues is obvious (Hanson 261). Van Gogh's series of sunflower paintings, beginning before his breakdown, were an explosion of yellow, but in contrast, his cypress paintings from the asylum were dark green, almost black (Jirat-Wasiutynski 647). Green is a symbol of nature, signifying hope of eternal life and growth, while black is symbolic of sorrow, death, and grief (Birren 171). The use of these colors in his cypress paintings reflects his want of a cure, but the inevitable hopelessness of being in an asylum the rest of his life. In addition, these colors can be tied to his career: Van Gogh continued to paint, hoping to become a success, yet he remained a poor and unrecognized artist. The colors used during Van Gogh's

last months seem to be glaring, almost brutal, and filled with tension that came from inside him (Jaspers 176). In the 1890 portrait of Dr. Gachet, Van Gogh painted an extensive mixture of blues two months before his suicide (Phillips 74). Inness said that excessive blue in art reflects coldness (Promey 46). This may be Van Gogh's way of detaching from the world that never let him be a success nor let his mind be free of illness, and therefore, preparing for his eventual escape through suicide. He wrote to his brother Theo that he painted "not only with color, but with self-denial and self-renunciation, and with a broken heart." (Michaud 33). When speaking of his abrupt change of color choice, he says: "And so I am struggling for life and progress in art." (Hulsker 90). It is apparent that Van Gogh used color to represent his thoughts and emotions, in both obvious and unconscious ways; after his state of mind was severely altered, so was his choice of color.

Van Gogh's brush strokes are also psychoanalytically representational of his madness. He is well-known for his circular, coiled, and spiral brush strokes (Jaspers 175). These techniques may have stemmed from the blowing mistral that was said to have frightened and unnerved Van Gogh, adding to the disruption and disorganization of his illness. This led to his restless, frenzied strokes of fury and intensity, as if his madness was limiting his time to paint (Meissner 283). In Van Gogh's letters to Theo, he speaks of these mistrals: "It is quite impossible to do anything in this wind. The sky is a hard blue with a great bright sun which has melted almost all the snow, but

the wind is cold and so dry that it gives you gooseflesh." (Hulsker 101). Van Gogh may have let the mistral frustrate him so much that he could only let his aggression out through his quick, almost violent brush strokes. Even he noticed the change as he described to Theo: "My brush stroke has no system at all. I hit the canvas with irregular touches of the brush, which I leave as they are. Patches of thickly laid on color, spots of canvas left uncovered, here and there portions that are left absolutely unfinished, repetitions, savageries." (Hulsker 101). In this way, he let his emotions escape through his technique of painting.

The subject matter that emerged on Van Gogh's canvases are also connected to his mental instability. Through his series of sunflower paintings, one can see how both the flowers and the sun held importance for Van Gogh. His life and painting were both dominated by his relationship, both literally and metaphorically, with the sun. The artist, comparing himself to the people who slaved under the sun reaping corn, was a slave to the scorching sun under which he would paint at great lengths. He associated this slavery with death, yet was not sad or resentful but accepting (Hanson 267). His sun paintings can be read as an expression of his personality and of his illness. He explained to Theo that "there is a bit of the sunflower in me" (Michaud 25). The sun has a strong relationship with sunflowers not only in their similar appearance, but also in the psychological theme that binds them: the double bond that unites the two. The sun is linked to the withered flower, as the ideal term is linked to the

real term of the ego. The relationship of the sun and sunflower can also be applied to the relationship between Vincent and Theo. They had alternating roles as the sun, which provides warmth for the other, and as the sunflower, which wilts and perishes from the excessive heat that it nonetheless seeks. Vincent refused to be only the sunflower, devoted to withering to death, or to be only the sun, devoted to destroying in the process of giving warmth and life. To be constantly caught between the two roles was torture in that he saw it as being caught between death and immortality (Michaud 37).

The sunflowers series continues to be the most mysterious of all of Van Gogh's work. Interestingly, he referred to three of his versions of sunflower paintings as having only fourteen flowers, yet in the actual painting, fifteen flowers are shown (Phillips 40). Gilbert Rose says that art reunites memories and perceptions, and influences which may have been lost due to trauma and denial (Spitz 124). In this way, the fifteenth sunflower could be psychoanalytically interpreted as representing the first Vincent born into the Van Gogh family. Van Gogh's act of ignoring the extra flower when giving the painting a title could be his way of blocking out his dead brother's constant, haunting presence throughout childhood. Like the extra sunflower was a part of the painting despite the title, the brother was a part of Van Gogh's life and family despite his death. In addition, the sunflowers series included a mixture of both wilted and blooming flowers. These may have represented his varying bouts of sanity mixed with insanity, tremors with calm.

Van Gogh's passion for landscape painting as subject matter can also be analyzed psychologically. After his attack in 1889, his painting began to reflect the inner turmoil of a chaotic mental illness: the mountains are convulsed, the clouds swirl with rage, the stars explode, the trees writhe, and the background blends with foreground (Meissner 283). Although there were fields, gardens, and orchards around the asylum, Van Gogh chose to paint the rugged hills, old plantations of olives, and clumps of wind-blown cypresses. This harsher landscape can be seen as a mirror of the artist's state of mind; he picked a scene that reflected his feelings. Cypress trees were planted in cemeteries in Mediterranean countries, and have been associated with death and was a symbol of immortality (Jirat-Wasiutynski 647). The cypress trees may have been Van Gogh's connection to cemeteries, death, and his still-born brother. The death of the first Vincent had such an impact on Van Gogh's life, leading to a constant struggle for a self-identity, that it is very possible that symbols or reminders of the incident would appear in his paintings.

In addition to cypress trees, Van Gogh painted wheatfields. He wrote Theo: "In every man who is healthy and natural there is a germinating force as in a grain of wheat. And so natural life is germination. What the germinating force is in the grain of wheat, love is in us." (Hulsker 94). By painting a series of wheatfields, Van Gogh may have been searching for this love, because he was shown so little in life. In his work, the endless fields of wheat may have resembled his endless search for love.

In July of 1890 he painted three large canvases of wheatfields. He wrote to his brother: "They are vast fields of wheat under troubled skies, and I did not need to go out of my way to try to express sadness and extreme loneliness...I myself am quite absorbed in the immense plain with wheatfields against the hills, boundless as a sea...I am in a mood of almost too much calmness, in the mood to paint this." He also states: "Another landscape with nothing but a green field of wheat, stretching away to a white country house, surrounded by a white wall with a single tree." These words to Theo also lend support to the idea that Van Gogh is in search of something within these fields. The tree in the field may actually be him in the middle of a seemingly endless impossible search. It may also be that, with this mood of calmness, he is accepting his fate of mental illness and failure as a painter. His calm may come from knowing that he will soon be far away from any of his hardships; he may have, at this point, been planning his suicide.

Psychoanalysis also gives way to the trend of opposition, which is a continuous stream throughout Van Gogh's painting. There are competing goals that bring tension into his work through opposition (Kuspit 50). These oppositions are contradictory emotions of the artist that emerge into the art, creating visual arguments (McNiff 45). These include such things as complementary colors and contradictory subject matter with in the work. Van Gogh wrote: "I have just finished two pictures of the hospital, one of the inner court...It is a picture quite full of flowers and vernal green. However, three gloomy black tree

trunks pass through it like serpents, and in the fore ground four big dismal clusters of somber box shrub." (Hulsker 138). In addition to obvious opposites in his work, the often opposite relationship he had with his brother may also have had an effect on his work. In his letters to Theo, Van Gogh has described the two brothers as opposites, on opposite sides of the barricades, "minds that cannot agree" (Michaud 34). This opposition upset Van Gogh, seen in his writing: "One cannot always tell what it is that keeps us shut in, confines us, seems to bury us; nevertheless, one feels certain barriers, certain gates, certain walls." (Hulsker 165). It makes sense that Van Gogh took advantage of the portrayal of opposites, because during his life he had the opposite of love: differences, estrangements, disappointments, hate, and no hope (Hanson 242). By putting opposites in his paintings, Van Gogh may have been trying to balance out the contradictions that life throws at a person; he may have been trying to break down the barriers between him and his brother by building barriers within his artwork.

Both unconsciously and consciously, Van Gogh gave the world himself through his artwork. His childhood, his relationships, his feelings, his emotions, and his torment of mental illness are all revealed through his painting. Psychoanalysis can be tricky, especially when interpreting art, so it is very important to cover several bases, not just focus on one area. Looking at Van Gogh's letters to Theo and specific pieces of his artwork help to decode the psychological trends that are apparent when dealing with the artist. No interpretation except Van Gogh's would be

fool-proof, but having scholarly support helps to make intuitive conclusions about Vincent Van Gogh.

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