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Belief Even Unto Martyrdom

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BELIEF EVEN UNTO MARTYRDOM

A Special Studies (H491)

Presented to

Miss Fay Holiman

By

Susan Murray

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207

Introduction

From the title of this Special Studies project it is perhaps difficult to determine that it is about Vincent van Gogh--the sensitive Dutch boy--the passionate artist--the rejected man. With this short summary of his life and the trials, the problems, and the love, I hope to show how the statement "belief even unto martyrdom" applies to van Gogh. I further will endeavor to prove that Vincent van Gogh was the father of the modern Expressionist movement.

Belief Even Unto Martyrdom

Vincent van Gogh was a Dutch painter whose tragic life and brilliant canvases have made him almost a legend. Much of his life was spent in a tragically slow struggle to discover himself as an artist. Everything about him is so strikingly interesting.

Vincent Willem van Gogh was born on March 30, 1853, at Groot-Zundert in the Netherlands. He was the eldest son of Theodorus van Gogh, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, and Anna Cornelia Carpentus, the daughter of a well-known bookbinder in the Hague. Theodorus, who had a strong family feeling and was greatly attached to his parents, was gentle and kind, but narrowminded, holding inflexible views on right and wrong. Anna was "domineering, energetic, forceful, hot-tempered and highly emotional, possibly to the point of hysteria--the history of her children suggests it."¹ Vincent had two brothers, Theo, whom he loved deeply, and Cornelis, as well as three sisters, Anna, Elisabeth and Willhelmina. The van Goghs were middle-class citizens living narrow and monotonous lives.

As a young boy, Vincent was extremely sensitive, but sturdy, tough and plucky. He is described as a short, thick-set boy with red hair and strangely green eyes. The family felt Vincent to be an intruder and avoided intimacy with him.

He was frustrated and misunderstood as a child, not given his due meed of affection, who ended as a man without roots in rebellion or bewilderment, almost always embittered. Van Gogh spent four years, 1864-1868, at an institute at Zevenberger, where he received his education.

Three of his uncles were picture-dealers, one of them carrying on business in the Hague. At the age of sixteen, in 1868, Vincent became an assistant with Goupil and company, an international firm of art dealers, having shops in the Hague, Paris, and London. In 1873 he joined the Goupil branch in London.

About this time, his unhappy love affair with an English schoolmistress, Ursula Loyer, accentuated his inferiority complex. This was the first violent inner conflict which he faced and it brought about an intense interest in literature, religion, and art. Contact with his immediate environment became more difficult.²

In 1875 van Gogh was transferred to Goupil in Paris where he lived in complete isolation and devoted himself to a fanatical study of the Bible. After being dismissed by Goupil in 1876, he made five unsuccessful attempts to achieve something in society along the lines of his religious desires. He was an assistant schoolmaster in Mr. Stokes' boarding school at Ramsgate in England from April to June of 1876. Van Gogh then accepted a position as schoolmaster and curate at the Jones Methodist School at Iselworth. From April to June of 1877 he was employed in

a bookstore at Dordrecht, Holland. His family rescued him from despair and gave him the tuition for the entrance examination at a theological college, which he had to give up after many unprofitable months of study. After taking a three month course in a school for missionaries, Vincent became an evangelist in the Borinage, a coal mining district in Belgium, to preach to poverty-stricken miners. He proved inadequate as a preacher, and his appointment was cancelled. This was the turning point of his life: out of a religious tension a creative tension was born.

In April of 1881, van Gogh set off for Brussels to study art. He was supported by his brother Theo. After a violent and impossible love affair with his niece, Kee Vos, Vincent married a prostitute named Sien. At the end of 1881, he left for the Hague where he took painting lessons from Anton Mauve. It was at the Hague that Vincent became aware of the kind of man he was and of his vocation.

He went to the province of Drenthe to convalesce from malnutrition, but in 1883, he fled for refuge to the parsonage of his father at Nuenen. He was welcomed into the family, but never forgiven for his association with Sien. He began to paint dark, haunting domestic scenes of peasant poverty. This culminated in some fifty portraits painted as studies for the large painting "The Potato Eaters," the masterpiece of his early period.

Van Gogh became a pupil of the Academy at Antwerp, following his father's death in 1885. He was put in a preparatory

class because the professor considered his drawing inadequate. He studied Rubens and Japanese woodcuts and learned how to brighten the colors of his portraits.

Van Gogh's brother Theo made it possible for him to continue his studies in Paris (1886-1888) under Cormon. Here he came in contact with Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Seurat, Bernard, and Pissarro. His work had become lighter, more nervous and extremely sensitive to influences. Vincent made contact with the Impressionists but he did not follow them in their ways. On Lautrec's advice, Vincent left Paris in February of 1888 to seek intense colors of Provencal landscape at Arles. The first summer at Arles he produced some of his best known paintings, such as "Sunflowers", "The Bridge", "The Chair and the Pipe", and "The Harvest". The sun became his symbol during this period.

Van Gogh invited Gauguin to come to Arles and found a community of artists called the "House of Friends". The visit was not a successful one--the contrast between the men could scarcely have been more marked. A dispute arose over a portrait of van Gogh which Gauguin was painting--a cruel piece of work, clever, like yet unlike, a half truth. The tormented Vincent watched every move of Gauguin. Gauguin was crossing the Place Lamartine when he heard familiar footsteps--short, quick, uneven--behind him. Vincent was coming for him with an open razor blade in hand. Gauguin spoke to him sharply and Vincent turned away without a struggle. He ran into the house without speaking, stood before a mirror

and hacked off part of his left ear with the razor. He tied a scarf around his head, wrapped his ear in paper and carried it to a girl in a brothel.³ Nevertheless, van Gogh was truly happy at Arles. He accumulated some two hundred paintings and drawings.

Van Gogh's mental state caused him to take up residence voluntarily in the Asylum of St. Paul at St. Remy. The greyness of his earlier period returned and lines were more uneven and turbulent. The sun declined as the main symbol, and the moon and stars became predominant.

In January of 1890 the well-monthly "Mercure de France" published the first enthusiastic article on the work of Vincent van Gogh, written by Albert Auver, the art critic. On the twenty first of May in 1890, Vincent went to Auvers-sur-Oise and called upon Dr. Paul-Ferdinand Gachet whom he visited regularly after that time. Dr. Gachet was very much interested in painting and Vincent made several portraits of him. He was still not at peace with himself or the world. One witness stated in describing van Gogh: "You've found exactly the right word; depressed, perhaps tormented and most certainly afflicted."⁴ His work became extremely uneven as his condition became more unbalanced. His style of painting was getting slack, his line hardening, his touch going astray and his color diminishing.

On a Sunday when the village was almost empty, Vincent left Ravoux' place and walked toward the hamlet of Chaponval. He entered a farmyard, concealed himself and fired a revolver

bullet into his groin. He returned to the Ravoux cafe and collapsed like an injured animal. Theo came to Vincent when he heard that he was mortally wounded. He died after uttering these words: "No use, I shall never be rid of this depression."⁵ It was only in the grave that he found the rest which had been denied to him in life.

The art and life of Vincent van Gogh are so closely interwoven, so inseparably bound up with one another, that it is almost impossible to describe them separately. His work followed no one direction or programme. He was a missionary who painted: he was a painter with social ideas. His life is the tale of a lonely heart which beat within the walls of a dark prison, longing and suffering without knowing why. Van Gogh spent most of his life seeking amidst sorrow, pain and despair after the simplest, the most obvious thing in existence, the sun, and died as soon as he had found it.⁶ The life of the artist was an uninterrupted giving of himself, and his painting was nothing but the most adequate means of giving himself. The violence of his love did not bring him within the community of man, but separated him from it.

"The singularity of van Gogh's life lies in the fact that art was for him a personal destiny in the fullest sense: first as heritage in his family of art dealers, which brought him early into touch with art and determined his unsuccessful profession as picture salesman--then as a choice made for personal salvation, after he had failed in a religious

mission as evangelist in the Borinage."⁷ The choice on which he staked his life sent him back to Holland among the peasants, pushed him on to Paris for maturation, to Arles for release from conflicts with Parisian artistic life, to the asylum of Saint-Remy, and to Auvers, in preparation for return to Paris--and there to suicide. What is most important is that van Gogh converted all this aspiration and anguish into his art, which thus became the first example of a truly personal art, art as a deeply lived means of spiritual salvation or transformation of the self; and he did this by a most radical handling of the substance of his art.

Every stage of his art has a personal meaning--his career as an artist is a high religious-moral drama and not only a rapid development of a new style and new possibilities of art. His art is the reflection of a tortured and unhappy personality and its influence lies on the highly emotionalized contemporary method known as Expressionism. During the decade before the First World War, his effect was at its strongest, particularly in Germany where the Expressionist movement developed.⁸ Although he devoted only nine years to intense art, he created fresh domains for painting and paved the way for a school of painters that has not yet attained the summits reached by him. Van Gogh stated: "Art is nature, reality, truth, but with a significance, a conception and a character which the artist alone can express."⁹ Van Gogh further said concerning his art: "Real painters are guided by their conscience, which is called feeling, and by their

soul....What I try to capture is not a mathematically accurate head, but an expression. In short, life."¹⁰ His goal was to express more than the tangible truth: "To express hope with a star. The ardor of a being with the radiance of the setting sun."¹¹

Van Gogh first came to art in Holland. With his characteristic emotional intensity, he threw himself into the work of comforting the people of the little town of Wasmès (Borinage). His decision to give himself to others, to love and be worthy of love made him a peasant painter. The work of van Gogh, even from the beginning, is the result of his own emotional approach, his passionate love and sympathy for the poor unfortunates who were his friends.¹² A typical example of the first phase of drawing is "Dead Woman" which had dramatic light and dark contrasts, ugly angularity of form and features against the stark poverty of its surroundings. Exaggerations and distortions of this kind, the profound feeling of inner emotion poured into the form, make the young artist an unselfconscious Expressionist whose approach will be mirrored again and again in works of painters of twentieth century Germany.¹³

Many unusual paintings were done by van Gogh in a period at Neunen with his parents (1884-1885). These paintings, such as "The Potato Eaters", were done in the "green soap" manner.¹⁴ Certain later Expressionists have this same view that peasant life represents a kind of primitive honesty and simplicity which the modern world needs badly. Van Gogh felt

it necessary to feel his way into his subjects, as did later Expressionists, and he approached his subjects from an emotional and systematic point of view rather than an aesthetic one.

Van Gogh discovered the senses and a world of light and color which he had lacked when he went to Paris (1886-1888). Having outgrown Impressionism, Paris was looking for an art like his. The painting "Montmartre" is an example of this period.

At Arles (1888) his expressionism found a fixed point. He made no distinction between subject and object. Intensity became his first aim; he presented a firm, clear and advancing image exalted by daring color.¹⁵ Light was an emanation from flattened shadowless objects. The sun was the most vivid and radiant object of all. All distance was abolished. There was an emphasis on the psychological rather than physical and color was used as a vehicle for strong emotions. "The Bridge at Arles", a painting of the Pont de l'Anglois, is representative of this period. The picture not only represents the bridge, but the artist himself. He is a bridge who wishes to fill in a gap, an isolation, which dreams of uniting on earth the towns and the countryside, and also the earth with the stars.¹⁶ Van Gogh believed fanatically that he could not make a representation of appearance, but the essence of reality in the image. This conviction was not of a religious nature, but magical-realist and expressive. His penetrating realism has no forerunners in

the old art, but was the beginning of a new technique of expression. During this period at Arles, van Gogh painted forty-six portraits. This love of portraiture is not surprising in a man so deeply attached to humanity. The new coloring of face opened the way for poetic searching of personality in its varied course of feeling. Yellow symbolized love and blue was infinity.¹⁷ The demonic and evil entered his symbolism of color: "I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by red and green."¹⁸

This supremely vital art was interrupted by attacks of insanity. The precise nature of his illness is uncertain, but recent medical studies have viewed it as epileptic process.¹⁹ During this period of alternating crises and recovery, he produced some of his greatest works, which have an aspect of strained intensity. Nature reflects all the emotional contrasts struggling for possession of the artist's soul. A cyclone of emotion that causes vegetation to writhe and clouds to pile up tumultuously is found in "Landscape with Cypresses".²⁰ Nearness and remoteness were both striving qualities to which he gave a live expression. The distances in his paintings gave an effect of active movement toward the horizon. To modern artists, these perspective schemes appeal as abstract forms--pure expressions vested in the shapes as such, without regard to the world they represent.²¹ The object became a symbol and guarantee of sanity. There were continuous coiling, wavy forms and a complicated network of sharply angular and jagged, diagonal lines.

The vivid forms are essential elements of a style of high excitation and strain. Unstable forms were the typical patterns of the self in its entanglement and wild impulsiveness.

At Auvers, he continued to struggle with these alternatives. He gave the quality of compulsion and pathos, as if driven by anxiety to achieve the most rapid contact with the world. He hastened to converge parallel lines, exaggerating the extremities in space. His work at Auvers passed through an extraordinary wave of stormy feeling.

In only ten years, he set down in words and paint some of the most sympathetic and moving ideas of any artist anywhere. His message was not destined for form-conscious cubists, but rather for the French and German Expressionists. Many evidences of his influence can be found in the main points of modern Expressionism:

1. A respect for the canvas as a two-dimensional field which must have an integrity or unity of its own. To preserve the picture field, to endow it with a creative value, which makes it different from nature, is a first aim of Expressionistic art.
2. The artist arranges volumes, planes, lines, colors, and textures in order determined by a feeling he has experienced.
3. There is a main direction of movement and an enriching minor counterplay of backward-forward movement.
4. The search for means to fix the play of movement has led to increased abstraction and an attempt to reveal the expressive form quality.

5. The abstract links with mystic's search for personal identification with rhythm at the heart of the universe.
6. A new intensity of expression is brought about by increased precision of feeling in regard to materials and method; capitalization upon freshly discovered or understood potentialities of color, movement, etc.²²

Van Gogh and his Expressionist followers looked at the world from the inside. The French and Germans derived entirely different influences from the works of Van Gogh.

The Germans absorbed from the French what was most useful to them and adapted it in a characteristically German manner, so that their art avoided the relatively abstract post-Impressionist art of Cezanne and Seurat. They went directly from van Gogh and Gauguin to the inward-searching method known as Expressionism. The Germans took from van Gogh his heavy passionate quality and frenzy, while the French gained a free technique and brilliance of color.²³ Van Gogh and his tortured mysticism, his ardent yearning expressed in writhing colors and twisted forms, is unquestionably one of the greatest antecedents of the Expressionist movement.

Jay Holman

Footnotes

¹Lawrence Hanson and Elizabeth Hanson, Passionate Pilgrim (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 3.

²A.M. Hammacher, Vincent Van Gogh (London: Spring Books, 1961), p. 26.

³Hanson, p. 235.

⁴Frank Elgar, Van Gogh (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publisher, 1958), p. 246.

⁵Ibid., p. 258.

⁶Wilhelm Uhde, Vincent Van Gogh (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 9.

⁷Meyer Schapiro, Van Gogh (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publisher, 1950), p. 11.

⁸Bernard Meyers, Modern Art in the Making (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1950), p. 235.

⁹Hanson, p. 60.

¹⁰Robert Crandall (ed.), Encyclopedia of World Art (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1961), p. 699.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Meyers, p. 237.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 238.

¹⁵Schapiro, p. 13.

¹⁶Hammacher, p. 12.

¹⁷Schapiro, p. 19.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 22.

²⁰Meyers, p. 244.

²¹Schapiro, p. 31.

²²Sheldon Cheney, Expressionism in Art (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 1958), p. 61.

²³Meyers, p. 333.

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