QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis
Dutch Post-Impressionist Vincent van Gogh's unique vision, brushwork and use of color provide stylistic links from Impressionism to the conceptual practice of Abstract Expressionism. Although he produced his most acclaimed work in a span of less than three years, his technique, subject matter, sense of movement and vibration in his compositions influenced many artists of his day and of the future. His gestural use of line and distortion of reality for emotional effect became a guiding principle for the Abstract Expressionist artists of the New York School.

Key Ideas
• Van Gogh's dedication to articulating the inner spirituality of man and nature led to a unique fusion of style and content that resulted in dramatic, imaginative, rhythmic, and emotional canvases.
• His personal temperament came to symbolize the romantic image of the tortured artist and was an icon of self-destructive talent that would be echoed in the lives of many artists in the 20th century and beyond.
• Van Gogh used an impulsive, gestural application of paint and symbolic colors to express subjective emotions. These methods and practice came to define Abstract Expressionism.

DETAILED VIEW:
Childhood
Vincent van Gogh was born the second of six children into a religious Dutch Reformed Christian family. His father, Theodorus van Gogh, was a clergyman and his mother, Anna Cornelia Carbentus, was the daughter of a bookseller. Van Gogh exhibited unstable
moods during his childhood, and showed no early inclination toward art making, though he excelled at languages while attending two boarding schools. He left formal schooling at fifteen and the following year moved to Paris.

**Early Training**

In 1869, Van Gogh apprenticed at the headquarters of Goupil & Cie, international art dealers. Van Gogh was transferred to several offices of Goupil & Cie, in Brussels, where he studied anatomical and perspective drawing, and at The Hague. In 1873, Van Gogh moved to the London office and, despite his daily contact with artists and works of art, he became depressed and turned to God. He attended exhibitions and decorated his rooms with his favorite works, but continued to feel lost. After many further transfers, he was let go from his position and became a clergyman. In 1880, Van Gogh decided he could be an artist and still remain in God's service, writing, "To try to understand the real significance of what the great artists, the serious masters, tell us in their masterpieces, that leads to God; one man wrote or told it in a book; another, in a picture."

A year later, in 1881, dire poverty motivated him to move back home with his parents, where he taught himself to draw. Trying to master perspective, shading, and anatomy, he experimented with numerous methods and styles, depicting a variety of subjects. With the support of his brother, Theo, Van Gogh studied under Anton Mauve, a leading member of The Hague School who was also a cousin of Van Gogh's mother. During his time with Mauve, in 1882, Van Gogh drew urban workers and the poor, influenced by Jean-Francois Millet, who was renowned for depicting these themes.

**Mature Period**
In 1884, Van Gogh began drawing weathered hands, heads and other anatomical features. Due to the extreme religiosity of his family, certain actions by Van Gogh created untenable rifts; specifically, Van Gogh's continued pursuit of his cousin, who rebuffed his advances, split the family apart. Additionally, Van Gogh accused Theo of not trying hard enough to sell his paintings, to which Theo replied that Vincent's dark palette was out of vogue and the current Parisian style of the Impressionist artists was bright and bold.

Suddenly, on March 26, 1885, Vincent's father died from a stroke and shortly afterward, Van Gogh completed the *Potato Eaters*, his first large-scale composition and first great work.

Van Gogh enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp where he discovered the art of Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens as well as artwork by various Japanese artists.
However, the rigidity of academicism did not appeal to him and he left for Paris where, in 1886, he moved in with Theo.

In Paris, Van Gogh studied with painter Fernand Cormon, who ushered Van Gogh into the Impressionist circle. The influence of artists such as Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, and Georges Seurat, as well as pressure from his brother and the need to sell paintings, motivated him to move toward a lighter palette.

Van Gogh experimented with Impressionist techniques, seeking to objectively record nature through the fugitive effects of color and light. While admitting his debt to the pure, brilliant colors of Impressionism, its freedom from traditional subject matter, and its technique of defining form with short brushstrokes of broken color, Van Gogh sought a more emotionally expressive mode of painting, and became known as a "Post-Impressionist," an artist emerging from the shadow of Impressionism to expand the more limited aims of the optically-experimental, pastoral style.

In his own work, Van Gogh distorted and exaggerated forms to express his emotional turmoil, eventually evolving a highly individual style. From 1886-88, he became acutely interested in Japanese prints, encouraging his friends to collect them. He became closer to the Paris avant-garde in January of 1887 through his time spent at Pere Tanguy's art shop, an informal gathering place for painters, mostly Cubists and Futurists. He began making portraits, including self-portraits and still lifes of flowers, working to improve his use of color. In late 1887, Van Gogh exhibited his own work at an exhibition that included colleagues Emile Bernard, Louis Anquetin and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and organized two exhibitions of Japanese prints. At the beginning of 1888, Van Gogh exhibited work with Neo-Impressionists Seurat and Signac at the Salle de Repetition of the Theatre Libre d'Antoine. Theo also arranged for an exhibition of Van Gogh's paintings at an important exhibition of the Artistes Independents in Paris.

**Late Period and Death**
During the fall and winter of 1888, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin lived and worked together in Provence. The relationship began as a plan for a new community of artists and came at a critical point in each of the artists' careers. Their creativity was stimulated by association as both entered into an enormously productive period. They worked closely together and developed the conception of color as not necessarily reflective of nature, but rather as symbolic of inner emotion. Despite his enormous productivity, Van Gogh suffered from various types of epilepsy, psychotic attacks, delusions and most likely a bipolar disorder. Gauguin left for Tahiti partially as a means of escaping Van Gogh's increasingly erratic behavior.

Most of Van Gogh's best works were produced during the final two years of his life. On May 8, 1889, reeling from his deteriorating mental condition, Van Gogh committed himself into a mental institution. As the weeks passed, his mental well-being remained stable and he was allowed to resume painting; in the ten weeks spent under doctors' care, he created over 100 works, including *Church at Auvers*. The clinic and its garden became his main subject, all rendered in the style of swirling patterns typified by his famous canvas, *Starry Night*. On supervised walks, Van Gogh immersed himself in the experience of the natural surrounds, later capturing the forms of olive and cypress trees on canvas. Shortly after leaving the clinic, Van Gogh's depression worsened and he shot himself in the chest with a revolver, dying two days later.

**Legacy**

Van Gogh's renown steadily increased after his death, and his revolutionary approach to painting had a strong influence on the next generation of artists. The Fauves and the German Expressionists adopted both Van Gogh's use of color and gestural style, and later Abstract Expressionists such as Pollock and de Kooning made use of Van Gogh's experimental technique of sweeping, expressive brush strokes. He demonstrated that painting was not merely a study of the visible world, but also an expression of the artist's emotional response to his surroundings. His life of mental illness and instability created
an image of a tortured soul who later captured the imagination of the world. His art and life have also inspired numerous films, as well as classical and popular music. Van Gogh painted 900 paintings and made 1,100 drawings and sketches, while only selling one of them in his career. Sharply contrasting his lifetime of poverty, Van Gogh's paintings have now sold for tens of millions of dollars and are some of the most rare and sought after acquisitions in the art market.

**ARTISTIC INFLUENCES**

Below are Vincent van Gogh's major influences, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

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Vincent van Gogh
Years Worked: 1886 - 1900

ARTISTS

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CRITICS/FRIENDS

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MOVEMENTS

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Quotes

"It is not the language of painters but the language of nature which one should listen to, the feeling for the things themselves, for reality, is more important than the feeling for pictures"

"Dying is hard, but living is harder still."

"I know for sure that I have an instinct for color, and that it will come to me more and more, that painting is in the very marrow of my bones."
"Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I see before me, I make more arbitrary use of color to express myself more forcefully."

**Major Works:**

Oil on canvas

*Starry Night* is often considered to be Van Gogh's pinnacle achievement. Unlike most of his works, *Starry Night* was painted from memory and not *en plein air*; the emphasis on interior, emotional life is clear in his depiction of the sky, which was a radical departure from his previous, more naturalistic landscapes. In *Starry Night*, Van Gogh followed a strict principal of structure and composition: the distribution of forms across the surface of the canvas is in exacting order. The result is a landscape perceived through swirling curves and lines, its seeming chaos subverted by a rigorous formal arrangement. Since 1941, The Museum of Modern Art in New York City has held *Starry Night* in its permanent collection.
Cafe Terrace At Night, Vincent van Gogh, 1888, Kroller Muller Museum, Otterloo
Oil on canvas

Cafe Terrace at Night was one of the first scenes Van Gogh painted during his stay at Arles and the first painting where he used a nocturnal background, which he later elaborated in full in Starry Night. Using contrasting colors and tones, Van Gogh achieved a luminous surface that pulses with an interior light, almost in defiance of the darkening sky. The lines of composition all point directly to the center of the work drawing the eye along the pavement as if the viewer is actually strolling the cobblestone streets. He wrote in a letter to his sister about the painting, saying "Here you have a night painting without black, with nothing but beautiful blue and violet and green and in this surrounding the illuminated area colors itself sulfur pale yellow and citron green. It amuses me enormously to paint the night right on the spot.. It is true that in the darkness I can take a blue for a green, a blue lilac for a pink lilac, since it is hard to distinguish the quality of the tone. But it is the only way to get away from our conventional night with poor pale whitish light, while even a simple candle already provides us with the richest of yellows and oranges." The cafe still exists today and is a mecca for Van Gogh fans.
After cutting off a portion of his earlobe during a manic episode, Van Gogh painted *Self Portrait with a Bandaged Ear* in a period of reflection on his illness. The painting bears witness to the artist's renewed strength and control in his art, as the composition is rendered with uncharacteristic realism, where all his facial features are clearly modeled and careful attention is given to contrasting textures of skin, cloth, and wood. The loose and expressive brushstrokes are clearly visible; the marks are both choppy and sinuous, at times becoming soft and diffuse, creating a tension between boundaries that are otherwise clearly marked. He deployed the technique of impasto, or the continual layering of wet paint, to develop a richly rendered surface. *Self Portrait with a Bandaged Ear* has an emotive force and intensity unparalleled in its time.
Oil on Canvas

Van Gogh's Sunflower series was intended to decorate the room he was keeping for Gaugin at the Yellow House in Arles. His lush brushstrokes built up the texture of sunflowers and employed a wide spectrum of yellow, in part because recently invented pigments that made new colors and tonal nuance possible. Van Gogh used the colors to express the entire lifespan of the flowers, from the full bloom in bright yellow to the wilting and dying blossoms rendered in melancholy ochre. The composition, in the restricted palette and frontally placed subject, appears simpler and more deliberate than in other still lifes, yet Van Gogh makes a powerful statement about the fleetingness of time and the subtleties of nature. Yasuda Fire and Marine Insurance Company of Tokyo, Japan bought the painting in 1995 for US$36.23 million.
Van Gogh's *Bedroom* depicts his living quarters at 2, Place Lamartine, Arles, known as the Yellow House. It is one of his most well known images and is one of five versions Van Gogh created: three rendered in oil on canvas and two are small letter sketches. His use of bold and vibrant colors to depict the off-kilter perspective of his trapezoidal room demonstrated his liberation from the muted palette and realistic renderings of Dutch artistic tradition. He labored over the subject matter, colors and arrangements of this composition, writing many letters to Theo about it, "This time it's just simply my bedroom, only here colour is to do everything, and giving by its simplification a grander style to things, is to be suggestive here of rest or of sleep in general. In a word, looking at the picture ought to rest the brain, or rather the imagination."
After Van Gogh left the asylum at Saint-Remy-de-Provence in May of 1890, he travelled north to Auvers. *Church at Auvers* is one of the most well known images of Van Gogh's Auvers period, and he painted this picture during the last year of his life. In the *Church at Auvers*, Van Gogh distorted and flattened out the architecture of the church; the colors are vivid and sumptuous while the perspective is unusual. With the snaking lines and the exaggerated forms, this work has an almost surreal and mystical quality. Perhaps as he was struggling with mental illness, Van Gogh portrayed the church as a place of gloom, rather than as a sanctuary for refuge.