

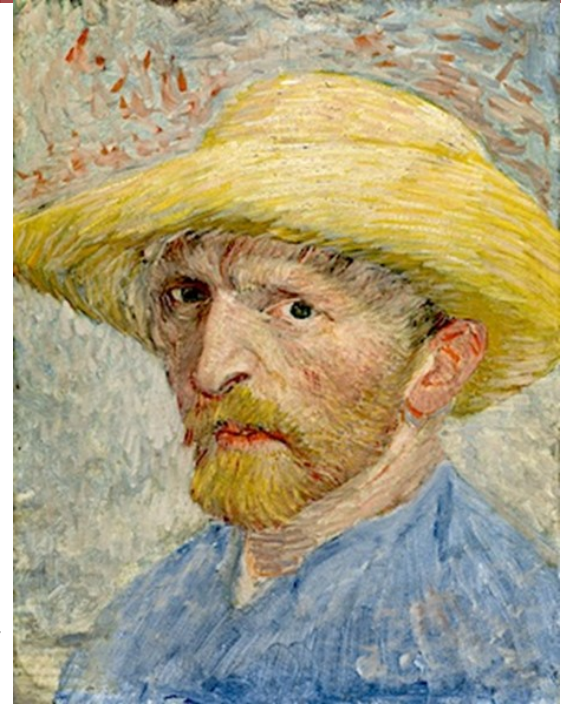
Vincent Van Gogh, Father of Expressionism

By Ricki Morse

Part of an ongoing series for the Van Gogh exhibit, Fall 2022



AS WE BEGIN our exploration of the influence of Van Gogh on the art world, I find it important to reiterate where we are coming from. Over the months we have come to understand the motivations, the passions, the spirituality, the deep humanity of Vincent Van Gogh. As an artist we see his connection with nature and remember that he saw him-



Vincent van Gogh, *Self Portrait* 1887, oil on board, Detroit Institute of Art.

self as a realist. He had certainly been influenced by the Barbizon School of plein air painters, Cezanne's fragmenting of the landscape into planes, the iridescence and response to light of the impressionists, the flat, outlined, decorated images of Japanese woodblock prints. These same influences had radiated throughout Europe, beginning multiple schools of thought and practice. It is the art of this diaspora that we now compare with Van Gogh's painting, keeping ourselves anchored in the core Van Gogh spirit, which influenced various schools differently.



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Self Portrait with Pipe*, 1907, oil on canvas, Private Collection. We recognize the gnarled tree trunks in the background echoing Van Gogh, as they blend the physical setting with the mood.

Two other events in France and in Vienna enhanced the influence of the new art styles. In 1839 the daguerreotype print became a practical means of recording images, and by 1850 photography was in popular use, providing duplicatable portraits and landscapes, freeing art from the traditional role of the only realistic representation. And in Vienna in 1899 a neurologist named Sigmund Freud published *Interpretation of Dreams*, positing an entirely new understanding of human feelings. He saw dreams as meaningful reflections of the "unconscious" mind and psychoanalysis as a process of free association which revealed the sources and meaning of human feelings, now seen as valid expressions of the individual.

With the arrival of the 20th century, Expressionism ignited among European artists with the vigor and broad scope of expression which we later saw in this country after WWII when abstract expressionism became the ruling New York School. As

we compare the European works with the earlier work of Van Gogh, we understand why he was heralded as the father of expressionism, and we can clearly see which aspects of Van Gogh's work they took for their own.

Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter

In 1905 a group of young bohemian artists in Dresden formed around Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and adopted The Bridge as their symbol—initiating a movement into a new world more open to change.

They aspired to an expression of feeling, untutored by art schools, expressed in vivid, sometimes clashing colors and simplified forms. Germany's early wide acceptance of Van Gogh was the work of Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Theo's widow, who had translated the letters Vincent wrote to Theo into German and made them available to German art dealers, who began to buy and show his paintings. By 1912 over 120 Van Gogh paintings were in private hands in Germany. The expanding Die Brücke group now included Max Pechstein, whose iconic work is in our collection. The anti-academic, anti-conventional stance of Die Brücke is expressed in the harsh, flat areas of bright color, the black outlined planes, the harsh diagonals of the bridge supports, the yellow railings



Max Pechstein, *The Old Bridge*, 1921, oil on canvas, SBMA.



Vincent Van Gogh, *The Langlois Bridge at Arles with Women Washing*, 1888, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands.

slashing across the canvas. The complex but subtle geometry of Van Gogh's Drawbridge becomes more explicit in Pechstein's Bridge—flat areas of color like building blocks in the background extend the forceful reduction of detail, revealing a more abstracted image. Pechstein declared, "Van Gogh was the father of us all."

Der Blaue Reiter, the Blue Rider group, emerged in Munich in 1911 through the work of Franz Marc, who with Wassily Kandinsky reimagined the role of the artist as a symbolist, embodying in their images the power and passion inherent in nature and represented by symbolic colors. Marc felt that the horse projected the passion, power and organic vibrancy of mankind, blue the color of male being. Van Gogh's



Van Gogh, *Tree Roots*, 1890, oil on canvas, VG Museum, Amsterdam

influence was not one of style, but of intent. Van Gogh painted nature as deeply felt. He projected his passionate nature onto tree trunks and roots, branches of blossoms and landscapes communicating his experience of a scene. We see this same symbolizing in the powerful organic curves of Marc's milling horses, sug-

gesting the beauty of a human body and presenting man and nature as one organic whole.

The Secessionists

Vienna was home to the first contemporary art museum in Europe. The Secessionist Museum



Franz Marc, *The Large Blue Horses*, 1911, oil on canvas, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

opened in 1897 to display the work of the painters, graphic artists, sculptors and architects related to the Art Nouveau movement. Led by Gustav Klimt, they had resigned from the traditional organization and formed their own union. They rejected the hierarchy of arts placing painting and sculpture above graphic arts and craft, instead promoting a strikingly linear design style, which combined organic flow like leaves and stems with softened colors and intense, repetitive patterns. The art nouveau movement soon led into Art Deco in the 1920s, but from this time forward design became accepted in the fine arts as appropriate to the medium, though in the 19th century it had been rejected as unrefined and inappropriate.

Design became the most important element in Gustav Klimt's painting, as it was throughout the movement. Earlier, design had played a significant role in the art of Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh—from the flowers behind Gauguin in his gift portrait to Vincent, and Van Gogh gave it prominence in expanding the branches to cover the entire surface of the painting in his *Almond Blossoms* gift to Theo and Jo's new baby (shown here on p 10 from the July *La Muse*). Van Gogh incorporated the pointillism of the post-impressionists into his landscapes, combining it for decorative atmos-

Design became the most important element in Gustav Klimt's painting, as it was throughout the movement. Earlier, design had played a significant role in the art of Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh—from the flowers behind Gauguin in his gift portrait to Vincent, and Van Gogh gave it prominence in expanding the branches to cover the entire surface of the painting in his *Almond Blossoms* gift to Theo and Jo's new baby (shown here on p 10 from the July *La Muse*). Van Gogh incorporated the pointillism of the post-impressionists into his landscapes, combining it for decorative atmos-



Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Baroness Elisabeth Bachofen-Echt*, 1914, oil on canvas, Private Collection. Klimt's model was the daughter of a major benefactor.

phere in this garden in Arles. And it is echoed in Klimt's portrait of the Baroness.

To take a closer look at the dramatic quality of Van Gogh's sense of design, let's spend some time with one painting made of the beach near Arles (bottom, right).



Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of Père Tanguy*, 1887, oil on canvas, Musée Rodin, Paris. Julian Tanguy was a paint grinder and often traded art supplies for paintings. Vincent was befriended by the fatherly Tanguy who displayed his pictures while he lived in Paris.



Left: Vincent Van Gogh, *Flowering Garden*, 1888, oil on canvas, Private Collection.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saintes Maries*, 1888, oil on canvas, VG Museum Amsterdam.

As the fishing boats left before sunrise, Van Gogh couldn't paint them at the beach. Instead he made sketches of the boats which he used in his studio to insert in the painting.

Notice that the boats leave no shadow on the beach and that their forms are exaggeratedly three dimensional against the rough sand. Particularly we are drawn to the linear complexity of the masts, which are configured in a delightful design arrived at in the studio.

The Fauvists

Henri Matisse and André Derain were the leaders of the Fauvist movement in France. The "wild beasts" of the Parisian avant garde celebrated the expanding expressionist movement throughout Europe, rejecting representational art and traditional brushwork, opting for often decorative motifs, loose brush work, bright, even clashing colors. Matisse was at first slow to take up the German and Austrian stylistic changes, but in 1879 an Australian artist friend took him to a Van Gogh exhibition. The effect on Matisse's painting was almost instant. Van Gogh's work, though still grounded in realism, displayed in his brush work an intense focus, a felt connection to the observed world. His village painting in the last year of his life has a very human feel in the curves of the cottages, the sagging tile roofs. Matisse loosened his brush work and increasingly allowed his own humor and wit to enter his paintings.



Henri Matisse, *Les Toits de Colliour (The Roofs of Colliour)*, 1905, oil on canvas, Hermitage, St. Petersburg.



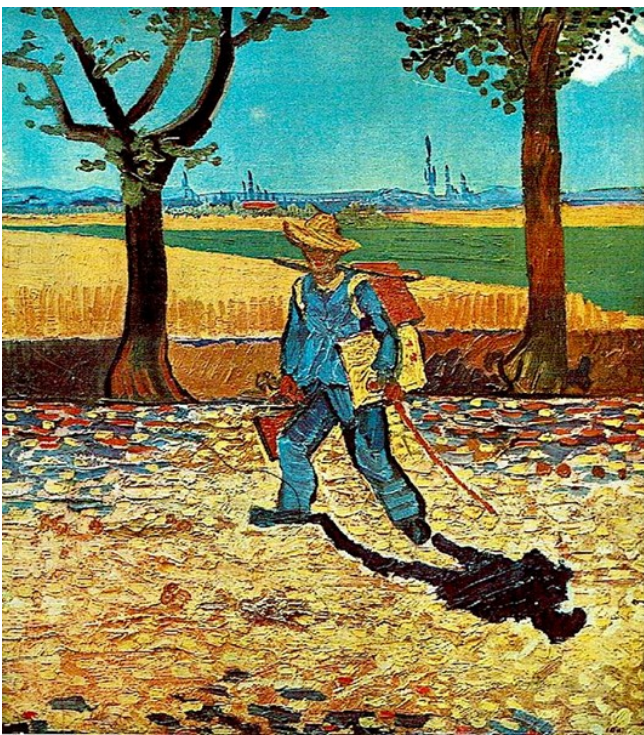
Vincent van Gogh, *Street in Auvers-sur-Oise*, 1890, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Shadow

In looking back at the images throughout the article, you will enrich your grasp of Van Gogh's personal presence in his art and will find that you really "get" him. While the article looks forward

into the various influences Van Gogh had on expressionists coming after him, we can reverse this process and expand our seeing. Look now at the Van Goghs above and see how they are uniquely his own private communication to us. Others borrowed paint stroke styles or linear design, but we gain a sense of his intrinsic message to us—his identification with nature, the power of his commitment to share the world as he saw it.

In the 1950s The British contemporary artist Francis Bacon painted a Van Gogh series, copies of a Van Gogh work lost during WWII, which exists today only in a glass photographic plate. In reaching into the past to capture the essence of Van Gogh, it felt appropriate to him to copy a lost self portrait of the artist walking along a road, casting a shadow. It is that shadow Bacon focuses on, and which he asks us to contemplate. ■



Vincent van Gogh, *Painter on the Road to Tarascon*, 1888, oil on canvas, copy of photographic glass print.



Francis Bacon, *Study for Portrait of Van Gogh*, 1957



Paul Gauguin, *Self Portrait dedicated to Van Gogh (Les Miserables)*, 1888.



Vincent van Gogh, *Flowering Almonds*, 1888.