

Why Popularity Chose Vincent van Gogh

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Abstract

Vincent van Gogh is arguably one of the most famous artists. From his artwork consuming social media with merchandise sales and reproductions to being featured in museum spaces, there is definitely not a lack of exposure to the artist's work. His name is just as potent in popular culture, frequently being remembered as the artist who cut off a portion of his ear. With such a magnitude of popularity, why van Gogh became so popular becomes a curious question. Why was the artist chosen by popularity? The answer arises with the analysis of his biography and the work of scholars which have frequently romanticized and mystified the artist into a saintly martyr. By comparing scholarly work surrounding van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, the cause for van Gogh's rise to fame is compared to the contested status of Gauguin in popular culture. Through analysis and comparison, the work of scholars with adoration, romanticization, and mystification turn the artist into a selfless saint, martyr, and relatable figure and therefore is the cause of why popularity chose Vincent van Gogh.

Acknowledging the Popularity

A man of acclaimed artistic talent whose paintings find themselves on the walls of major art museums, it is an understatement to say that Vincent van Gogh's name precedes himself. From the museum space with its marketing banners for its exhibitions and the artist's artwork itself to merchandise of the artist's most popular artworks, van Gogh has made a defined presence in popular culture. Not to mention the artist's presence on social media in the form of posts of adoration or attempts to market the multitudes of merchandise celebrating the artist. Of significant importance are the countless books both shelved physically and online in databases filled cover to cover with the articulations of the artist's biography and, more often than not, adoration for the popular artist. Whether you choose to search for the artist's name or not, finding it is far from a difficult task.

With the artist's name everywhere, the claim that popularity has chosen Vincent van Gogh is difficult to argue. The defense is supported by just how potent the artist's name is within popular culture, not just within the artistic society of art enthusiasts and scholars but also outside of this society. To someone outside of this society, claiming neither to be an "art nerd" nor an "artist" to any extent, popularity has successfully made van Gogh's name familiar. These individuals tend to remember the artist for his popular biographical moment when the artist cut off a portion of his ear. However futile the reason for the familiarity, the point to the artist's life and recorded biography points to scholars' defense of keeping the artist within popular culture. The reason for this is how van Gogh's life has captivated scholars.

Such captivation exists across multiple disciplines. Not shocking is that one of these disciplines includes that of the arts, though this discipline points more toward the artwork of the famed artists, taking up much of the latter portion of the artist's life. However, it is the entirety of the artist's life that interests many biographers and historians, who seek to pick through the artist's life searching for rich nuggets of information that are numerously buried throughout the artist's life story to romanticize and articulate. The latter half of the artist's story also captivates

that of the scientific and medical disciplines, with a special interest in attempting to medically evaluate the artist's mental illness, popularly leading to the artist's decision to cut off a portion of his ear. The work by these scholars, especially the latter of these works for those not in direct association with the artistic society, is what has only encouraged Vincent van Gogh into popularity.

The influence of popularity's decision does not stop with the scholars but also lies with the author of this thesis. I too have been captivated by popularity's decision to thrust van Gogh's name in my face, the thrust being heavily encouraged by the many scholarly works that have been the subject of my research. Infatuated by the artist, not only by his art but also by his intensely interestingly written biography, van Gogh made his way to being a favorite artist of mine. In such a way, there is a similarity between myself and these past scholars, both adoring the artist but also turning the artist into a focus of study. Just as van Gogh's popularized *Starry Night* found its way onto my high school graduation cap, and later his popularized sunflowers on my college graduation cap, he has become the subject of my research.

Though, even if the artist does not become the subject of an individual's research, he has made his way into the hearts of many admirers. Thus, my infatuation is notably far from unique as many others find their way to becoming admirers of the famed artist. A visit to the artist's *Starry Night* at the Museum of Modern Art makes this obvious, the painting is practically always being swarmed by admirers. Renditions persist as well, discrediting any uniqueness of my own, as artists study van Gogh and his famed artistic style. Artisans create artwork for themselves but also merchandise to sell to fellow admirers. The artist's presence on social media is because of these admirers and museums alone. It is the artist's ability to persist through admirers, especially scholars and their continuous study of major influence, that speaks to just how popular the artist has become.

However, this all begs the question of why popularity chose Vincent van Gogh in the first place. There are many artists to choose from across the decades and centuries with multitudes of different artistic styles and ideologies. Looking with a more direct gaze in search of the answer,

other modernist artists similar to van Gogh have hardly achieved the same adoration and admiration of popularity. One such modernist artist is Paul Gauguin, whose artistic style partially resembled van Gogh's for a portion of his oeuvre. Gauguin even lived and worked with van Gogh for a time in Arles, the artists studying the same subject matter. Should van Gogh have grown popular due to his artistic style or the subject of his artwork, the question persists of why Gauguin has not received the same magnitude of fame. Turning away from these artists' artwork, the only other option is their lives, their biographies recorded by countless scholars in literary forms. With close analysis, the didactic of how the artists' are articulated in this scholarly literature, with favor pointing toward van Gogh to cause the increase of van Gogh's chances of being favored by popularity over that of Gauguin. Thus, the romanticization of Vincent van Gogh's life by admiring scholars has led to an abundance of potential diagnoses of the artist's mental illness and the creation of biographies and hagiographies that have endearingly enticed the artist into popularity as more than an artist but rather a relatable, selfless, and admirable saintly martyr.

The purpose of this endearing enticement must not be taken for granted. The simple statement that van Gogh's romanticized life is what beckoned scholars and the favorability of popularity carries with it the heavy baggage of the artist's intensely eventful life. From his late start in the artist profession to his illness sparking the end of his life, the events of van Gogh's life are vast, telling a story of family, romance, artistry, and more. Though it is the scholars who are able to articulate the artist's life in such a manner to bring forth each story, turning the artist's life into a story compelling and appealing to multiple audiences. As such, this scholarly literature grants the artist popularity in popular culture due to the ability to be interesting and enticing to multiple individuals.

However, what encourages these scholars to share van Gogh's story cannot only be deemed a cause of admiration but rather a never-ending attempt to apologize for the lack of recognition and understanding of the artist during his life. It is as if scholars have continuously been attempting to fill an unpayable debt to the artist for the lack of appreciation he was forced

to endure during his life. This “collective guilt” is what compels scholars to celebrate the artist, to give the artist the admiration that he never received (Heinich 90). And in such a pang of collective guilt that also fosters the celebration of the artist from non-scholars, influenced by the scholars and their literature to continue in this restoration of justice “by way of atonement,” (ibid 95).

Thus, scholars, whether with a passion for justice or pure admiration, who studied van Gogh and brought the artist into popularity through their literature have become a major influence upon the popularity of van Gogh in popular culture. To study such an influence on non-scholars, the literature circulating the artist written by admiring scholars becomes the main subject of focus. However, to study such a subject constitutes not also being an admirer but rather articulating and deciphering the admiration from the biographical facts. The scholars' literature whose romanticized words have become subjects of research must be completely studied for their connotation and undertones, calling for cross-examination with other scholars to ensure the factual truth over the admirer's mystification. The scholarly admiration must be torn away from the artist's life to examine the artist's factual biography in order to understand the influence of the scholarly literature and its magnitude. With the two components separated, the artist's factual life can be understood first before the admiring lens through which scholars interpret van Gogh's life influences the reader's perception of the popular artist.

The Life of the Popular Artist

The artistic realm was a part of Vincent van Gogh's life before he even got the chance to see the world with his own eyes. His uncles were the ones to cause this, many of whom worked in art-related careers. Hendrick Vincent van Gogh, known as “Uncle Hein”, worked as an art dealer in Brussels; Cornelis Marinus van Gogh, known as “Uncle Cor”, was also an art dealer; and Vincent van Gogh, known as “Uncle Cent” and not to be confused with the famed painter himself, was also an art dealer and worked at The Hague, an epicenter for art (Metzger 18-19). It was through these familial relationships and connections that van Gogh first found himself in the

art world. By 1869, at the age of just sixteen, van Gogh had worked his way up in The Hague and had joined the branch of Goupil & Cie in The Hague, one of the leading institutions in Europe, as an apprentice (ibid 19-20). A reference written in 1873 by the manager of the specific branch of The Hague, Mr. Tersteg, remembers van Gogh as a “friendly, dependable, employee,” (ibid 20). However, this praise of the young van Gogh and recognition of his work ethic and positive attitude led to the decision to transfer him to London in the summer of 1873 (ibid 20). It was this decision and further the move of the young van Gogh to this city away from home that sparked the “inescapable loneliness” that would accompany Vincent van Gogh for the rest of his life.

Though something positive resulted from this loneliness, even if it is only to the benefit of studies of van Gogh’s life. As a medicinal relief to the stark loneliness of the new city, van Gogh wrote and sent numerous letters to his family and dear friends. Three-fourths of these letters were sent to his brother, Theo, who, heavily influenced by his collector instincts, preserved over eight hundred of these letters (ibid 21). From 1914 to 1915, Theo’s widow, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, worked to publish the letters her beloved husband had preserved, accomplishing to publish 652 letters (ibid 21). These letters along with others preserved by other recipients of van Gogh’s written word were organized by who the recipient was and in chronological order (ibid 21). Collectively, these letters effectively tell the story of van Gogh, invasively peeping into the artist's thoughts meant only to be seen by the recipient of these letters that ultimately led to the decisions van Gogh made throughout his life, including how and what he painted. Thus, the story of van Gogh lies within his writing signed intimately with his first name, Vincent, to only further remind those peeping into the letters that they were originally meant for only the recipients so closely bound to the artist, whether familial or friendly (ibid 26). However, to truly understand the artist in his full authenticity, the researcher must become a peeping voyeur.

Becoming this invasive researcher, the desire of van Gogh to gravitate toward art and religion grows clear. In 1879, van Gogh had chosen an entirely different career path apart from that of art. Finding himself in the Belgian town of Borinage, the appointed van Gogh preached to

coal miners and dove into his devotion to religion (ibid). This lasted for only a short period of the artist's life due to the intense grief resulting from the artist's poor experiences in the slums of Borinage (ibid). In the spring of 1876 van Gogh found himself in Paris, specifically the still young van Gogh found himself in the Louvre gazing at Philippe de Champagne's votive paintings and fascinated by Thomas à Kempis's words in *The Imitation of Christ* (ibid 35-49). With this admiration for religion and roots in art, van Gogh "...achieved a position where Art and Religion, if they imposed moral obligations, were in fact one and the same degree" (ibid 57). This abstracted sense of fusion of two differing ideologies led van Gogh to devote himself to painting as a religious moral duty (ibid 57).

This newfound devotion to the act of artmaking instead of art dealing led the artist to art school, specifically to the Academy in Brussels for Art (ibid 58). During this time, van Gogh looked to his family for help, routinely requesting money from his brother Theo, depending on notoriety from his art dealer uncles, and receiving essential advice from his mother's brother-in-law, Anton Mauve, on how to handle paint (ibid 58-60). With this necessity for familial support and a hectic shifting of careers leading to a prospective life-long career, van Gogh desired family support and approval (ibid 60). However, his desires would be left unfulfilled. His father who was a devout reverend was deeply disgruntled that his son had left his appointment as a preacher and consequently removed van Gogh from his house. To further sever the father-son relationship, van Gogh had fallen in love with his cousin Kee who was still mourning the loss of her husband (ibid 61). Becoming the breaking point for his father, van Gogh was disowned by his father, and thus, van Gogh from this point on would struggle with his familial relationships.

Eventually, van Gogh left the academy and instead chose the guidance of Charles Bargues's *Cours de dessin* and *Exercices au fusain* for his artistic studies (ibid 66). Additionally, he begged his brother Theo to send engravings of contemporary works of art which had made lasting impressions on the then-still amateur artist (ibid 66). It was the social romanticism of Jean-François Millet and Jules Breton that especially spoke to van Gogh (ibid 66). A

subscription to *The Graphic* further became a source of inspiration, heavily influencing the artist into a potential artistic career within the literary industry of printed magazines and books (ibid 70). Speaking to these subjects of inspiration, van Gogh wrote in Letter 140, “Without presuming to suggest I could do as well as the people I have named, I do hope that if I work hard at drawing these working people, and so forth I shall become more or less capable of doing illustration for magazines or books,” (ibid 70). The amateur artist recognizes he was such an amateur, but finds hope for his potential, believing in himself and his potential capabilities. It is van Gogh’s hope that allowed him to compensate for his “absence of skill [that] made it impossible for him to take a descriptive approach to things” through his “expressive vigour [sic] that enhanced all his shapes and forms and made sheer energy into an aesthetic quality” (ibid 73). Van Gogh understood his place but also believed in his capabilities as an artist, determined to perfect his craft even without the institutionalized teachings of an academy.

Though as his pursuit to better his artistic skill took a unique path, so did his pursuit of love. After a failed last attempt with Kee, van Gogh turned to another woman, Christine Clasina Maria Hoornik, also known as Sien, who worked as a sex worker. Writing in one of his letters, van Gogh acknowledges his unique attraction to certain women: “It is not the first time that I’ve been unable to resist the feeling of attraction and love towards those women in particular whom the pastors damn so vehemently, condemning and despising them from on high in their pulpits,” (ibid 75). Sien had one child with a second child on the way but this did not deter van Gogh in the slightest. Van Gogh understood that many would disapprove of this relationship, especially his father who acted in the pastoral role that would have “damn[ed] so vehemently” from his pulpit but he could not be swayed from his decision. Explaining himself, van Gogh further writes, “If one wakes early and is not alone, one sees a fellow human being beside one, it makes the whole world so much more of a livable place. Far more livable than the devotional books and whitewashed church walls the pastors are so in love with,” (ibid 75). Calling negative attention to those of the likeness of his father that would only judge, van Gogh argues his choices by arguing the need for a companion to have through life purely for a lack of loneliness which is something that had plagued the young artist in the past.

But it was van Gogh's love for Sien and the two children that caused more turmoil in his life. Due to his choice of lifestyle and "immoral" relationship choices, van Gogh lost all financial support from his family except for the very little allowance that Theo was able to send (ibid 81). Adding to the struggle, Sien stopped her work as a sex worker, cutting finances even closer. Due to this, the funding for van Gogh's artmaking fell short to the point there was no money for these artistic endeavors. Writing in letter 227, van Gogh explains this struggle, "For fourteen days now I have painted from early in the morning till late in the evening, and if I go on like that it will be too expensive as long as I am not selling anything," (ibid 81). Trying to keep his new family supported financially, van Gogh was forced to revamp the way he worked with art.

In addition to financial trouble, van Gogh was also experiencing a shortage of time with his figure models. As a solution to both adversities, van Gogh shifted to making his sketches in oil directly on the canvas. In Letter 308, van Gogh articulates the shift in his own words, "At that time it threw me totally if my sketch was no longer clear during the painting, and I would have to spend a lot of time redoing the sketch, which meant quite simply that if I could only have the model for a short while nothing whatsoever was produced. But now I don't care at all if the drawing disappears; I do it with the brush right away, and this creates enough form, so that my study is of use to me," (ibid 85). This adjustment allowed for fewer expenses due to fewer materials being used and less time redoing sketches before working on the final composition. Not to mention, this act of sketching directly on the canvas with oil paint might have started the artist's journey to his popularized sketchy style. Further, the details of his work were becoming more vivid, with the sketch transforming into the final composition upon the same canvas by the work of the artist's hand.

Even in this partial attempt to save money though, van Gogh was still forced to leave Sien due to financial reasons (ibid 88). However, this turning away from his relationship approach to happiness, "made his expectation of life dependent on what he would create as an artist," (ibid 95). But even if his art improved, his loneliness grew. He was deeply troubled by his decision to leave Sien and the two children, feeling like a traitor to them (ibid 99). By this time,

van Gogh had disposed of his “religious mania” and desires for family life and instead looked toward a new sense of autonomy that would inspire his newfound independent art career (ibid 103). And without the financial burden of family life, van Gogh was able to completely afford oil paint and canvases for his artwork (ibid 107). With this dreadful decision, van Gogh ultimately established himself as an artist though it would cost him the price of loneliness.

With this shift away from family life, van Gogh searched for a purpose for his paintings and the meaning behind them. In letter 133, he searched for this meaning that “some people call God, others the Supreme Being, and still others Nature,” (ibid 109). Nature took a certain interest in the artist in the sense of the “harmonized landscape” and specifically how “Nature kept within seemingly peaceful bounds by Civilization - is enough to express feelings of anxiety and isolation,” (ibid 114). Looking into nature, van Gogh easily related himself to its existence of being bound by civilization, not really fitting in but still feeling the consequential pressures of “anxiety and isolation”. Thus, as there was a shift in the artist’s life, so was there a shift in the subjects of his artwork.

As his art practice grew, social relationships did form though these were singularly bound to art. Van Gogh had pupils who were amateur artists eager to have van Gogh look at their in-progress artwork and learn from the more experienced artist (ibid 114). One of these such pupils was Charles Hermans with whom van Gogh took a specific interest. Hermans was a goldsmith which resulted in the possession of many beautiful objects (ibid 114). To van Gogh, these objects were eagerly waiting to be painted, to be caught up in the composition of a paint-soaked artistic brush. Van Gogh wrote to his brother, Theo, about his eagerness to shift to a yet another different subject matter, “Hermans Possesses so many beautiful things old pitchers and other antiques, and I am wondering if you might be pleased with a still life of some of these articles, for instance, Gothic things, to hang in your room,” (ibid 114). With this newfound inspiration, van Gogh eagerly painted many still lifes which led to arguably his most popular still life *Still Life with Three Bottles and Earthen Vessel*. With this being different from his compositional connection with nature, van Gogh ultimately bettered his artistic skill and

versatility. Though not every painting the artist made at this point in his life was not of expert quality, as many artists' oeuvres include their fair share of duds, the artist had accomplished creating a truly 'conventional' picture which was intensely noteworthy to van Gogh's progression as a painter.

These paintings that displayed van Gogh's true progression as an artist were all given to Theo starting February 1884 (ibid 126). The only exception was the singular commission that van Gogh had throughout his entire life. Charles Hermans, the same pupil who had given van Gogh the much-needed inspiration to create a still life, requested imagery of saints while van Gogh suggested imagery of the four seasons as a better conversation starter (ibid 118-122). The final composition ultimately took on the vision of the latter after van Gogh's convincing. Though past this singular commission, van Gogh sent all of his artwork to his brother who he felt was the owner of these artworks because all the materials used to create them were bought by Theo. However, Theo only saw himself as a trustee of his brother's artwork, taking on the supportive role both socially and financially that van Gogh truly needed and ultimately felt indebted to. The dynamic between the two would remain as such throughout their lives, a tight brotherly supportive bond.

Though this bond was relatively new. Before this, van Gogh had always compared himself to his brother, seeing him as the better, more superior son. He related the contrast of their lives with a comparison to Modernism, with Theo as the opportunist and Vincent as the rebel. It was "a central polarity in Modernism, between the penniless artistic outside and the corrupt and obese bourgeois philistine," (ibid 128). While the relationship and idea van Gogh had of his brother would improve positively, this mindset that van Gogh had about the world would also live with him just as his newfound relationship with his brother would. Van Gogh "dreamt the dream of revolution, and indeed he had to do so if he was to accept the iron indifference of the uncomprehending pillars of society who blithely ignored his art," (ibid 128). Van Gogh wished to be taken seriously in his artistic practice, for his art to be understood and this desire propelled

him further in his painting despite the onslaught of the feeling of loneliness of being misunderstood and never recognized.

This ideology led van Gogh to the next subject matter for his paintings: the poor. Van Gogh felt more comfortable around them and felt like he could relate more to these people who had also been pushed out of the normalcy of society. Because of this relation to the very thing his paint brushes were pushing into the canvas, for “the first time in van Gogh’s oeuvre... the artist [was] engaging in the process of questioning his subjective attitudes and starting a dialogue with his subjects,” (ibid 131). With this connection to the people he was painting, them now becoming more than just subjects of his composition, van Gogh poured meaning into his paintings. The ambiguity of reception and paradoxical relationships which van Gogh had come to adore were persistent within his compositions, even becoming hallmarks in them (ibid 143). These hallmarks proved his belief in an untiring urge to get ahead to make “real” progress, to put pressure on himself to improve, and a devotion to himself. This ideology is paramount to the typical 19th-century mindset that focused on this “professional achiever instinct” (ibid 151). This is in direct opposition to the Romantic ideology of “inwardness, devotion, and profundity” (ibid 151). Van Gogh agreed with this newer 19th-century mindset in Letter 418, declaring that paintings needed to be created “with willpower, feeling, passion and love,” (ibid 173). This defined van Gogh’s passion for his art that he carried with him and pressed into every painting but also pointed to his mindset in agreement with the majority of thinkers in his time.

As van Gogh was finally finding himself as an artist, his father died of a stroke on March 26, 1885 (ibid 152). His father, who had never supported van Gogh, had been consistently grieving what in his opinion was his son’s lack of success. This caused van Gogh’s reputation to decline as his father was a respectable figure as a reverend. Another blow to van Gogh was toward his integrity as a painter by his dear friend Anthon van Rappard who he had met through his brother. He had sent his famed and beloved work *Potato Eaters* for Rappard to give his input. Van Gogh adored this artwork, it acted as a synthesis and summary of all he had learned and would be a statement of how he had progressed as an artist. However, Rappard could not have

disagreed more, writing, “You will agree that a work like this cannot be meant seriously. Fortunately, you are capable of better things; but why ever have you viewed and treated everything in the same superficial way? Why did you not study their movement thoroughly? What you have here are poses,” (ibid 167). After his friend nearly ripped the artwork to shreds in his critique, van Gogh resent the letter to his friend in frustration (ibid 167). Rappard did not intend to be outright insensitive for he was familiar with van Gogh’s artistic progress because he had been sent multiple sketches from his dear friend (ibid 167). The harsh words were instead questioning how the composition was captured, how the subjects were captured in such ugliness, and the artwork inherently being a pose. Rappard, despite how familiar he was with van Gogh’s artwork, was missing the dedication van Gogh had toward depicting truth honestly despite how ugly it might have been.

Charles Baudelaire’s “Painter of Modern Life” essay speaks to this dedication to authenticity when depicting truth and it is easy to associate Baudelaire’s words with van Gogh to better understand the artist. Baudelaire writes, “He started by looking at life, and only at a late stage did he go to the trouble of acquiring the means of expressing life. What resulted was striking originality, and whatever barbaric or naive qualities remained now attested his fidelity to his impressions, a kind of flattery offered to Truth,” (ibid 173). To deconstruct Baudelaire’s words, to give truth the respect and “flattery” it deserves, was to depict it in its fullness despite its lack of beauty. So, despite the ugliness of his subject, van Gogh chose to flatter the truth. Van Gogh further agrees with Baudelaire’s words, to place himself within them, by writing in letter 418, “I long more than anything to learn how to do things wrong, how to create discrepancies, adaptation, changes to reality so that it all becomes- well, lies if you like, but truer that literal truth,” (ibid 176). It is this devotion to truth that gives van Gogh the title of a modernist because this devotion was the hallmark of modern art: “to record the ugliness” (ibid 175).

Though despite his devotion, he could not make up for what he did not have from full teaching in an academy setting, and still he was misunderstood by so many not only artistically but also socially because for van Gogh, both these aspects of his life were tightly intertwined.

Oddly, van Gogh's father's status as a reverend had protected him from the possible onslaught of society's worst accusations and distaste for this artist. When the looming reverend father figure died, the members of society in Nuenen turned against van Gogh with accusations, the society was no longer gripped with the fear accusing the reverend's son. One scandal blamed van Gogh for an incident surrounding an unmarried village woman who had been infatuated with the artist and had not been able to handle her feelings for the misfit painter and the pressure of her family. To make the scandal worse, the woman had collapsed on a walk with Vincent, having drunk poison just before. But this was not the only accusation tied to the artist; another dealt with a peasant girl that had posed for the artist having gotten pregnant. With van Gogh's name already tainted, it was easy to blame him yet again. Thus, with his father's distaste and his father's death removing what had been an invisible shield, van Gogh took on the title of the misfit.

Van Gogh was not deterred in the slightest from his devotion, however, choosing to move to Amsterdam possibly due to the onslaught of negative accusations from Nuenen. But the main reason derives from a realization that all that he was learning about the art world, the great museums, and old masters was indirectly coming to him through his brother, Theo (ibid 193). So, in a desire for directness, van Gogh made the move to Amsterdam, starting in Antwerp, the city of Peter Paul Rubens. He found influence from Rembrandt and Frans Hals, though he did not copy them, instead staying true to his uniqueness. He gazed upon the work of the old master, capturing his bearing on the art before making it his own, this rebelliousness possibly being why van Gogh could never last at an academy. Van Gogh took on his popular style of "an impulsive, crude art of vitality and energy that was so sketchy in character that there was surely a point in wondering whether his canvases were finished products," (ibid 198). This questioning of the finality of his artwork was what truly made van Gogh's style. He did not strive for the perfect blending or straightness of lines. Instead, he accepted the sketchiness of his linework and the apparent blotchiness of colors. Through these decisions, he did not choose to refine his work, to articulate the truth within them. Instead, he gave truth the ugliness it desired, the honesty it desired. Therefore for van Gogh, if an artwork was to be considered "finished" it had to capture the "soul" and the truth of the composition (ibid 201).

As van Gogh progressed in his work, he dove into this idea of capturing the ugliness of truth through his artistic interpretation further with a newfound interest in color. He worked in a unique way to present a thesis through his interpretation upon a canvas (ibid 213). While to some his artwork became more artificial-looking with its vivid hues and colors, the compositions were just becoming interpretations of the artist as he adapted through his ideologies and mindsets. He created his artistic style despite what other people thought about his artistic skill. Noteworthy was the result of his entering into a competition in 1886 at an academy where placed in a class for 13 to 15-year-olds. Thus, the perception of his artwork was still misunderstood, seen as the work of an unskilled artist, but to van Gogh, he was creating art in his unique style that was intertwined with his ideologies of the world.

Van Gogh kept on with his work and his traveling, moving to Paris in pursuit of progressing his art career further. With Theo living in Paris, the letters grew sparse as the brothers most likely shared more verbal conversations than written ones. What is in writing is Theo's letter to his sister discussing the dynamic of the two brothers in the same city, speaking on how van Gogh had helped Theo get more familiar with multiple painters (ibid 227). Writing honorably and expressing how proud he is of his brother, Theo tells his sister, "He [Van Gogh] is one of the pioneers of the new ideas, or rather he is trying to revive ideas that have been falsified in routine everyday life and have lost their lustre," (ibid 227). Thus, van Gogh had the support of his brother in his unique, colorful, sketchy style that stood starkly out against the rest of the artists at the time. Van Gogh had not only achieved the financial support from his brother but also his social support and even arguably his adoration.

Not only did van Gogh's move gain him the support of his brother but it also allowed him to join in artist circles, finally finding some sense of community. The unique misfit of an artist even matriculated at a private art college run by Fernand-Anne Piestre, called Cormon, around 1886 (ibid 232). The artist made further friendships with his classmates, including Louis Anquetin, Emile Bernard, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (ibid 233). By creating this community with fellow artists, van Gogh assisted his brother with his art dealing. Van Gogh would introduce

these artists to Theo who would then become the contact for the up-and-coming art dealer (ibid 238). He was only able to do this because of how “likable” the artist had become, especially among experienced artists. Theo wrote home to his mother, telling her of how van Gogh had seemingly evolved from a social outcast to a likable and even “popular” person, noting how his “acquaintances” would send him bunches of flowers to use as his subject matter (ibid 257). For once, van Gogh was finally not a complete social misfit outcast.

Possibly due to his newfound social status, Van Gogh accomplished the completion of 230 paintings during his stay in Paris, more than he completed anywhere else in his lifetime (ibid 241). Being able to commune with many other artists and having a newfound gumption and acceleration to paint, van Gogh dove into his art and improved his techniques. *Lane at the Jardin du Luxembourg* is arguably the most realistic of van Gogh’s works, his sketchy style and devotion to devote truth resulted in a lane of beautiful trees and figures whose oily painted composition made the canvas appear more like a window looking out at the scenery. *Montmartre: Quarry, the Mills* proved the progression of van Gogh’s ability to portray texture, the luscious greenery of nature juxtaposing man’s created buildings that stick almost awkwardly up from the ground. Van Gogh could not help but also dive into his main interest of color, working with the flower still lifes like in *Vase with Hollyhocks*. With these studies of different techniques for his artistic progression, van Gogh continued to slip away from literal realism and instead to Impressionism. *Self-Portrait with Straw Hat* shows van Gogh’s shift to a freer sense of color, allowing himself to reach into the vividness of hues that his sketchy artistic style would accentuate beautifully. While many artists at this time were seeking their artistic uniqueness, van Gogh was finalizing his own, giving himself the freedom to dive into his own style with the fuel of his newfound society of artists.

With this society and his raging artistic progression, van Gogh organized an exhibition in November of 1887 at the Restaurant du Chalet in Montmartre (ibid 275). The exhibition was filled with artwork from van Gogh and his artistic friends, including Bernard, who sold his first piece at the exhibition (ibid 275). At the time, there was a division growing between the old

masters and the modernists, realists against Impressionists. Van Gogh found himself in the middle of this argument, working in both styles. In a letter to Bernard, van Gogh called for unity between the two arguing factions of artists and declared the need for respect for what each could master (ibid 275). The exhibition encouraged van Gogh to speak out and to request the two warring parties to subdue their argumentative attitudes toward each other because ultimately, van Gogh used both of their styles to create his artwork. If they continued to argue, van Gogh would inevitably find himself caught lonely between the two with no one to truly relate to.

As van Gogh found himself seeking inspiration from two arguing artistic styles, he found inspiration from another source: Japanese prints. They came to Paris through trade but mainly by the 1867 Paris World Fair (ibid 283). These prints were sold by Western dealers and van Gogh got his hands on the prints, collecting hundreds of them for himself and his brother (ibid 284-286). The prints harmonized well with the artistic styles of Europe at the time, having first been influenced by European art that had come to Japan through the same trade routes the Japanese prints were coming to Europe (ibid 286). These artworks were not arguing with any of van Gogh's prior artistic styles but instead confirmed his use of black and vast areas of unbroken color in his compositions (ibid 290). With the inspiration of these Japanese prints, van Gogh moved south from Paris, away from the negativity of the arguing artistic styles and racing like he always had toward his artistic progression (ibid 284). It was there that van Gogh was arguably the first to create copies of these "japonaiseries", using it as a technique to improve his color technique (ibid 290). As van Gogh noted in letter 510, "My whole work is founded on the Japanese, so to speak,... in its homeland, Japanese art is in a state of decline but it is putting down new roots in French Impressionism," (ibid 298). Japanese art had made its home in influencing French Impressionism and a special place in van Gogh's heart who would cherish the artistic style as a teacher and influencer in the rest of his artwork.

With this move, van Gogh pushed forward into his individuality. He stayed true to himself, dedicated to his inspiration and his unique technique. He stayed true to his work because to him, "if his work was worth nothing, then he too must be worth nothing," (ibid 307). Through

this loyalty to his artwork, van Gogh had truly become a modernist, creating his uniqueness and investing in “the phenomenon of individual symbolism” (ibid 306). Though van Gogh would stay loyal to himself and his style regardless, the art world did come to discover the artist, even if only a little. In the backrooms of Julien Tanguy’s modest store could be found the first opportunity to see Seurat, Cezanne, Gauguin, and van Gogh’s artwork together. Though van Gogh found himself, like all the rest, “of little or no interest to anyone,” he had found some sense of humble belonging in the art community and the art world (ibid 294). What utopia of belonging van Gogh could not find in the real world, he created with his brush, compositionally satisfying his desires with the painted canvases.

Staying loyal to himself, van Gogh chased his adoration for the Japanese style and artistry. The artist moved to Arles in search of his “own Japan,” truly wanting to dive into this new part of his artistic identity and style (ibid 316). His decision to move was assured by his conviction that he was establishing a connection with the Japanese art he admired so much (ibid 322). It defended his belief in the unity of art and life and his devotion to nature and its ever-changing colors, especially the ability to provoke such intense color that van Gogh admired and worked to capture in his art. Even in his lifestyle, the influence of the Japanese defended and influenced him, assuring the artist of his simplistic lifestyle and inspiring him to exchange self-portraits with fellow artists Gauguin and Bernard (ibid 320). Van Gogh was confident in his ability to create his own little Japan in Arles with its seasonal change offering better inspiration for his desire for vivid color that the Japanese art style had officially affirmed for the artist. *Still Life: Blossoming Almond Branch in Glass* spoke to the seasonal colors while *Street in Saint-Maries* spoke to van Gogh’s devotion to autonomous color and *Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saint-Maries* showed a balance between his love of detail, abstraction, and color to create a beautiful harmony (ibid 348-349). Van Gogh was burying himself in his artistic lifestyle, dedicated to himself and his art like never before.

This dedication led the artist to his ideology and practices in capturing light. He believed that there was light within all objects (ibid 352). Therefore, he would eradicate light sources and

shadows from his artwork. While to some this might ruin the impressionism of his art, to van Gogh he was pursuing the quest for the light within objects through his compositions. This technique by van Gogh is vivid in *The Night Cafe in the Place Lamartine in Arles* in which he portrays his admiration for the night which van Gogh thought to be “much livelier” and its “colors intenser” than the day as he wrote in letter 533 (ibid 377). *Starry Night over the Rhone* further portrays this belief but also the artist’s distaste for artificial light and instead his admiration for natural light (ibid 379). At night, the stars glowed more vividly to accentuate themselves against the darkness of the night sky, practically begging the artist who adored vivid hues and dark undisturbed blackness within his compositions to paint them. Van Gogh’s admiration grew to encompass the stars, “projecting his idea of the stars as a utopian counter-world of the imagination where the artist might find a home,” (ibid 382). The stars soon became the artist’s refuge, and his thoughts shifted toward the power of death and how it could be a passage to the stars, to his own sense of utopia. These thoughts of death not being an inherently negative process was an ideology that would haunt the artist for the rest of his life.

Something else came to haunt the artist and that was financial trouble, something that the artist had been haunted by his entire life. Theo, his main provider, was struggling financially with his employer (ibid 357). Due to this, van Gogh turned to sketching, much cheaper than his usual paintings that required expensive oil paint, canvas, brushes, and other materials. Still, van Gogh adored colors and made sure to note the colors of his composition in his grayscale sketches (ibid 360). However, the financial struggle was partially subdued by Uncle Cent whose inheritance was sent to Theo who then sent funds to van Gogh (ibid 391). While money would never be a commodity for the artist, nor his brother, this financial help from Uncle Cent would allow van Gogh to pursue his dream of the Yellow House (ibid 391). Still seemingly fixated on the artistic community he had in Paris, van Gogh dreamed of creating an artistic community of his own, living and working together within this Yellow House that was positioned within his new home of Arles that he had come to adore.

Gauguin was the first artist to be included in this dream of van Gogh. Gauguin had been a person of admiration for van Gogh, having worked to impress Gauguin with his artwork. Van Gogh had found yet another thing, in this case, a person, to dedicate himself. This decision derived from Gauguin being the one to encourage van Gogh to practice speed painting and to continue to work with sunflowers which would become something of notoriety for van Gogh (ibid 405). As for speed painting, van Gogh's sketchy artistic style made his artworks already appear rushed. His practice of sketching directly on the canvas was also seen as a method of hastening the artistic process. For van Gogh however, he believed his speed painting was efficient, writing in letter 507, "And so, if people say that it was done too hastily, you can reply that they looked at it too hastily," (ibid 373). As always, van Gogh stood loyally behind his artistic style, even as it adapted to his artistic progress, not deterred by onlookers. Thus, for van Gogh to be so infatuated with Gauguin is noteworthy and was possibly due to this early encouragement and agreement with the artist's already partially established style and subject matter.

It was Gauguin who was hesitant toward a closer relationship with van Gogh. Arguably due to the artist's arrogance, Gauguin did not rush to live in the Yellow House with van Gogh. Though with some persuasion on the part of van Gogh, Gauguin did make the move and join the artist Arles. Though, he did practically take over the household and desired a pupil, arguing for his hesitation having been due to arrogance, as this shows signs of arrogance (ibid 437). But van Gogh did not seem to care all too much, still admiring Gauguin and allowing him to take over the house that was essential to his dream. That in itself was arguably the reason for van Gogh's compensation, his desire, and again devotion to his dream which was the Yellow House. Van Gogh needed the relationship with Gauguin for his dream to prosper and so explains his patience and dedication to the artist.

However, eventually, the artists would clash. It began with van Gogh taking on the method of Gauguin who claimed, "Art is abstraction," and that van Gogh should, "derive the abstraction from Nature as you dream, and think more about your own creative work and what

comes of it than about reality,” (ibid 447). Though instead of following Gauguin’s method specifically, van Gogh would appropriate it and turn it into his own. There started the clash of the artists, with van Gogh’s dedication to his artistic style leading to the appropriation of Gauguin’s method while Gauguin in his arrogance was angered at the seeming disrespect of van Gogh to feel the need to appropriate his artistic method (ibid 448).

With this clash of the artist, van Gogh could see his dream shattering. Van Gogh had always devoted himself so intensely to his ideas that the proposed disaster of his Yellow House dream would cause him great devastation. Gauguin did not assist in this devastation, instead only adding to it. Gauguin believed van Gogh’s idea of the unity of art and life to be entirely impossible, arguing against the very core of van Gogh’s ideology. With this disagreement, van Gogh was losing confidence in himself as an artist and falling into devastation. Gauguin, upset with the apparent futility of the attempted relationship between the two artists, left the Yellow House and ultimately broke van Gogh’s dream. Terribly distraught by the death of his dream, van Gogh cut his ear lobe and sent it to a sex worker at the nearby brothel, the only place he had ever felt socially accepted due to his misfit nature that had always lingered with him (ibid 456-457). The unsuspecting sex worker, shocked at such an oddity of a gift, notified the police who would search for the devastated artist, finding him passed out from blood loss (ibid 456-457). This set of events leading to the artist’s cutting of his ear would be disputed in the years to come as well as the events that would occur right thereafter, but what would prove to be the truth of them all was that the event marked the decline of the artist.

With Gauguin’s departure, van Gogh had fallen into devastation in the face of his shattered dream and the lack of the ability of his devotion to saving such a dream. In the face of such a failure, van Gogh only dedicated himself more to his art. Writing to his brother in letter 557, his dedication is as intense as ever, “I sense that I must go on creating till I am shattered in spirit and physically drained,” (ibid 460). Van Gogh would turn to drugs, coffee, and alcoholism to push his body to its limits, painting endlessly to create work after work. Yet he would still face the lack of recognition of his work and again wrote to his brother in devastation in letter 571,

“My pictures are of no value; though of course they cost me a very great deal, at times even my blood and my brain,” (ibid 460). Still, van Gogh did not hesitate in the slightest to continue to dedicate himself fully to his artwork. The artist was exhausting himself both physically and mentally. He pursued his ideology of the connection of art and life which Gauguin had denied, and to the community of Arles, he had pushed himself to insanity in search of such a connection. To please his surrounding community and understand his mental state, van Gogh entered himself into the Saint-Remy asylum (ibid 473). Van Gogh was proving the degree to which he would remain dedicated to his ideology and art, a glimpse of which had caused Gauguin to depart from the artist. Thus, Gauguin had not only escaped the Yellow House dream but had also escaped existentialism, leaving van Gogh to fall into it (ibid 460).

With the dream of the Yellow House now completely gone, van Gogh was settling into his new home at Saint-Remy. Because he could no longer find his inspiration from walking around the beautiful landscape of Arles he began painting copies (ibid 487). He could not stop painting, art being like a lifeline for the artist. It was practically the only thing that gave him a purpose. He had agreed to enter Saint-Remy because he understood his mental state but also the state of being locked up in the asylum trapped the artist in what he would make his art studio, forcing the artist to continue in his devotion. Van Gogh was progressively succumbing to his maddening devotion to his art. He had concluded that freedom only existed in the “realm of art” (ibid 501). Van Gogh was pushing himself mentally to a state that he believed would progress his art. His devotion was now affecting him mentally as it had been physically and socially.

As a result of van Gogh pushing himself to such lengths, his arguably most popular artwork was created: *Starry Night*. The artist had remained dedicated to his vivid hues, and allowance of flaws to show the honest ugly truth of his subjects. New to his dedication was his use of curvy lines that curled and snaked across his composition. Possibly echoing his mental state, the lines chaotically flowed throughout the canvas, taking on van Gogh’s sketchiness to create an assortment of twisted hues. With all of these techniques, van Gogh attempted to depict a state of shock, possibly investigating himself and his reaction to finding himself in an asylum

but to him becoming the most progressing in art than ever before. This attempt is what became the *Starry Night*, with its rolling mountains below a spiraling sky of vivid hue that sparkles upon the small town within the darkened landscape for it all to be abruptly interrupted by a large Cyprus tree shooting out of the bottom of the composition. The artwork expresses van Gogh's style in its final form and arguably the most popular form. Its sketchy dashed lines curling upon themselves with hues of color begging to be mixed but starkly contrasting each other in their blotchiness all encompass the artist's progression and his inherent dedication.

Van Gogh was growing closer to his relationship with art, maybe finally finding that connection between art and life. But he knew he was slipping mentally and he spoke to this understanding in letter 602, "My work is a far better distraction than anything else at all, and if I were able to plunge into it with all my strength, it would probably be the best cure. The impossibility of models, and a number of other things, prevent me from doing so," (ibid 529). Van Gogh's art was his remedy for his mental state while also being the cause. It gave him purpose while also pushing himself to his mental limits. Van Gogh had yet again found himself in a beloved paradox: "the greater the energy with which it [art] seizes hold of the dynamic dazzle and flow of Life, the more it inhibits Life's freedom," (ibid 541). Eventually, the paradox tipped in favor of art becoming an inhibitor, convincing van Gogh to ingest his paint, the very thing that was the metaphorical and yet also literal inhibitor (ibid 532). Because of this, the governors of the asylum confiscated van Gogh's paint, both saving the artist from the overarching inhibitor but also putting him at risk of succumbing to his mental state that art had become a remedy for.

But just as van Gogh was struggling, having pushed himself nearly to his limits, his brother Theo reached out in a way he had never before, requesting van Gogh to send his artwork to the *5th Salon des Independants*, an annual exhibition (ibid 557). After much convincing by Theo, van Gogh sent two artworks, *Starry Night over the Rhone* and *Irises*, the latter achieving the highest price at the auction (ibid 557). It was here at this exhibition on September 3, 1889, that van Gogh was finally, truly recognized. It came on the behalf of J.J. Isaacson who wrote a

month earlier in the issue of the Dutch periodical *De Portefeuille*, “Who will interpret for us, in form and colour, this great and might Life that is achieving more and more self-confidence in our century? I know of one man, a man who has gone his own way, a pioneer, struggling on in the darkest night, and posterity will do well to remember his name - Vincent,” (ibid 558). Using the much more intimate form of van Gogh’s name, Isaacson works to eloquently speak highly of the artist, even as he is “struggling on in the darkest night” which many would come to judge the painter for. Isaacson’s words argued with Henry de Groux’s words after six of van Gogh’s pictures were shown at the seventh exhibition of Les Vingt, the Belgian equivalent of the *Salon des Independants* in January of 1890 (ibid 559). De Groux viewed “Monsieur Vincent”’s painting of potted sunflowers as “revolting” (ibid 559). Despite De Groux’s opinion, van Gogh sold his first artwork at the exhibition to Anne Boch for 400 francs, making *The Red Vineyard* the only painting van Gogh would sell since he normally gifted them away. Van Gogh’s success continued to the *6th Salon Des Independants* in March of 1890 where he exhibited ten pictures. Van Gogh was finally making his way into major art exhibitions.

However, credit must be given to van Gogh’s main exhibitor: Père Tanguy. In the backrooms of his shop still hung van Gogh’s artwork. Bernard showed van Gogh’s artwork to Jan Albert Aurier who in 1890 wrote an article in the *Mercure de France* about van Gogh. Excerpts of the article prove how infatuated Aurier had become with van Gogh after viewing the artist’s work. As Aurier writes, “Beneath skies carved from glittering sapphires and turquoise, or moulded out of some infernal sulphur, hot, deadly and dazzling; beneath skies like molten metal and melting crystals, where scorching suns shine, beneath a constant and terrible patter of all kinds of conceivable lights,” and remaining extremely metaphorical he continues into describing van Gogh himself as “a sort of intoxicated giant, better equipped to move mountains than to toy with bric-à-brac, a seething brain irresistibly pouring forth its lava into all the gorges of Art, a terrible and half-mad genius, frequently sublime, sometimes grotesque, at all times very nearly sick,” (ibid 560). Unbelievable is Aurier’s ability to explain van Gogh through his paintings, nearly describing the artist flawlessly with his “seething brain irresistibly pouring forth its lava into all the gorges of Art” that made him a “half-mad genius”. With this unexpectedly realistic

explanation of the artist, Aurier moves on to articulate the artist in the realm of art, concluding, “Vincent van Gogh is at once too simple and too subtle for the bourgeois spirit of our contemporaries. He will only ever be fully understood by his brothers, by those who are true artists [...] and by those happy few among the lower and lowest of people who have chanced to escape the dogmas of Latin School!” (ibid 560-561). Aurier again nearly flawlessly describes the artist in his misfit manner than only allowed for him to associate with others as the understanding of his ideologies as he was or the “lower and lowest of people” who understood his misfit nature and not being accepted into society. Being the first to examine the artist in such portraiture of words, Aurier gave the world its first true understanding of the artist, a glimpse into his mind that would soon be its type of inspiration to other writers, especially those who like Aurier, became infatuated with the artist.

Yet one positive lengthy article and a couple of showings in some exhibitions would not push the artist into popularity, not amongst the multitudes of other artists at this time. Despite this, van Gogh remained dedicated to his work, accepting the hard life that he assumed was necessary to pay for his progression as a painter. There was surely the wondering of just how much more of himself he would have to expend to become successful, van Gogh determined that pushing himself to such lengths would be the path to such a successful career. Thus, his artistic status became infringed upon by his declared madness that he craved more and more, van Gogh connected the two to the point they were intertwined as one.

His life gave him one more opportunity for positivity and that was with his brother’s marriage to Jo Bonger and a change of scenery. The true moment that would uplift the artist was the naming of Theo and Jo’s child: Vincent (ibid 591). Of course, the name was in respect of Theo’s artistic brother who would also be the child’s godfather (ibid 591). It was a beautiful moment, even if van Gogh had to experience it through the lens of his mental state. Though he would at least see more positivity with his dismissal from Saint-Rémy. The artist had been suffering from mental attacks and there was hope that should he have a change of scenery they

would stop (ibid 598). So the artist moved back to Paris on May 16, 1890, before moving to Auvres due to the advice of a newfound friend Paul Gachet (ibid 634).

Paul Gachet was a doctor with a particular insight into the soul and there could not have been a better therapist for van Gogh. Writing in a letter to his sister he speaks of Gachet as a “true friend” who had a “mental resemblance” to himself and that “his profession and his faith keep him going” (ibid 634). The similarities between the two allowed van Gogh to feel a connection that was necessary for the artist in his social relations and why his relationship with van Gogh had ended so poorly. Gachet gave the artist a final new friendship, assisting the artist with sifting through his intense thoughts and mental state.

But van Gogh had paved his path, his mind and desire to make art and life one finally taking its ultimate toll on July 27, 1890 (ibid 663). The artist had left for the day off to paint which was not abnormal, *Wheat Field under Clouded Sky* was supposedly the painting that was on the artist's easel. However, he returned with a deep and serious gunshot wound to his abdomen (ibid 663). The cause for such a wound has been and is being disputed. It was Gachet who was called to see the wound physically, who ironically had thought his friend had been improving mentally (ibid 663). Gachet wanted to tell Theo but Vincent denied it, not wanting to bother his brother. Remaining persistent, Gachet messaged Theo through the gallery at which he worked (ibid 663). On July 28th, Theo arrived at his brother's deathbed only to observe the artist reclining with a smoking pipe in his mouth, completely content (ibid 663). His contempt would carry van Gogh to his death two days after the original wound (ibid 663). The last words the artist spoke were: “I wish it were all over now,” (ibid 663). His life had been plagued by misunderstanding, loneliness, and un-belonging. His contempt was for his art, but his dedication to progress would lead him to his deathbed. What can be determined was that van Gogh was ready for death, nearly wishing for it as the true medicine to the plagues of his life and the corruption of his artistic dedication. As Theo wrote to his mother, “He had found the peace he never found on earth,” (ibid 663).

The Romanticization of Vincent

“But yet my dear Brother [Theo], there is this that I have always told you, and I repeat it once more with all the earnestness that can be expressed by effort of a mind diligently fixed on trying to do as well as possible - I tell you again that I shall always consider you to be something more than a simple dealer in Corots.... Well, my own work, I am risking my life for it and my reason has half foundered because of it - that’s all right - but you are not among dealers in men as far as I know, and you can still choose your side, I think, acting with humanity - but *que veux-tu?*”

- Vincent van Gogh (Letter 652)

Van Gogh writes to his brother in one final letter, though this one, in particular, was unsent, having rested in the artist’s jacket pocket (Metzger 663-666). This is its final passage which speaks eloquently to what has come to fascinate historians and scientists: van Gogh’s selfless life and his unique mind. Both interact heavily with each other as they do in van Gogh’s own words. He begins by honoring his “dear brother”, praising him as “more than a simple dealer” but rather someone far more important, far more successful. Though van Gogh’s words aspire to add more than speaking to his brother just as an art dealer, but rather to his importance and significance as a person. His outright adoration and admiration for his brother portray the artist as selflessly throwing the “spotlight” onto his brother instead of himself when all van Gogh had done was work tirelessly to perfect his craft.

This is just one instance in which van Gogh is found to be selfless, as many more have been recognized by historians who have analyzed the artist’s life. The main ideology surrounds how the artist is addressed in these analyses by historians. While the artist’s full name “Vincent van Gogh” can obviously be used, the deliberate choice to call the artist by his first name “Vincent” is charged with a positive bias toward the artist. Addressing the artist with his first

name gives off a sense of intimacy. It is not a lack of respect, but a desire for closeness between the writer, usually some sort of historian, and the artist. This is usually due to some sort of adoration for the artist, similar to van Gogh's admiration for his brother. An analysis of van Gogh's life gives some writers a sense of relatability to the artist, the many trials the artist had to face gave the artist a sense of humbleness that makes him more approachable than a high figure that was always perfect. Thus, the name choice is one of familiarity, one of closeness, and one of admiration.

In my own writing, I have chosen to address the artist by his full name before continuing with the shortened "van Gogh". Though I admire the artist, I am striving for an unbiased approach to the artist's life, one that is not glossed over with a positive sheen of admiration. It is also necessary in analyzing the very adoration this first name basis name choice gives to the artist in many historians' writing. The name choice gives the artist a sense of approachability in the historian's writing. A last name gives a bland sense of historic rhetoric but the choice of the first name makes the artist more approachable, bringing the artist to the reader's level by using a sense of relatability to their everyday practice of addressing companions by their first name. The last name makes the artist formal, portraying him more as a masterful painter. The first name however gives the artist a sense of approachability that is appreciated by historian admirers and intriguing to their readers.

The use of "Vincent" instead of "van Gogh" romanticizes the artist in its effect on both the writer and the reader. The artist is not seen as an uptight painter who painted many of the masterpieces plastered advertisements, merchandise, books, magazines, social media, etc. Instead, the artist becomes a likable and more feminized figure, one that is recognized as inherently more accepting with this intimate use of his first name. While this is entirely on the part of the writer, this use of the artist's first name derives from the artist himself. The artist would use his first name to sign artworks that were more than a study to him as well as signing his many letters with his first name (ibid 200). Thus, the artist himself put value into the use of his first name, designating it, especially for his valued artworks and his intimate letters to his

companions but especially his brother. This value and intimacy that the artist charged his first name with are the same doing that writers act in today by using it. Just as the artist used his first name as his valued and intimate signature, so do writers use “Vincent” as a romanticized version of the artist's name that creates a more valuable and intimate relationship for writers and readers alike (Heinich 71).

This exemplification of the artist began in 1889 with J.J. Isaacson who wrote in the issue of the Dutch periodical *De Portefeuille* “posterity will do well to remember his name - Vincent” (Metzger 558). Posterity would not wait long because the literature admiring the artist would surge after the artist’s death in 1890. In 1892, van Gogh was named a “genius” by one critic, and by 1905, Dutch and French critics alike would give the artist the newer title of “legend” (Heinich 3). By the 1930s, van Gogh was on the international scene with his popularity after critics (ibid 3). This shift from the negative judgemental view that van Gogh had found himself in all his life to a positive admirable view is due to a shift in the art world toward modernism (ibid 9). While van Gogh himself was a unique artist in his technique, the art world had not yet shifted to this new sense of modernism, instead still looking toward a traditionalist style of painting, one that disgraced van Gogh’s sketchy, unfinished, vivid style. Though the shift of the art world with its critics would shift in the 1890s, it would be too late for the artist to see such a shift. Thus with this shift, there is the glorification of van Gogh by critics who enabled the artist “to escape denigrating contempt or worse still, the scornful silence of traditionalists,” (ibid 10). Had this initial work on the part of these critics who were making this shift from traditionalism to modernism never used van Gogh’s work as a method to push their admiration for this newer art form and encourage a shift in the art world, van Gogh’s name would not have rippled from the critics to the international scene of art dealers and the general public who read the critic’s compelling words.

With these writings from critics, van Gogh was understood for his uniqueness, and his ability to bend from the conforms of traditionalists. Van Gogh was “characterized by the rarity of his work” and in this manner took on a “categorical value” that allowed the artist to become a

“category of reference” and was therefore “praised more and more categorically,” (ibid 13-14). Thus, rather than being judged for his stark and ambiguous uniqueness, the artist had found respect in the critic’s push to shift the art world, so much so that now van Gogh was a point of reference. This led to the inclusion of the artist in an 1896 exhibition that also featured Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, Paul Gauguin, and Cézanne (ibid 14). Being shown with these select renowned artists pushed van Gogh into high praise, “since it meant being picked as one of the few names worthy of being remembered,” (ibid 15). Van Gogh’s name was making its way into popularity with the initial push of adoring critics.

Literature pushed the artist further in a different form: biographical accounts. Emile Bernard, one of van Gogh’s closest companions, was the first writer of such literature in September of 1891 (ibid 20). Paul Gauguin and Gabriel-Albert Aurier also wrote of the artist, adding to his perception of uniqueness in their words, further noted by critics who struggled to place the artist into a specific art movement due to such uniqueness (ibid 24). With this, van Gogh’s personal life entered into history and circulated throughout the public. In combination with his letters which were published by Theo’s widow, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, from 1914 to 1915, this literature surrounding the artist propelled him into the limelight (Metzger 21). Thus, through the efforts of the people who knew van Gogh propelling the artist’s story into the public sphere, the artist’s life story was passed onto posterity (Heinich 21).

Through this emergence of literature surrounding van Gogh, the artist’s paintings began growing in popularity. They were recognized by their strangeness, the ability to unusually not fit into a singular art movement (ibid 21). The unique strangeness propelled the artwork to find its way into the art market in the 1920s (ibid 24). As the market for impressionist painting grew, van Gogh’s artwork found its way into the hands of art dealers and collectors who would come to recognize the artist as a master (ibid 24). By the 1930s, the first forgeries of van Gogh’s work were circulating in the art market, trying to replicate the now-recognized master and preaching his popularity in the market (ibid 24). Further, the sale value of van Gogh’s artwork soared quickly. In 1890, the artist’s work sold for 400 francs which increased to 1100 francs in 1900 and

32,500 francs in 1913 (ibid 30). By 1932, van Gogh's artwork sold for 361,000 francs, an over 90,000 % increase from the 400 francs sale price in 1890 (ibid 30).

But the sale price of van Gogh's artwork was not the only thing that was rising in number. The amount of literature being written about the artist soared with 671 articles and books being published on the artist before World War II (ibid 30). Accentuating the pace of soaring increase, 22 articles and books were published from 1890 to 1899, 35 were published from 1900 to 1909, 79 were published from 1910 to 1919, 220 were published from 1920 to 1929, and 288 were published from 1930 to 1939 (ibid 30). This intense surge of literature surrounding the artist can be attributed to the publication of the artist's letters in 1914. Biographies, memoirs, and psychiatric studies of the artist were absent before such a publication. However, once these writers had such source material on the artist's life, there was a surge of literature on the artist causing a soaring increase over the decades leading to World War II. With these pieces of literature surrounding the artist's life, van Gogh's popularity grew. First, the literature of his fellows who knew him propelled his art into the art market and later, literature propelled the artist's life into the public sphere and further into popularity.

This propelling literature in question focused on two main aspects of the artist's life: his character and his mental health. While memoirs and biographies worked to convey the artist as a martyr and saintly figure, psychiatric studies worked to diagnose the artist's mental illness. Both forms of propelling literature in their unique ways pushed the artist into popularity through their compelling words. By working with the same source content of literature from those who knew van Gogh personally and his intimate letters, these writers of different disciplines analyzed the artist. But the different disciplines coincide, both using the entirety of the artist's life for their analysis. Biographies and memoirs used the artist's death as a beautiful end to his dedicated life, while psychiatric studies used the artist's life to bring reason to the cause of the artist's death. How the writers of such compelling literature wrote about the artist is what propelled van Gogh into popularity and thus is worth studying.

Biographies and memoirs in the collective celebration of van Gogh likewise paint the artist as a saintly figure due to the historical facts of the artist's life. Because of this, many of the biographies of van Gogh become hagiographies rather than biographies (ibid 35). Biographers would accentuate the artist's selflessness and humility through the many rough patches of his life. These included the many times the artist suffered financially, his struggles with not being accepted by his family, and his battle with his mental health. However, the artist would persevere, staying intensely dedicated to his artwork throughout, even overcoming his financial struggle by sketching directly onto his canvas, unfazed by the trouble. Of significance is the artist's relations with people of lower statuses. From the coal miners to sex workers, van Gogh selflessly cared for them, even capturing them in artwork, creating portraits of people who otherwise would have never been captured by an image, never remembered postmortem by paint on a canvas to be looked upon by posterity. This gave these people importance that they otherwise would not have had and these biographies accentuate the artist's dedication to such, feeding into their portrayal of an artist with humility. Thus these characteristics of selflessness and humility become trademarks for van Gogh in biographies that are better recognized as hagiographies.

The saintliness of van Gogh is attributed to these two characteristics but also to the artist's dedication to the people in his life. Of significance was his devout dedication to Sien. Though she was a sex worker with children whose father was not the artist, van Gogh unconditionally cared for her and her children. The artist even suffered financially for his "family" as he recognized them to be. Any other man would have turned the mother and her children away just because of the Sien socially unaccepted occupation and the children in their "illegitimacy". But van Gogh cared immensely for them, showing what biographers would claim as his saintly selfless compassion. As Rainer Metzger attributes such compassion, it was van Gogh's "innate goodness" and "sentimentality colours" of vision that led to his compassion for the family. This all arises from the letter (Letter 213) van Gogh wrote when Sien gave birth to her second child at Christmas,

A strong, powerful emotion visits a man's spirit when he sits beside the woman he loves, with an infant child in the cradle next to them... Even if she was in the hospital and I sitting beside her where she lay - it would still always be the eternal poetry of Christmas night, with the infant in the manger, as the old Dutch painters portrayed it, and Millet and Breton - with a light nevertheless in the darkness, a brightness amidst the dark night (Metzger 76).

With van Gogh's words, these writers take as source material for their romanticization of the artist into a selfless, saintly figure of history. Van Gogh's words alone speak to his feelings toward his family, his connection with his relationship with his family having a new birth to his knowledge of the Christian story of the birth of Christ. However, these words are what are adapted, just the same as the rest of his life, into a hagiography rather than a biography. Van Gogh is portrayed as a saint, a person of high esteem, rather than the selfless individual he was. It is this portrayal of the artist as such a likable and pleasant figure of history that makes him inherently pleasing to the reader.

Furthermore, the artist's relationship with Paul Gauguin grew in closeness at the Yellow House. Van Gogh had invited the fellow artist, hoping to build a community of artists in Arles. But Van Gogh's intense devotion to his art had coincided with his belief in the connection between life and art and it was this ideology that Gauguin had denied. Gauguin even went so far as to claim the connection to be impossible which led to van Gogh's questioning of himself as an artist with Gauguin's conflicting words. Van Gogh had looked to Gauguin for some time as a source of inspiration and as a friend. He had humbled himself in the shadow of such a master of art as he had seen him. However, with Gauguin's denial, van Gogh found conflict in himself. Gauguin cleared the conflict for the artist by leaving the Yellow House and crushing van Gogh's dreams of an artist community in Arles at his Yellow House. With this disparity, van Gogh cut a portion of his ear off. But his saintliness appears yet again according to biographers with his move into Saint Remy, a mental institute, at the request of the local community. Van Gogh did not cause a ruckus but instead sacrificed his free life for the betterment and satisfaction of the community, showing his humility and selflessness. This is just one of the many examples that

biographers use to accentuate the saintly qualities of the painter, and thus van Gogh grew popular due to his life and the literature surrounding it, not his paintings.

It is this telling of van Gogh's life surrounding his act of cutting his ear that extends the literature written about the artist to psychiatric studies because it is the first undeniable symbol of van Gogh's mental health. The first of these psychiatric studies was in 1928. All attempts to diagnose the artist and his mental health that surrounded his devoted devotion to art and the intensity by which he lived his life under the ideology of the connection between art and life. By the 1920s and 1940s, dada, surrealism, and "raw art" were making their way into the art scene, and the so-called "madness" of the artist was accepted in the art community as revolutionary and sacred (Heinich 79-82). It was his "madness" or rather his "ailment" that caused van Gogh to "intoxicate himself with his art" (ibid 78). With these new art movements and the hagiography-like biographies already surrounding the artist, the artist's mental health was hardly seen as a stumbling block to van Gogh's admirers but rather a topic of interest. Rather than being recognized as a "madman" as he had been by the people of Arles, he was "rehumanized (as one who had paid the price of madness for his art)," (ibid 85). The artist's mental health was and arguably still is revered as the cause for his ability to create art and to devote himself so diligently to his craft. These psychiatric studies therefore just propelled the artist's name further into the public sphere, feeding the admirers more information about their beloved artist.

The moment in the artist's life that brings together both the biographies and the psychiatric studies is van Gogh's death. While psychiatric studies will speak to the moment as the result of the artist's mental illness, biographies speak to the artist's death as a romanticized completion of the martyrdom of the artist. He had devoted himself so passionately to his practice of art that he was willing to die for it, to pay "the price of madness for his art". That price was death. The artist had forced himself so far into existentialism that he could not proceed further, could not push himself mentally further, and therefore his body physically was forced to give up. This is the martyrdom that these biographies prefer to tell, that the artist was ready and willing to die for the very thing he had devoted himself to, his art.

The biographies tell a second story of the artist's death with the portrayal of the artist as a selfless saint. Van Gogh's brother Theo had always paid for his art supplies, the true reason for van Gogh's ability to create his artwork. This did not mean that Theo was necessarily overly financially endowed to finance his brother. However, he still did, sending van Gogh art supplies at the artist's request through his letters. It is because of this that van Gogh, as argued by the biographies, felt indebted to his brother and also a sense of guilt. Theo and his wife had just brought a baby into the world which would require appropriate financial support. Van Gogh, with a guilt-ridden heart and desperation to finally provide for his brother, died by suicide, knowing that a dead artist's artwork would better financially support his brother's art dealing instead of being another financial burden to his brother (Metzger 678-681). With an ultimate sacrifice and a selfless end to his saintly biography, van Gogh's life is romanticized to portray the artist in the biographer's admiration and to infatuate the reader.

However, further research on the artist leads scholars to believe that the cause of van Gogh's death might not have been suicide but rather murder. The artist suffered from a gunshot wound for 30 hours before his death on July 29, 1890. Kaufman Arenberg, Vincent J. M. De Maio, and Michael M. Baden together argue that while "the basis and validity of this suicide narrative are still very hotly debated among van Gogh scholars to this day," that "...it was likely impossible for Vincent to self-inflict his mortal wound," (Arenberg). With a recreation of van Gogh's supposed suicide method, scholars found that the mortal wound was impossible for the artist to do on his own accord. While the research being conducted by the scholars along with other current scholars is at least 130 years old, the scholars still argue, "that is impossible to disprove murder given the data," (ibid).

This newer argument surrounding the cause of the artist's death only speaks further to the artist's popularity due to literature. Even within this more scientific and medical study of the artist, the literature still depicts the artist honorably. The scholars used the artist's intimate first name when making their claim. Their words further add to this, again using the first name as before when discussing the age of the evidence of the investigation, "These missing forensic files

will remain buried with all the secrets Vincent took with him to his grave,” (ibid). This wording is not scientific but rather an assemblage of articulated words to romanticize the death of the artist, the very focus of study for the scholars. The scholars further call the incident of the artist’s death a “crime”, a method to push their argument but also to portray the artist as an innocent honorable victim, one that readers would feel pity for and come to endear (ibid). The rest of their claim further argues, “This crime, whether suicide or murder, has generated renewed interest and numerous questions surrounding the suspicious death of the most iconic artist of the 19th century,” (ibid). Again, the scholars stray away from a scientific writing style to admire the artist as an “iconic artist of the 19th century”. However, the rest of their words argue what is the thesis of this paper, that it is this literary piece of study that, like all the other literature surrounding the artist, has pushed the artist into popularity and continues to do so through more questions and more research.

Through all of these literary pieces, van Gogh is propelled more and more into popularity. Each act in their way, from biographies to medical-centered studies on the artist’s mental health and death. The biographies work “...to personalize artistic greatness...” while the medical studies work to analyze the artist’s mind, his source of artistic devotion (Heinich 63). As Nathalie Heinich argues,

Under the exasperated or disdainful gaze of the specialists, books for the general public and works of popularization sprout up, the abundance of their color illustrations echoing the generosity of their rhetoric, designed to impress all of those for whom van Gogh is henceforth ‘the man with the severed ear.’ In the modern compendium of legends devoted to ‘accursed artists’, the elevation of the hero is explicitly imputed to the exemplary character of his life, which cannot be dissociated from the greatness of his work (ibid 63).

Worthy to note is that all the literature surrounding van Gogh is not entirely positive. Even in his lifetime, the artist had his fair share of negative critics, including De Groux in 1890. However, this negative criticism continues to propel the artist into popularity just by the mention of his name. The exposure of more and more of the general public to the artist's name is further

familiarization with the artist. Admirers will read the negativity in attempts to disprove it as they read while newcomers will read the critique and be introduced to the artist. Either way, popularity is what comes to the Vincent van Gogh name and therefore artist.

Despite the negative or positive light that these pieces of literature shine on van Gogh, all effectively push the artist's name into popularity. It was through these biographies that “the progressive superimposition of the biographic excellence of the author on the professional excellence of the painter,” (ibid 74). Further, it was the “exemplary life” of the artist that brought on the popularity, not his work as an artist (ibid 74). That it was “the greatness of the artist’s personality” that progressed van Gogh’s popularity rather than “the mediocrity of the painter’s skills” (ibid 74). And with this intense glorification of van Gogh’s life, more and more literature has its source material, has its fuel to continue to create more and more publications surrounding the artist and further pushing the artist into popularity.

The biographies of the artist are “an open production that can be reiterated indefinitely (in conformity with the hagiographical model), so the psychiatric literature never seems to have quite finished with the van Gogh ‘case!’” (ibid 74). Thus, as biographies continue to investigate further into the artist's life, studies on the artist medically and psychiatrically continuously have further cases to study the artist. Just as biographies give more historical information surrounding the artist’s death, studies investigate further into the artist’s mental health and the forensic evidence, trying to solve the case of the famed artist’s death. So as biographies give more admirable information, they only give more curiosity to studies that work effortlessly to pursue such curiosities. It is an endless cycle that only propels the artist further and further into popularity. He is known for his biography as “the man who severed his ear” or the “accursed artist” (ibid 63). The artist's life proceeds him, being intriguing to multiple audiences both interested in history and science with endless biographies and medical and psychiatric studies. And through these, the artist is intensely romanticized as a saintly martyr, as a likable personable figure due to his unconditional compassion, and as a person of humble humility which kept the artist from being an undesirable arrogant man. Thus with all these positive characteristics imbued

upon the artist, the reader is infatuated with the artist and becomes just as intrigued with van Gogh as the author, and the artist is propelled further into popularity.

Why Not Paul Gauguin?

While Vincent van Gogh was propelled further into popularity, Paul Gauguin was left behind in notoriety. More writers, historians, and researchers took hold of van Gogh's name and the compelling story tightly attached to it, leaving fewer scholars in comparison to speak about the life and work of Gauguin. Though the same cannot be said for Gauguin's name; it prominently makes its way into the telling and study of van Gogh's life. Van Gogh's biography and psychiatric medical studies can hardly be analyzed without finding the counterpart painter's name. The question, therefore, circulates around the reason for van Gogh's popularity and not Gauguin's popularity in the same magnificent and notably positive magnitude.

The combination of the two artists as counterparts and the corresponding comparison that cannot be ignored in their intertwining biographies originates with the two artists working together within the same time period and more closely in the Yellow House at Arles. The two artists were familiar with each other before this though, with them commonly exchanging self-portraits. However, it is the time the two artists shared at the Yellow House that provides a true comparison, and consequently obvious contrast, of the two artists' lives and ideologies.

The Yellow House was van Gogh's own idea, possibly more accurately explained as a dream. He hoped to build an artist community in Arles at his beloved Yellow House where they could all work and live together. In this atmosphere, the artist would have access to an abundance of inspiration that would flourish between the ideas of the artists. It was "a plan for a new community of artists - brothers who would flourish in a harmonious condition of mutual support," (Silverman 3). This desire for closeness, for a brotherhood of artists, was van Gogh's dream that he encompassed in the Yellow House.

The artist that would have what could arguably be described as an honor, being the first artist to be invited to the Yellow House, was Paul Gauguin. Van Gogh respected Paul Gauguin and desired a closer relationship with his fellow artist than just a trading of self-portraits. However, with such a closeness that the Yellow House gave, the artists, especially Gauguin, discovered their differences. As usually discussed in van Gogh's biography, Gauguin directly disagreed with van Gogh's ideology of the connection between art and life. This ideology was not something that van Gogh could simply deny in order to continue a united relationship with Gauguin. This ideology was what van Gogh had dedicated himself to, both physically and mentally. His dedication to such an ideology had only grown throughout the years and van Gogh would not stop this dedication from growing more in order for the connection between art and life to grow closer. Thus, van Gogh was more dedicated to the relationship between art and life than his artistic relationship with Gauguin.

Though this is not to say that van Gogh was not desirable for a relationship with Gauguin; this ideology of a society of artists at the Yellow House was a dream of his. However, his ideology of the connection between art and life would ultimately be a stumbling block for Gauguin and the two artists would never achieve "the goal of brotherly harmony" (ibid 3). Instead, the relationship would be anything but harmonious, an argument breaking out between the two artists that would lead to one of the most popularized moments of van Gogh's life. With this disagreement and rift, the relationship between the two artists was "reduced... to an episode of personal incompatibility culminating in the violent incident, after an argument, when van Gogh cut off part of his left earlobe to spite Gauguin" (ibid 3).

In this manner, van Gogh's despair in the tragedy of his dream caused by the disagreement that led to him cutting his ear in pure agony has been blamed on Gauguin. The blame is both indirectly and directly attributed to Gauguin. While it is recognized that the action of cutting his ear was solely the direct action of van Gogh, his decision to do so was ultimately ignited by the dispute with Gauguin. Though van Gogh was already suffering from the mental toll of his dedication to his ideology of the connection of art and life, it was not this solely that is

recognized for this action of despair. It is the rift between the artists that led to Gauguin's decision to leave van Gogh and his Yellow House dream and such happened just before the artist turned to self-harm. This direct connection between the events is what scholars of van Gogh's life use to point the guilty finger at Gauguin for the cause of the act of disparity.

With this guilty finger comes the corresponding negative connotation. This association of Gauguin with the beginning of the overarching recognizable downfall of the beloved van Gogh is what is the cause for this onslaught of negativity. While it was simply due to a disagreement in values between the two artists, the result ultimately crushed van Gogh at the devastating burn-out of the flame of his beloved dream that he had dedicated himself to. The failure of such a dream was monumental, gut-wrenching, and nearly unbearable. It was only bearable through the physical release of pain by cutting his ear lobe. It is such magnitude of agony and disparity that van Gogh suffered from Gauguin's strong disagreement and departure from van Gogh's dreamed Yellow House that creates this complex of negativity toward Gauguin as arguably the villain in van Gogh's biography. In such a manner, therefore, van Gogh is victimized and Gauguin is villainized, creating a compelling dynamic that gives van Gogh a heroic tone within his own biography.

This villainization of Gauguin has become a point of discussion for van Gogh's admirers for several decades. One very recent example comes in the form of a podcast by a group of art historians who call themselves "the Art History Babes" (The Art History Babes). The podcast's title is "F*** Gauguin" which already blatantly speaks to the negative connotation that Gauguin has acquired (ibid). The description of the podcast summarizes the art historians' opinions of Gauguin, titling the artist as "the most problematic of artists". They invite the listener to join them for "some unabashed Gauguin bashing" while they highlight "all the reasons he [Gauguin] was literally the worst" which include "his terrible treatment of van Gogh" (ibid). The art historians add other reasons pertaining to this negative perception of Gauguin closely tied to Gauguin's own biography. However, their blatant labeling of Gauguin as the villain of van

Gogh's biography actively places van Gogh into the role of a hero which requires further analysis.

This heroism is the result of van Gogh's perseverance through Gauguin's criticism. Van Gogh did not turn away from his ideology of the connection between art and life. He instead continued to hold onto it tightly. However, by doing so he was forced to fight between dedicating himself to this ideology or his dream of the Yellow House. It was the ideology that prevailed but the decision could have gone the alternate way with van Gogh instead deciding to dedicate himself to his dream of the Yellow House, his dream of an artists' society. By abandoning his ideology, van Gogh's oeuvre would have completely changed, for the first time subverting himself to the ideologies of another. It would have been an unlikely turn for the artist who had relentlessly dedicated himself to his own ideologies despite the input of other people in his life. Yet, Gauguin had a compelling influence on van Gogh as someone he admired. Thus, Gauguin's words against van Gogh's ideology held some weight which gives validity to investigating what might have happened had van Gogh listened.

The result of listening to Gauguin would have led van Gogh to leave the ideology he had dedicated himself in order to save the dream of the Yellow House. He would have subdued his own ideology in order to pursue that of Gauguin. It would have pushed van Gogh away from his own intended life purpose, to find that connection between life and art, to pursue it to its fullest despite the mental and physical hardships. Yet, such a destiny would not have been fulfilled. Instead, van Gogh's own artistic aspirations would have been painted over by that of Gauguin. Consequently, van Gogh would have become more of Gauguin's prodigy rather than his own individual artist. The Yellow House dream was an artist community where inspirations and artistic ideologies could be shared not forced upon each other. Thus, with Gauguin's forceful sharing of his artistic ideology, the Yellow House dream was already dying.

The intention of Gauguin whether he desired to change van Gogh's complete ideology or change it just enough for the artists to be able to collaborate is questionable. However, Gauguin's desires to influence van Gogh to think differently about art can be justly argued. He shared his

compelling words toward his own artistic ideology firmly with van Gogh claiming that “art is abstraction,” and that van Gogh should, “derive the abstraction from Nature as you dream, and think more about your own creative work and what comes of it than about reality,” (Metzger 447). This ideology of abstraction completely argued against van Gogh’s pursuit of materiality to connect art and life and the outright contrast of the two ideologies is what caused van Gogh to deny it (Silverman 6). Van Gogh could not outright deny his ideology and this was not his intention for the Yellow House. Yet, Gauguin did not take the denial lightly, and decided to leave van Gogh and his dream, his pride likely compelling him to leave the fellow artist who had denied his ideology (Metzger 448).

With Gauguin’s departure, it became evident that Gauguin was in pursuit of sharing his ideology and arguably desired to compel van Gogh to change his ideology to align more with Gauguin, but Gauguin was not willing to mutually exchange ideologies. Further, his departure prohibited van Gogh from the possibility of compelling Gauguin to even alter his artistic ideology slightly. This is not to say that van Gogh would have done this or that Gauguin was not aware of van Gogh’s artistic ideology. Rather, Gauguin was familiarized with van Gogh’s ideology, the two having been in contact through mail. However, the argument remains that Gauguin desired to influence van Gogh with his artistic ideology but was not willing to be influenced by van Gogh.

This prideful appearance that Gauguin radiates within van Gogh’s biography does not portray the artist in a positive light. It turns Gauguin into the villain of the romanticized life of van Gogh, becoming comparable to a novel. The villain attempts to turn the hero away from his life’s pursuit and towards the villain’s own pursuit. However, the hero perseveres, beats the villain who departs from the story (Gauguin leaving the Yellow House), and continues on his pursuit. Though the encounter with the villain takes its toll (van Gogh cutting his ear), the hero continues onward in his destined path undeterred. And thus, the reader becomes more infatuated with the persevering hero, now becoming his champion as the words of his biography continue in front of their eyes.

The popularization of van Gogh's decision to cut his ear, found in many of these heroic biographies, is what does not assist Gauguin in hiding from his actions toward van Gogh. As discussed before, this stage in van Gogh's life is one that has granted the artist the notoriety as "the man who severed his ear" (Heinich 63). Biographies, which mainly speak to this notoriety, typically point their finger at Gauguin when seeking the culprit of this act. It is recognized that the severing of the artist's ear was in direct relation with Gauguin's departure from the Yellow House and his thus destruction of van Gogh's dream. Though it was van Gogh's distressed hand that partook in the act, the fellow artist who had already left Arles is the one recognized as the culprit. The act can be recognized as an act of desperation for van Gogh, but further analysis of the details and a possible recognition of opinion, point a guilty finger at Gauguin.

Gauguin is rarely mentioned again in van Gogh's biographies until the end of the artist's life. The fellow artist wrote of van Gogh in his memoir, speaking of his humility and personal madness (ibid 21). While humility agrees with many of the other adoring writers, the inclusion of personal madness speaks further to Gauguin's perception of van Gogh. It is acknowledged that van Gogh dealt with some sort of mental illness but the term "madness" has not aged well. Indeed, the term has been recognized as derogatory in nature and though the term "madness" in Gauguin's time might not have been directly recognized as derogatory, readers today still recognize it as such. This would yet again throw negative light onto Gauguin and it would be easier with there already being negative connotations from his departure from the Yellow House.

However, without looking at the term "madness" as derogatory, it must still be recognized that Gauguin chose to include such a detail in his memoir. Aurier at the same time spoke of van Gogh as a "genuine artist" (ibid 21). Aurier's choice not to include a description of the artist including his mental state speaks in direct contrast with Gauguin's words. It is such a contrast that even without the recognized derogatory notions of the term "madness", Gauguin still receives negativity in his appearance.

The appearance of Gauguin is further articulated with his paintings, particularly in comparison with van Gogh's which continuously set the artists apart in popularity. The two paintings of focus are Gauguin's *Landscape Near Arles* and van Gogh's *Korenschelven in de Provence* (Newfields) (Kroller Muller). Both artworks', created in 1888, contain compositions encompassing the landscape near the Yellow House (ibid). In particular, both contain a wheat stack and a simple building in the top left corner of the painting (ibid). Staying colorful in their own right, but maintaining an abundance of yellow, its many hues take hold of the wheat and the architectural structure (ibid). In this way, the natural aspect of the painting is connected to architecture and thus creates a complete composition to please the viewer.

The contrast of the two images comes with what the artists are searching for and articulating through their canvases. Van Gogh wandered into the fields, not an abnormality for the artist, searching to study the first harvest of the season with his painterly eye (Kröller Müller). The study resulted in "at least five drawings and ten paintings of weaving wheat, wheat stacks and rows of wheat sheaves" that included *Korenschelven in de Provence (Wheat stacks in Provence)* (ibid). Unusual compared to other artists at the time is the choice to place the wheat stack in the foreground and center of the composition (ibid). Yet, it was not unusual for van Gogh to stray from the normalcy that other artists established. For van Gogh, the wheat field and their corresponding wheat stacks were comforting (ibid). He is quoted for saying, "Their story is ours, for we who live on bread, are we not ourselves wheat to a considerable extent, at least ought we not to submit to growing, powerless to move, like a plant, relative to what our imagination sometimes desires, and to be reaped when we ripe," (ibid). Thus, van Gogh's comfort with the wheat comes with his connection to it, finding a likeness between himself and the wheat. With this and his corresponding painting, van Gogh is finding this connection of art and life by connecting himself as living to the wheat which becomes his artistic composition.

However, Gauguin, who could not agree with van Gogh's ideology of the connection of art and life, sought to capture something entirely different in his painting. Taking inspiration from van Gogh and his *Korenschelven in de Provence* painted only a few months before,

Gauguin also captured the unusual subject matter of the wheat stack at the forefront (Newfields). The canvas upon which Gauguin painted had been gifted by van Gogh to the artist (ibid). The rural subject matter and vivid colors recall van Gogh's style while the nearly forced geometric shapes in which the composition is captured are purely influenced by Paul Cezanne (ibid). The brushwork of Gauguin distinctly separates the two artworks, straying away from van Gogh's sketchiness towards more carefully and articulately placed brush strokes (ibid). Thus, the result of Gauguin's composition becomes a more abstract view of the landscape with its forceful geometric shapes abstracting the free forms of reality. Therefore, Gauguin was rebelling against "Impressionism's reliance on the visible world" and was instead "altering nature's shapes and colors" in order to capture a more "subjective reaction to the landscape" upon his canvas (ibid).

With nearly the same landscape before each artist and nearly the same subject matter of the wheat field harvest, both artists capture two very different and contrasting compositions. While Gauguin takes inspiration from van Gogh, he does not fall into the ideology of van Gogh, instead leaning into his own inspiration for the landscape. While van Gogh continues further into his sketchiness of style, Gauguin becomes more and more abstract with his artwork. The only inspiration from van Gogh that arguably stuck with Gauguin was van Gogh's appeal to brightly colored hues, the colors regularly found in Gauguin's compositions were hardly the same as the more muted tones of his subject matter.

However, the subject matter for Gauguin drastically changed after his interaction with van Gogh. While van Gogh continued finding his subject matter amongst nature with the occasional portrait and self-portrait and city-scape dotting his oeuvre, Gauguin's artworks become drastically problematic and have hardly aged well. The biographies of the two artists tell this contrasting story, as van Gogh's takes him to further battle his mental illness in pursuit of the connection between art and life while Gauguin travels in pursuit of new subject matter abroad. Gauguin found this new subject matter away from his family and fellow artists, instead finding himself in Tahiti. Thus comes a massive fork in the road of the two artist's biographies, both

geologically and morally. It is such “fork” that is a major cause for van Gogh’s massive positive popularity and Gauguin’s lackluster negative popularity.

The “fork” begins with Gauguin’s move to Tahiti. He spent ten years in “colonial” Tahiti where he found his new subject matter, both of the landscape and of the Indigenous peoples who lived there (Maleuvre 197). It was the choice of such subject matter that points to Gauguin having painted and disported “with the natives and availing himself of all the advantages with colonialism, racial domination and patriarchy put at his disposal,” (ibid). This choice to paint those that were suffering the horrible effects of colonialism speaks to Gauguin’s prideful nature, viewing himself hierarchically above others. He paints these Indigenous peoples within his landscapes as if they were merely objects within the natural landscape. They are severely dehumanized, and not nearly painted in the same respect as his subjects within his portraits.

One of the many paintings by Gauguin that works to dehumanize while also portraying his investment into colonialistic actions was his *The Seed of the Areoi*. The painting alludes to the “myth of Areoi, a Polynesian secret society, a male sun god mates with the most beautiful of all women, Vairaumati, to found a new race,” (The Museum of Modern Art). However, the painting captures Gauguin’s “Tahitian lover” Tehura instead of Vairaumati (ibid). This switch not only likens Tehura to the most beautiful Tahitian woman but more so likens Gauguin to this male sun god that was “meant” to have relations with this most beautiful woman. Further, it is the replacing of Vairaumati with Tehura that attributes Tehura as the most beautiful woman and therefore “worthy” to be loved by the prideful Gauguin. Titling the painting in association with the myth of Areoi shows Gauguin’s desire to argue his actions in Tahiti and that he was “meant” to have relations with Tehura with further validation that she was indeed the most beautiful Tahitian woman. It is in these two components of this ideology that dehumanizes Tehura as an object of Gauguin's lustful colonialism.

Adding to the artist’s problematic and negative oeuvre, his paintings much like *The Seed of the Areoi* often encourage colonization and its corresponding ideologies (Maleuvre 199). Gauguin’s paintings were shipped back to France where they were viewed by many Europeans

(ibid 198). At this time just before the turn of the 20th century, Europeans had not many other modes of viewing Tahiti. Thus, Gauguin's depictions of both the Tahitian landscape and the Indigenous peoples that lived there were the lens that these Europeans understood Tahiti through. This lens covered the Tahitian landscape in unrealistic vibrant colors that Gauguin claimed were relevant to the reality of the landscape, though the similarities between the two are lacking (The Museum of Modern Art). Possibly more problematic is the subjectification and objectification of the Indigenous peoples captured in Gauguin's paintings, many of them nude. Therefore, these images allowed Europeans to have an excuse to view the nude body, often the excuse being educating themselves in the happenings of the world and of course, projecting ideas of sexuality onto the Indigenous women. This objectification of the Indigenous body was often an encouragement to colonial voyagers to travel to Tahiti where they could, as Gauguin had, reap the "benefits" of colonialism.

This work by Gauguin has hardly aged well, instead becoming a highly problematic component of the artist's oeuvre. As Gauguin's paintings aged with time, the time "when the sins of artist could be brushed under the immunity clause granted to great minds and creators," was left in the past (ibid 198). Gauguin's objectification of Indigenous peoples and his infatuation with the French colonization of Tahiti has grown into one of the largest and most potent blemishes on Gauguin's oeuvre and biography. There is no saving grace to the perception of Gauguin. He was never forced to depict these Indigenous peoples, never forced to travel to Tahiti away from his family, never forced to dive into the ideologies and causes of colonialism. It was instead the artist's intent to partake in all of these and in this intent constitutes the negative perception of the artist.

This negative perception continues into his family life. For, to travel to Tahiti, Gauguin had to leave his family behind. Different from van Gogh's departure from his family in which van Gogh departed due to financial reasons or the continued search for the connection of art and life, Gauguin's departure from his family was purely personal. Gauguin's absence in his family's life spoke heavily to his callousness to everything but his artistic ambition (ibid 198). His

decision to leave his family, to become “the artist-voyager who shuns the City of Lights” to instead go and exploit Tahiti and the Indigenous peoples in his colonialistic and artistic habits was what did and continues to throw the artist into a negative light (ibid 199).

Thus this negativity of the artist’s life habits is the cause for the negativity and problematic nature associated not only with Gauguin as a person but also with his artwork. The two become inseparable in recognition and perception. The two can hardly be separated because when viewing an artwork, the artist’s name is either signed to its composition, found on the wall next to it in a gallery space, or plastered to the webpage on which it is being viewed. The artist’s name cannot be removed just as the artist’s life decisions and actions cannot be removed from his biography from which the negative perception is created. Thus, it is “indisputable” that “the work of an artist is coloured by what we know of his personality and circumstances,” that “his paintings must be ‘problematic’ to the same extent and degree that he was ‘problematic’ to the same extent and degree that he was ‘problematic’...” (ibid 198). Further, the connection between the artist and his work will cause the artist’s paintings to be drug into the same negative and problematic lights as the artist’s biography resides.

Therefore, when modern scholars have sought to portray the artist, this negativity often comes as a natural consequence. Though, the same cannot be said about the scholars and critics speaking on the artist in the early twentieth century. As Martha Lucy states, Gauguin’s artwork was deeply rooted in the “origin fantasy that had its historical roots in Darwinism and that intersected empirically with the scientific discourses of the period, namely the evolutionary sciences...” (Broude 7). As scholars sought to equate Gauguin’s work to an ethnographic study of the “origin” of the human species, Gauguin’s artworks were seen as more than just artistry but as a scientific diagram. Further, scholars pushed away the possible negativity that could be found in Gauguin’s lifestyle, arguing that these artistic depictions portrayed women in a high position in society, arguing against the normal patriarchy of Europe (ibid 4). As for Gauguin’s sexual relationships with younger Tahitian women, art historian René Huyghe excuses the artist by equating a thirteen-year-old Tahitian woman to an eighteen or twenty-year-old Europe (ibid 2).

Thus, in the early twentieth century, Gauguin was recognized practically as positively as van Gogh, notarized as a “key progenitor of modernism” (Childs 230).

This all changed in the late twentieth century, when feminist art historians began analyzing Gauguin. In 1989, Abigail Solomon-Godeau exposed the “mythic speech” that was the cause for the scholar valorization of Gauguin as “the father of modernist primitivism in the visual arts” (Broude 2). Just over a decade earlier, Linda Nochlin analyzed *Two Tahitian Women* by juxtaposing the artwork with a “mock-pornographic” photograph. In the first image, a Tahitian woman offers fruit to the viewer that accentuates her breasts while the “mock-pornographic” photograph portrays a nude male with bananas accentuating his genitals. The juxtaposition calls to question the acceptance of the “sexualized and possessive gaze of the male upon the body of the female as integral to the patriarchy’s definition of high art and universal cultural greatness,” (ibid 1). As June Hargrove notes the support of Gauguin’s artwork in the early twentieth century, she also argues, “as strongly as he may have come to identify with the native population at the end of his life, he was irrevocably a colonizing ‘other’ in their land,” (ibid 6). Thus in most cases, Gauguin’s biography and artwork have become a blemish on the artist’s perception, leading to a cause of falling from positive fame into negativity.

As more scholars speak out about Gauguin, artists have sought to appropriate the oversexualized images within Gauguin’s artwork. New Zealand-born Samoan artist Tyla Vacau created the 2009 photographic series *Dee and Dallas Do Gauguin* in which the artist created reproductions of Gauguin’s artwork and inserted photos of her own sister and friend to prohibit the woman and cultures portrayed in Gauguin’s artwork to be recognized as objects of the past (Nayeri). The work further argues the need that the analysis of the problematic tones of Gauguin’s artwork cannot be overlooked or excused for being in the past with past ideologies but should rather be assessed for what they continue to be: persisting colonial Western male-centered gazes of Indigenous peoples.

Art history scholars are seeking to do the same, particularly in researching the women Gauguin captured within his paintings. Teha’amana is one of these such women and was also a

woman that Gauguin engaged in a sexual relationship with. Though Elizabeth C. Childs actively gives power back to Teha'amana with her research of the two's relationship, stating that Teha'amana "evidently chose to remain with the artist" and that instead, she engaged in the relationship as a means for a "strategic alliance" and further boosting of social status before leaving the artist for another man (Childs 232). While the unequal structure of society that favored the colonizing French subjects of Indigenous peoples is problematic as well as Gauguin's invasiveness toward a relationship with a teenage woman, Childs gives Teha'amana power in showing that she actively worked through the problematic social system to boost her own social class, not allowing herself to remain objectified. Again, a hero complex arises not around Gauguin but Teha'amana who actively worked against the colonialist social structure and invasive Gauguin while Gauguin is again villainized for causing the hero's hardships.

With this rise of negative portrayal and recognition of Gauguin, the role of his artworks in the museum space has become one of contention. While the artist is still recognized for his role as a skilled modernist with retrospective exhibitions being shown in twenty-first-century exhibitions in Paris, Chicago, and San Francisco, the active displaying of the artwork in a climate of "heightened public sensitivity to issues of gender, race and colonialism" has caused a need for the museum to reassess their displaying of Gauguin's artwork (Nayeri). As Christopher Riopelle, co-curator of the National Gallery in London who hosted a retrospective of Gauguin's artwork articulated, "I don't think, any longer, that it's enough to say 'Oh well, that's the way they did it back then'," (ibid). The retrospective in question thus included wall text calling out the artist by stating, "Gauguin undoubtedly exploited his position as a privilege Westerner to make the most of the sexual freedoms available to him," and when exhibited in Ottawa at that National Gallery of Canada, the newly appointed director Sasha Suda chose to edit nine exhibition labels "to avoid culturally sensitive language" (ibid). This adjustment in the articulation of exhibiting Gauguin's artwork emphasizes the impact scholars have had on the perception of Gauguin not only of those in the museum field but also of the general public. Of the 2,313 feedback cards written by visitors to the exhibition, fifty of them complained about Gauguin and the museum's programming (ibid). This negative perception of Gauguin and complaints toward the possible

glorification of the artist which had past been accepted by the general public at the beginning of the twentieth century proves the power of scholars in their portrayal of Gauguin and the influence the words of scholars have on their readers.

With these understood differences between the artists that only grew with the ‘fork’ in the road of the two artist’s biographies, the different portrayal of the artists becomes obvious. While van Gogh remains devoted throughout his life to his ideology, willing to sacrifice himself mentally and physically while also staying humble and selfless; Gauguin chooses to follow colonialism to Tahiti where he dives into such negative corresponding actions and compositions in his artistic work as his personality grew more obviously prideful, arrogant, and callous. The differences not only in their artistic ideologies but also in their biographies are what makes these artists distinctly separate in the perceptions that are garnered from them. Where van Gogh becomes an icon of popularity, Gauguin becomes a problematic artist whose personality matches such problematic undertones in his artworks. Further, Gauguin easily becomes the villain in van Gogh’s story which propels the artists into further contrast. And with this contrast, it is van Gogh who finds himself in the limelight of popularity while Gauguin falls into problematic and negative perceptions to be a mention in van Gogh’s biography but hardly a positive one.

Conclusion

With this comparison to Paul Gauguin, the purpose for popularity choosing van Gogh becomes all the more evident. Though the artist’s paintings took on different motifs and subject matters toward the latter part of their lives, the purpose for such a difference is rooted deeply within their ideologies and personalities. It is this factor which leads to the difference in the portrayal of the artists in biographies and how these artists are perceived by the writers of such biographies. As van Gogh received more and more scholarship speaking to the purpose for his popularity, it was Gauguin who received more and more negative words to his name. These pieces of literature are what current scholars and researchers use to learn about these artists, to gain their own perceptions of these artists. Thus, these pieces of literature sway the perceptions

of their readers with their opinionated perceptions of the artists, continuing the perceptions of their original writers.

This process continued for decades as more and more scholarship arose to speak positively about van Gogh. It is how the otherwise ordinary artist Vincent van Gogh was “gradually constituted as a public figure noted for his singularity, admired for his greatness, and celebrated as a virtual saint,” (Heinich xi). Van Gogh was first granted the title of a “genius” in 1892 by a critic and “legend” in 1905 by Dutch and French critics (ibid 3). By the 1930s, van Gogh was on the “international scene of popularity” (ibid 3). It is how “...the van Gogh who died in 1890 became the van Gogh celebrated in the 1990s,” and how the artist’s name became so familiar. How such a familiar name springs forth “a series of motifs” including “the great artist ravaged by madness, his severed ear, Arles, the Irises and Sunflowers, his brother Theo, his tragic death, the unrecognized genius, his contemporaries’ incomprehension, today’s record prices of paintings,” and his countless letters. Through the writing of scholars who focus on this rich variety of motifs, van Gogh’s life was romanticized and glorified with biographies and mystified through psychological and scientific studies surrounding his mental health and death. It is how van Gogh became much more than just an artist, but someone chosen by popularity.

Popularity has brought van Gogh to the forefront of popular culture. From inspiring current scholars to continue creating literature surrounding the artist to continued display of his artwork in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the continuance of the Van Gogh Museum, the name Vincent van Gogh persists. It is found online on marketplaces where rich variations of merchandise are sold to the consumer and on museum websites where the artist’s work can be viewed by onlookers from around the globe, encouraging fascination and fandom circulating the artist. The artist’s name has persisted verbally, his remembrance constituting the notoriety of the cutting of his ear among artistic minds and those outside the artistic community. Thus the artist’s name continues to flourish within multiple modes, from museum spaces to online marketplaces.

Continuance and persistence of the popularity of the artist has encouraged the creation of new modes of celebrating the artist. The major new mode arises with the technological

advancements, making immersive experiences possible. These experiences allow the viewer to be surrounded by the selected subject matter, to be completely immersed in it or rather consumed in it. More simply, the chosen subject of immersion becomes the viewer's new reality, at least in that moment of experience. Thus, the meshing of this new mode and the fascination of Vincent van Gogh creates *The Original Immersive van Gogh Exhibit*. The inclusion of "The Original" in the title makes obvious the abundance of these immersive van Gogh exhibits that have sprouted up globally, seeking to profit from the artist's popularity. Though the original was the first to foster this idea of profit and mode of celebrating the artist, and thus becomes the focus of study.

The Original Immersive van Gogh Exhibit was created by Massimiliano Siccardi, who has been pioneering immersive exhibitions in Europe for thirty years (Immersive van Gogh). His work led to creating the immersive exhibit to celebrate the famed van Gogh, honoring the artist with 60,600 frames of video, 90,000,000 pixels, and over 500,000 cubic feet of projections (ibid). The experience gives the visitor "the rare opportunity to 'step inside' and experience the incredible post-Impressionist works of van Gogh like never before," (ibid). While this is an articulated capitalist sales pitch, the statement accentuates the exhibit while also adequately describing it. It has also proved adequate in fostering engagement with the community. The exhibit is hosted in a multitude of cities across the United States as well as Toronto, Canada with many of the city showings of the exhibit selling out quickly (ibid). In the first month, the exhibit sold out in San Francisco, California where over half a million tickets were sold (ibid). In Chicago, Illinois, the exhibit sold out but was then extended to adequately accommodate the demand of visitors (ibid). News reviews from *Chicago Tribune*, *Toronto Sun*, *CTV*, and *Washington Post* to name a few that are included on the exhibit website are filled with positivity. *Artnet News* speaks to the exhibit, calling it a "blockbuster digital experience that has taken the art world by storm," (ibid). Needless to say, the exhibit has garnered attention and positive at that, flourishing off its positive subject matter.

In July of 2021, I visited the immersive exhibit where it was then showing in Greensboro, North Carolina. Although no longer showing in the city, the exhibit stays relatively the same at

each location, accommodations made singularly for the location and its facilities in showing the exhibit. The demand for the tickets was immense at the time, my own tickets being bought months in advance. Time slots were also established partially due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic but also due to the magnitude of visitors who desired to visit the exhibit. I was one of the lucky individuals, along with my family who went with me, that was able to snatch a ticket and experience the immersion for myself.

With a ticket and complementary poster in hand, now hanging proudly upon my wall, I stepped within the doors of the exhibit. However, the immersion took quite a few steps. First, the visitor was led past photo opportunities with magnificent sculpture that accentuated the artist's style. These included a larger-than-life sunflower and later an assemblage of massively-scaled buttons that became the backdrop for the artist's expansively written name "Vincent" signed in red. Using the artist's first name was a deliberate choice, desiring intimacy and closeness between the visitor and the subject of the immersive experience.

After walking past all of the photo opportunities and decorations that spoke more and more to the artist and his work, building the visitor's anticipation with each step, I finally stepped within the immersive experience. Upon entering, the visitor is completely immersed in the artist's work, projectors plastering the artworks on the white-screen walls that consume the space in an inorganic fashion, preventing the space from being a boring polygonal shape. Attendants assist the visitor to a space marked by a circle where the visitor can sit in a provided chair or stand to experience the immersion. As the artworks flow across their bodies by the projectors which play a sequence of moving images of the artist's artwork, the visitor being consumed by the artwork and therefore becoming the artwork. Music plays all the while, further immersing the visitor as they watch van Gogh's artwork swirl around them, much like his swirling spirals and sketchy flowing lines that are abundant in the artist's artwork. The visitor is torn from their reality and consumed by the experience of existing within the artist's artwork. For those who admire the artist, it is an unreal experience, being a component of your idol's artwork. There is no question for the interest nor the continued interest in the immersive experience, its mode of

celebrating the artist truly being worthwhile in its ability to bring the admirer so close to that which they admire, allowing it to virtually though also literally flow across their skin. It allows admirers to “touch” what otherwise would be untouchable in a museum space or only consist of descriptive words in a piece of literature. Thus, the immersive experience gives the admirer a closeness that is otherwise unattainable.

Though, *The Original Immersive van Gogh Exhibit* is far from unique, other exhibits are flourishing. The most major of these is *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*. Its similar name makes a simple internet search garner the result of the latter first rather than the original. Its similar name also causes confusion, some thinking both exhibits are the same when in actuality they are different exhibits just with the same subject matter. Whether one exhibit is better than the other is arguable, but what can be argued is that *The Original Immersive van Gogh Exhibit* was in fact the first and all the immersive exhibits that came thereafter were influenced by the original. While each exhibit will have its own differences and unique qualities, they all seek to immerse the visitor into van Gogh’s artworks to provide an experience of closeness that museums and the internet cannot provide.

As these immersive experiences prove with their ticket sales, the interest in Vincent van Gogh has hardly reduced. Instead, the interest in van Gogh is encouraged more by these immersive experiences just as literature, the predecessor mode of celebrating the artist, has for decades. It began with van Gogh’s closest friends then with the critics who viewed his artwork. After his death, art critic’s literature influenced scholars who wrote biographies that heavily romanticized the artist, turning him into a saint and a martyr. Then, scholars tried to diagnose the artist's mental health and further articulate his purpose for taking his own life. However, now the latter is being debated, scholars now arguing that the artist could have been murdered but, to save his murderer from punishment, kept the fact a secret. This theory, heavily articulated and disputed as it may be, continues to encourage the martyr complex that has already been established around the artist. Should he have selflessly kept such a secret even on his deathbed,

there is practically nothing more selfless than to allow your death to be deemed a suicide rather than a murder and to further allow your murderer to live his life freely.

As the end of the artist's life becomes a subject of debate however, the artist is thrown further and further into popularity. The artist's life has been articulated end to end, from his birth to a religious family to his death in Arles as a misunderstood artist. There is a story for every interest that has been created out of the artist's life. Romance blossoms between van Gogh and Sien while a hero-villain dynamic fosters between Gauguin and van Gogh. The story of a saint and a martyr is the most prevalent, many scholars turning the artist into such a highly figure exalted for his selflessness in his dedication to his ideology, his "illegitimate" family, and Gauguin at the devastation of himself mentally and physically which caused his battle with mental health and arguably his death. Even the claim that his death was at the hand of another proves the artist to be selfless, never desiring his perpetrator to be punished should the scholars' claim be true but rather dying at ease, contempt with his life.

It is in this literature that van Gogh becomes this "likable" figure. Van Gogh becomes so much more than a post-impressionist artist. He becomes a martyr, a saint, a man dedicated to his ideology, an idol for admirers, and a selfless giver. He becomes relatable through his hardships from his financial struggles to his struggle for being understood and recognized. He becomes a positive figure that nearly anyone can relate to. He becomes a historic icon that researchers can grow close too through his intimate letters and the use of his first name. The artist becomes an open book through the writing of scholars that many can read and understand. From the literature, van Gogh becomes more than an artist but rather the subject of choice for popularity.

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