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VAN GOGH: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS AND ART

This chapter explores interconnections among conceptualizations of mental illness, artistic genius, and emotional suffering. It does so through the extended example of Vincent Van Gogh from 1890, the year of his death, to the 1990s, a period of record-breaking sales of his work. My intention is to assess, first, how popular culture in contrast to modernist high art circles regard the place of emotionality in aesthetic activity. Second, I examine the role of emotions and emotional disorders in public perceptions of mental illness when applied to twentieth century art. Emotional disorders, as I use the term, encompass mood, anxiety, and significant aspects of personality disorders.¹ The two preceding concerns link together in that modernism's artistic persona attempts to unite madness, troubled emotionality, and aesthetic brilliance in one figure. However, as we will see in the case of Van Gogh, attempts to integrate such vastly different, complex aspects of human existence have created more controversy than clarity.

Modernism's artist as 'mad genius' is often depicted as a struggling, misunderstood figure, a martyr to the cause of art through his or her isolation, imposed by a troubled but inspired brilliance. As a cultural influence, Van Gogh has captured popular imagination on a global scale, which culminated in a series of blockbuster exhibits in the 1980s and 1990s that broke attendance records.

The same two decades witnessed the zenith of Van Gogh's economic impact, when his work sold repeatedly for record-breaking prices.² His persona endures as the epitome of simultaneous insanity and inspired brilliance, in which mental illness plays a key role in this cultural legacy.

The Van Gogh Legacy

In a 1998 article in *Newsweek* titled "Tortured Souls" with the subheading, "Do Artists Really Have to Suffer Greatly to Make Art?," critic Peter Plagens reviews major exhibits of the work of Vincent Van Gogh and Jackson Pollock that both took place in autumn of that year.³ Although Plagens, citing the work of Warhol, ultimately concludes that not all artists need be tortured souls, the article makes clear an intimate link between artists' psychiatric disorders, their artwork, and their capacity to feel intensely. In the case of Van Gogh, Plagens describes his only "natural qualification" as an artist to be "the lack of a psychological shield to protect him from the pain of feeling everything – *everything* – right down to the quick".⁴

In this view, it is precisely their intense capacity to feel that makes great artists, first, exceptional and, second, mentally ill. Additionally, their ability to translate their powerful emotional sensibilities onto the canvas explicates their popular reception. A front page article in *USA Today*, similarly using "Tortured Artist" as part of its title, reviews the same 1998 Van Gogh exhibit.⁵ Describing him as "the exemplar of the crazy, starving, tragic artist," the author attributes the artist's enormous popularity to his emotionality and, specifically, to the way

museum-goers are able to recognize and respond to the work's affective intensity.⁶ The paintings, crafted by and saturated with emotion, cause their viewers, in turn, to feel – a positive, desired outcome. Yet it remains a sought-after effect with clear limitations, as exemplified by the artist-figure with his/her perilously excessive emotionality. A boundary exists in which enhanced emotional capacity is safe and highly valued as long as it falls short of the dangerously acute emotional sensibilities, leading to mental illness, embodied by such artists. The capacity to feel, and to chronicle those feelings in one's artwork, draws viewers to certain artists. Simultaneously, this same quality sets the artist apart, marking him or her as exceptional in a troubling way.

In contrast, in professional artistic circles many of the most highly valued attributes of twentieth-century modernism reject inner turmoil and emotionality in favor of formal, aesthetic, or intellectual properties. As a result, contestation within modernism occurs between an emotion-based aesthetics of the popular versus a pure aesthetics of 'high art.' Both high formalism and high emotionality exist as features of modernist artistic practices; however, they usually have been structured as contradictory, competing impulses. Van Gogh is a significant figure in this conflict because his legacy brings struggles surrounding emotionality versus pure art into high relief.

A century before the reviews of his 1998 exhibition in Washington, D.C., similar observations about Van Gogh's excessive emotionality were already being made. In her study of the early reception of Van Gogh's work, *The Formation of a Legend*, Carol Zemel examines responses to the artist in four

European countries (the Netherlands, France, Germany, England), in the period from 1890 to the 1920s by which time many art historians, including Zemel, believe Van Gogh's legendary status is entrenched.⁷ In those early decades, Van Gogh's critical fate – whether he is lauded, reviled, or ignored by art experts – varies from nation to nation. However, in *all* cases, discussion centers on the place of emotionality in art, based on the prominence of passion and disturbance, whether “anguished or ecstatic” in Van Gogh's work and life.⁸

From the outset, in art circles Van Gogh's paintings and persona elicit mixed reviews, garnering little consensus concerning his rightful place in the pantheon of modernism. In the Netherlands, emotionality was accepted as key to the critical understanding of Van Gogh's work and, thus, central to his elevation as an artistic master in his country of origin. In Germany, he was hailed as a harbinger for the Expressionist movement. Drawn by his story of madness and suicide, that movement perceived a “liberating and visionary sensibility” in his paintings.⁹ In Germany and the Netherlands, Van Gogh was a tragic figure who struggled heroically and, as such, is already the tortured soul of accounts a century later.

In contrast, in France, the country in which he created his most famous paintings, critical opinion had difficulty reconciling the emotionality of Van Gogh's work with the aesthetic standards of the day. By the first decade of the twentieth century, French commentators, under the influence of modernist aesthetics that stressed “balance, order, stability,” found Van Gogh's work wanting and a number of art experts “simply doubted his lucidity.”¹⁰ As a result, in France it

wasn't his art that took hold but, rather, the narrative of Van Gogh's life. The story of his difficult, impassioned nature, his madness, his social isolation and, despite all, his determination to keep creating fit well with the dominant conceptualization of the modern artistic genius. Thus, in the early years of the twentieth century, Van Gogh's art went into decline in France, while the legend of his person flourished.

In England, Van Gogh met with the harshest response of the four countries studied by Zemel. For Roger Fry and other influential English critics, emotionality and mental illness could not be integrated with the dominantly formalist aesthetics they espoused. In England, his work was seldom shown in the decade after 1913, and both his paintings and his life story were consigned to playing "a marginal part [in] Post-Impressionist and modernist history."¹¹

Despite a lack of critical consensus about the aesthetic merit of Van Gogh's work in Europe and, indeed, some heated opposition to him, Zemel contends that by 1920 "the presence of his paintings in public collections [and] their growing market value...testified to his international success."¹² Yet his mixed reviews from members of the art world well into the 1920s fails to explain his "international success" by 1920. As the title of her book suggests, Zemel never doubts Van Gogh's early legendary status. However, focusing primarily on experts in the art field leaves some element unaccounted for in the leap from mixed reviews to legendary status. In emphasizing the perspectives of the specialized art world, Zemel's account neglects the impact Van Gogh has had on

a general public: that is, his place in popular culture, based on the intense emotionality of his work, as the 1998 reviews pinpoint.

In contrast to Zemel, Cynthia Saltzman's account traces Van Gogh's growing reputation over the course of the twentieth century through the provenance of a single painting, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (1890), which sold in 1990 for the then record sum of \$82.5. Turning to the development of Van Gogh's standing in the United States, she argues popular reactions were so enthusiastic that by the late 1940s he "was probably the most well known artist in America."¹³ However, his rise in popularity came with a simultaneous decline in his status as a painter among some art authorities, who cast doubt on his technical and formal skills. For example, the very influential Clement Greenberg raised questions about Van Gogh's "craft competence" and whether he could even be considered a great painter.¹⁴ Saltzman contends that the negative recalibration of Van Gogh's reputation in the U.S. replicated a similar occurrence in Europe in the 1920s among art critics, as a result of the artist's accelerating popular reception. She links the reassessment of Van Gogh's artistic skills specifically to his popularity beyond the art world: "the success of the Van Gogh legend in America's mass market culture unsettled art professionals."¹⁵

Yet, despite critical denigration and an absence of museum exhibitions of his work, "the price of his pictures rose with his public popularity."¹⁶ Thus, regardless of critical word or action, Van Gogh's attractiveness to a broader public beyond art professionals strengthened. At the same time, critical resistance continued around the intense emotionality of Van Gogh's work,

viewed as a reflection of his “troubled psyche.”¹⁷ Effectively, the paintings could not be simultaneously emotional and intellectual, the product of measured consideration and intense feeling, or of mental illness along with the clarity of aesthetic concerns.

Ultimately, the problem for members of the art field who advocated against Van Gogh’s formal and technical skills is that their position could not be maintained. By the 1980s, in the face of Van Gogh’s seemingly ever-ascending popularity and the accompanying rise in prices for his work, and in an era that encompassed “blockbuster exhibits” devoted to him in Europe, North America, and Japan,¹⁸ which museums depend upon to sustain them economically, the art world simply could not afford to dismiss him.

Thus arose the constitution of what Saltzman dubs “the new van Gogh,” although clearly neither Van Gogh nor his work had changed.¹⁹ Instead, members of the art world worked to re-appropriate Van Gogh on their own terms. Saltzman reports that analyses by art experts altered drastically between 1984 and 1990, in an effort to reclaim Van Gogh for high art by reinventing him. She regards his reinvention as “part of an effort by art historians to dismantle the persistent Van Gogh legend and replace it with more accurately drawn historical information,” including the conclusion that his mental illness “had little to do with his accomplishments as a painter.”²⁰ Here Saltzman states, in accordance with scholarly reevaluation, the accurate account lies in the fact that Van Gogh’s illness had little, if anything, to do with his artistic output or subsequent success. For example, Saltzman quotes from a 1984 catalogue exhibit: “In van Gogh’s

case, there was what has been seen as a preordained progression from asylum (with the implied assumption of madness) to suicide, which has fueled the myth of the mad genius. But whatever his illness may have been...the fact [is] that it did not directly affect his work.”²¹ Critical recuperation by the art world necessitated that Van Gogh’s legacy be distanced from both excessive emotionality and madness. “Freed” from the limitations of his emotional and disordered psyche, Van Gogh became suitably fit for reinstatement in the pantheon of modern art, as “an intellectual leader of the Postimpressionist generation” and “a consummate craftsman and a cerebral painter.”²²

While I certainly do not wish to quarrel with assessments of Van Gogh as a consummate professional in formal and intellectual terms, evidence remains that he also was always emotionally troubled. To omit this surely is to neglect an important aspect of his work and life and, therefore, to ignore a significant source of the meanings and value he, and other artists, hold for audiences. From Saltzman:

In the course of the 1980s, van Gogh not only withstood the demanding inquiry of historians, but emerged as a painter of far greater intellectual substance than before.... in a way that would convince a skeptical late-twentieth-century audience of his true stature.²³

The late-twentieth-century skeptics she references were certainly not the broader, art-viewing public, such as those who attended the 1998 “blockbuster” exhibition with which I began my discussion of Van Gogh. Such attendees weren’t skeptics but avid fans. And they weren’t fans because suddenly the veil of historical misinformation had been lifted to reveal Van Gogh’s greater than

previously believed “intellectual substance.” None of the reevaluation that occurred within the art world altered Van Gogh’s already extensive popularity among a broader public. Nor did reassessment by art experts change the reasons for the widespread popularity of Van Gogh’s paintings. Those reasons remained attributable to the emotionality of his work, coupled with his life story. Instead, adjustment was made within the art world, working to synchronize itself with a much wider-held popular view. However, art professionals sought – and largely failed – to reconstruct the collectively held meanings of Van Gogh’s work. As discussion surrounding the 1998 exhibition reveals, Van Gogh’s public value remains vested in him as a painter of emotion.

Troubling Emotion

In the case of Van Gogh, while the popular imagination of a general public largely succeeded in preserving the importance of emotionality for artistic activity, a similar struggle was enacted over the place of emotions in conceptualizations of his mental illness.

The most intense period of Van Gogh’s difficulties began in Arles, in the south of France, in December 1888. With its onset signaled by the famous act of cutting off a portion of his left ear, Van Gogh experienced, over a period of a year and a half, hallucinations, disorientation, severe agitation and anxiety, and intervals of amnesia that required three periods of hospitalization as well as a year-long stay in an asylum (May 1889 to May 1890). During these attacks, he moved “in and out of coherence” for stretches at a time.²⁴ He “lashed out

violently,” “trusted no one, recognized no one...took no food, could not sleep, would not write, and refused to talk,” or if he did, his “words came out in an incoherent babble.”²⁵ Additionally, in the midst of these bouts, he could not paint or draw. His biographers, Naifeh and Smith, describe six instances of attacks that, progressively, became more intense, persisting for a month or a month and a half instead of a week. These psychotic episodes are the ones most closely associated with Van Gogh’s madness, although much current opinion believes these were manifestations of a form of epilepsy.²⁶

In determining that his illness manifested only in a limited manner, in both episodic duration and time period in his life, art scholars have felt justified in maintaining that “whatever his illness may have been...the fact [is] that it did not directly affect his work.”²⁷ Art historian Griselda Pollock characterizes the critical distance put between Van Gogh’s art and his madness – enabling his recalibration to a cerebral, consummate professional – as a “sanitized” event, in the dual sense of cleansing and rendering sane.²⁸ The process of sanitization enables Zemel to interpret a painting such as *Self-Portrait (Dedicated to Paul Gauguin)*, painted in September 1888, three months before wounding his ear, as predating “the record of any destabilizing episode.”²⁹ However, Zemel’s claim, as with any scholar who maintains Van Gogh’s illness did not affect his art, rests on a selective understanding of what constituted his ‘madness.’

According to Naifeh and Smith, already in his childhood Van Gogh was “a boy of inexplicable fierceness” who, throughout his life, pursued all his activities “in a fury,” that is, with extreme urgency, rapidity, and fervent single-

mindedness.³⁰ Although often interpreted as a sign of the psychotic/epileptic behavior that plagued his final two years, the frenzy with which Van Gogh painted was not indicative of his latter-day illness but part of a life-long pattern.

Well before he determined, in 1880, to become an artist, Van Gogh lived through significant periods of anger, despair, and what Naifeh and Smith describe as “bizarre excesses of behavior.”³¹ His bizarre behaviors included extended lengths of time during which he failed to eat or sleep, maintained a disheveled appearance in both hygiene and clothing, engaged in frequent combative encounters with other people, and pursued physically punitive activities such as walking extraordinarily long distances, despite the availability of inexpensive transportation.³²

His biographers record “breakdowns” everywhere he lived.³³ And throughout his life, he demonstrates social ineptitude resulting in isolation. His relations with acquaintances, friends, and family, including his brother Theo, were typified by prolonged arguments and habitual upheaval. On one occasion of many, Naifeh and Smith characterize the tone of contact between Vincent and Theo as suffused with “acrimony,” during which Vincent, in his letters, “unleashed a torrent of abuse” on his brother.³⁴ Throughout his life, people regarded him as odd and eccentric or, equally often, as “crazy,” treating him – or shunning him – as mad.³⁵

An alternate way to understand Van Gogh’s ‘madness’ other than episodic and confined to his mid-thirties, is to consider his difficulties constitutive of “a life of struggle, poverty, and psychological pain.”³⁶ This is the position Saltzman

attributes to numerous art critics, from the period immediately following the artist's death until the reformulation of his image in the 1980s as "the new Van Gogh." Regarding Van Gogh as subject to life-long psychological troubles entails viewing some form of mental illness as part of his existence prior to the onset, in the last year and a half of his life, of psychosis possibly associated with epilepsy.

If we accept this alternate view, it becomes questionable to maintain, as Saltzman does, that the 1980s art history revision of Van Gogh served to "sweep away" the romanticized view of him as "an emotionally volatile, gifted amateur" in favor of a more accurate image of the artist as a "consummate professional."³⁷ What cannot be so easily swept away is the emotional volatility he experienced for much of his life and expressed in his work.

Yet, after itemizing a lifetime of difficulties and disorder ("In the princely Hague they spat on him; in Neunen, they banished him; in Arles, they threw stones at him"), Naifeh and Smith summarize Van Gogh's existence as "years of failure, penury, guilt, loneliness, and finally madness."³⁸ Compiling his life difficulties in this sequence suggests he was mad only at the end ("finally") and that his madness occurs as a result of other events in his life, including failure, penury, guilt, and loneliness.

Psychoses, of course, have intense emotional aspects. They are not circumstances in which issues of rationality can be neatly excised from emotionality. In Van Gogh's instance, his psychotic episodes encompassed severe anxiety, agitation, "outbursts of temper," "brooding silence," paranoia, panic, and other mood swings.³⁹ Further, symptoms of temporal lobe epilepsy

may well include irritation, anger, rage, “easy excitability, furious work habits,” apathy, depression, impulsiveness, aggression, and other forms of “profound mental suffering” and labile moods.⁴⁰

Yet, Van Gogh’s legacy represents an attempt in which, if madness as psychoses can be dismissed, then the need to address any emotional disorders attached to his temperamental volatility, can be minimized as well. The effort to explain away Van Gogh’s madness as sporadic and occurring only in the last year and a half of his life assumes that once the issue of mental illness as psychosis presumably is put to rest, concerns about his emotional volatility also disappear as if satisfactorily resolved. Emotional volatility is recognized as disturbing when it exists in conjunction with a failure of lucidity, but often treated as a minor vicissitude when appearing in stand-alone fashion.⁴¹

The emotionality that holds such a prominent position in the legend of Van Gogh’s life and art in the popular imagination becomes subjected to attempts at recuperation at least twice. First, a bid to eliminate emotionality occurs in efforts to render him a worthy modernist figure, in which he resurfaces as a consummate professional, a painter befitting the echelons of high art. In this first attempted reinvention, instead of exhibiting a style driven by emotional intensity, he is refigured as a painter of formal and intellectual substance in the cause of a pure aesthetic. In the second attempted rejection of emotionality, his mental illness is dismissed as barely a factor in his creativity or aesthetic successes. In arguing that his madness is limited to episodic psychosis only, his emotional disorders presumably can safely be ignored. In the process of sanitizing his

reputation, his emotional volatility is marginalized in order to make the claim that no form of disorder directly affects the pure quality of his work.

An earlier, expanded version of this chapter appeared in *A Cultural Approach to Emotional Disorders: Psychological and Aesthetic Interpretations*, E. Deidre Pribram, Routledge, 2016.

¹ For a detailed discussion of emotional disorders, see E. Deidre Pribram, *A Cultural Approach to Emotional Disorders: Psychological and Aesthetic Interpretations* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

² For example, *Vase with Fifteen Sunflowers* and *Irises* sold in 1987 for \$39.9 million and \$53.9 million, respectively. 1990 saw the sale of *Self-Portrait (Dedicated to Charles Laval)* for \$26.4 million and *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* for \$82.5 million. The record for *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* was not surpassed until 2004 with the sale of Picasso's *Garçon à la pipe* for \$104.2 million.

³ Peter Plagens, "Tortured Souls," *Newsweek*, October 12, 1998, 78-80.

⁴ Plagens, "Tortured Souls," 78, italics in original. As for Jackson Pollock, "letting the paint leap off the end of a stick...allowed his deepest feelings to go directly into his pictures." Plagens, "Tortured Souls," 80.

⁵ Maria Puente, "Tortured Artist Would Never Have Understood His Appeal," *USA Today*, October 2-4, 1998, 1A-2A.

⁶ Puente, "Tortured Artist," 2A.

⁷ Carol Zemel, *The Formation of a Legend: Van Gogh Criticism, 1980-1920* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980).

⁸ Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 94.

⁹ Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 105.

¹⁰ Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 94, 103.

¹¹ Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 148.

¹² Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 149.

¹³ Cynthia Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet: The Story of a Van Gogh Masterpiece* (New York: Viking, 1998), 234.

¹⁴ Greenberg quoted in Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 237.

¹⁵ Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 237.

¹⁶ Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 239.

¹⁷ Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 237.

¹⁸ Puente, "Tortured Artist," 1A.

¹⁹ Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 260.

²⁰ Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 254.

²¹ Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 254.

²² Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 254, 255, 265.

²³ Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 271.

²⁴ Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random, 2011), 707.

²⁵ Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 708, 725.

²⁶ For example, Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 749-751, 762-763; Griselda Pollock, "Artists' Mythologies and Media Genius: Madness and Art History," *Screen* 21.3 (1980): 74. Turning to psychiatric accounts for elucidation on the nature of Van Gogh's illness remains precarious given the extensive number of differing diagnoses that have been made. Blumer, in 2002, indicates more than 150 physicians have written on the subject and 30 distinct diagnoses have been conjectured. Dietrich Blumer, "The Illness of Vincent van Gogh," *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 159.4 (April 2002): 519, 522.

²⁷ Exhibit catalogue quoted in Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 254.

²⁸ Griselda Pollock, "Crows, Blossoms and Lust for Death: Cinema and the Myth of Van Gogh the Modern Artist," *Mythologies*, ed. Tsukasa Kōdera (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1993): 219.

²⁹ Carol Zemel, *Van Gogh's Progress: Utopia, Modernity, and Late-Nineteenth-Century Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 158.

³⁰ Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 4.

³¹ Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 210.

³² Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 122.

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- ³³ Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 434.
³⁴ Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 414.
³⁵ Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 418, 434.
³⁶ Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 58.
³⁷ Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 260-261.
³⁸ Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 748, 858.
³⁹ Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 701, 708, 749.
⁴⁰ Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh*, 751, 760-761, 750.
⁴¹ For more on this, see Pribram, *A Cultural Approach to Emotional Disorders*.