

Research on Diagram of the Spirit Inner Causes of Van Goghs Painting Art

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Abstract: *Vincent van Gogh's art transcends traditional realism, offering a deeply personal and spiritual visual language. This article explores the inner causes of his painting style, including psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Through an analysis of his relationship with nature, society, and artistic ideals, it examines how Van Gogh's unique vision shaped a new expressive path in modern art. His bold use of color, dynamic brushwork, and symbolic compositions reflect his pursuit of truth, emotional catharsis, and artistic authenticity, highlighting the profound inner world behind his remarkable creations.*

Keywords: *Van Gogh; Spirit; Inner Cause*

1. Introduction

Vincent van Gogh stands as one of the most emotionally resonant and spiritually profound figures in modern art history. His paintings, marked by vivid colors and expressive brushwork, are not merely visual representations but reflections of his inner turmoil, ideals, and spiritual pursuit. Far from traditional realism, Van Gogh's art is deeply rooted in personal experience and psychological depth. This paper aims to explore the internal forces—emotional, psychological, and philosophical—that shaped his artistic vision, and to reveal how his work continues to inspire through its honesty, intensity, and spiritual vitality.

2. The Expression of Subjective Emotions and Spiritual Experiences in Painting

Van Gogh's painting art breaks away from the constraints of traditional realistic representation, emphasizing the expression of subjective emotions and inner experiences. He regarded painting as a tool to convey emotions and mental states, rather than merely replicating objective reality. His works, such as *The Starry Night* and *Sunflowers*, demonstrate his profound feelings about nature, life, and the universe through intense colors, exaggerated brushstrokes, and dynamic compositions. Van Gogh's art is concept-driven; each of his works carries his reflections on existence, loneliness, hope, and struggle. This subjective mode of expression made his painting a pioneer of "concept-first" in modern art, influencing movements such as Expressionism.

As a pioneer and prophet of modern painting, Van Gogh relentlessly pursued his artistic ideals throughout his nearly tragic life. The vast body of work he left behind not only chronicles his life and artistic journey but also immortalizes his spirit. Although the era in which Van Gogh lived grows increasingly distant, his works continue to convey the fervor of his passionate heart. Van Gogh's art, born from the depths of his soul, embodies an unwavering pursuit of ideals and a concentrated expression of faith. His art not only soothed his own soul but also laid the spiritual and emotional foundation for modern art that followed.

3. Escape from Reality and the Construction of an Ideal Spiritual World

In a sense, Van Gogh's paintings represent an escape from reality, driven primarily by two key factors. First, as a pantheist, Van Gogh held ideals rooted in religious salvation and a yearning for a utopian society, even attempting to realize these ideals as a missionary. However, the harsh realities of society left him feeling lonely and helpless, leading him to question the true value of religion. The gap between reality and his ideals prompted Van Gogh to turn to painting, where he found freedom in expressing his thoughts and unprecedented joy. Although painting could only create an ideal spiritual

world and was a deeply personal act, it fulfilled his need to express emotions and ideas—“The painter’s duty is to infuse a certain thought into his work” [1]. Through painting, he gave voice to ideals that were unattainable in real life. This is vividly reflected in a series of his works that sincerely depict the lives of the poor, characterized by simple yet striking compositions that powerfully convey his thoughts and emotions at the time, filled with humanized compassion for the struggling masses.

For example, Van Gogh’s 1882 work *Money and the Poor* portrays a crowd in front of a lottery shop. The painting’s overall tone is somber, imbued with a sense of oppression and sorrow. The figures move like ghosts, trudging toward the dark abyss of the shop’s entrance, which seems to swallow their souls. The only warm, emotional focal point is a couple on the right (a woman holding a baby), depicted with greater specificity than the surrounding crowd, creating a contrast that enhances the atmosphere and carries symbolic meaning. Another notable work, *The Great Timber Auction*, is a powerful depiction of the lives of the laboring masses at the bottom of society. The figures’ faces are not clearly defined, but their rigid postures vividly reflect their living conditions. Some might misinterpret the seemingly naive handling of the figures’ dynamics as a lack of technical skill, but this is not the case. Earlier works from the same period, such as *The Diggers* (1883), demonstrate Van Gogh’s ability to capture human dynamics with precision and simplicity. So why did Van Gogh choose to depict figures in this manner? In a letter to his brother Theo, he wrote, “If my figures were accurate, I would despair. You should understand, I don’t want them to be academically accurate... I want to create these inaccuracies, these deviations, to reshape and alter reality—yes, they may become unreal, you could say—but more real than literal reality” [2]. Furthermore, the author believes Van Gogh sought to express his intentions clearly and directly through a simple yet forthright approach to composition, akin to the simplicity of children’s drawings, yet imbued with profound and moving ideas. Through these works, we can discern Van Gogh’s individualized personality and artistic characteristics (Figure 1 and Figure 2).



Figure 1: Money and the Poor



Figure 2: The Diggers

Secondly, Van Gogh's reclusive personality, shaped by illness and other factors, along with his pure idealistic beliefs, made it difficult for him to integrate into society or communicate effectively with others. Throughout his life, Van Gogh faced rejection from society and individuals, which contributed to a personality that struggled with rational social engagement and normal interactions. However, it was perhaps this very flaw that gave rise to his artistic achievements, forming his unique artistic character defined by a focus on inner emotions and truthful expression. Had Van Gogh enjoyed the prestige of a social elite, a comfortable life, or a rational, conformist approach to worldly affairs, the history of art might never have included his paintings. While enduring the pain of being unable to connect normally with society and others, Van Gogh strove to build his spiritual sanctuary through painting. Painting became an effective means for him to express his innermost thoughts and release suppressed emotions. This approach encompassed his emotions, his understanding of art, and a personalized expressive language.

The language Van Gogh used in his paintings, beyond his specific artistic pursuits, was also closely tied to his personality and the psychological state shaped by the indifference and rejection he faced from various quarters. The pressures of life, lack of understanding from others, and the impact of illness made it difficult for Van Gogh to maintain a calm state of mind, often leaving him in a state of anxiety and unease. The author believes that this psychological condition was a significant factor in determining the direction of his expressive language in painting. This can be glimpsed in the rhythmic, dynamic brushstrokes of his works. Some describe the brushwork in Van Gogh's paintings as resembling flames, but the author suggests it is more akin to an eruption of pent-up energy under a particular psychological state—a need for release, even carrying a hint of neurotic intensity. For instance, in his 1889 work *Evening Landscape Under Moonlight* (Figure 3), Van Gogh's brush acts like a carving knife, each stroke on the canvas as deliberate like a sudden storm, unmistakably conveying a sense of cathartic release. While balancing his psychological state, Van Gogh's heart gradually merged with his art, finding a spiritual anchor.



Figure 3: Evening Landscape Under Moonlight

4. Nature as a Spiritual Anchor and Source of Artistic Inspiration

Van Gogh held deep respect and awe for nature, viewing it as a sacred realm. While everyone possesses an innate love for nature, for Van Gogh, it was—apart from his brother Theo—the only friend with whom he could truly communicate. The rich diversity of nature provided him with endless psychological fulfillment, alleviating his pain and regulating his fluctuating moods. He sought to draw spiritual nourishment from nature as much as possible, stating, “One must tirelessly copy nature” and “...maintain your love for nature, for that is the true path to increasingly profound understanding of art” [3]. Many of Van Gogh's works repeatedly depict the same subject, yet each painting feels distinct, reflecting his relentless pursuit of nature's truth and the rich variations in his emotions and sensations.

Additionally, he strove to capture the spirit of nature in his own unique way through his paintings. In the process of continuously depicting nature, Van Gogh gradually discovered a language that resonated with his spirit, crafting in his works a visual language that moved his soul, all rooted in nature. He once said, "I see that nature has told me something, ... and I have recorded these things in shorthand" [4].

Van Gogh considered himself a figure painter, yet his landscape paintings demonstrate a greater interest and progress in expressing his spiritual connection to landscapes compared to his figure works. While objective factors, such as a lack of models and difficulties in communication, hindered his exploration and expression in figure painting, Van Gogh's inner inclination was to commune with nature. This stemmed from both a need to express personal emotions and a pursuit of artistic expression. If his figure paintings from the Brabant period primarily reflected his social ideals and humanistic concerns, his landscape paintings from his mature period, particularly those from the Arles period, more prominently showcased his spiritual realm and artistic aspirations. In Arles, he discovered a utopian world infused with an Eastern sensibility that aligned with his artistic ideals, allowing him to temporarily set aside life's troubles and diligently explore new understandings of color influenced by Impressionism. Although Van Gogh's paintings share the vibrant and bright colors of Impressionism, they lack the hazy, objective quality of Impressionist color. He sought to transcend Impressionist color concepts, exploring color's expressive potential from a new perspective, stating, "The painter of the future will be a colorist such as has never yet existed" [5]. In Van Gogh's hands, color became a direct tool for non-naturalistic expression, handled with subjectivity and meaning. His use of color was more formal and expressive, carrying explicit symbolic significance and emotional resonance that corresponded to his spiritual state. For instance, yellow, a color Van Gogh favored, is imbued with tension in his works, fully harnessing the power of color. Under its influence, elements like the sun, the sky it illuminates, ripened wheat fields, and harvested haystacks transcend their material reality in his paintings, with their spiritual qualities becoming unmistakably evident. However, his creative use of color is just one aspect of the artistic achievement in his landscape paintings.

Van Gogh's works were primarily created in response to nature and through sketching from life, yet each painting was born from creativity. While the natural scenery in his paintings is clearly recognizable, it is no longer a mere reproduction but a medium through which Van Gogh freely expressed himself using a personalized artistic language. The rhythmic lines in his works, though influenced by Japanese art, were genuinely distilled and generalized from natural landscapes, organized and intensified according to his inner emotions and expressive needs, resulting in a distinctive artistic effect unique to his paintings. Van Gogh's works retain the vitality and spontaneity of sketching from life, yet they also convey a particular emotion through a unique, meaningful form—a result of creative endeavor. This was remarkably rare and forward-thinking for his era, further demonstrating that Van Gogh's understanding of art surpassed the perceptions of his time. He stated, "Art is nature, reality, truth; but the artist can express an idea, a characteristic through it; the artist has their own form of expression for these meanings, ideas, and characteristics, distinct and original, clear and unmistakable" [6]. Additionally, in shaping his artistic identity, Van Gogh diligently learned from tradition, saying, "You must do everything possible to master the true knowledge of painting. Visit museums as often as you can; learning about the old masters is beneficial" [7]. Through the works of artists like Millet, Delacroix, Rembrandt, and Daumier, Van Gogh amassed rich artistic knowledge and experience, establishing an artistic ideal aligned with his thoughts and inner emotions. On the other hand, he immersed himself in nature and real life, integrating the artistic knowledge and experience he gained with his personal sensations. He sought an art form that belonged neither to past masters like Delacroix or Rembrandt, nor to contemporaries like Gauguin or Cézanne, but was entirely his own—an unprecedented art that belonged to the future.

5. Conclusion

The value of Van Gogh's painting art lies in its profound emotional expression, love for humanity and nature, pursuit of spiritual transcendence, courage in artistic innovation, and the radiant hope shining through adversity. Through bold colors, exaggerated brushstrokes, and dynamic compositions, he vividly conveys his inner joy, pain, loneliness, and passion for life. His works are not only a visual feast but also a profound reflection of the human spirit, inspiring people to find beauty and meaning in difficult times. Van Gogh's painting art is rich in intellectual and spiritual depth, expanding and deepening the expressive possibilities of art, and awakening the qualities that reside deep within every human soul. His art, therefore, is full of charm and passion. To experience Van Gogh is perhaps the best way to truly feel ourselves and the essence of art.

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