

Lecture II: What is an Artist?

During my first talk we focused on ourselves: where we came from, how we got here, why we are musicians, who we really are, and how the answers to those questions might possibly help guide our careers. This talk picks up from where the last left off and focuses more on what we are trying to become.

First I'd like to pose some questions:

Is it possible to perform surgery professionally and not be a doctor?

Is it possible to practice law without passing the bar and becoming a lawyer?

Is it possible to fly an airplane (legally) without being a pilot?

The answers to the above are all no, obviously.

Now for another question:

Is it possible to be a musician and not be an artist?

My answer is yes. I would guess that we all know some people who unfortunately belong in that category.

The argument I'd like to put forward here is that having a successful and happy career as a musician is inextricably linked to also being an artist.

So that brings me to the subject of this talk: What is an artist? If we are all trying to be artists, what do we imagine that means?

Let me ask another question: Do you think that artists are born that way, or does it come from training/environment? My argument is that all humans are born artists, and that as we grow older, society inhibits artistic tendencies.

One thing is for sure that enables children to be artistic: the incredible capacity of a child's imagination. What would happen to us if we were able to retain the ability to imagine things that we did as children? Is it not possible that some among us –those who perhaps we consider very artistic – have simply kept our imaginations as active as we were at 3 years old?

I'd like to ask the question of the room: What is art? Art is part of the word artist. I want to know what art means in the sense of when someone says: "That meal was a work of art!"

Let me provide a bit of history and context.

What we now considered "art" has been happening for a very long time. Cave paintings

discovered in France and Australia date back at 40,000 years.

The word “art” comes from the ancient Latin “Ars” which means method, technique or skill.

Until the 17th century, the idea of skill or craft was synonymous with art. During the Renaissance, it was unthinkable that an artist did not possess special skills and a high degree of technique.

During the Romantic age, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the persona, feelings and the impression of the “artist” came front and center. Haydn, for example, who died in 1809, thought of himself as a craftsman and a servant of his music and of his patrons. But Beethoven, who had lessons as a young man with Haydn and who died in 1827, declared himself an artist, a title of distinction, and would not step aside for royalty to pass.

The Impressionist style, beginning around 1870, ventured away from literal depictions of things and instead strove to capture the overall essence of an image, concentrating on the light being reflected from it and around it. Most often the impressionist painters worked outdoors in order to capture, at the moment, the changing effects of the light. Impressionistic age composers such as Debussy began use ambiguous key centers, whole tone scales, and polytonality.

In the early 20th century, society was shocked and turned upside down by World War I and also be earthshaking discoveries and revelations in science and medicine, such as the proof of the theory of relativity by Einstein and the discovery of the subconscious by Freud. All conventional values were called into question, and artists responded. Around this time, Schoenberg invented the 12-tone system.

Perhaps you’ve heard of an art movement called Dada. A response to the war, this art movement rejected all rules of art that came before, and prized itself on irrationality, nonsense, a kind of “anti-art” doctrine. Perhaps the most famous artist of this movement was Marcel Duchamp, whose sculpture, “The Fountain” is not much more than a urinal turned on its back. The process of its creation involved the notion that if the artist said it was art, then it was art. You are free to believe in that or not; many do and many don’t.

Out of this influential movement came surrealism and post-modernism, styles that once again relied on more hands-on technical skills of the artist. Rene Magritte and Salvador Dali are among the most well-known surrealist artists. The work of Freud was essential to them, as the Surrealist Manifesto – a document created by French writer Andre Breton, dictated that: “Surrealism...proposes to express...the real functioning of thought.”

So now let’s try to say a few definite things about what art is:

1. Art, for our purposes here, is exclusively man-made. It is not a sunset or a tree, but representations of them. And it can be a discovered object, like a urinal, if the artist says so.

2. Genres of art include: the performing arts – dance, music, theater, opera, film and other live events; fine arts includes painting, sculpture, photography, multi-media; architecture is sometimes referred to as an art but its requirement to be practical and useful to society sometimes puts it in another category. One sees the phrase “Art and Architecture” used often. Literature is certainly an art form but not always. A poems, plays and novels are works of art, but cookbooks and instruction manuals are not.

3. An essential component of art is the consumer. “Beauty is in the eye of beholder” is the simple phrase to remember. Isn’t a painting a work of art just a thing without anybody looking at it? Isn’t music just sound without listeners responding to it? It is pretty undeniable that when art is being experienced – in a concert hall, an art gallery, even in a street performance – that something is happening in the air that is different and special. Something unseen but very tangible is passing between the art and the consumer. In music, performers emphasize special harmonies, play with certain rhythmic power, to engage the musical instincts of the audience. A great painting mesmerizes, connecting the viewers to the subject matter, stirring their own associations, perhaps recalling the life of the artist. At a dance performance, the audience experiences vicarious energy just watching the motions of the dancers, feeling the dances within themselves. Such is the magic of the arts.

All of what I’m talking about in this third point falls under the heading of aesthetics. Aesthetics is not an easy word to define, but the concept of it is essential to a clear understanding of ourselves as artists and of the artistic experience. Aesthetics basically is a branch of philosophy that deals with the science of the sensory experience as it relates to the arts. If something is “aesthetically pleasing” it means that it appeals to you in a sensory way, often in terms of its beauty.

There are many different aesthetics depending on history and culture. For example, the ancient Greeks felt that perfect depiction of the human form was the most aesthetically pleasing form of art. Western medieval art’s focus was religion. Art in India inspires states of spirituality. All of these are different aesthetics under which the art was created and experienced, and have to do with the interaction of the art and the consumer.

In order to make some sense of what the attributes of an artist should be, I made a list on the side of all the personality traits and qualities that do not necessarily make an artist an artist. Although many artists have had them, throughout history, none of the following is a requirement:

1. That you have to be either crazy or sane.
2. That you have to be poor, or rich.
3. That you have to have come from a stable or troubled family.
4. That you have to be well-connected.
5. That you have to be commercially successful as an artist
6. That you need to be self-centered.

7. That you need to be addicted to substances.
8. That you need to be irresponsible and unpredictable.

So what do real artists do? They create or interpret art at high levels of skill, creativity and depth, in ways which distinguish them one from another and have a lasting effect on consumers.

What attributes do real artists have in common?

1. They have special, intense relationships with their art forms.
2. They are driven to practice the art.
3. They are pro-active and productive.
4. They are highly creative and often innovative.
5. They know and interact with tradition to varying degrees
6. They are open-minded.
7. They are passionate.
8. They spend their lives evolving.
9. They have special skills.
10. They spend a lot of time devoted to their art.
11. They are driven primarily by artistic principles, putting artistic quality ahead of other concerns.
12. Their work provokes the interest of the public either during their lifetimes or after.
13. They are always highly sensitive people.

So now it's time to jump again to another aspect of this presentation. I'm going to take you through the lives and work of some people who are arguably some of the most potent and extraordinary artists the world has ever known: Ludwig van Beethoven, Vincent van Gogh, and Martha Graham.



Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) needs little introduction to a music school audience. He was the central figure of the transition from the classical to the romantic age. Incredibly productive, he was the composer of 9 immortal symphonies, 5 piano concertos, 16 string quartets, 32 piano

sonatas, 10 violin sonatas, 5 cello sonatas, 7 piano trios, and many other great works still in the standard repertoire. He was famous during his time, although by his later years he was considered to be somewhat eccentric. He most famously became completely deaf by the age of 40, yet continued to compose astounding music. His so-called "late period" works are some of the most transcendent and groundbreaking music ever written.

Born in Bonn, Germany, in 1770, he was the son of Johann, a tenor and music teacher who was his first teacher. Johann was an alcoholic and an abusive father who would get his son out of bed in the middle of the night to make him play for his drunken friends. He basically exploited his son in the tradition of Leopold Mozart, who had dragged his son Wolfgang all over Europe making money by exhibiting him as a prodigy.

Beethoven's talent was evident early on, and gave his first public performance at the age of seven. At the age of 17 he went to Vienna to study with Mozart, but returned home abruptly on hearing that his mother was ill. His mother died shortly after, and, with his father being in poor shape, he cared for his two brothers for the next five years.

By 1792 Beethoven was back to Vienna to study with Haydn. He took Vienna by storm as a pianist, and with his early piano trios Op. 1 he made enough money to live on for a year. He improvised incomparably and performed Bach's Preludes and Fugues, as well as his own compositions, for nobility. He was fully expected to succeed Mozart, who had died in 1791. Beethoven's early works were in Mozartean style but possessed the signature Beethoven traits that would eventually blossom in his middle period works. He also taught students who would go on to major careers such as Karl Czerny.

In 1795 he gave one of his first concerts in Vienna, performing his own piano concerto, but by the next year was already complaining of ringing in his ears. Turning out chamber works, violin and cello sonatas and string trios, he finally tackled the string quartet genre, and in 1800 produced his first set of six quartets, Op. 18. When Haydn heard these, he basically gave up writing quartets.

In 1802 his deafness became acute, and Beethoven penned his famous Heiligenstadt testament, a kind of confession as to why he was so difficult to be around (he was embarrassed about his deafness). In this document, he hints at suicide, but soon found a reason to live: to serve music. An incredible period followed beginning in 1803, heralded by the "Eroica" Symphony, the first ever to last a full hour. Beethoven himself had entered his own "heroic period".

Patronage from the Archduke Rudolph, Prince Lobkowitz and others offered Beethoven, in 1808, the means to continue living in Vienna and to continue composing unimpeded. But darker times loomed: in 1809, Napoleon attacked Vienna. Beethoven hid in his brother's basement, covering his ears to protect them from the thunder of the mortar shell explosions. 1811 saw his final, failed performance as a piano soloist in which he could not hear well enough to get through his own 5th concerto. That summer he became seriously ill, and pined via letter

to the “Immortal Beloved”, the still-unidentified object of his amorous desires, which were never fulfilled.

By 1814, Beethoven was totally deaf, and relied on written conversation books to communicate with people. His composing fell off and he entered a relatively dry period. The following year, his brother died, leaving his nephew Karl in Beethoven’s care and sparking a years-long custody battle with his brother’s widow, which drained Beethoven both financially and emotionally.

Beethoven’s so-called late period began near the end of the decade. During this final period of his life, his music became almost mystical and often inexplicable. Yet he was revered as a genius. He concerned himself increasingly with older musical forms, such as fugue, and even Medieval church modes. His works from this period include the *Missa Solemnis*, the 9th symphony (1824), and the late piano sonatas and string quartets, all of which stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the greatest works of art produced in history: the plays of Shakespeare, Michelangelo’s *Last Supper*, Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*.

Beethoven died in March of 1827. He composed nearly all the way to his death, completing the five last string quartets near the end. The funeral rites took place at the church of the Holy Trinity. It is estimated that between 10,000 and 30,000 people attended. Franz Schubert, timid and a huge admirer of Beethoven, without ever having become close to him, was one of the coffin bearers, along with other musicians. Schubert died the next year and was buried next to Beethoven.

So what made Beethoven an artist?

Perhaps the greatest artistic feature of Beethoven was his evolution. The fact that his own musical breakthroughs literally altered the course of music itself is an accomplishment approached by only a few other composers in history.

Second, the fact that the art of music and his will to serve it apparently saved Beethoven’s life is further evidence of the do-or-die quality in Beethoven’s relationship to his music.

Beethoven’s respect for traditional skills in piano playing and composition demonstrated the kind of artistic self-discipline and self-knowledge essential for anyone wanting to leave significant work behind.

That Beethoven was innovative is an enormous understatement. Beethoven was more of a musician for all times, including the future. No composer has written music which taps music’s earliest techniques and traditions (such as Renaissance modes) and in the next moment vaults forward, often sounding like music of the modern age.

Fortunately for Beethoven, he was recognized and revered during his lifetime. That does not mean that his music was totally understood by all, or even by many. Yet, by his late years, he composed in a state unconcerned about immediate appreciation. He knew his music was good,

and that it would take time for listeners to grasp it. All great art, for that matter, grows in impact the longer and more times it is experienced.

And finally, his deafness. What greater evidence of artistic will exists to be able to triumph in a skill while at the same time being deprived of the sense which experiences it?

Beethoven was, and remains, one of the most inspiring people who have ever walked the planet. The gifts he left us continue to vouch for our potential to become something better than we are.



Dancer and choreographer **Martha Graham**, born in 1894, became one of the world's most influential artists, establishing her own dance company which still exists today. She has been compared to Stravinsky, Picasso and Frank Lloyd Wright, and was the first dancer ever to perform at the White House. She is widely considered to be the lead founder of what is called modern dance. Modern dance, which evolved in the late 19th century, blossomed in the early 20th and continues to this day, is a rejection of the traditions of classical ballet and reflects a freedom and athleticism (especially among women) that were general cultural trends thriving in the first thirty years of the 20th century. Graham is the author of what is known as the Martha Graham technique, which is taught and practiced today by current members of her company.

This excerpt from John Martin's reviews in the *New York Times* provides insight on Graham's choreographic style. "Frequently the vividness and intensity of her purpose are so potent that on the rise of the curtain they strike like a blow, and in that moment one must decide whether he is for or against her. She boils down her moods and movements until they are devoid of all extraneous substances and are concentrated to the highest degree."

Extending conceptual innovations pioneered by dancers such as Isadora Duncan and Maud Allan, Martha Graham's own artistic descendants include entire ballet companies and schools of our time: Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, Alvin Ailey, José Limón and Eric Hawkins. Graham is perhaps most widely known for her ballet *Appalachian Spring*, for which she commissioned

American composer Aaron Copland to write the music in 1944. The set was designed by the Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi.

Martha Graham was born 1894 near Pittsburgh, to a psychiatrist father of a strict Presbyterian family, descendents of Puritans. In 1915 she began to study dance, and within ten years was teaching in the drama department of the Eastman School, also producing films.

In 1926, she established the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance was established in NYC, which is now the oldest dance company in America. The first performance by the all-female company took place that year.

By 1936, in reaction to world events such as war and the stock market crash, her work began to become darker and more avant-garde. In 1938, Erick Hawkins was the first man to dance with her company.

Over the next years, the composers she commissioned included Copland, William Schumann, Samuel Barber, and Gian Carlo Menotti. She also brought male dancer Merce Cunningham into her company, who became iconic in his own right with his own company in the latter part of the 20th century. She was a great collaborator in every way, working with photographers Phillippe Halsman and Yousef Karsh.

Martha Graham stopped dancing around 1970 at the age of 76 and did not take it very well. She wrote in her autobiography: "It wasn't until years after I had relinquished a ballet that I could bear to watch someone else dance it. I believe in never looking back, never indulging in nostalgia, or reminiscing. Yet how can you avoid it when you look on stage and see a dancer made up to look as you did thirty years ago, dancing a ballet you created with someone you were then deeply in love with, your husband? I think that is a circle of hell Dante omitted. [When I stopped dancing] I had lost my will to live. I stayed home alone, ate very little, and drank too much and brooded. My face was ruined, and people say I looked odd, which I agreed with. Finally my system just gave in. I was in the hospital for a long time, much of it in a coma."

She suffered from depression and attempted suicide, but by 1972 she had recovered and went on to create many more ballets. She also reorganized her company and brought many earlier ballets back to the stage. She died in 1991 at the age 96, choreographing all the way to her death. Her ashes were scattered in New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Martha Graham was extremely productive. Look at this list of her works:

Year	Performance	Music
1926	<i>Chorale</i>	César Franck
1926	<i>Novelette</i>	Robert Schumann
1927	<i>Lugubre</i>	Alexander Scriabin

Year	Performance	Music
1927	<i>Revolt</i>	Arthur Honegger
1927	<i>Fragilité</i>	Alexander Scriabin
1927	<i>Scherza</i>	Robert Schumann
1929	<i>Figure of a Saint</i>	George Frideric Handel
1929	<i>Resurrection</i>	Tibor Harsányi
1929	<i>Adolescence</i>	Paul Hindemith
1929	<i>Danza</i>	Darius Milhaud
1929	"Vision of the Apocalypse"	Hermann Reutter
1929	<i>Moment Rustica</i>	Francis Poulenc
1929	<i>Heretic</i>	from folklore
1930	<i>Lamentation</i>	Zoltán Kodály
1930	<i>Harlequinade</i>	Ernst Toch
1931	<i>Primitive Mysteries</i>	Louis Horst
1931	<i>Bacchanale</i>	Wallingford Riegger
1931	<i>Dolorosa</i>	Heitor Villa-Lobos
1933	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	
1935	<i>Praeludium</i>	Paul Nordoff
1935	<i>Frontier</i>	Louis Horst
1935	<i>Course</i>	George Antheil
1936	<i>Steps in the Street</i>	
1936	<i>Chronicle</i>	Wallingford Riegger
1936	<i>Horizons</i>	Louis Horst
1936	<i>Salutation</i>	Lehman Engel
1937	<i>Deep Song</i>	Henry Cowell
1937	<i>Opening Dance</i>	Norman Lloyd
1937	<i>Immediate Tragedy</i>	Henry Cowell
1937	<i>American Lyric</i>	Alex North
1938	<i>American Document</i>	Ray Green
1939	<i>Columbiad</i>	Louis Horst
1939	<i>Every Soul is a Circus</i>	Paul Nordoff
1940	<i>El Penitente</i>	Louis Horst
1940	<i>Letter to the World</i>	Hunter Johnson

Year	Performance	Music
1941	<i>Punch and the Judy</i>	Robert McBride
1942	<i>Land Be Bright</i>	Arthur Kreutz
1943	<i>Deaths and Entrances</i>	Hunter Johnson
1943	<i>Salem Shore</i>	Paul Nordoff
1944	<i>Appalachian Spring</i>	Aaron Copland
1944	<i>Imagined Wing</i>	Darius Milhaud
1944	<i>Hérodiade</i>	Paul Hindemith
1946	<i>Dark Meadow</i>	Carlos Chávez
1946	<i>Cave of the Heart</i>	Samuel Barber
1947	<i>Errand into the Maze</i>	Gian Carlo Menotti
1947	<i>Night Journey, Martha Graham</i>	William Schuman
1948	<i>Diversion of Angels</i>	Norman Dello Joio
1950	<i>Judith</i>	William Schuman
1951	<i>The Triumph of St. Joan</i>	Norman Dello Joio
1954	<i>Ardent Song</i>	Alan Hovhaness
1955	<i>Seraphic Dialogue</i>	Norman Dello Joio
1958	<i>Clytemnestra</i>	Halim El-Dabh
1958	<i>Embattled Garden</i>	Carlos Surinach
1959	<i>Episodes</i>	Anton Webern
1960	<i>Acrobats of God</i>	Carlos Surinach
1960	<i>Alcestis</i>	Vivian Fine
1961	<i>Visionary Recital</i>	Robert Starer
1961	<i>One More Gaudy Night</i>	Halim El-Dabh
1962	<i>Phaedra</i>	Robert Starer
1962	<i>A Look at Lightning</i>	Halim El-Dabh
1962	<i>Secular Games</i>	Robert Starer
1962	<i>Legend of Judith</i> ^[22]	Mordechai Seter
1963	<i>Circe</i>	Alan Hovhaness
1965	<i>The Witch of Endor</i>	William Schuman
1967	<i>Cortege of Eagles</i>	Eugene Lester
1968	<i>A Time of Snow</i>	Norman Dello Joio
1968	<i>Plain of Prayer</i>	Eugene Lester

Year	Performance	Music
1968	<i>The Lady of the House of Sleep</i>	Robert Starer
1969	<i>The Archaic Hours</i>	Eugene Lester
1973	<i>Mendicants of Evening</i>	David G. Walker
1973	<i>Myth of a Voyage</i>	Alan Hovhaness
1974	<i>Holy Jungle</i>	Robert Starer
1974	<i>Jacob's Dream</i>	Mordechai Seter
1975	<i>Lucifer</i>	Halim El-Dabh
1975	<i>Adorations</i>	John Dowland Girolamo Frescobaldi
1975	<i>Point of Crossing</i>	Mordechai Seter
1975	<i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	Hunter Johnson
1977	<i>O Thou Desire Who Art About to Sing</i>	Meyer Kupferman
1977	<i>Shadows</i>	Gian Carlo Menotti
1978	<i>The Owl and the Pussycat</i>	Carlos Surinach
1978	<i>Ecuatorial</i>	Edgard Varèse
1978	<i>Flute of Pan</i>	Traditional music.
1978 or 1979	<i>Frescoes</i>	Samuel Barber
1979	<i>Episodes (ballet)</i>	Anton Webern
1980	<i>Judith</i>	Edgard Varèse
1981	<i>Acts of Light</i>	Carl Nielsen
1982	<i>Dances of the Golden Hall</i>	Andrzej Panufnik
1982	<i>Andromanche's Lament</i>	Samuel Barber
1983	<i>Phaedra's Dream</i>	George Crumb
1984	<i>The Rite of Spring</i>	Igor Stravinsky
1985	<i>Song</i>	Romanian folk music
1986	<i>Temptations of the Moon</i>	Béla Bartók
1986	<i>Tangled Night</i>	Klaus Egge
1987	<i>Perséphone</i>	Igor Stravinsky
1988	<i>Night Chant</i>	R. Carlos Nakai
1990	<i>Maple Leaf Rag</i>	Scott Joplin
1991	<i>The Eyes of the Goddess</i>	unfinished

Martha Graham was one of the most powerful, intimidating and mesmerizing artistic personalities I personally have ever seen. Almost every word of her autobiography is intense, challenging and almost frightening. Let me share with you a quote from her that appeared in dancer and choreographer Agnes de Mille's biography of Graham:

"The greatest thing she ever said to me was in 1943 after the opening of *Oklahoma!*, when I suddenly had unexpected, flamboyant success for a work I thought was only fairly good, after years of neglect for work I thought was fine. I was bewildered and worried that my entire scale of values was untrustworthy. I talked to Martha. I remember the conversation well. It was in a Schrafft's restaurant over a soda. I confessed that I had a burning desire to be excellent, but no faith that I could be. Martha said to me, very quietly: "There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. ... No artist is pleased. [There is] no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others."

So what made Martha Graham an artist?

The first and foremost feature of Martha Graham as a person was the intensity of her relationship to her art form. Beyond being something that she practiced, or an art form she created for, dance was for her a dominating presence, the demands of which ruled her habits and her moods for most of her life. Graham's relationship to dance was like a complex human relationship containing love, jealousy, obsession, doubt, passion and sacrifice. For her, it was all-consuming. One doesn't ever hear of what Martha Graham liked to do when she wasn't dancing or creating dance.

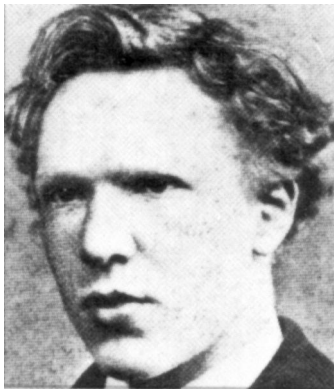
It must have taken incredible courage for Martha Graham to establish a dance company in her own name in America during the 1920's. Only in 1920 had women gained the right to vote in America, and Graham's initially all-female company was certainly not in the mainstream of American culture. Plus, her dances, not being classical ballet, didn't appeal as widely as more traditional fare. Yet, she persevered.

Martha Graham's wellspring of determination was very, very deep. Witness the number of dances she created, and the composers she commissioned. And her unflinching faithfulness to her inner drive – to dance and create dance – still serves as an inspiration and example for creative people in all fields.

Martha Graham is widely regarded as one of the most innovative artists in history, having virtually created new ways of thinking about and moving the body. She remained, until her death, the utmost authority on her school of dance, and continued to perform way past the age

at which most dancers retire. She transcended the traditional role of ballet dancer to create a new kind of dancer, one whose artistic core was centered in the torso, as opposed to classical ballet's obsession with the limbs. And cementing her own legacy is the long line of students who, to this day, continue to practice and teach her system.

History has had many great dancers, but few have possessed the total, all-consuming artistry of Martha Graham, an artistry so powerful that it consumed her as well. She is still a legend who lives on through her work.



Vincent van Gogh was a Dutch painter who lived during the Impressionist era. His work is characterized by boldness or even roughness, vivid, extreme colors, often great beauty and bizarreness, and influenced the history of art. His paintings today are among the most valuable in the world, although during his lifetime he enjoyed little or no commercial success, selling a total of one painting. He was troubled by mental illness for much of his 37 years and died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

He started painting seriously only in his late twenties, and made most of his important art during his last ten years. He was extremely productive, and is famous now for his edgy and challenging portraits, his magical scenes of country and city, for his flowers, fields, skies, and night scenes.

He was born in 1853, in the southern Netherlands, to family of pastors and art dealers. His interest in art blossomed early and he started drawing as a child.

In 1868 his troubles began. He left boarding school: "My youth was gloomy and cold and sterile". By 1869 he had become an apprentice to an art dealer in the Hague. Having been transferred to London, he was briefly happy, but after his amorous advances were rejected by a woman, he became increasingly depressed. He was transferred again to Paris and eventually fired in 1876.

Van Gogh's life from here on seems to be an almost unbroken string of unsuccessful ventures: a teaching job in London failed; a job in a bookstore in the Netherlands didn't work out. He became interested in religion but failed both the theology entrance exam *and* a 3-month theology course in Brussels. He decided to become a missionary, helping poor coal miners in Belgium, but was fired by the church for living in squalid conditions (he was sleeping on straw). After returning home his parents became exasperated and his father tried to have him committed to an asylum.

It was after this time that van Gogh began to dabble in drawing. Returning to the mining town where he had previously volunteered, he began sketching the people around him. His brother Theo recommended that he attend art school to study, and he did, briefly attending the Académie in Brussels to study art techniques. He returned home, only to be rejected by another woman and to have arguments with his father. He went to The Hague in 1882 and took up not only lodgings with a prostitute and her family, but also oil painting. He fathered a child by her and eventually left her and the family. The woman eventually drowned herself.

Van Gogh returned home and continued painting and drawing. He pursued another woman who tried to commit suicide but was saved by van Gogh. It was during this time, in 1885, that he painted his first famous picture, *The Potato Eaters*, part of a group of paintings he referred to as "peasant character studies". That summer, his paintings were shown in Paris by his brother Theo, but deemed too dark in color and character to sell well in the vibrant age of Impressionism.

In the fall of 1885 van Gogh moved to Antwerp and lived in poverty, apparently consuming only bread and coffee and smoking incessantly. His teeth began to fall out. He was briefly hospitalized for what was likely syphilis. He attended drawing classes and got into fights with the teacher. It was decided that he needed to repeat a year of school and he left for Paris to live with his brother in 1886.

Theo soon found living with his brother intolerable, but during this time, Vincent managed to befriend many of the major artists of his day, and his painting style brightened up. He painted around two hundred paintings during his two years in Paris, and eventually left for the city of Arles in the south of France, plagued by ill health.

It was in Arles that his true unique style emerged. Bewitched by the colors in both city and country, he painted most of his famous pictures there, such as the picture of his bedroom, the *Starry Night*, the *Night Café*, and so many more. His friend, the artist Paul Gauguin, moved in with him and they painted together. But after a short time their relationship became strained: eventually van Gogh attacked Gauguin with a razor and, in a fit, cut off part of his own ear. He was committed to mental health supervision by the local authorities.

Soon after, van Gogh committed himself to an asylum in Saint-Rémy, continuing to paint all the while. He left in under a year to live closer to his friend and future doctor Paul Gachet in Auvers-sur-Oise. It was there, on July 27th, 1890, that van Gogh shot himself. The wound itself

was not life-threatening, but without a surgeon around to remove the bullet, an infection set in and van Gogh died a little more than a day later. He was 37. In death, van Gogh joined a coterie of musical geniuses who died at the height of their powers: Schubert (31), Mozart (35) and Mendelssohn (38).

Van Gogh summary

So what made Vincent van Gogh an artist?

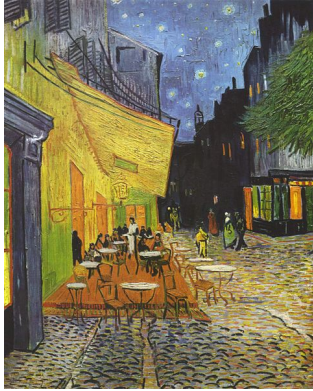
There are many, many aspects of van Gogh's personality and circumstances that qualify him as a quintessential artist: his productivity, creativity, passion, and uncompromised will to follow his own path are just some of them.

What I'd like to focus on here, though, are two qualities that van Gogh possessed in the extreme: his sensitivity to the visual, and his capacity to re-imagine reality in order to make it even more real.

There exist some six hundred letters that van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo. They provide a fascinating window into his complex personality. I have read many of them, and what has struck me is how they almost invariably dwell on his visual experiences. Here's an excerpt from one of them:

"I was only interrupted by my work on a new painting representing the exterior of a night café. On the terrace there are small figures of people drinking. An immense yellow lantern illuminates the terrace, the facade, the side walk and even casts light on the paving stones of the road which take a pinkish violet tone. The gables of the houses, like a fading road below a blue sky studded with stars, are dark blue or violet with a green tree. Here you have a night painting without black, with nothing but beautiful blue and violet and green and in this surrounding the illuminated area colors itself sulfur pale yellow and citron green. It amuses me enormously to paint the night right on the spot. Normally, one draws and paints the painting during the daytime after the sketch. But I like to paint the thing immediately. It is true that in the darkness I can take a blue for a green, a blue lilac for a pink lilac, since it is hard to distinguish the quality of the tone. But it is the only way to get away from our conventional night with poor pale whitish light, while even a simple candle already provides us with the richest of yellows and oranges."

The scene he's talking about is the one he painted in Arles of the café terrace at night.



I visited Arles in 2005 and the café looks just the same:



But the truly amazing fact is, when van Gogh painted it, it didn't look like this at all. The awnings and walls were white. To van Gogh, however, it looked like what he painted. Ever since this painting became famous, the owners of the café have naturally painted it to look like the picture, attracting tourists eager for a picture in front of the famous location. It would have been more of a tribute to van Gogh's genius to leave it the original color, and tell the true story.

His creative process is beautifully revealed in the letter I shared above. When he speaks of the colors and textures, one has the sensation that he's not just observing but is somehow possessed by them. Biographers of van Gogh have documented – often through the letters – how van Gogh was emotionally affected by color, as many musicians and music lovers are deeply moved by sound. The American composer George Crumb, now approaching his 90th year, has made his mark on music through the highly creative use of unorthodox, non-traditional sounds woven into works of stunning beauty and power. Such it is also with the paintings of van Gogh: shockingly vivid colors that are not literal representations; bold, even crude brush strokes; distortions of reality; an impulsive rather than studied quality; use of color itself as an expressive tool, as in his portraits, in which he imparted the character of his subjects not by exact physical replication but through the power of color instead. All of these qualities made his work a true harbinger of modern art, and were created in the midst of an age hardly ready to appreciate such vision.

Finally, one cannot look for long at van Gogh's paintings to realize that he was able to create alternative realities so powerful that they far surpassed what actually existed. Perhaps, being such a hypersensitive and mentally unstable person, his power to imbue something such as a night sky with such turbulent emotion is explainable:



Yet there are still the unfathomables about van Gogh: how he came to such a unique style of painting; how he managed to produce so much (860 paintings) in the midst of such a life of poverty, squalor and misfortune; and finally, how the man who sold only one painting during his lifetime produced what would become perhaps the most valuable body of art created by a single person. There are many famous works by Picasso, Monet, Velasquez, and others. But how many of their works hold the same instantly recognizable, iconic identity of so many of van Gogh's? If da Vinci has one Mona Lisa, van Gogh has dozens of them.

This talk has been designed to inspire you to nourish and grow that part of each of you that is inherently artistic. If you were here for my previous talk, you hopefully spent some time answering for yourselves the questions I posed as to your reasons for being a musician and how you came to where you are in your lives now. Perhaps, as a result of this session, you will be able to make further sense out of what you are doing with your lives, and how to get to where you want to be.

I wouldn't have made this talk – or even this whole series of talks – if I didn't think it was essential for us all to be artists in order to have a career. Because a genuine career in the arts – as you've heard from some of the stories I've told – is not really generated by phone calls, e mails, publicity photos, resumes, or even managers, record companies or PR firms. True, all of those components and tools of the music industry can be used to support a career, but the real question is: What exactly are they supporting? If they are not there to bring the public's attention to a true artist – and even more, to allow the artist to continue on a path of discovery, creativity, hard work and growth - then they are only creating a paper tiger, a suit of the Emperor's New Clothes.

There is nothing wrong with emulating, and to a certain point even imitating, artists you admire. Certainly there is no reason not to imitate their habits if they make sense to you. If you are a composer, for example, and have the time, take a day and spend it pretending you

are Beethoven. There's nothing wrong with completely changing your habits for a day or so. Who knows what you might learn, how it might affect you and your art and your life? At least, for sure, we know it worked for Beethoven!

© ArtistLed 2019