

The Strokes of Madness: A Study of Spaces in the Paintings of Vincent Van Gogh

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Vincent van Gogh was a Dutch post-impressionist painter who created about 2,100 artworks, including around 860 oil paintings, most of which date from the last two years of his life. It can be seen that van Gogh's paintings and the spaces that he take up as the subjects of his works are often inspired by the simple imageries of everyday life; and so, he is often considered as a painter of rural life and nature. Most of the paintings were artistic representations of his favourite places, but the way in which they were represented hinted the mind-set of the painter. Some spaces are visual explosions of bright colours, whereas some a harmonic combination of pastel shades. This extremist feature was present not only in the paintings, but also in the life of Van Gogh. The paper examines in detail the spaces represented in his paintings.

Keywords: paintings, spatial theory, art and space, Vincent Van Gogh

Introduction:

Vincent van Gogh was a Dutch post-impressionist painter who is often admired as one of the most famous and influential figures in the history of Western art. Widely theorised as having bipolar disorder, van Gogh belongs to the extraordinary category of masters whose chaotic psyche created eternal masterpieces. In just over a decade, he created about 2,100 artworks, including around 860 oil paintings, most of which date from the last two years of his life. They

include landscapes, still life images, portraits and self-portraits, and are characterised by bold colours and dramatic, impulsive and expressive brushwork that contributed to the foundations of modern art. This paper examines in detail the spaces represented in some of his major paintings, the techniques employed by the artist and its possible implications.

A glance through the painted spaces:

To understand a general nature of Van Gogh's paintings, his earliest works - completed from 1881 through 1883 need to be examined, and the same show attention to detail as well as hints the talents of a budding genius that would fully emerge in his later paintings. The subjects of his paintings were mostly landscapes and peasants in static poses, and the colors used were mostly restricted to a black and white palette. Also, rather than closed spaces, the early paintings dealt with open spaces, that were the images of places often visited by the painter. However, the paintings created in his later life were mostly coloured, usually with hues of yellow and blue, and most of them were representations of still life images, portraits and closed spaces.

Moving on to specific ones among Van Gogh's paintings, *The Bedroom* series holds a special importance, as it depicts a closed, personal space that belonged to him in all sense. There are three similar paintings of the same title. The painting shows van Gogh's bedroom at 2, Place Lamartine in Arles, Bouches-du-Rhône, France, known as the Yellow House. The room was not rectangular in shape, but trapezoid with an obtuse angle in the left hand corner of the front wall and an acute angle at the right. The bedroom was fitted out with simple wooden furniture and van Gogh's own paintings on the walls. By use of strong, contrasting colours, the artist sought to express particular emotions: here the pale purple of the tiles, the yellow of the furniture and the light violet of the walls are intended to evoke the rest or sleep that he experienced in his bedroom. The portrayals of such closed private spaces were not at all common in his early works. The mental disturbance that he experienced could be one of the factors that made him paint about the space that offered him solace.

Another interesting fact in this painting is the fact that there are always two pillows on Vincent's bed, which may be a suggestion

that the artist did not want to be alone. In a letter to his brother Theo, Vincent explained the reasons that made him to paint such a picture: he wanted to express the tranquillity, and bring out the simplicity of his bedroom using the symbolism of colours. The space that offered him comfort and ignited his creativity needed recognition as per the painter. Thus, he described in one of the letters to his brother Theo: “the pale, lilac walls, the uneven, faded red of the floor, the chrome-yellow chairs and bed, the pillows and sheet in very pale lime green, the blood-red blanket, the orange-coloured washstand, the blue wash basin, and the green window”, stating “I wanted to express absolute repose with these different colours”.

Another of his most famous work, *The Starry Night*, describes the view from the east-facing window of his asylum room at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, just before sunrise, with the addition of the image of a village. It is basically a painting based on an imaginary space created by van Gogh’s direct observations as well as his imagination, memories, and emotions. He has incorporated elements of familiar spaces from his own past in the work. The steeple of the church, for example, resembles those common in his native Holland, not in France. But, the whirling forms in the sky matches with published astronomical observations of clouds of dust and gas known as nebulae. The painting is also noted for the hallucinatory space that it creates in a viewer’s mind.

The dark spires in the foreground are cypress trees, plants most often associated with cemeteries and death. Also, the space of sky, represented with violent strokes of blue and the explosive yellow strokes that depicts the stars makes a catchy visual spectacle. This gives a special significance to this van Gogh quote, “Looking at the stars always makes me dream. Why, I ask myself, shouldn’t the shining dots of the sky be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France? Just as we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star.” (Bee et al. 25). What one can see here is how the artist tries to bring forth his troubled mental space into his own paintings. His belief in afterlife- a space beyond his disturbed real life is also reflected in this work.

Looking into van Gogh's 1890 oil on canvas piece, *Sorrowing Old Man*, the spatial setting encapsulates the sorrow and grief of a man who is beyond the point of happiness. Finished just two years before his suicide, the painting is an ode to his relapse into mental despair and depressive deliriousness. The painting exemplifies the isolation one goes through when left in a sordid state of mind. By using a strong blue to highlight the main figure of the painting, van Gogh is making a spatial representation, showing his depression and anxiety. The surrounding space is left bare except for a small fireplace which surprisingly never illuminates the room or surroundings.

Moving on to other works by van Gogh, *Wheat Field with Crows* is another renowned work by him. Although there are many who have disputed the claim that this painting is the last artwork ever made by Vincent van Gogh, one cannot deny the tragic air associated with this image. Many elements of the painting can be interpreted as indicating the emotional turmoil van Gogh experienced and as a result, it makes for an interesting example of how the spaces depicted in an artwork can be reflective of the mental state of an artist.

The painting itself is oil on canvas, vivid in colour and expressive in brushstrokes; as is typical of van Gogh's style. The canvas depicts an open space of a gold-hued wheat field with threatening skies overhead and crows swarming amongst the wheat. The overall note that hangs over the painting is that of uncertainty. The space offers ambiguous meanings- that of loneliness, an element of chaos, and often of gloom. We can also see a path that divides the field, leading to nowhere. The work visualises the intense loneliness that van Gogh was experiencing and wrote about in his published letters. Looking first at the space that represents the sky, the ominous darkness above the field can be interpreted as reflecting the impending depression in van Gogh's own life. In addition, the suggestion of an incoming storm through the darkened blue paint has been read as foreshadowing of his death. The birds in the painting also act as an effective reference to van Gogh's emotional state. Crows are usually a feature that often appear in horror films and gothic literature, and are often used as an indicator of darkness or as an omen of death, which is especially fitting when it comes to this painting. It is thought

that van Gogh shot himself in the chest in a location similar to that depicted, managing to return to his room in Auvers where he would die. Knowing this, it is understandable why *Wheatfield with Crows* has been interpreted to be a suicide note as it appears to depict the exact setting of van Gogh's death; the disorder of the crows can even be seen as responding to a gunshot.

Another space, which van Gogh draws out in most of his works, is that of a tangled one. Rather than a single perceptive idea, tangled strokes offer more depth, and thereby, offer a complex spatial dimension to the works. For instance, the *Tree Roots* appears as a jumble of bright colours and wild abstract shapes in first sight. Powerful strokes and thickly applied paint mark the canvas and makes it unique. The subject and the space depicted only become apparent when you look more closely: tree roots, plants, leaves, with the brown and yellow of a sandy woodland floor under them. Van Gogh painted other scenes of trees and woods in numerous other works too. He often cuts off his compositions in an unusual fashion, often painting trees without their tops, or a piece of woodland showing only undergrowth and flowers - or, as here, only the roots of the trees. Incomplete and tangled spaces thus became a common element in his paintings which he made towards the abrupt end of his life. All these elements points to the artist's psyche which is deep and complicated, just like his works.

Conclusion:

What is so admirable about van Gogh is the fact that ultimately, he sees his psychological struggles not as something to negate but as his artistic truth, as a vital part of his honest experience, which is the necessary foundation of great art, and he has expressed the same ideas in his letters to Theo. Art is inevitably linked to the mental state of its creator, and van Gogh's works can be seen as excellent manifestations of the same. The spaces he created in his paintings express how one can depict one's own psyche, and how the element of creativity can be a source of solace. Thus, undoubtedly, Vincent van Gogh was a genius artist who gave method to his madness, through the spaces he created through his masterstrokes.

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