

# bio. CLASSROOM



## Vincent Van Gogh Classroom Guide

**Introduction:** Vincent Van Gogh is considered one of the world's most influential painters, known for his use of vibrant colors and his enormous contributions to the post-Impressionist school of painting. Born in the Netherlands in 1853, Van Gogh lived a difficult life and he was plagued by madness and depression throughout his lifetime. While he struggled to maintain his sanity, Van Gogh developed an extraordinary talent for painting. His use of exquisite brushwork, striking color, and contoured ornamentation in hundreds of paintings established Van Gogh as one of the most innovative painters of the modern era. Although he cultivated his talents throughout his lifetime and wrote detailed letters about his devotion to his art, Van Gogh's work did not achieve popularity until after his death.

***Vincent Van Gogh: A Stroke of Genius***, traces his career, exploring the ways his painting style was influenced by and mirrored the psychological suffering he experienced. After his early years drawing portraits of working class scenes, Van Gogh moved to Arles in the South of France where he struck up an influential friendship with the French painter Paul Gauguin. This documentary examines the interactions of these two painters as they produced some of the most well-known pieces of post-Impressionist art. Even as Van Gogh reached heights as a painter, he continued to live a life marked with despair and tumult. Through learning Van Gogh's immense talents and tumultuous personal life, students will gain new insights into the world of post-Impressionism and its most influential artists. Educators may want to use clips from this program for their course units and lectures on Van Gogh and his era.

### **OBJECTIVES AND CURRICULUM LINKS**

***Vincent Van Gogh: A Stroke of Genius*** is appropriate for high school students. Due to some sensitive content, teachers are encouraged to view it in its entirety before airing it in class. This program is useful for Art, Art History, English, and Culture courses. It meets the National Council for History Education requirements for (1) Civilization, cultural diffusion, and innovation, and (2) Patterns of social and political interaction.

**Vocabulary:**

Using the dictionary at [www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com), an Internet resource such as [www.history.com](http://www.history.com), or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

- Ascetic
- Austere
- Delirium
- Diligently
- Macabre
- Melancholy
- Nuance
- Pilgrimage
- Post-Impressionist
- Voracious

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What role do you think Van Gogh's upbringing played in his development as an artist? How do you think his relationship with his brother Theo affected his life and career?
2. As a young man Van Gogh wished to be a preacher and spent some time as a preacher in a mining town. How do you think these experiences influenced his art?
3. Why do you think Van Gogh decided to become a professional artist?
4. What people and places do you think had the most influence on Van Gogh in the early phases of his career? Do you think he realized his own talents?
5. Describe the artistic style known as Post-Impressionism, as expressed through the work of Van Gogh and Gauguin. What characteristics did it share with Impressionism? How did it diverge?
6. How do you think Van Gogh's move to France affected his art? Do you think he would have developed the same style if he had never moved to France?
7. How do questions of mental health affect our understanding of Van Gogh's life and art? Some art historians argue that however sick Van Gogh may have been, he was in complete control of his painting. Do you agree or disagree with this distinction? Explain.
8. How was art of the nineteenth century different from art of the eighteenth century or the twentieth century? How was Van Gogh's technique different from the other great painters of his era?
9. Van Gogh's work was not recognized as important until after he died. Why do you think he did not achieve acclaim in his lifetime? Do you think he wanted fame and fortune?
10. During his lifetime, Gauguin struggled to make a living from his paintings, and Van Gogh sold only one canvas while he was alive. Today, however, their works sell for millions of dollars. Why are some works of art worthless at one moment and highly valued later? How has the financial value of art in general changed over time?
11. How would you rank Van Gogh in terms of importance as an artist? Do you think he should be remembered as one of the world's top painters 100 years from now? Discuss.

**Extended Activities:**

1. Based on what you learned about Van Gogh and his techniques from viewing this documentary, create your own painting. Write a short one page essay describing this painting, how it represents Van Gogh's style, and which era in Van Gogh's career it represents. Teachers may want to set up a mock museum displaying these painting.

2. Van Gogh and Gauguin had a very close relationship, and they both created paintings which are considered some of the greatest works of the Post-Impressionist period. Using what you learned from this program as background knowledge, write a letter from one of these painters to the other describing their approach to painting or the process they used to create their works of art. Students may also want to write letters from the perspective of both of these artists in order to compare and contrast the ideas of the two.

3. Van Gogh is considered one of the world's most important artists, but during his lifetime he was not highly regarded. Imagine you were alive at the time of Van Gogh's death and discovered his paintings. Write a letter to a newspaper describing the paintings and why you think Van Gogh's work was worthy of attention.

4. Van Gogh and Gauguin are both considered significant members of the Post-Impressionist school of painting. Based on what you learned from watching this documentary and your own research online or at the library, write an encyclopedia entry about Post-Impressionism. These entries should be original and in your own language, and you should cite any sources you use to compile the information you include. Alternately, students can create a PowerPoint or poster-board presentation about Post-Impressionism.

### **Additional Resources**

#### **Websites**

Learn more about Van Gogh on Bio.com:

<http://www.biography.com/articles/Vincent-van-Gogh-9515695>

Representations of many Van Gogh paintings:

<http://www.vangoghgallery.com/>

The Van Gogh Museum:

<http://www3.vangoghmuseum.nl/>

A Van Gogh Bio from the BBC:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/van\\_gogh\\_vincent.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/van_gogh_vincent.shtml)

#### **Books**

Gauguin, Paul. *Noa Noa: The Tahiti Journal of Paul Gauguin*. Dover, 1995.

Muhlberger, Richard. *What Makes a Van Gogh a Van Gogh?*. Viking / Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993.

Parsons, Thomas and Iain Gale. *Post-Impressionism: The Rise of Modern Art*. Studio Editions, 1992.

Van Gogh, Vincent. *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*. Ed. Ronald de Leeuw. Penguin, 1998.