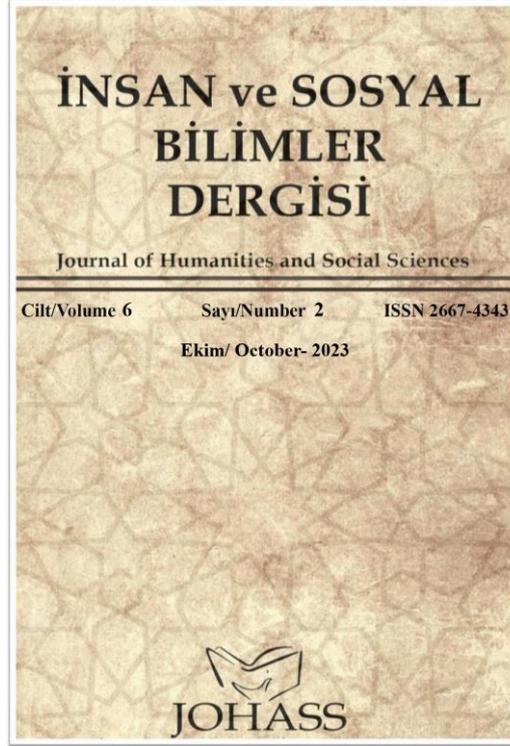


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**The Effect of Vincent Van Gogh's Psychopathology on His Works**

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## **The Effect of Vincent Van Gogh's Psychopathology on His Works**

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### **Abstract**

Vincent van Gogh, whose life was summed up in the phrase "Sorrow will last forever", opened the door to a new era and led his successors to question art in a process that evolved from the abstract to the concrete, from style to substance, from nationality to universality. The artist, who personally considered himself a failure, did not stop working, despite his increasing pathological disorders, and became a great beacon of hope for the painters who would be his successors. Many competing claims have been made about Vincent van Gogh's physical and mental health, but no consensus has yet been reached. After his death, in addition to the old diagnoses, discussions inspired by his writings and letters continued about depression, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, paranoid schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, sunstroke, self-harm, anxiety disorder, etc. Vincent van Gogh's rejection of Impressionist art, his refusal to submit to the artistic authority of the time, his disregard for academic rules and his declaration of his own manifesto on art in France, the cradle of art, are either an expression of the artist's spirit or a reflection of his pathological condition. In the context of many conflicting claims about Vincent van Gogh's physical and mental health, this study proposes an alternative interpretation of his work. It concludes that an interdisciplinary study of Vincent van Gogh's work is important for understanding him and making sense of his work.

**Keywords:** Vincent van Gogh, art, psychopathology, work of art

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## **Introduction**

Vincent van Gogh did not make any progress in painting until he was 27 years old, due to the difficult years he had lived through. The painter's life, as we know it today thanks to the letters he wrote to his brother Theo, was a life of searching, and until the age of 27, his search for a profession and his efforts to start a family continued throughout his life. Coming from an aristocratic and authoritarian family, Vincent van Gogh did not find what he was looking for at school and suffered from loneliness in boarding schools. In the later years of his life, Vincent van Gogh's inability to pursue the professions he wanted and the fact that he was being courted by women led him to a state of mind where he could no longer tolerate the life he led with his friend Gauguin.

Many conflicting claims have been made about Vincent van Gogh's physical and mental health, but no consensus has yet been reached. After his death, in addition to the earlier diagnoses, discussions inspired by his writings and letters continued about depression, bipolar disorder, hypomanic episodes, borderline personality disorder, paranoid schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, sunstroke, lead poisoning, Meniere's disease, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harm and anxiety disorder. Vincent van Gogh wrote the following in a letter to his brother Theo:

*"Work is going very well, I'm finding things that I've sought in vain for years, and feeling that I always think of those words of Delacroix that you know, that he found painting when he had neither breath nor teeth left. Ah well, I myself with the mental illness I have, I think of so many other artists suffering mentally, and I tell myself that this doesn't prevent one from practising the role of painter as if nothing had gone wrong (van Gogh, 1889/1996)."*

Vincent van Gogh's rejection of Impressionist art, his refusal to submit to the artistic authority of the time, his disregard for academic rules and his declaration of his own manifesto on art in France, the cradle of art, was either an expression of his artistic spirit or a reflection of his pathological state. There is still no clear answer to this question.

In the context of many conflicting claims about Vincent van Gogh's physical and mental health, this study proposes an alternative interpretation of his work. The conclusion of the study is that interdisciplinary research on van Gogh's artworks is important for understanding him and making sense of his work. In this interdisciplinary approach, I believe that it would be healthier to evaluate Vincent van Gogh's works from a multidimensional perspective as a result of collaborative research that brings together experts in the fields of

social psychology, psychiatry, child psychology and clinical psychology, experts in the field of art history and experts in the field of art therapy.

### **The Effect of Vincent Van Gogh's Psychopathology on His Works.**

Art, as a phenomenon that has existed in every period of human history, has continued its existence in close connection with man, society and human life; abstract and concrete, style and essence, nationality and universality, sensuality and intellectuality have evolved to the present day depending on the world view formed by the historical period and the conditions in which they are intertwined.

Today, art is a form of aesthetic expression in which imagination and creativity are blended, while the creative process, which is a component of art, involves intuition-based analysis, holistic perception of the cosmos, and a dissociated state of mind. When Plato defined the artist as "*a man to whom the gods have given a sacred madness*", he was explaining an ancient tradition that goes back thousands of years. From primitive art on cave walls to the priests who led the cult of faith in societies dominated by religious rituals, the first known artists were privileged individuals respected by society in a state of dissociation. In a subjective sense, this involved the creative individual's transition to another reality, his or her detachment from reality, and the visualisation of unconscious thoughts and processes.

Rollo May, while defining the creative person, stated that creative people do not submit to mediocrity and authority and therefore they prefer not to interfere with society. He also said, "*These artists are the bearers of the ongoing defiance of humankind. They like to sink into chaos, just as God created form out of chaos in creation* (May, 1988)." He also used the expression. When R. May's discourse on creativity is analyzed, it is possible to see many signs of the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh. Likewise, Nancy Andreasen, in her interviews with people engaged in creative activities, has obtained the information that the time of creativity is outside the earthly reality. "Recent, more systematic biographical research suggests that the higher incidence of mental disorders in creative people may not be a coincidence (Soygür, 1999)."

According to N. Andreasen, "*Creative people are as prone to dissociative states and concentration as they are to non-participatory, cold-blooded observation*(Andreasen, 2013)." In the same way, it is possible to see this ability to observe in the work of Vincent van Gogh. Creative artists like Vincent van Gogh have a much higher fear quotient than other people. A.M. Ludwig found that suicide attempts, psychosis, substance abuse and mental disorders

are two to three times higher in the group of artists than in people engaged in creative activities and other professions (Ludwig, 1992).

*"Every creative individual is a duality, or a synthesis of contradictory qualities."* (Jung, 2017, p.135). Therefore, artists like Vincent van Gogh are a synthesis of a human being with a subjective life on the one hand and a dissociated state of mind, intuitive analysis and holistic perception of the cosmos in a creative process on the other.

From the beginning of his artistic career, Vincent had a desire to study and a passion for the use of colour. For him, colour was the primary symbol of emotional and spiritual expression. Vincent van Gogh expressed these symbolic colours in his works with his individualistic style, intuitive and subjective feeling, and these methods and practices became the defining elements of many modern art movements from Impressionism to Expressionism. Personally, the artist considered himself a failure, and despite his increasing pathological disorders, he did not stop working, thus providing a beacon of hope for the painters who would follow him, especially the Expressionists.

In 1879, Vincent van Gogh "returned to his parents' home after being expelled from Borivage, a mining town in Belgium, and began to paint flowers as an amateur (Turani,1997)" For a long time Vincent van Gogh was torn between religion and art. Impressed by Millet's art<sup>1</sup> and its social content, Vincent decided to become a painter and befriended the painter Ridden van Rappard in Brussels, from whom he took lessons in perspective and anatomy.

Vincent met Sien Hoornik (Clasina Maria Hoornik), a sex worker on the streets of The Hague, and painted some of her nudes. He named Sien Hoornik's most important drawing 'Verdriet' (Sorrow). After living with Hoornik for twenty months, the artist returned to the Netherlands when she fired him. He told his father that he wanted to be a painter and, despite his father's objections, decided at the age of twenty-seven that it was best to devote his life to painting and passionately resumed his studies.

Through his brother Théo, Vincent van Gogh became acquainted with the Impressionist painters in Paris. In the later years of his artistic endeavours, Vincent seems to have absorbed the pointillist teachings of both Impressionism and Seurat and reflected them in his work. Vincent van Gogh used pure colours, especially yellow and blue, with flat brush

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<sup>1</sup> *François Millet, who wanted to follow Constable's teaching and look at nature with new eyes, decided to extend this understanding by moving from landscapes to figures. He wanted to faithfully reproduce scenes from village life and paint men and women working in the fields. In the painting 'Women Picking Spikes', instead of an idealised rural landscape, he did his best to emphasise the slow and painstaking work of peasant women, their strong bodies and determined behaviour.*

strokes, dotted strokes and thick layers on the canvas, and this technique, which he preferred, reached a very different dimension from what the Impressionist artists wanted to do because of the pathological elements he experienced, without ignoring his talent. Van Gogh used every brushstroke he applied to his canvas not only to mix colours, but also to express his own enthusiasm. His brushstrokes also give us some clues about his state of mind. His works reflect his state of mind and the excitement in his head: "*I paint in my dreams and then I paint my dream*". He said that he was not much interested in the exact representation of reality, using colours and styles, through his dreams or creativity, he transferred what he felt and what he wanted others to feel into his works. "He did not care much about what is called 'three-dimensional reality', the representation of nature like a photograph" (Gombrich, 2002). Vincent van Gogh, who did not hesitate to exaggerate and even change the appearance of objects, abandoned the goal of "imitating nature" in painting and did not hesitate to metaphorise some forms to achieve his goal. Freud, who described art as "*the symbolism of a repressed sense of satisfaction*", emphasised that this symbolism is not specific to dreams but is typical of unconscious thought.

Vincent van Gogh had a passionate and exciting temperament that surprised his contemporaries and successors. Above all, he believed in his art and the path he had chosen. On the other hand, he was a character who was ostracised by the society in which he lived and failed in social relationships. Vincent van Gogh is one of the few people who have reached the stage of self-actualisation, the fifth level of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (the most extreme point of the pyramid), by attaining virtue and creativity, but for him the area between the physiological needs and the need for esteem is a huge void and an enigma. It is possible to see this sense of emptiness in some of his works. In this context, we need to pay attention to the environment, the objects and the expressions on the faces of the figures in Vincent van Gogh's "*De aardappeleters*" (The Potato Eaters), which can be seen in Figure 1. This work does not depict a family of five gathered around a table under a lamp, eating potatoes and drinking coffee. Vincent van Gogh, who paints the figures in this work, consisting of two men and two women and a girl with her back turned, with great seriousness, transfers the family environment and the warmth of this family environment onto his canvas against the feelings of exclusion, loneliness and abandonment that he felt. The only portrait we do not see in this work is the girl with her back to us. Vincent van Gogh left the expression on this little girl's face to the viewer's imagination, hiding the only source of hope in this little girl's face despite her difficult life (E. & Newel, 2005).

**Figure 1**

*His' painting 82 x 114 cm, painted in Nuenen in 1885. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam*



His understanding of art and the fact that his works received much criticism was due to his disregard for academic rules and his use of dark colours. -At the time, such a painting was unacceptable- as in Figure 1. However, in this work, which depicts a group of people eating potatoes around a table in a very realistic way, the breaking of the known rules, the deformation of the figures and the free use of colour would later influence the Expressionists and their successors in contemporary and modern art. Van Gogh, who turned to vivid colours in the company of the Impressionist understanding, later broke away from this understanding and developed a new artistic technique. The colours in the works of the artist, who struggled with his new understanding of art in the later years of his life, lost their intensity and his lines became harsh and pessimistic, reflecting his restlessness. Vincent van Gogh began to apply thicker and more violent layers of paint to his canvases, depicting swirling suns, twisted cypresses and swelling mountains. On the other hand, as his illness worsened and he was admitted to the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum, Vincent van Gogh began to use bright, vivid colours in his most famous work, *The Starry Night*, and in other works (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*His' 1889 Oil Painting Measuring 73.7 Cm×92.1 Cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York City*



Vincent van Gogh's life-altering illness(s) were both the creator of his masterpieces and the murderer who turned his life upside down. Van Gogh's self-portrait of himself after the incident of cutting off his ear is a summary of this painful process, and the bandaged self-portrait of his severed right ear under his dark green beret appears as an expression of the mental and physical change that had taken place in him. With this self-portrait (*Zelfportret met verbonden oor*), Vincent van Gogh wanted to share and confront himself with the traumatic event he had experienced. In this self-portrait, with its dramatic use of colour, contrast, harmony and composition, we see a man trying to recover in spite of everything. This work depicts the artist's life between the deep predicaments of his spiritual world and the dilemma of the real world. “After this incident, we see the painter in a mental hospital. Despite his temporal epilepsy and the resulting psychosis, Van Gogh continued to work with ambition (Aktay, 2009)”

Meissner (1993) hypothesised that Vincent van Gogh's self-portraits are seen as repeated and unresolved efforts at self-discovery and self-definition, aimed at giving a sense of continuity and integrity to a fragile and fragmented self-awareness.

Realising that he could not risk living alone, Vincent, with the support of his brother Théo, voluntarily entered the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole lunatic asylum in Saint-Rémy in May

1889. Here he continued to paint the landscapes he saw and depicted, first from the window of his room and then in the open air. In the later stages of his illness, the feeling of nature dancing with fluctuations began to dominate his work. He used short, thick brushstrokes side by side, one on top of the other. During his hospitalisation, the artist began to use brush strokes, spatula marks, paint tube marks -sometimes finger marks- and curved lines in his works, and these paintings became an indicator of his mental variability.

Van Gogh searched for something that reflected his personality in the iris flower<sup>1</sup> painting he did in this hospital a year before his death, and he drew a single white iris flower in the middle of the purple iris flowers, making a reference to his loneliness with the expression "In the middle of all the purple flowers, a white iris remains, the symbol of the lonely painter". As far as the Post-Impressionist period is concerned, the painting 'Starry Night' occupies a privileged place among Vincent van Gogh's works. Painted at dawn in June 1889 in the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole lunatic asylum, it is Vincent van Gogh's unique interpretation of the city of Saint-Remy-de-Provence as seen from his room. Although there were iron bars on the window of the artist's room, Vincent did not reflect them in his painting. For this reason, it is possible to interpret that he was reflecting his longing for freedom in his painting. Furthermore, although the houses and the church of the town of Saint-Remy-de-Provence were not visible from the window he was looking out of, he used his imagination and creativity to depict them in this painting. In this painting, which is dominated by blue and yellow tones, there is a cypress tree<sup>2</sup> in dark brown and dark green tones, and Vincent van Gogh's reflection of the cypress tree in his painting is an expression of his pain, restlessness, eternal loneliness and melancholic state. This tree is a symbol that connects heaven and earth in Greek mythology, and while this symbol embodies sadness and death, artists such as Vincent van Gogh were able to reflect their own thoughts about death in their works. For this reason, the painting 'De sterrennacht' (The Starry Night) is a representation of Vincent van Gogh's ongoing preoccupation with death and the afterlife through his religious beliefs<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *The iris flower symbolises wisdom, optimism and trust in Dutch culture. It also means 'friendship with you means a lot to me'. (Symbolic meaning of flowers, plants, trees. (2022, 01 07). De groene kruidhof: Retrieved from <https://www.degroenekruidhof.nl/symbolische-betekenis-van-bloemen-en-planten-bomen-en-vruchten>), whereas many western painters reflected the iris flower in their paintings to symbolise death.*

<sup>2</sup> *The cypress tree symbolises death and mourning in the West and endurance and immortality in the East. In Greek mythology, the cypress tree is identified with Kyparissos: Kyparissos accidentally shoots a deer sleeping on the grass while shooting a spear one day, and the deer dies on the spot. Kyparissos regrets what he has done and is so sad that he dies of sadness. The gods turn him into a cypress known as the "tree of sorrow"*

<sup>3</sup> *Noting that Vincent van Gogh's father, Theodorus van Gogh, was a priest of the Dutch Reformed Church and his uncle was an important theologian and biblical commentator in the same church, researchers suggest that the famous painter was influenced by the religious atmosphere around his family during his childhood and youth.*

Vincent's preference for the colour 'yellow Vincent van Gogh's predilection for the colour yellow in his works has attracted the attention of many researchers, most notably Paul Wolf. In the last years of his life, Vincent van Gogh's paintings were characterised by halos and yellow, and critics attributed his obsessive passion for colour to a variety of causes, including chronic sun damage, glaucoma and cataracts.

After moving to Arles, the artist developed an obsessive weakness for the colour yellow and used it extensively in many of his works, notably 'Yellow House' and 'Sunflowers'. In 2001, Wolf suggested in a study that the artist's fondness for the colour yellow was due to the use of foxglove (*digitalis*) in the treatment of epilepsy. It is true that Vincent van Gogh was given large quantities of foxglove for therapeutic purposes, but the treatment began after his illness. However, Vincent van Gogh used yellow in his paintings in all shades and in much greater quantities than other colours before he started taking medication.

Dr Michael Marmor and Dr James Ravin have claimed that Van Gogh painted 'Night Coffee' and 'Starry Night' under the influence of glaucoma, or intraocular pressure (Marmor, Michael. J.G, Ravin. 2009). Their argument is based on the swelling of the cornea in glaucoma and the appearance of circles of light similar to the halos seen around the moon. Similar halos can be seen in the paintings entitled 'Night Coffee' and 'Starry Night'. There are also many arguments in Van Gogh's letters about light emanating from a source and the divinity of light.

The repetitive harmonious brushstrokes in the form of moiré mentioned by Drs. Ravin and Marmor and the linking of objects with these repetitive brushstrokes is a technique used by Vincent Van Gogh in his last period. Marmor and Ravin's hypothesis is far from understanding Vincent Van Gogh's state of mind, the meaning he attached to art and his inner world. Therefore, it would not be the right approach to reduce a technique unique to Vincent Van Gogh to an optical illusion.

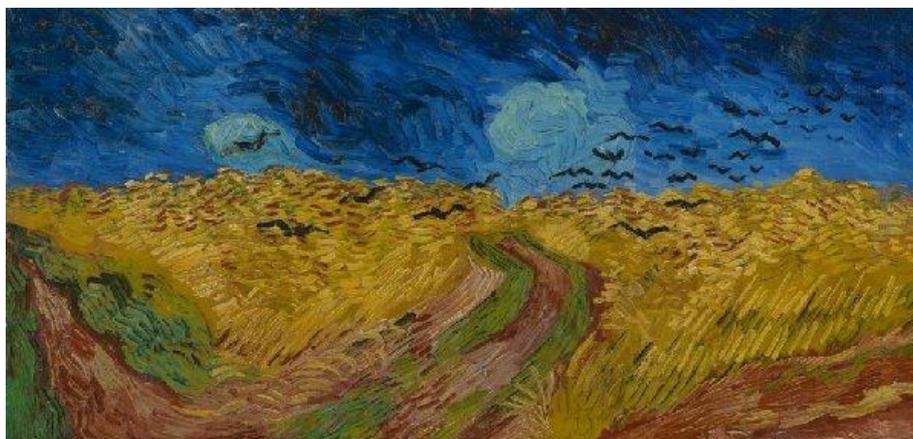
Another hypothesis is that Van Gogh used the colour yellow intensively because he was a wormwood (absinthe) drinker. According to the biochemist Dr Arnold, who claims that Vincent van Gogh suffered from wormwood-induced toxic brain poisoning, one of the side effects of drinking absinthe was that it caused jaundice in his eyesight. These and many other hypotheses are not sufficient to explain why van Gogh was obsessed with the colour yellow, and "there is no single answer to his obsession with the colour yellow (Shelly, 2021)."

Van Gogh's art not only reflected his struggles, but also helped him to stave off the illness that overwhelmed him and led to his suicide. Vincent's suicidal gestures are depicted in

his last paintings, which show his loneliness and sadness in vast wheat fields under a dark and stormy sky. He painted his last work, 'Korenveld met kraaien' (Wheatfield and Crows), in July 1890. Vincent van Gogh, who used wheat fields as a theme in many of his works, did the same in his Wheat Field and Crows, painting the field and the paths with an intense use of yellow, where he found serenity and peace. While a path in the centre of the work divides to the left and right, it is unclear where these paths lead and what their purpose is. Some critics have suggested that this reflects the uncertainty of the artist's own life up to that point. It is unclear where the third road in the middle leads. Does it lead to a new horizon? Or does it lead to an inevitable end? Van Gogh left the answer to these questions to the viewer. It is also possible that this path represents the feeling of emptiness in Vincent van Gogh's heart. In the same work, the crows flying in the same direction, which have been the subject of debate for many years, have led to different interpretations of this work. For Vincent van Gogh, who was a keen observer of nature and passionate about all that it contains, these crows could also symbolise the freedom, peace and hope he sought (Figure 3). R. Pickvance writes, *Crows Over the Wheat Field* has attracted a great deal of critical commentary. Interpretations of its symbolism and meaning have varied enormously. It has been interpreted as Christian iconography, from Crucifixion to Last Judgment; as an image of cosmic chaos projected through van Gogh's inner torment; as a psychic graph of his imminent suicide. Many of these interpretations are linked to the assumption that it was van Gogh's last painting (Pickvance, 1986: 274-276).

**Figure 3**

*"Wheat Field with Crows", 50.5x103cm, Auver-sur-Oise, June 1890, Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam*



## **Discussion and Results**

The phenomenon of art, which has existed in every period of human history, opened the door to a new era in Vincent van Gogh's time and allowed his successors to question art in a process that evolved from the abstract to the concrete, from style to substance, from nationality to universality. His rejection of the Impressionist understanding of art, his refusal to submit to the artistic authority of the time, his disregard for academic rules and his declaration of his own manifesto on art in France, the cradle of art, are either an expression of his artistic spirit or a reflection of his pathological condition. There is still no clear answer to this question. The works and the life of Vincent van Gogh, who, in the face of the feelings of exclusion, loneliness and abandonment he felt, transferred the family environment and the warmth of this family environment to his canvases, using the colour yellow carefully, are still being discussed in the sciences of art psychology, psychiatry, psychology and so on. If the illness or illnesses that ruined his life lie behind his works, it is possible to think that these pathological elements were both the creator of his masterpieces and an assassin who turned his life upside down.

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