

*Madness, Genius, and the Œuvre:
Unlikely Connections Between Vincent Van Gogh and Surrealism*

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Introduction

The French philosopher and intellectual Georges Bataille wrote in 1937 that “Vincent Van Gogh belongs not to art history, but to the bloody myth of our existence as humans.”¹ This striking statement exemplifies one of the many characterizations Van Gogh has accrued since his premature death in 1890. Today, humanity identifies him as a singular figure in the art historical canon; he lived a life of challenges, both social and psychological, and his life ended in tragedy. While he was hardly recognized for his talent when alive, today he is one of the world's most beloved artists; there have been hundreds of exhibitions worldwide dedicated to him, numerous books written about various facets of his life, and a substantial number of films focused either solely on him or inspired by his art. In fact, a quick Google search of “most famous artists” returns the results of Van Gogh alongside other artists including Pablo Picasso, Leonardo da Vinci, and Rembrandt, among others. There is much art historical scholarship dedicated to Van Gogh, yet there remain ample arenas for research relating to him. This paper positions itself in an arena not yet pursued: a connection between the Dutch painter from late 19th century and the Surrealist movement of the early 20th century vis-à-vis the question of “madness”² in art and the formal painting techniques and physical themes investigated by several artists. Theories by the poet and playwright Antonin Artaud also guide the introductory questions of art and madness and the fascination with Van Gogh. There arise two differing but complementary avenues this paper will explore: (I) the ways in which both madness and Surrealism were understood as radical manifestations of

¹ Georges Bataille and Annette Michelson, “Van Gogh as Prometheus,” *October* 36 (Spring, 1986): 60.

² While by today's standards, madness is not an appropriate designation, I use it here because of the historical connotations – “madness” was used in many of the sources I consult.

experience and (II) the formal³, thematic and methodological parallels between Van Gogh and surrealist artists, particularly Salvador Dalí.

Artaud was himself a multi-faceted figure of the avant-garde – an early participant in Surrealism,⁴ he is well-known for his collection of essays on the theater titled *The Theater and Its Double*, which includes his manifesto for *The Theater of Cruelty*, as well as for his roles in films including *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Artaud also suffered from psychological afflictions and spent almost a decade in the later years of his life in psychiatric hospitals throughout France. After being released from a hospital in Rodez in 1946, he wrote a small book dedicated to Van Gogh titled *Van Gogh: Le suicidé de la société* (Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society) in 1947; this coincided with an exhibition at the Musée de l'Orangerie of Van Gogh's paintings. In this short publication, he vehemently argues in defense of Van Gogh's madness as related to his artistic genius, the conformity of institutions, and the nature of suicide (among other things). He stands in isolation at that point in time in terms of what he argued and how he did so; despite the growing interest in Van Gogh, cultural thinking of the era did not delve into the type of critique that Artaud makes in the book.

After Artaud had been expelled from the surrealists, some of the prominent figures of the movement including André Breton, Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí, as well as other contemporary artists such as Jean Dubuffet and Paul Klee, turned to the art of the mentally ill in pursuit of intangible qualities that would reinvigorate their own artistic practices.⁵ Some surrealists such as Joan Miró and André Masson did reference Van Gogh's work explicitly, both producing works that took Van Gogh's series of shoes as their example (figures 1-3);⁶

³ The formal aspects, while similar to Van Gogh, may likely have been as a result of the number of modern painters from which Dalí and other burgeoning Surrealists could have looked to. I will discuss this later in the paper.

⁴ As André Breton became increasingly political, Artaud was eventually kicked out of the Surrealist group due to his nonpartisanship and interest and commitment to the theater, which Breton viewed as too bourgeois.

⁵ Each artist approached the work of psychiatric patients differently, therefore focusing on specific techniques to employ in their own works. This will be addressed later in the paper.

⁶ Miró returned to the still life form while in exile in Paris. His anguish towards the political situation in his native Spain at the time is evidenced in his *Still Life with Old Shoe*. "Joan Miró: *Still Life with Old Shoe*," Museum of Modern Art, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80555>.

however, these two artists did not consider his madness in this pursuit. Moreover, there are a number of parallels between other artists and Van Gogh. For example, Dalí and Van Gogh both were born the second child to their respective parents, after the deaths of infant older brothers of the same names; naturally, left a lasting impression on both artists throughout their lives and artistic careers.⁷ Furthermore, despite the apparent absence of formal similarities between Van Gogh and surrealist artists, there are latent thematic interests as well as methodologies employed that are reminiscent of Van Gogh; however, the methodologies employed in the art making process are distinct from the formal aspects of Van Gogh's paintings. It is necessary to ask then why the surrealists did not explicitly cite Van Gogh in their pursuit of renewed aesthetic expression, as it related to the question of the relationship between art and madness.

Van Gogh's "Madness"

Before one can begin to consider how surrealist artists utilized psychiatric patients' artworks in their own, madness as a concept and Van Gogh's relationship with it must be outlined. In the late 19th century, the term madness encompassed a number of disorders that could be both mental and physical; Van Gogh himself refers to his own condition as an "illness,"⁸ that afflicted him – mental disturbances revealed through physical actions.⁹ Borrowing Artaud's conception of the madman, one suffering from madness is often silenced by a society that does not wish to hear the unbearable truths the madman would speak.¹⁰ The most infamous instance of Van Gogh's madness happened in the last days of 1888, when Van Gogh cut off his ear (or more accurately his left earlobe). There is still debate over why

⁷ Dalí is often more explicit in his dialogue with his deceased brother in his paintings than Van Gogh is though.

⁸ Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Theo Van Gogh, Arles, April 21, 1889, accessed at <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let760/letter.html>.

⁹ For the purposes of this paper, madness and mental illness connote the same idea, as the artists mentioned would have conceived of those suffering from mental illness to be mad.

¹⁰ Antonin Artaud, "Van Gogh: The Suicide Provoked by Society," *Horizon*, trans. Peter Watson, January 1948, 46.

exactly he did this; the most popular thought is that he and his friend, fellow painter Paul Gauguin, got into an argument relating to a prostitute named Rachel. A local newspaper in Arles reported that he told Rachel to "*gardez cet objet précieusement*," (preciously guard this object) after he sent the cut off earlobe to her.¹¹ In the report, it also referred to the painter as "*un pauvre aliéné*," (a poor insane person).¹² In his own life as well as today, this event not only caused Van Gogh to be thought of as mad but also became emblematic of him.¹³ Following this, he voluntarily agreed to be interned at the psychiatric hospital of Saint-Rémy. Scholars throughout the 20th and 21st centuries have noted this period of time was incredibly productive artistically for him. His doctors allowed him to paint (under supervision) as part of his treatment, and he completed around 140 canvases during his year-long stay. During this period, he completed such famous works as *The Starry Night*, *A Wheatfield with Cypresses*, and *Irises* (figures 4, 5, 6), as well as recreated paintings by some of his favorite French Realist artists such as Jean-François Millet and Gustave Courbet. One example of such is his reinterpretation of Millet's *The Sheepshearer* (figures 7, 8).

Millet in particular is of importance, as Van Gogh had valued him as a painter from as early as 1880, when he was first beginning to pursue an artistic career: "Millet... is that essential modern painter who opened the horizon to many."¹⁴ He was quite taken with the subject matter of Millet's paintings and utilized the agricultural landscapes, peasants and farm workers to practice figural drawing; as his own artistic style matured, Van Gogh's paintings became formally and thematically less like Millet's. However, while at Saint-Rémy, Van Gogh returned to Millet's œuvre, translating into color the black and white prints available to him at the hospital:

¹¹ "Chronique locale," *Le Forum Républicain* (Arles), December 30, 1888.

¹² "Chronique locale."

¹³ See Blandine Joret's reference to David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* as well as other films. Blandine Joret, "Film and the Other Arts," in *Studying Film with André Bazin* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 123.

¹⁴ Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Theo Van Gogh, Neunen, February 3, 1884, accessed at <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let428/letter.html>.

I place the black-and-white by [Eugène] Delacroix or Millet...in front of me as a subject. And then I improvise color on it but, being me, not completely of course, but seeking memories of their paintings – but the memory, the vague consonance of colors that are in the same sentiment, if not right – that’s my own interpretation.¹⁵

The modern interest in Millet is not limited to Van Gogh, as a joint exhibition between the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, and St. Louis Art Museum recently demonstrated; Salvador Dalí, too, was taken with Millet, specifically his painting *The Angelus* (figure 9) after seeing a chromolithograph of it in his childhood home. However, Dalí interpreted Millet quite differently from Van Gogh. Therefore, while it was well-documented and known that Van Gogh spent time in a psychiatric hospital, and there were shared artistic interests between him and Dalí, artists who were interested in the question of how madness may affect artistic production in the 20th century did not cite Van Gogh explicitly, instead turning to research on and analysis of contemporary psychiatric patients.

The Prinzhorn Collection

Critical to understanding the academic relationship between art and madness is the book written by Hans Prinzhorn in 1922, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*. Prinzhorn, a German art historian and psychiatrist, presented ten schizophrenic patients and their artworks in the book, referring to them as “masters.” Prinzhorn did not want to be “only diagnostic in his interpretation,” but he also did not “seek to be only aesthetic...caution[ing] against any simple equations of the ‘pictures’ with art.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, he identified six drives of the patients within their works: (I) The need to play; (II) the need to express; (III) ornamental

¹⁵ This quote highlights Van Gogh’s artistic project, creating compositions based on reality or realist artworks but relying emphatically on his own emotional interpretation as well. Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Theo Van Gogh, Saint-Rémy, September 20, 1889, accessed at <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let805/letter.html>.

¹⁶ Hal Foster, “Blinded Insights,” in *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2004), 196.

elaboration; (IV) patterned order; (V) obsessive copying and; (VI) symbolic systems.¹⁷ Prinzhorn subsequently held many of the works in a collection, which he did not exhibit publically during his life; the book, however, included fully-colored reproductions of the artworks, a practice which had scarcely been done before in art publishing. Given that *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* was written in German, and was not translated into French until some decades later, many artists viewing the book most likely would not have been able to read Prinzhorn's texts, only viewing the artworks included.¹⁸

One of Prinzhorn's ten masters was Franz Pohl, a man who had worked as a locksmith, draftsman and instructor of "industrial arts" prior to his hospitalization when he suffered from schizophrenia.¹⁹ Prinzhorn frequently introduces Van Gogh as a canonical comparison to Pohl (in terms of aesthetic style and self-portrait subject matter): "We are forced to think of van Gogh's late self-portrait, the only other picture in which we meet a man looking out at us with such burning tension, whose view of life seems to be so inconsolably destroyed at the same time."²⁰ Moreover, Prinzhorn interprets the way in which Pohl drew, the "expressive movement" of it, as revealing of his illness; "We experience the alienated psychic state of its author directly and visually...Such an eerie impact is achieved notably and primarily by the works of trained artists who became schizophrenic."²¹ He goes on to say that Pohl's work even reminds one of Van Gogh's last paintings before his suicide.²² Prinzhorn cites Van Gogh as an example of artistic ability to bolster his hypothesis about schizophrenic art production,²³ specifically stating that "Van Gogh's productive potency increased during his

¹⁷ Hal Foster, 197.

¹⁸ Thomas Röske, "Inspiration and Unreachable Paradigm – *L'art des fous* and Surrealism," in *Surrealism and Madness*, ed. Thomas Röske and Ingrid von Beyme (Verlag Das Wunderhorn, 2009), 10.

¹⁹ Hans Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, trans. Eric von Brockdorff (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 1972), 218.

²⁰ Hans Prinzhorn, 225.

²¹ Hans Prinzhorn, 264.

²² Hans Prinzhorn, 265.

²³ It should be noted that Prinzhorn traveled to Saint-Rémy in 1930 and subsequently wrote an article in which he does not specifically claim to diagnose Van Gogh as schizophrenic. He wrote that "the case of Vincent Van Gogh forces us to revise

illness and raised his work to previously unattainable standards."²⁴ This assertion, at once both objective and subjective, lends itself to scrutiny today, as it establishes a mode of thinking that designates people suffering from mental illness as inherently able to produce high-quality art (because of their illness). While Van Gogh's artistic output during his time at the psychiatric hospital in Saint-Rémy certainly was abundant, whether or not the paintings were of vastly higher quality is difficult to say definitively. Prinzhorn also set an example in (falsely) equating a mental illness with the increased quality of artworks for future artists and scholars alike. Those making art who suffered from mental illness, but were, at the time, thought of as mad, were revered but from a point of Otherness; that is, the irrationality of their madness made their art of interest to the surrealists but also prevented their artworks from canonization. This intrigue is evident through the sales of the first edition of *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, in which the first 1,500 books printed sold out quickly, prompting a second edition to appear in 1923.²⁵ The success of the book as an illustrative work is unmistakable, emphasizing the impact Prinzhorn's research and subsequent collection had on modern European artists in the early 20th century.

The Surrealists Meet Prinzhorn

As has been briefly stated earlier, some of the artists associated with the Surrealist movement became quite infatuated with both the possibilities of art through the assistance of madness and the art of psychiatric patients, following the thought that their artworks inherently contained some "individual, moral achievement," as well as a break from reality.²⁶ The leader of the Surrealist movement, André Breton, wrote a semi-autobiographical book

our traditional ideas about the old problem of genius and madness." Hans Prinzhorn, "Genius and Madness," *Parnassus* 2, no. 1 (January 1930): 20.

²⁴ Hans Prinzhorn, 267.

²⁵ Thomas Röske, 10.

²⁶ Peter Bürger, "The Lure of Madness: On the Problem of a 'Surrealist Aesthetic,'" in *Surrealism and Madness*, ed. Thomas Röske and Ingrid von Beyme (Verlag Das Wunderhorn, 2009), 30.

called *Nadja* in 1928 detailing his relationship with an eponymously-named woman, who is later revealed to be mad. Breton's fascination with Nadja, as well as his 1937 book *L'Amour fou* (*Mad Love*) demonstrates the surrealists' obsession with how madness affected people, relationships and art. Breton, having seen firsthand the tragedies of war during his service in a World War I hospital, believed that if rationality had allowed war, violence and destruction to rampage Europe, it was the irrationality of the madmen and women that could escape that.²⁷ Moreover, many of "the Surrealists saw the inmates of psychiatric institutions not as mentally ill, but as victims of the 'social dictatorship.'"²⁸ Interestingly, this is actually similar to how Artaud will go on to define a madman in *Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society*. "*c'est un homme qui a préféré devenir fou, dans le sens où socialement on l'entend, que de forfaire à une certaine idée supérieure de l'honneur humain,*" (a man who preferred to become mad, in the socially understood sense, then to forfeit a certain superior idea of human honor).²⁹ Van Gogh also held this opinion of himself and his madness, writing in a letter "I would prefer my madness to other people's wisdom."³⁰ This understanding of madness is also in line with how contemporary authors and poets conceptualized it – different from clinical insanity and made to be displaced from society.³¹ However, the position of the surrealists is quite different from how Artaud argues for the madman, and specifically Van Gogh. "For the Surrealists, it [madness] contains a promise of freedom and spontaneity."³² However, artists interpreted this freedom differently and thus produced works that are formally vastly different from one another.

²⁷ Peter Bürger, 30.

²⁸ Peter Bürger, 28.

²⁹ Antonin Artaud, "Van Gogh: Le Suicidé de la Société," originally from 1947, in *Antonin Artaud Œuvres* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2004), 1441.

³⁰ Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, Arles, July 30, 1888, accessed at <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let651/letter.html>.

³¹ William Robinson, "The Artist Versus the Legend: Repetitions and Madness," in *Van Gogh Repetitions* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 10-11.

³² Peter Bürger, 30. For Van Gogh, and most likely Artaud as well, this was not the case. In fact, Artaud argues that Van Gogh was very rational in his art. Rational in the sense that he was *intentional* in what he painted and the aesthetic manner in which he did. I will go into further explanation later in the paper.

The art historian Hal Foster highlights three artists that engage with Prinzhorn's collection explicitly: (I) Max Ernst; (II) Paul Klee and; (III) Jean Dubuffet.³³ He goes on to suggest that Ernst was compelled by hallucinations, Klee viewed art as making visible the invisible and Dubuffet was interested in transgression – against institutions and against standard notions of beauty; Dubuffet declared in 1951 that he advocated for “instinct, passion, mood, violence, madness,” in art.³⁴ Foster notes that in the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937, the Nazis tried to link the expressionism in works by such artists as Ernst and Klee to mental illness, precisely through the comparison to works in the Prinzhorn Collection.³⁵ Peter Bürger, also an art historian, highlights a fourth surrealist, Dalí, who was interested in aesthetic questions related to afflictions of the psyche; however, Dalí was not concerned with Prinzhorn or his specific collection. Dalí used what he termed the paranoiac-critical method as he sought “in art the neurotic, the pathological, the delirious: his own art, however, remain[ed] highly rational.”³⁶ The paranoiac-critical method may be defined as the: “spontaneous method of ‘irrational knowledge’ based on the critical and systematic objectification of delirious associations and interpretations.”³⁷ Therefore, the paranoiac-critical method is less about the pathology of paranoia and more about the ability to see and organize multiple perspectives. Where many of the surrealists were focused on the unconscious and how it could be manifested into art, Dalí turned his attention to hyper-conscious and hyper-real methods. “Dalí’s basic aim, then, is to ‘systematize confusion,’ that

³³ While Klee and Dubuffet were not technically members of the Surrealist group, they worked at the same time as Surrealist artists and followed some similar lines of thinking. They are also critical to mention for this paper as they all directly referenced Prinzhorn's collection.

³⁴ Jean Dubuffet, “Anticultural Positions,” originally from December 20, 1951, in *Jean Dubuffet: “Anticultural Positions,”* (New York: Rizzoli, 2016), 29.

³⁵ Hal Foster, 196.

³⁶ Peter Bürger, 42.

³⁷ André Breton, “What is Surrealism?” originally from 1934 speech, School of Arts and Sciences, University of Pennsylvania, accessed June 17, 2020, https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~jenglish/Courses/Spring02/104/Breton_WhatSurrealism.html.

is to say, create a new order or system from elements taken in the external world which otherwise would be unrelated to one another, and thereby subvert the world of reality."³⁸

Herein lies an important distinction between the surrealists and the psychiatric patients they looked to: they consciously employed methodologies that have roots in questions of psychic misbalance without departing into madness themselves. In the book *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*, Dalí wrote:

Van Gogh was mad, and unconditionally, generously and gratuitously cut off his left ear with the blade of a razor. I am not mad either, yet I would be perfectly capable of allowing my left hand to be cut off, but this under the most interesting circumstances imaginable: on condition, namely, that I might for ten minutes be able to observe Vermeer of Delft seated before his easel as he was painting.³⁹

Through this statement, Dalí underscores the surrealists' position that not only were they themselves sane, but that through the actions of madness could artists attain some painterly quality of the likes of a venerable artist such as Vermeer. Bataille suggests in an essay that mutilation – particularly automutilation – can be understood as a modern-day sacrifice, in both a secular and religious sense. While the madman or woman might commit the actual automutilation, Bataille contends that "the meaning of the word...is still as closely linked as possible to the notion of a *spirit of sacrifice*."⁴⁰ It is this *spirit of sacrifice* that the surrealists hoped to tap into through their consideration of art produced by psychiatric patients; they embraced the absurdity of automutilation without committing the terrible act itself, just as they employed the madman's methodologies without become mad themselves.

³⁸ Salvador Dalí, qtd. by André Breton.

³⁹ Salvador Dalí, *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*, trans. Haakon M. Chevalier (New York: The Dial Press, 1948), 13.

⁴⁰ Georges Bataille, "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 67. Original emphasis.

Missed Connections

As has been alluded to, there are some formal similarities shared between Van Gogh and several of the surrealist artists, which can be seen more clearly in works made prior to their Surrealist ones. For example, some very early paintings by Dalí such as *Port of Cadaqués (Night)* and *Hort del Llané, Cadaqués* (figures 10, 11) actually are quite reminiscent of Van Gogh's painting style (e.g. colorful, thick brushstrokes, the depiction of landscapes, see figures 5 and 6). By the early 20th century, Van Gogh's paintings were beginning to be shown in galleries in Paris, included in exhibitions in Germany and collected by museums throughout Europe and in New York City; it is during these first decades of the 20th century that avant-garde artists may have discovered Van Gogh's work and been inspired by it. The formal similarities, in terms of impasto brushwork and non-local color selection, may be seen more plainly in such movements as German Expressionism and by artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, as they felt Van Gogh's emotional engagement with color offered an entirely new approach to art making away from a "restrictive reliance on perception alone, typical of both Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism,"⁴¹ (figures 12, 13). Mature surrealist works may seem less formally similar to Van Gogh, due to a reaction against such distinctly expressionist movements, yet the insistence upon using more than just visual perception is crucial.

Therefore, what is even more apparent upon closer examination of Van Gogh's œuvre and many of the surrealists' works is that thematic subjects are similar; it is not necessarily the painting style that is alike so much as the choice in what to paint and how to paint it. Reality was the starting point for both Van Gogh and surrealist artists, and they all took what they saw and knew to be real and used different techniques to move beyond nature itself, e.g. Dalí's paranoiac-critical method, Dubuffet's transgressive art brut, Van Gogh's re-collecting

⁴¹ Timothy O. Benson, "Expressionism in Germany and France: From Van Gogh to Kandinsky," *Unframed*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, June 5, 2014, <https://unframed.lacma.org/2014/06/05/expressionism-in-germany-and-france-from-van-gogh-to-kandinsky>.

nature. The concept of “re-collection,” may be understood as “the attempt to account for Van Gogh’s expressive brushstrokes and colors; it is the collection of emotions layered with the collection of subject matter.”⁴² If the surrealists start with the accepted reality, like Van Gogh, they then use parts of their psyche (the subconscious or the unconscious mind) to move past it to an “absolute reality” that combines both the dreaming and waking world – to a *surreality*.⁴³ As Breton wrote, “surreality will reside in reality itself and will be neither superior nor exterior to it;”⁴⁴ that is to say that for the surrealists, they worked within a sort of constructed reality that was individual to them and their unconscious but very much still dealt with the accepted reality at hand. Van Gogh likewise begins with the accepted reality but instead of turning to the unconscious mind, imparts his emotions onto the canvas in conjunction with the experiential reality he paints. In fact, Breton wrote about him that “à l’encontre des impressionnistes, Van Gogh ne se soucie plus de couleurs justes mais entend que ces couleurs expriment à la fois le paysage et l’état d’âme de l’artiste devant lui,”⁴⁵ (to the contradiction of the Impressionists, Van Gogh no longer cares about accurate colors but means for those colors to express at once the landscape and the condition of the soul of the artist before him). “Even though he altered or invented certain elements for compositional or expressive ends, other aspects of [the] canvases accurately reflect recognizable attributes,” of surrounding landscapes, exemplifying Van Gogh’s re-collective practice.⁴⁶ Artaud talks about the ability to “interpret reality” in his defense of Van Gogh, explaining that his skill in drawing upon his emotional experiences was part of his genius and had never been done before.⁴⁷ To underscore this mastery, Artaud contrasts the painting projects of Gauguin and

⁴² Jordan Kriseman, “Framing Madness: Antonin Artaud and Alain Resnais on Vincent Van Gogh,” (undergraduate honors thesis, University of Florida, 2020), 7.

⁴³ André Breton

⁴⁴ André Breton, originally from “Surrealism and Painting,” in 1928, re-qtd. here.

⁴⁵ André Breton, “Inédits I,” (originally from 1946), in *Œuvres complètes, Volume III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999): 236.

⁴⁶ Samantha Friedman, “Landscape,” in *Van Gogh, Dalí, and Beyond: The World Reimagined* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art and Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2013), 15.

⁴⁷ Antonin Artaud, “Van Gogh: The Suicide Provoked by Society,” 48.

Van Gogh: "Gauguin thought the artist should look for the symbol and the myth and expand everything in life into a myth, whereas Van Gogh thought that we must know how to infer the myth from the most everyday things in life."⁴⁸ Likewise, Dubuffet believed in an art "which would be in immediate connection with daily life, an art which would start from...daily life, and which would be a very direct and very sincere expression of our real life and our real moods."⁴⁹ There is then an important and implicit link to the surrealists vis-à-vis interpreting accepted reality.

However, each surrealist who looked to madness for inspiration used a different methodology; there were different aspects to the madman's art that the surrealists latched onto to use in their own art or artistic process and some of these processes naturally would preclude Van Gogh from being a source of inspiration, whether explicitly or implicitly. For example, Klee believed art could make visible the invisible – which, it could be argued, Van Gogh tried to do as well. However, Klee (along with Dalí) also credited the "child, madman, and savage," as having a special power, as they can look into the "in-between-world," that "exists between the worlds our senses perceive."⁵⁰ Van Gogh instead was very much grounded in our world, even during his stay at the psychiatric hospital, and it was through his own personal emotions and experience that he painted the real world. Alternatively, Dubuffet was interested in how art of psychiatric patients could transgress institutions and aesthetics. In fact, he articulated this transgression as the refusal of beauty during a lecture in 1951 at the Arts Club of Chicago, stating: "I believe beauty is nowhere... I refuse absolutely to assent to this idea that there are ugly persons and ugly objects."⁵¹ He believed that psychiatric patients (along with children and "savage" peoples) had no aesthetic goal in their art – no concept of the Western standards of beauty; this inherently rendered their art

⁴⁸ Antonin Artaud, 48.

⁴⁹ Jean Dubuffet, 30.

⁵⁰ Paul Klee, *The Inward Vision*, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: Harry Abrams, 1959), 5.

⁵¹ Jean Dubuffet, 30.

transgressive and of interest to Dubuffet. Van Gogh's art was, in the time he lived, also transgressive; the vibrant colors and expressive brushstrokes he employed broke with aesthetic conventions for painting in the 1880s and 90s. And, to a certain extent, it remained transgressive during the early 20th century as well, as academics and the public alike found his work more acceptable but still tinged with the impression of madness and its accompanying social ramifications.⁵² In fact, Artaud wrote that Van Gogh's art did not attack manners and morals, but instead the conformity of institutions, something that Surrealism was also quite interested in disrupting.⁵³

What emerges then is that while the surrealists' art may vary from one another and from Van Gogh, some of their thematic interests are very much rooted in the same ones that Van Gogh held. In one of many letters to his brother Theo, Vincent wrote:

"In my view [Jean-François] Millet and [Léon Augustin] Lhermitte are consequently the true painters, because they don't paint things as they *are*, examined drily [*sic*] and analytically, but as *they*... feel them... my great desire is to learn to make such inaccuracies, such variations, reworkings, alterations of the reality, that it might become, very well – lies if you will – but – truer than the literal truth."⁵⁴

This view by Van Gogh is interesting for several reasons, the first being that it demonstrates exactly how he differed from the impressionists like Claude Monet, Édouard Manet or Camille Pissarro. Van Gogh did not record the sensation of nature so much as animate the landscape in a kind of reflection of his own emotional and psychological agitation.⁵⁵ Secondly, in *Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society*, Artaud describes Van Gogh in a comparable way, as the most painterly of painters, due to his ability to re-collect nature ("*Van Gogh est peintre parce*

⁵² In a review of the 1947 Musée de l'Orangerie exhibition, one critic wrote that Van Gogh "n'a jamais pu s'adapter à la société," (never could adapt to society). "Un Foule Patiente Piétine Pour Voir Ces Toiles," *Elle*, February 25, 1947, 4.

⁵³ Antonin Artaud, "Van Gogh: Le Suicidé de la Société," originally from 1947, in *Antonin Artaud Œuvres* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2004), 1440.

⁵⁴ Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Theo Van Gogh, July, 14, 1885, accessed at <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let515/letter.html>. Original Emphasis.

⁵⁵ Claude Cernuschi, "Van Gogh and After," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, December 28, 2018, YouTube, 1:26:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzOt_QtEVgg.

qu'il a recollecté la nature.")⁵⁶ Van Gogh had said of his own painterly style that "*au lieu...de chercher à rendre exactement ce que j'ai devant les yeux, je me sers de la couleur plus arbitrairement pour m'exprimer fortement,*"⁵⁷ (instead of...seeking to make what I have before my eyes, I use color *arbitrarily* to more *strongly express myself*). Van Gogh therefore did not paint nature in an imaginative way but instead pieced together different aspects of nature while allowing his emotions to inform the liveliness and intensity of his compositions. While this may result in his works seeming fictitious or exaggerated, they are completely realistic from Van Gogh's point of view, due to the inclusion of authentic emotional additions. As Dalí wrote:

there is not the faintest shadow of madness in claiming...that if one places on one of the scales of a balance of pictorial justice a single drop of the medium with which Vermeer of Delft painted, one should not hesitate one second in throwing on the other scale of this same balance the left ear of Van Gogh, the left hand of Salvador Dalí.⁵⁸

While Van Gogh certainly imparted more personal experience in his paintings than Vermeer, Dalí unwittingly confirms this realist tendency through his equivalence of Van Gogh (and himself) to Vermeer.

Moreover, this intent directly ties Van Gogh to the surrealists: where Van Gogh would utilize color "arbitrarily" to more accurately express himself, the surrealists would use irrational subject-matter and dream-logic to capture their unconscious. A parallel to Dalí in particular can be understood here too, not because they painted in similar ways, but because there is an inherent similarity in terms of subject matter. The fact that both artists referenced Millet so specifically speaks to their shared interest in realism as well as hidden reality; however, this of course manifests in drastically different styles: Van Gogh through his re-collecting of nature and Dalí through Surrealism and psychoanalysis (a re-collecting of a

⁵⁶ Antonin Artaud, *Van Gogh le suicidé de la société* (Paris, K Éditeur, 1947), 65, 70.

⁵⁷ Vincent Van Gogh, qtd. in André Breton, "Inédits I," 237. Original emphasis.

⁵⁸ Salvador Dalí, 14-15.

different sort). Where Van Gogh re-collected nature and utilized color and emotion in his compositions, Dalí instead turned to dreams, fear, and other imaginings in his re-collected surrealist paintings. This results in Millet's *The Angelus* (figure 9), originally featuring a couple paused for prayer in the fields, to be re-imagined by Dalí in a way that is mournful and sexually charged. The contrasting interpretations of *The Angelus* demonstrate the broader idea that although the final result of the paintings may be quite different, they originate in the same mode of investigation – that of accepted reality and how one's own experience may change its construction. While Van Gogh did not consider questions of the unconscious within his own artistic practice, his example of re-interpreting - or re-collecting - an accepted reality to construct one based on his own experience proved pivotal in the development of Surrealism. This is to say that Van Gogh's and Dalí's, as well as other artists, own psychological additions to their works were at once both lies and truths. There is sometimes less rational coherence to the works of the surrealists than Van Gogh but the underlying pursuit is the same. Van Gogh was pre-occupied with "alternatives at either end of the spectrum of landscape paintings: free invention and truthful documentation."⁵⁹ In the quest to create art through new methodologies or in novel styles, a sense of formal realism may be lost; yet, it is in fact more true for the individual artist himself because of the personal and psychological nature of the art-making process – what Samantha Friedman calls "internal tumult...envisioned as an external phenomenon."⁶⁰ Van Gogh's swirling skies are no less real for him than are the impossibly sized figures in the dreamy landscapes of Dalí's *Archeological Reminiscence of Millet's Angelus* (figure 15).

⁵⁹ Samantha Friedman, 15.

⁶⁰ Samantha Friedman, 17.

The Question of the Œuvre

Considering then the interest in art of psychiatric patients in the 1920s and 30s, along with the methodological parallels between Van Gogh's art making process and that of avant-garde artists, there emerges a dichotomy between recognition of (socially) accepted artistry and reverence of innate creativity made visible through madness. The two avenues pursued in this paper therefore coalesce in the previously asked question: why did the surrealists not turn to the work of Vincent Van Gogh in their focus on art of the mentally ill? As has been well-documented, the art of the psychiatric patients included in Prinzhorn's collection certainly influenced many artists; in addition, there are thematic and methodological similarities between Van Gogh and the surrealists, in particular Dalí. Yet, there is no definitive documentation that surrealists and adjacent artists consulted Van Gogh specifically, as opposed to other psychiatric patients, in terms of stylistic inspiration. The era in which these artists worked reveals a possible reason that they did not consider Van Gogh to be like other psychiatric patients. As has been previously mentioned, the European art world and bourgeois citizens were beginning to accept Van Gogh and his art in the early 20th century. By 1912 he was included in the well-received Sonderbund Exhibition in Cologne, Germany, alongside artists like Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso; the inclusion in this exhibition demonstrates his entry into the canon of Art History as well as the association with bourgeois taste.

However, while Van Gogh was still alive, critic Albert Aurier did in fact praise him in a rare favorable critique. Aurier compared Van Gogh to some of the Dutch Masters such as Frans Hals, writing "*comme tous les illustres compatriotes, c'est un réaliste, un réaliste dans toute la force de la terme,*"⁶¹ (like all the illustrious compatriots, he is a realist, a realist in all the strength of the term). Moreover, he also said that "*il est difficile, pour qui ne veut être impartial et pour qui sait regarder, de nier ou contester la véracité naïve de son art,*

⁶¹ Albert Aurier, "Les Isolés," *Mercure de France*, January 1890, 26.

l'ingénuité de sa vision,"⁶² (it is difficult, for those who do not want to be impartial and those who know how to look, to deny or contest the naive truthfulness of his art, the ingeniousness of his vision). This characterization portrays Van Gogh as a realist in the tradition of his countrymen, giving credit to him at a time when many others cited his expressive realism as evidence of his madness. Dalí would then write decades later a similar sentiment through his comparison to Vermeer. Moreover, Aurier emphasizes that there is an inherent genius-ness to Van Gogh's art that cannot be discounted by those seeming to understand and recognize high art. He situates Van Gogh as a mad, but genius artist – one that may exist as both simultaneously – as opposed to a clinically insane patient who happens to paint. "Madness" can then be understood as a way to identify artists who exist outside of a society that has rejected them.⁶³ Artaud re-enters this debate, as he argued for Van Gogh to be recognized in this sense as well, as having been rejected by the society in which he lived. Van Gogh may be thought of then as Giorgio Agamben's concept of the *homo sacer*, a "person whom society has cast out and bares no blame for in killing."⁶⁴ The identity of Van Gogh as a *homo sacer* not only aids in Artaud's argument for society as the cause of death of Van Gogh but also serves to reiterate how the mentally ill were understood in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – as those who could be ostracized and made to be an Other, thereby rendering their art to a place of reverence (in terms of its anti-Academic or anti-institutional nature).

Furthermore, by looking at the bodies of work by Van Gogh, Prinzhorn's psychiatric patients, and even Artaud, Michel Foucault is called to mind. In *The History of Madness*, he suggests a relationship between madness and an artist's œuvre – specifically that "*where there is an œuvre, there is no madness.*"⁶⁵ Foucault attempts to delineate a language in

⁶² Albert Aurier, 26.

⁶³ William Robinson, "The Artist Versus the Legend: Repetitions and Madness," in *Van Gogh Repetitions* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 8.

⁶⁴ Giorgio Agamben, "Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life," in *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 61.

⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalifa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalifa (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 537. Original emphasis.

which to discuss madness – to discuss the absence of reason. However, in tracing the history of madness and its specific relation to art, he uses the very language of rationality that he seeks to distance himself from.⁶⁶ Art Historian Kaira Cabañas contends that “painting reveals neither the truth of madness nor the truth of reason but serves as a medium through which to challenge reason’s silencing of madness.”⁶⁷ Foucault’s understanding of madness, which he recorded some decades after the surrealists worked, speaks to the particular attitude that they held regarding madness and the art making process: that madness may be used as the vehicle for a work of art, but it cannot truly exist in the work of a rational person. The realization of an *œuvre* inherently resolves the madness, whether through conscious effort or coincidence. The existence of such established *œuvres* may then have governed who the Surrealists turned to for inspiration, albeit unconsciously.

Perhaps they could not, or would not have been able to, see the inventiveness of Van Gogh, the genius of his art (as Artaud refers to him⁶⁸) due to the artistic climate in the early 20th century surrounding how he was known and appreciated. Despite his gradual acceptance into the art historical canon, the biographical event of his madness still attached itself to him. What becomes evident is that not only was there a shift in how Van Gogh was viewed artistically, but there was a disjunction in types of genius, which can be seen through the consideration of *œuvres* as Foucault suggests. There are three types of genius that existed in the early 20th century that artists could have drawn from:

- I. The pure painterly genius of Van Gogh as Artaud defined it.
- II. The mad genius of Van Gogh and other artists as suggested by Prinzhorn, such as Henri Rousseau and Emil Nolde.
- III. The artless genius of Prinzhorn’s psychiatric patients.

⁶⁶ There has been academic debate between Foucault and Jacques Derrida over this use of language, but it is outside the scope of this paper.

⁶⁷ Kaira M. Cabañas, *Learning From Madness* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 1.

⁶⁸ Antonin Artaud, 1446.

The artists who fell into the second category of genius stand as special cases – those alluded to already in the consideration of Van Gogh as a *homo sacer*. Their works were being accepted, or already were, by the contemporary culturati; however, biographical facts still played an appreciable role in how they were considered. Artaud may also fall within this distinction. He did not think of his visual and written drawings completed during his time at the Rodez psychiatric hospital as Academic art; yet, he also did not want them to be included in exhibitions of other patients' works (as his psychiatrist wished to do). Artaud refused to have his works shown in a clinical context, as doing such could allow his works to be pathologized; while at the same time, he rejected Academic art under the supposition it had been unable to find the human visage.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Artaud was included in exhibitions and his art was supported by those such as Dubuffet, demonstrating not only the interest in, but support of artists working alongside their madness. Prinzhorn compares his patients to artists such as Van Gogh, who were already established prior to madness, to demonstrate the quality of art that was created by those suffering from mental illness. It speaks to the still-rigid understandings of high and low art at the time in that Van Gogh, though considered to have psychiatric imbalances in his own right, was an accepted Academic artist by the early 20th century. However, a patient like Franz Pohl who did not receive Academic training (instead working as a technical draftsman) was instead aided in some way by his madness in the art-making process at the psychiatric hospital.

“Madness is an absolute rupture of the *œuvre*.”⁷⁰ As Foucault argues, there cannot be madness and an *œuvre* in the presence of one another, they are simply incompatible. This is to say that madness may not produce an *œuvre*, yet it is the very thing that makes it visible.

⁶⁹ Artaud cites painters such as Holbein and Ingres as examples of Academic artists who have painted portraits without being able to show the humanity of their subjects. He contrasts these with Van Gogh, who he claims is the only one who has been able to show the human visage. Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud: Dessins et Portraits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, 536.

While Foucault wrote on this topic many years after Surrealism's beginnings, he identified the complex understanding that many artists had of madness and illuminates why artists like Dalí and Dubuffet did not cite Van Gogh specifically, regardless of thematic parallels or shared influences. There could never be the association of Van Gogh with madness in the way that the surrealists desired it because his *œuvre* had already been well-established. The madness was a point of contention that was one facet of Van Gogh's art that made him posthumously interesting (his distinctive aesthetic style which was less radical by the 1930s was another component) and made his *œuvre* worth celebrating and canonizing. The patients whose art is included in Prinzhorn's collection are instead the inverse of figures such as Van Gogh and Artaud in that most began to make art after arriving in the psychiatric hospital, after the onset of madness. There was no possibility for an *œuvre* because the madness existed first.

Moreover, Foucault asserts that Van Gogh knew his madness and his artistic *œuvre* were incompatible⁷¹; though he was spurned and criticized by most during his life, he knew the strength of his artworks – knew that though he suffered from some sort of mental illness that his art could speak on its own. For Foucault, “modern art such as that produced by Van Gogh and Artaud remains on this side of reason by the very fact that the works constitute an *œuvre*, a body of work.”⁷² “There is only madness as the last instant of the *œuvre* – for the *œuvre* indefinitely repels madness to its outer limits.”⁷³ The psychiatric patient of Prinzhorn, who created art that was collected and (eventually) exhibited, was not positioned to be cognizant of the *œuvre* he was bringing into existence, for madness was present first. This difference, though slight, is what interested the surrealists; they viewed these patients as truly radical and transgressive in a way that Van Gogh simply could not be. An aside that is also relevant here is that by 1946, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City had acquired

⁷¹ Michel Foucault, 536.

⁷² Kaira M. Cabañas, 2.

⁷³ Michel Foucault, 537.

The Starry Night, which, as Breton notes in writing, was valued at one million dollars.⁷⁴ Considering that he and other surrealists identified as Communists and enemies of bourgeois institutions, it is quite possible that Van Gogh was already considered to be too bourgeois by their standards, and this precluded him from being of substantial interest to them. Moreover, in the fourth *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, works from the collection of psychiatrist Gaston Ferdière (Artaud's doctor) were on view alongside surrealist objects; this curatorial strategy aimed to defamiliarize bourgeois conventions of viewing and support their beliefs of the freedom from rationality in which those with madness lived.⁷⁵ These facts are perhaps why it is so fascinating that thematic and methodological similarities between the Dutch painter and artists including Dalí, Ernst, Klee, Dubuffet or even Breton exist. The artistic pursuits of Van Gogh managed to unconsciously make their way through different artistic movements of the early 20th century, to become manifest in unlikely ways in Surrealism.⁷⁶

Conclusion

As was noted at the start of this paper, Van Gogh exists within the art historical canon in a special place of his own; he is included in the Post-Impressionist movement (which itself is wide-ranging and encompasses many smaller artistic movements), was mostly unappreciated and ostracized while alive, but is beloved now. His style is instantly recognizable to the 21st century viewer, and his art is celebrated and imitated by people around the world. Throughout all of this, the biographical facts of his life that have come to be associated with his madness remain tied to him and shape how his art is understood.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ André Breton, 237.

⁷⁵ Kaira M. Cabañas, 40-41.

⁷⁶ This is not a totalizing claim in any aspect – I am only making this assertion based on the artists that have been mentioned in this paper.

⁷⁷ In February 2020, Dutch art historians wrote about an obscure portrait in which they claim his madness can be read through how he painted himself: Louis Van Tilborgh, Teio Meedendorp, and Kathrin Pilz, "Van Gogh as mentally ill: his contested Oslo selfportrait,"

Despite this, if scholars can look past “madness” as a condemning label and instead use the ambiguity of madness as a point of investigation, new comparisons and conclusions can arise between previously disjointed figures or artistic movements.

If one were to look through the timeline of modern art history, the path from Van Gogh to the surrealist artists is not immediately clear. However, when the formal aspects of an artwork are considered concurrently with themes and methodologies, similarities slowly reveal themselves. While the question of how madness affects one’s personal experience may have been a leading concern for the surrealists, it is actually when reality is deconstructed that Van Gogh’s presence and influence may be felt within the art of the surrealists. When he and Dalí are regarded side by side, the re-collection of nature – of reality – is quite evident. Though their constructed realities, as well as methodologies, differ greatly, the quest to re-interpret what has been accepted and put forth as true reality is the same for Van Gogh and Surrealist artists. Artaud perhaps sums it up best, writing of reality that: “*il suffit d’avoir le génie de savoir l’interpréter,*”⁷⁸ (all that is needed is the genius to know how to interpret it).

The Burlington Magazine 162 (February 2020), 88-101. In 2005, a team of psychologists, psychiatrists, and neurologists came together to write a chapter on Van Gogh’s supposed bipolar disorder and how it was manifested itself in his paintings: Antonio Carota, Giuseppe Iaria, Alexandre Berney, Julien Bogousslavsky, “Understanding Van Gogh’s Night: Bipolar Disorder,” in *Neurological Disorders in Famous Artists*, eds. J. Bogousslavsky and F. Boller (Basel: Krager, 2005).

⁷⁸ Antonin Artaud, 1446.

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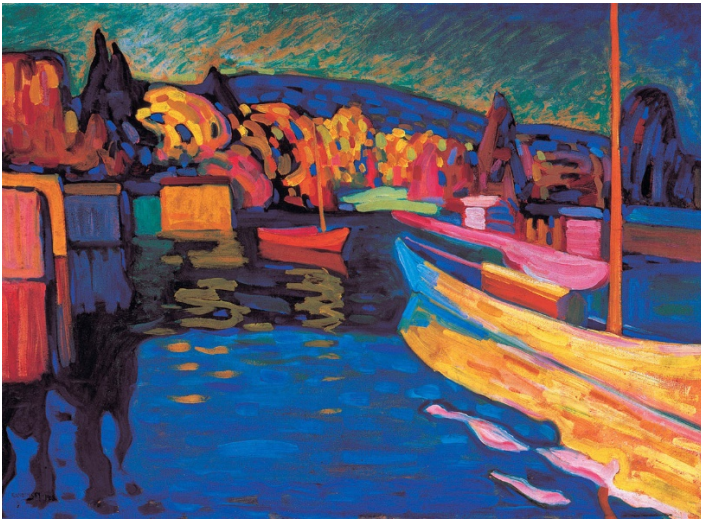


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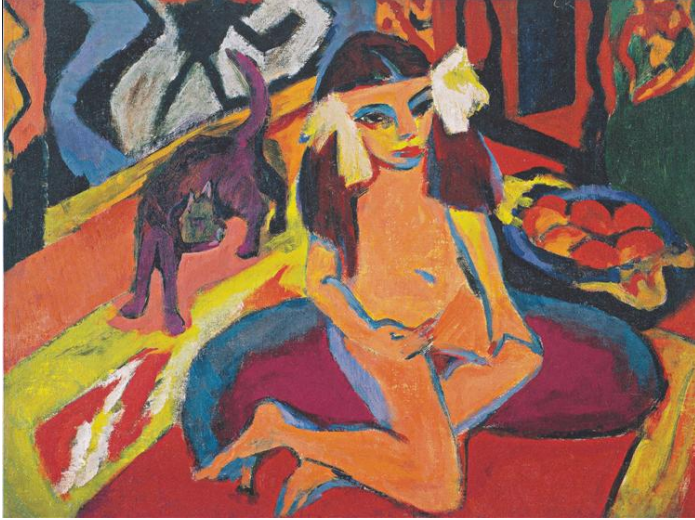


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