Emotions in Painting: Van Gogh's Self Portraits

NAME:_____   DATE:_____

Vincent Van Gogh's artistic career began after he originally planned to become a clergyman. He started by painting things he knew well: scenes of Dutch peasant life created in earth tones that literally express the dirt-poor existence of the rural working class. Within three years, Vincent moved to Paris, where he lived with his brother Theo (now also an art dealer) and experimented with the lighter colors and touch of the impressionist style.

He admired the unusual viewpoints and strong colors of Japanese prints, which were then the rage in Paris. But typical of Vincent, he became exhausted through overwork and too many late nights in the city. He decided to move to Arles, an ancient town in the south of France, where he hoped the warm climate and bright colors would relax and inspire him.

Vincent Van Gogh's artistic career was very short- it lasted only ten years. But during those 10 years,he made 800 paintings. Sometimes he would paint through the night with candles stuck in his hat brim for light! Unfortunately, he sold only one painting during his lifetime. But this did not dissuade him from believing that his art was worthwhile.

When Van Gogh suffered a series of nervous breakdowns, he actually cut off the tip of his ear during one. In early 1889, he entered a hospital in nearby Saint-Rémy. Van Gogh felt strongly that the only way he could recover from his illness was to start painting again. In July while painting in the fields around the hospital, he suffered another severe emotional crisis that left him unable to work for several weeks.
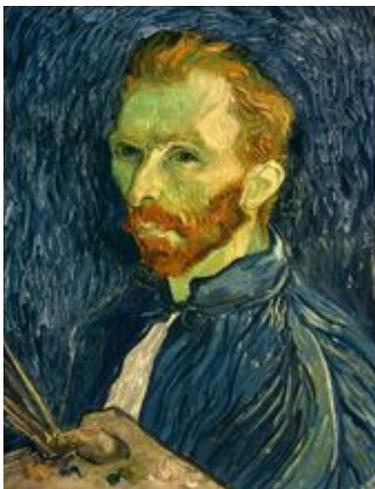
THE 1889 SELF-PORTRAITS

To the left is the first painting he made after this episode—a self-portrait. Van Gogh included his palette and brushes in the work. Perhaps he was trying to reassert his identity as an artist. He used strong colors and broad brushwork.

Van Gogh painted another self-portrait soon after this one (on the right).
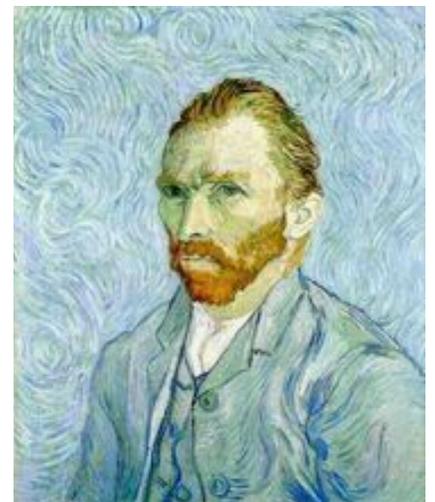
Compare the two "Van Goghs" painted as he recovered from his illness. In which one does Van Gogh appear calmer?

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What effect do the different colors in the background have on the portraits?

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What virtue or trait does Van Gogh possess which allows him to continue his painting even though he is not

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making money or selling his art? How would this trait help you in your life? Why?

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LETTER TO THEO

Van Gogh painted whenever he could and believed he would improve only by making art. By the time he died at age 37, Vincent had written hundreds of letters—one of the greatest bodies of personal commentary about the aims of art and the artistic process—and produced an astounding body of work comprising some 900 paintings and more than 1,000 drawings.

Here is what he wrote about these two portraits in a letter to his brother Theo. You can figure out which is which from the way they look.

Theo:

They say—and I gladly believe it—that it is difficult to know yourself, but it isn't easy to paint oneself either. For the time being, I am working on two portraits of myself—since I have no other models—for it is high time for me to paint some figures. One of them I started the first day I got up; I was thin and pale like a ghost. It is dark blue-violet, the head whitish with yellow hair, in other words, an effect of color. But since then I have begun another one, three quarter length on a light background. You will see when you put up the portrait with the light background that I have just finished . . . that I look saner now, even much more so. I am inclined to think that the portrait will tell you how I am better than my letter and this will reassure you . . . .

Ever yours,
Vincent.

Van Gogh says he was calmer in the one with the light blue swirling background. Does that surprise you? If you thought the swirling background might suggest he was more upset or nervous, you're not alone. But Van Gogh was making a comparison. The dark swirls of paint, his greenish skin tone and burning gaze make the earlier portrait more agitated.

Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin*, 1888

How is this self-portrait different from the ones Van Gogh painted in the year to follow?