Painting:  Starry Night

Artist:  Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Year Painted:  1889

Medium:  oil on canvas

Background Information on the artist:

Vincent van Gogh was born in southern Netherlands in 1853. As the son of a minister and the nephew of art dealers, Vincent was brought up in an upper middle class, religious and cultured atmosphere. However, he was highly emotional and lacked self-confidence. Vincent suffered his whole life with depression and mental illness.

As a child Vincent was serious, silent and thoughtful. He later commented that his childhood was "gloomy, cold and sterile." Once finished with schooling, Vincent moved from job to job and city to city. He was an art dealer, a book seller, teacher, and Methodist minister's assistant. He moved around from the Netherlands, England and France. Vincent documented much of his travels through his sketches. Between 1860 and 1880, when he finally decided to become an artist, van Gogh had two unhappy romances and was deeply hurt by the failures of those relationships.

Vincent became more and more interested in ordinary life and recorded what he saw around him in his sketches. With the encouragement of his brother, Theo, whom he was close to, Vincent attended the Royal Academy of Art in Brussels. There he studied anatomy, modeling and perspective. He wanted to be an artist in God’s service. The works of his early Dutch period are somber-toned and sharply lit, of which the most famous is "The Potato Eaters" (1885).

In 1886 Vincent went to Paris to join his brother Theo, the manager of Goupil Gallery. In Paris, he studied with Cormon and met other notable artists, Pissarro, Monet and Gaugin. He began to lighten his very dark palette and to paint in the short brushstrokes of the Impressionists. His nervous temperament made him a difficult companion and night-long discussions combined with painting all day undermined his health.

Vincent decided to go south to Arles where he hoped his friends would join him and help develop a school of art. In Arles, van Gogh paints his famous sunflowers and begins suffering from severe mental illness. His friend, Gaugin did join him but with disastrous results. In a fit of epilepsy, van Gogh pursued his friend with an open razor, was stopped by Gaugin, but ended up cutting a portion of his own ear lobe off. Van Gogh then began to alternate between fits of
madness and lucidity and committed himself to the asylum in Saint-Remy for treatment.

While in the asylum, van Gogh’s paintings became a torrent of activity. Although he could not draw and paint for long periods of time without suffering from an attack, he managed to create *The Starry Night* which resides as his most popular work and one of the most influential pieces in history. The swirling lines of the sky are a possible representation of his mental state. The same shaken style is visible in all of his work during his time in the asylum.

In May of 1890, he seemed much better and left the Saint-Remy asylum. Two months later he was dead, having shot himself “for the good of all”. During his brief career he sold one painting. Van Gogh’s finest works were produced in less than three years in a technique that grew more and more impassioned in brushstroke, in symbolic and intense color, in surface tension and in movement and vibration of form and line. Van Gogh’s fusion of form and content is powerful, dramatic, lyrically rhythmic, imaginative, and emotional. Vincent was completely absorbed in the effort to explain either his struggle against madness or his belief of the spiritual essence of man and nature.

We know so much about van Gogh’s life story because of the 900 letters he wrote, mostly to his brother Theo. Vincent van Gogh’s tragic life, filled with mental illness and artistic genius, has altered mankind forever. His work still astounds millions of people daily and although he only sold one painting (the *Red Vineyard*) in his life, his influence on the world is amazing and overwhelming. Vincent van Gogh killed himself believing his life was a terrible failure!

**Background Information on Post Impressionism**

Post Impressionism can be defined as French art from the period of 1886 to 1914. It is characterized by vivid colors, thick application of paint, distinctive brush strokes, real life subject matter, and they were inclined to emphasize geometric forms, to distort form to emphasize and to used arbitrary color. Post impressionism sought to evoke more emotion through color and line. Other post impressionists included Paul Cezanne, George Seurat and Paul Gauguin. Vincent van Gogh was the only post impressionist artist that was not French.

**About the Painting:**

*“The Starry Night”* is considered Vincent van Gogh’s greatest work and is one of the most well known images in modern culture. This masterpiece depicts the view outside his sanatorium room window in Saint-Remy, France, at night. He painted it from memory during the day.
Some aspects of the painting are as follows:

1. There is the night sky filled with exaggerated features; swirling clouds, stars ablaze in their own glow, a bright crescent moon. This sky keeps the viewers eyes moving around the painting following the painting and moving from star to star.

2. Below the horizon, lies a small quiet town. There is a peaceful essence flowing from the structures. The cool dark colors and the fiery windows spark our imagination of what exists in the night and dark starry skies. The center point of the town is the tall steeple of the church, towering over the smaller buildings. This steeple casts down a sense of stability onto the town, and also creates a sense of size and seclusion.

3. To the left of the painting there is a massive dark structure that develops an even greater sense of size and isolation. This structure is magnificent when compared to the scale of other objects in the painting. The curving lines mirror that of the sky and create the sensation of depth in the painting. This structure also allows the viewer to interpret what it is. From a mountain to a leafy bush, the analysis of this formation is wide and full of variety. But most believe the structure to be a cypress tree.

4. Van Gogh painted with small brush strokes, lots of paint and many shades of blue. The swirls in the painting could be meant to depict wind.

Discussion Questions for the kids:

What can you tell me about this painting?

What colors do you see in the painting?

Why is this different from what you see at night?

Can you tell if the paint on this picture is thick or thin?

Why are the brushstrokes important?

The brush strokes give the painting movement, drama, and allowed the artist to use many different colors and lots of it.

Can you see the little town at the bottom of the picture?

What do you think life is like in that town?

What buildings do you recognize?
What do you feel about van Gogh’s Starry Night sky?

How do the stars ablaze in the sky make you feel?

What do you think the weather was like on the starry night? A warm night or a cold night? A still night or windy night?

What do you think of the dark structure in the foreground? Most likely a cypress tree.

What would you have called this work of art if you were the artist?

Does anything you have noticed in the painting remind you of something in your own life?

How do you think Vincent van Gogh felt when you painted Starry Night?

How does the painting make you feel?

Please feel free to email me with any questions you may have. My email is lauraellwanger@gmail.com. Have fun!

Laura Ellwanger