

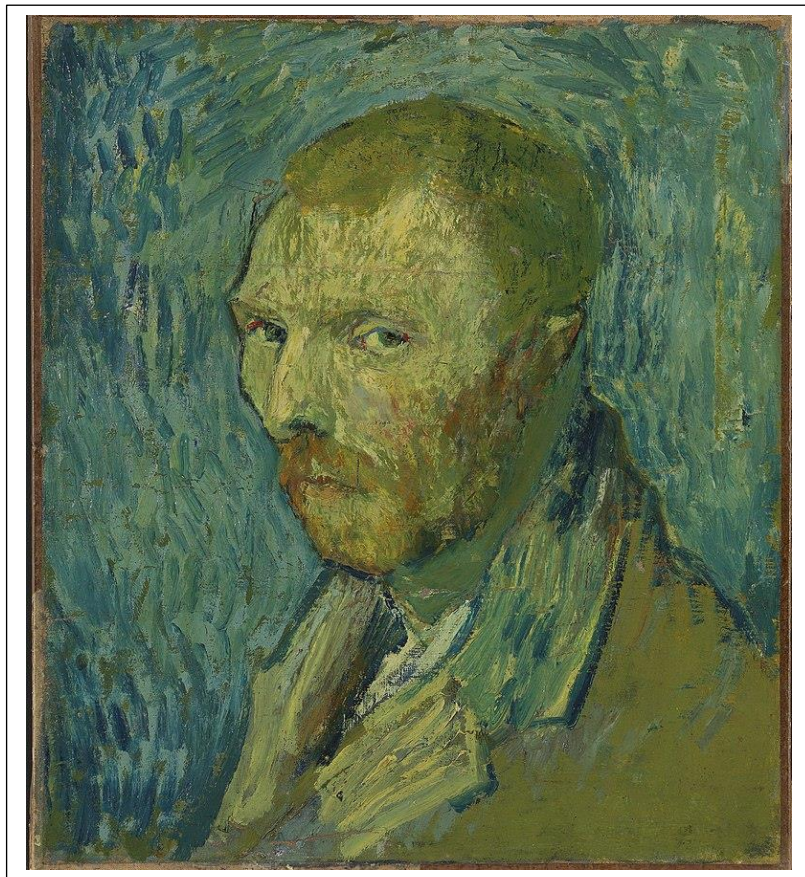
Vincent Van Gogh: Self Portrait Series

Hello:

I hope this finds you well and reading a good book.

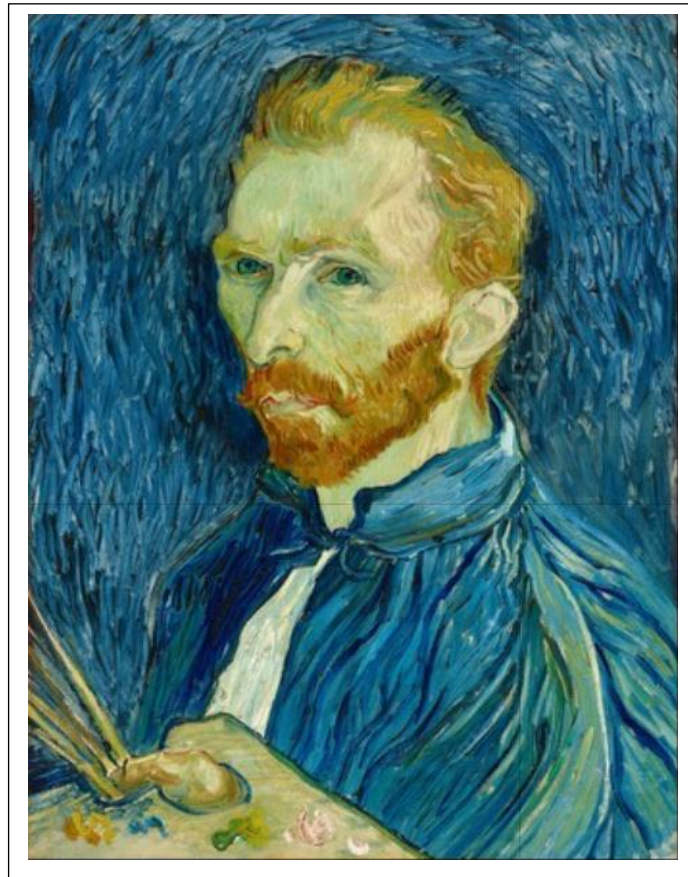
As I mentioned in my previous newsletter, Vincent Van Gogh painted in series, often producing three or more canvases of a similar scene and/or theme. The theme of three canvases on a particular subject is an unexpected plot development in my current novel-in-progress: “Saving Van Gogh.” A lot of the fun in writing novels is doing the research, and I never know what I may find, or where inspiration will strike. I was struck by the differences in these particular series of paintings. (Elizabeth Moynihan, the protagonist in “Saving Van Gogh,” is finding similar inspiration as the novel-in-progress takes shape.)

All four canvases date from 1889 while Van Gogh was at the asylum in Arles and recovering from a psychotic episode.



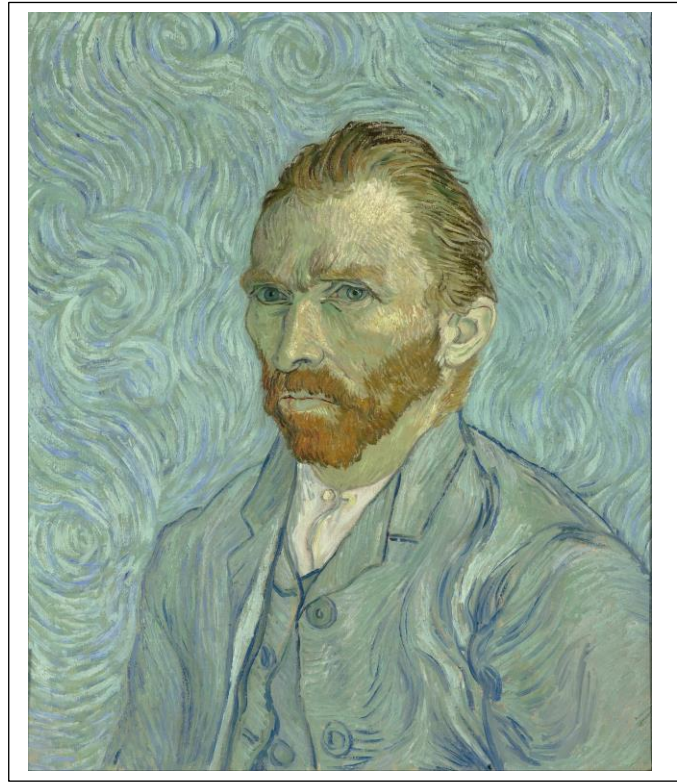
Self-Portrait: September 1889

In a letter to his brother Theo, Van Gogh refers to this self-portrait as, “an attempt from when I was ill.” He finished this canvas between August 22 and September 20th of 1889, immediately after the third crisis he suffered while at the asylum. In breaking with his customary technique, he used a palette knife to suppress the brush strokes, thus the liveliness of his face. The downward tilt of his head and averted gaze contributes to the melancholic feeling achieved with muted colors.



Self-Portrait: September, 1889

Van Gogh offers this insight about the second painting in the series: “They say—and I am very willing to believe it—that it is difficult to know yourself—but it isn't easy to paint yourself either. So I am working on two portraits of myself at this moment—for want of another model—because it is more than time I did a little figure work. One I began the day I got up; I was thin and pale as a ghost. It is dark violet-blue and the head whitish with yellow hair, so it has a color effect. But since then I have begun another one, three quarter length on a light background.”

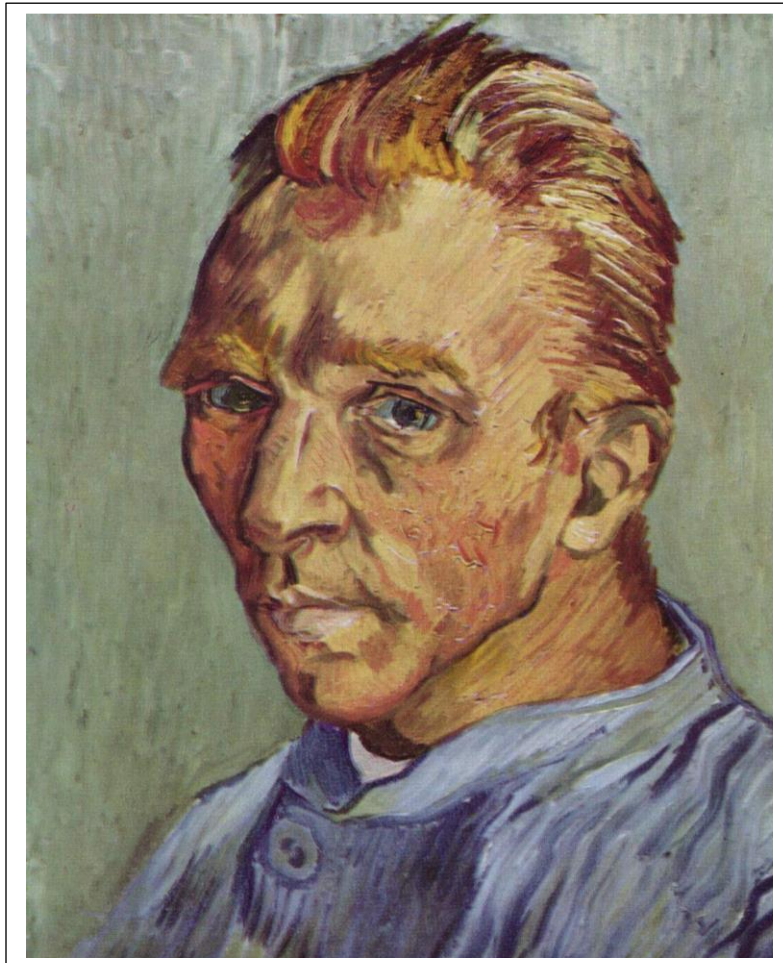


Self-Portrait: September, 1889

This is the, “three quarter length on a light background,” painting he is referring to in the previous quote. The dramatic, swirling brushstrokes in the background are commonly used as an example of his mental instability. “. . . the dissolving colours and same time turbulent patterns signal a feeling of strain and pressure, symbolizing the artist's state of mind, which is under a mental, physical and emotional pressure.” (Beckett, 1994) The Musée d'Orsay in Paris, where the painting is currently on display, notes that, “the model's immobility contrasts with the undulating hair and beard, echoed and amplified in the hallucinatory arabesques of the background.”

When Van Gogh sent the picture to his brother Theo, however, he suggests that, “You will need to study [the picture] for a time. I hope you will notice that my facial expressions have become much calmer, although my eyes have the same insecure look as before, or so it appears to me.” At the time, Van Gogh was hoping to leave the asylum and stay with fellow artist Camille Pissarro, so he asked his brother Theo to show Pissarro the painting as proof of his improved mental state.

And finally, perhaps the last self-portrait Van Gogh painted.



Self-Portrait: September, 1889

Van Gogh painted this clean-shaven self-portrait as a gift for his mother and sister. He comments that, “I still look more or less like a peasant from Zundert, rather than a city man from London or Paris.” This is interpreted as Van Gogh’s way of assuring his mother that he has remained the son she once knew despite his tumultuous life. Since he wasn’t allowed sharp objects at the asylum, like a razor, it’s likely that although he still had a beard, he simply painted himself clean-shaven to please his mother.

So much has been written about Van Gogh's mental health, that in the next newsletter I'll feature some of the possible causes and give examples of how these "conditions" are present in his work.

Here's a picture of Bee Balm (*Monarda fistulosa*) which is currently blooming in our garden. It's from the mint family, so it has a square stem. This Tiger Swallowtail butterfly has been a welcome visitor.

If you haven't already, please take a moment to leave a review on Amazon. It is really helpful with sales. Here is the link to my latest book, "[Stealing Picasso](#)." Thank you.

If you know of anyone who is looking for a speaker, the Kentucky Humanities Speakers Bureau is great about helping to subsidize appearances. I'm available as a speaker to talk about "[Stealing Renoir](#)," and how World War II was the largest art theft in history.

Or, if Kentucky history is appropriate for audiences, the Speakers Bureau will subsidize my appearance to discuss the findings from my research grant into the Underground Railroad in Kentucky. I'm also available to talk about gardening with native plants and "[Let The Earth Breathe](#)." If you or anyone you know would like to schedule a talk, here's the [link](#).

Meanwhile, I'll be giving the following talks:

Thursday, July 20, 11:00 am
"Let The Earth Breathe"
Shelby County Public Library
309 8th St.
Shelbyville, KY 40065

Friday, October 20th, 7:00 pm (CST)
Hopkins County Genealogy Society
56 North Main
Madisonville, KY 42431

[Here's the link to my website for the most up-to-date schedule of talks.](#)

Happy reading.

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