

Art and Psychiatry

Van Gogh: A Psychiatric Inquiry

David A. Casey, M.D.

Introduction

- Part of a series on psychiatric history
- Case histories of historical figures

Purposes

- What we can learn about psychiatry through the lens of history
- For example, are psychiatric illnesses best thought of as biological entities which are unchanging over time
- What about the influence of contemporary culture and personal experience
- Are current diagnostic approaches such as DSM5 applicable to individuals from other times or cultures

Art and Psychiatry

- The relationship between art and the humanities and psychiatry
- Visual arts; also literature, movies, music, etc.
- Depictions of madness and suffering
- The artist as sufferer or patient
- Explorations of emotional meaning

El Greco

Burial of the Count of Orgaz 1536

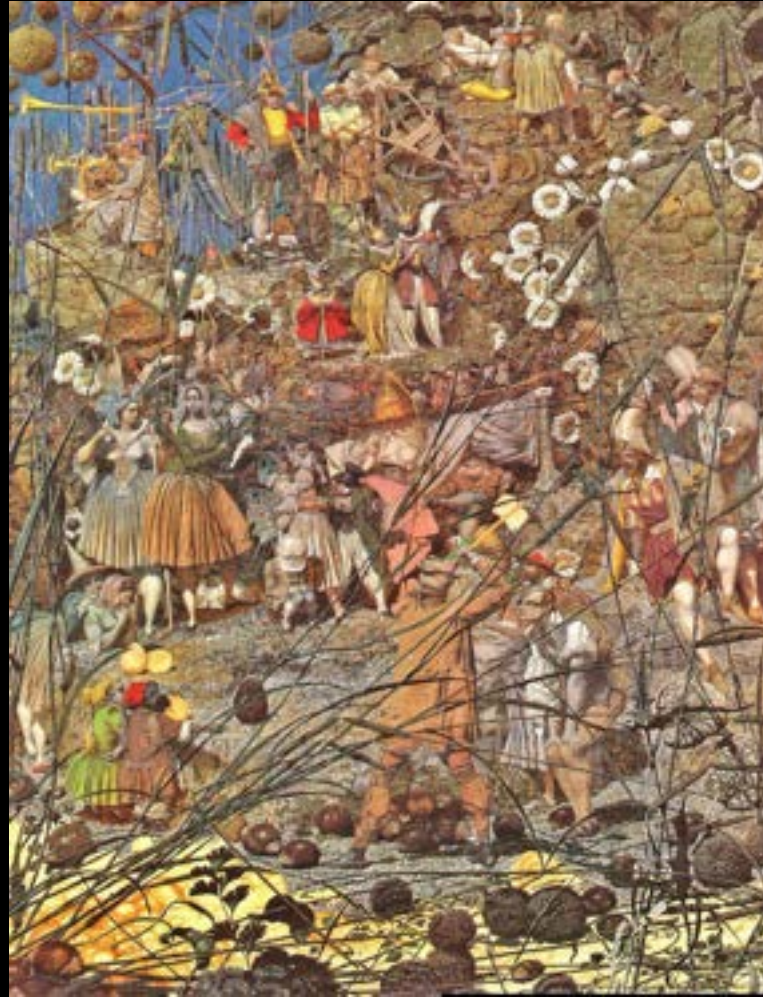


William Hogarth
Bedlam. A Rake's Progress 1773



Richard Dadd

The Fairy-Feller's Master Stroke 1855-1864

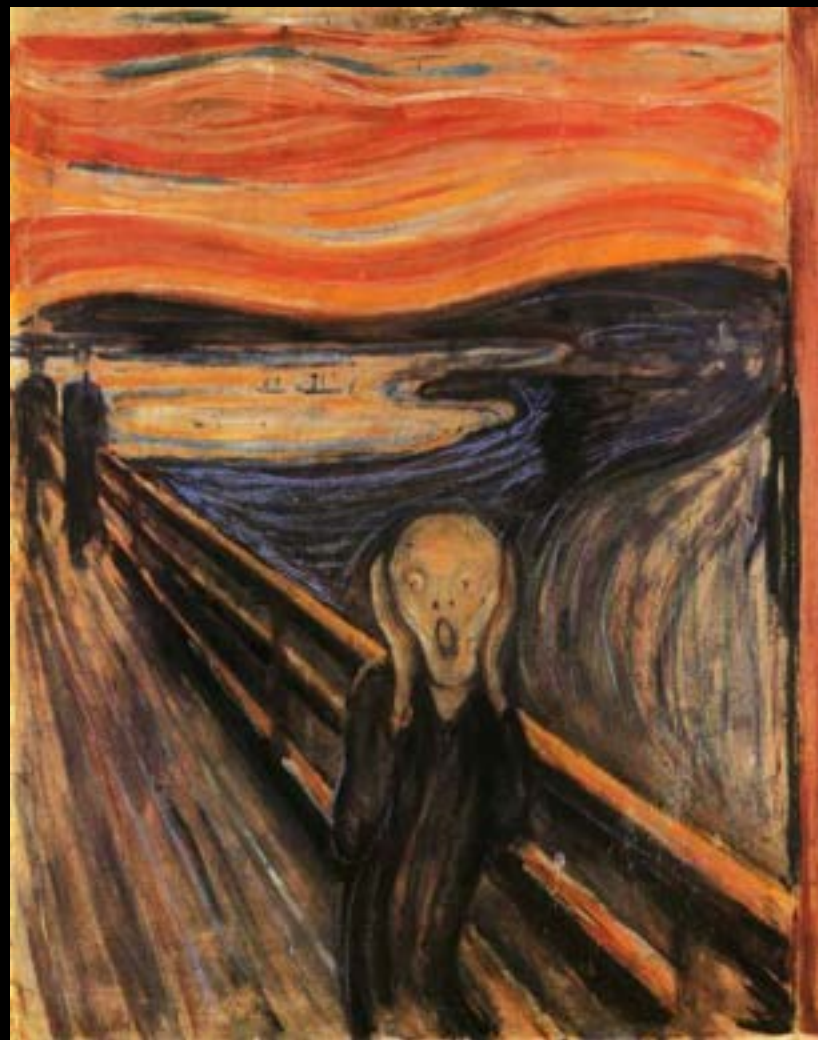


Claude Monet
Camille on Her Deathbed 1879



The Scream

Edvard Munch 1893



The Old Guitarist

Pablo Picasso 1903-1904



Salvador Dali

The Metamorphosis of Narcissus 1937



Frida Kahlo

The Suicide of Dorothy Hale 1938



Vincent Willem Van Gogh



Van Gogh

- March 30, 183- July 29, 1890
- Dutch “post-impressionist”
- Among the most famous and influential figures in the history of modern Western art
- 2100+ extant works; at least 860 oils, many in the last 2 years of life
- Landscapes, portraits, self-portraits, character studies
- The embodiment of the intersection between creativity and madness

Vincent Willem Van Gogh

- Born in Zundert, Netherlands to an upper-middle class family, eldest surviving of 6 siblings
- Named after his grandfather and stillborn brother who died a year before his birth; generations of “Vincent’s”
- His father Theodorus was a Protestant clergyman
- Mother Anna was a rigid, religious woman, proper woman who emphasized family to an extreme degree, eventually contributing to an estrangement between Vincent and his family
- Remained close only with his brother Theo and to a lesser degree with sister Wilhelmina

Theodorus Van Gogh



Anna Van Gogh



Brief biography

- Theo –next youngest sibling- was to be the most important person in Vincent's life
- Homelife was class and status conscious, despite relatively modest means
- Vincent both absorbed and rebelled against these constrictions
- Childhood of contradictions- thoughtfulness, rebelliousness, unbridled temper, wandering
- Eventually sent to boarding schools, which he resented and did not complete
- Years of poverty, alienation, mental illness, struggles with convention and authority

Theo Van Gogh (1857-1891)



Biography (continued)

- Learned basic drawing techniques as a child but apparently did not consider himself an artist
- Considered by friends and family as an odd, eccentric loner who liked to wander the woods and fields alone, against the norms of his family and class
- Very bright but an academic under-achiever
- Initially displayed no interest in following his father into the clergy; lifelong conflict between satisfying and rejecting parental authority
- Utopian fantasies; obsessiveness; entitlement; seeing himself as a failure

Art dealer

- Went to work as a clerk or apprentice for his wealthy uncle, a prominent art dealer also named Vincent Van Gogh (“Cent”) at “Goupil” in The Hague.
- This was a totally new type of business.
- Although he had mixed feelings about the work, he developed an encyclopedic knowledge of art styles and techniques, and a keen eye in evaluating art works.
- He was transferred to the London office, and for a year had the most content period of his life
- However, after a failed love affair he developed increasingly negative mood and religious preoccupation. Went from atheist to ascetic.
- His family arranged a transfer to the Paris office in 1875 which unfortunately was unhelpful, and he was dismissed. He had become angry about the firm’s “commodification” of art, an attitude present for the rest of his life

Religious period

- From about 1876 to 1880 Van Gogh's religious preoccupation deepened.
- Made a number of unsuccessful attempts to be admitted to training as a minister
- Took a job as a Protestant missionary in a Catholic district of Belgium; his increasingly bizarre and obsessive behavior there led to his dismissal and to his father's effort to have him committed to a "lunatic asylum". He escaped this fate by fleeing from the family home.
- Was deeply affected by his experiences ministering to suffering coal miners.

Beginning art career

- In 1880 he began drawing common scenes of people and country sides in the small Belgian town of Cuesmes, and his brother Theo suggested he take up an art career in earnest
- Despite his distaste for formal instruction he studied with a well known Dutch artist, at the Belgian Royal Academy, and later with his cousin Anton Mauve. He had conflicts with all his teachers and did not finish his courses- in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Paris.

Unhappy love affairs

- During this period he had a prolonged stay with his parents, courting his older widowed cousin Cornelia (“Kee”), who rejected him.
- He would not take no for an answer and continued to pursue her, eventually holding his left hand in a flame in response to rejection
- His private life continued to be disorganized: he was hospitalized for gonorrhoea and in 1882 moved in with an alcoholic prostitute, Clasina “Sien” Hoornik. She had a 5 year old daughter and soon gave birth to a son Willem, but was apparently already pregnant. He left them in 1883, under pressure from his father.

- In 1883 he returned to live for time with his parents, had another failed love affair, but greatly accelerated his drawing and painting
- Financially supported by father and later brother
- Once again had to flee the family home over a scandal
- “en plein air”: open air painting
- Following his father’s death in 1885 he moved to Antwerp, studied Dutch Masters in the museums, literally living as a starving artist, and showed signs of malnutrition; alcohol, tobacco and coffee
- He started depending on his brother Theo for financial and emotional support. Theo was in frail health but had become a successful art dealer. Theo made unsuccessful efforts to sell Vincent’s work, and encouraged him to expand his style and produce more saleable art.

Paris

- In 1886 he studied Japanese woodcuts, attempting to incorporate their style.
- He also apparently contracted syphilis and was hospitalized for this and alcoholism.
- He made another attempt to study at a prominent art school but once again left after conflict with his instructors
- After this episode he move to Paris, rooming with Theo and becoming part of the Paris art scene in Montmartre
- Here he was exposed to Impressionism and Pointillism, elements of which he adopted despite reservations about Impressionism
- He became more involved in oils over time rather than charcoals, colored chalk, and water colors
- In Paris he befriended Paul Gauguin and other prominent artists, but did not sell his work. Gauguin had just returned from Tahiti

Arles

- In 1888 Van Gogh, now 35 years old, moved to the town of Arles in Provence, in southern France. Exact reason for move is unknown
- He complained of needing to get away from Paris and hoping to recover from weakness and a smoker's cough; he also had thoughts of founding a cooperative artist's colony
- He had severely neglected his physical health
- This was his most prolific and creative period, completing more than 300 works. He was inspired by the light, countryside, and what seemed to him the exotic local people and culture

Gauguin

- Gauguin visited Van Gogh, reawakening hopes of an artist's colony
- Relationship deteriorated, quarrels ensued, and Gauguin prepared to depart
- Van Gogh perceived this as a personal rejection
- Van Gogh cut off left ear with a razor— all or part; hearing voices; paranoid delusions
- Took the ear wrapped in paper to a brothel
- Afterwards claimed not to remember what happened
- Diagnosed with “acute mania with generalized delirium”
- Repeated (voluntary) hospitalizations in asylum near Arles, arranged by Theo

Paul Gauguin, self portrait



Gauguin



Hospitalizations: Arles and Saint-Remy

- Relationship with Dr. Felix Rey at Arles
- Continued work while hospitalized at Saint-Paul Asylum, near Arles at Saint-Remy
- Increasingly creative, unique paintings as his mental health declined
- Work increasingly seemed to reflect and express his mental state
- “Expressionism”
- Essence of subjects; painting from life

Courtyard, Hospital at Arles



Dr. Felix Rey- Arles



Auvers-sur-Oise

- Discharged himself from Saint-Remy
- Moved to Auberge Ravoux in Auvers-sur-Oise, closer to Paris
- Dr. Paul Gachet
- Continued to be extremely productive
- Apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound July 27, 1890, dying two days later

Portrait of Dr. (Paul) Gachet (Auvers-sur-Oise)



Death- suicide?

- Shot himself in the side- not immediately fatal
- Lived for days– long enough for Theo to arrive
- Last words: “La tristesse durera toujours”; “the sadness will last forever”
- Ruled a suicide but doubters
- Almost immediately following his death his fame began to grow, promoted first by Theo and later his widow
- Theo died within 6 months, diagnosed with “general paresis” or tertiary syphilis- although his diagnosis although controversial

Legacy

- Van Gogh is now regarded as one of the most important figures in Western art
- Despite selling only one piece in his lifetime, his works are among the most valuable in the world, at times selling for record setting prices
- Highest price for a Van Gogh- over \$150 million for “Portrait of Dr. Gachet”
- Predecessor of modern art (Picasso and many others)
- Van Gogh Museum- Amsterdam

Rise to posthumous fame

- His work was both championed and criticized by colleagues
- Did not begin to gain lasting fame until his letters were published by his sister-in-law Johanna Van Gogh-Bonger (600+ letters)
- Became well known as a writer as well as painter
- She promoted his romanticized image as a starving artist; idea of connection between madness and creativity
- Lasting fame after publication in 1934 of biographical novel “Lust for Life” by Irving Stone; movie 1956

Overall health

- Poor digestion
- Malnutrition
- Venereal disease
- Dental disease

Diagnostic considerations- symptoms

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Extreme obsessiveness
- Mood swings, manic-like periods
- Amnesia
- Interpersonal and relational difficulties

- Psychotic symptoms- auditory hallucinations; delusions
- Spells, “seizures” tantrums, fits, crises, periods of dizziness/disorientation
- Nightmares
- Illusions?; periods of altered consciousness
- Periods of stupor
- Parasuicide and suicide
- Family history of depression and suicide
- Recurrent abdominal pain, GI symptoms

Diagnosis; cont.

- Porphyria
- Lead poisoning
- Borderline personality disorder
- Alcoholism/absinthe
- Possible syphilis
- Temporal lobe epilepsy?
- Meniere's disease?
- Bipolar
- Foxglove

- Meniere's disease
- Schizophrenia
- Lead poisoning
- Solvents
- Personality disorder?
- Rigidity
- "Attacks" became more serious and frequent in the year or so before death

diagnosis

- Letters with Theo
- No memoir
- Problem of “reification”
- Problems in applying criterion based diagnosis
- Relevance of Goldwater rule?
- Cultural changes over time: “culture bound syndromes”
- Changing criteria and concept of disease over time
- Narrative, contextual understanding of illness rather than focus on classification

- Van Gogh's development as an artist
- Increasing creativity and productivity despite advancing mental illness

Creativity and mental illness

- Connection with mood disorders, especially bipolar (and substance abuse)
- Artists, writers, musicians
- Lack of correlation with psychotic illnesses
- Narcissism

Van Gogh's Vision

- Evolving use of color
- Adaptation of pointillism
- En Plein Air
- Painting from life
- Meaning and purpose of art
- Role of the artist in society
- Social commentary
- “Commodification”

Preceding Van Gogh: Academic/Neoclassicism
Jacques-Louis David: The Oath of the Horatii 1784



Jean-Francoise Millet- The Sower— Realism 1850



Impressionism: Monet, the Water Lilies



Seurat: Pointillism



The Potato Eaters



Peasant woman; poverty



Van Gogh- the Sower (after Millet)



Skull with Burning Cigarette



Japanese influence



Night Café Terrace at Arles



Bedroom in Arles



Vase with Fifteen Sunflowers



Starry Night Over Rhone River



Starry Night



Courtyard of Hospital at Arles



St. Paul Asylum. Saint-Remy



The Church at Auvers



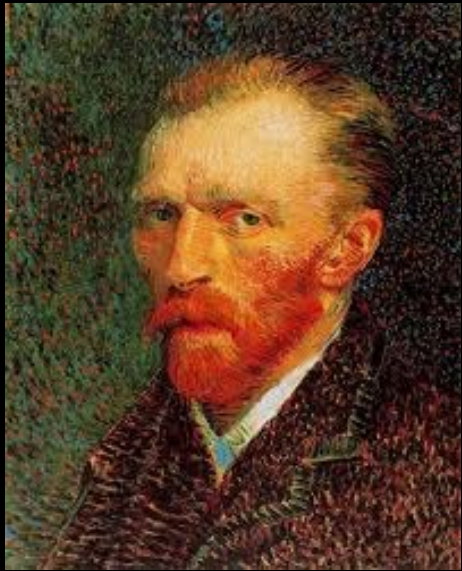
Wheatfield with Crows



Wheatfield with Cypresses



Self portraits



Next periods: Fauvism, Cubism, “Modern Art”

