Vincent van Gogh was not well known during his lifetime, but today he is one of the most famous painters of all time. He only lived a short time but painted approximately 800 pictures. In one of his letters to his brother Theo, he said, “I am functioning like a painting engine.” Although he was very ill during the final years of his young life, his last paintings are said to be his best.

He is known for his contrasting colors and his impasto style filled with hatch strokes and rolling, pulsing motions of his paintbrush. Van Gogh would stroke his paint on the canvas with a knife or brush – almost like working with clay – the paint strokes forming marks with textures. One of Vincent van Gogh’s most famous paintings is his Sunflowers, rich in color contrasts and impasto painting technique. The impasto painting of Vincent van Gogh is experienced by young artists with a very thick homemade paint with a rough finished texture.

Vincent van Gogh (VAN GO) lived only a short time but painted approximately 800 paintings. He was not well known during his lifetime, but today is one of the most famous painters of all time.

**Impasto**

**MATERIALS**
- Impasto Recipe

  In 1/2 cup of medium thick tempera paint, add one tablespoon of white detergent powder. Stir until mixed. Note: Other thickeners that work well are powdered cornstarch or white flour, using the same 1 T. to 1/2 cup paint. Tempera paint thicknesses can vary, so be prepared to thin with water or thicken with more detergent, cornstarch, or flour, if necessary.

  - jars or cups for mixing paints
  - spoons
  - Polystyrene® grocery tray or other flat container
  - popsicle stick or tongue depressor
  - paintbrushes
  - large, white paper or a heavy piece of white posterboard
  - tape

**PROCESS**
1. Prepare the impasto paint recipe in jars or cups, a different color for each container, using spoons, brushes, or popsicle sticks. Van Gogh liked warm colors such as yellow, orange, and brown, but any colors of choice are acceptable for this activity.
2. Scoop dollops of paint colors onto one grocery tray, keeping colors about 1” apart to begin.
3. Apply paint to the paper or posterboard with a popsicle stick or stiff brush. Make textures, lines, and shapes in the paint with the brush or stick.
4. Mix colors together with the stick or a brush on the grocery tray, if desired, to form new colors.
5. Continue to paint and apply more paint until a finished work is complete. The painting will be filled with thick strokes and designs in the paint.
6. Allow the thick impasto painting to dry overnight.
Van Gogh (VAN GO) tried to express his thoughts and emotions in his paintings, often working days without stopping, spending all of his money on paints, and even forgetting to eat.

**Starry Night**

**MATERIALS**
- one sheet of black or dark blue construction paper for the background
- paper scraps
- scissors
- glue
- tempera paints (suggested colors: white, yellow, orange) in jars
- paintbrush
- color print or postcard of van Gogh’s painting, *The Starry Night*, optional

**PROCESS**
Young children may wish to explore making stars with radiating concentric circles. Older children may wish to copy the format of van Gogh’s painting with houses, hills, and starry night sky.
1. Mix tempera paint to make very light yellow, white, orange, and darker yellow. Mix each color in a separate jar.
2. To begin, cut the paper scraps into the shapes of little houses, buildings, churches. Glue these in a row along the lower edge of the dark background paper.
3. Next, paint stars in the night sky. Paint a moon too, if desired.
4. For a van Gogh style, paint dots of broken circles around each star and moon (not a solid ring, but 2 or 3 curved brushstrokes that don’t quite connect). Then add a second ring of dotted brush strokes around the first ring, moving out from the star into the sky. The stars will begin to look like their sparkles are spilling light into the night sky.
5. Make as many rings around the stars and moon as desired, until the painting has a feeling like one of van Gogh’s starry night paintings.

Note: The cover art of *Great Artists* is a starry night painting by Christina Critelli, age 6.
Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Gogh, Vincent van (1853–1890)

Vincent van Gogh, for whom color was the chief symbol of expression, was born in Groot-Zundert, Holland. The son of a pastor, brought up in a religious and cultured atmosphere, Vincent was highly emotional and lacked self-confidence. Between 1860 and 1880 when he finally decided to become an artist, van Gogh had had two unsuitable and unhappy romances and had worked unsuccessfully as a clerk in a bookstore, an art salesman, and a preacher in the Borinage (a dreary mining district in Belgium), where he was dismissed for overzealoulessness. He remained in Belgium to study art, determined to give happiness by creating beauty. The works of his early Dutch period are somber-toned, sharply lit, genre paintings of which the most famous is The Potato Eaters (1885). In that year van Gogh went to Antwerp where he discovered the works of Rubens and purchased Japanese prints. In 1886 he went to Paris to join his brother Théo, the manager of Goupil’s gallery. In Paris van Gogh studied with Cormon, inevitably met Pissarro, Monet, and Gauguin, and 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. He decided to go south to Arles where he hoped his friends would join him and help found a school of art. Gauguin did join him but with disastrous results. In a fit of epilepsy, van Gogh pursued his friend with an open razor, was stopped by Gauguin and ended by cutting off his own ear. Van Gogh then began to alternate between fits of madness and lucidity and was sent to the asylum in Saint-Rémy for treatment. By May of 1890 he seemed much better and went to live in Auvers-sur-Oise under the watchful eye of Dr. Gachet. Two months later he was dead, having shot himself “for the good of all.” During his brief career he had 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 the movement and vibration of form and line. Van Gogh’s inimitable fusion of form and content is powerful; dramatic, lyrically rhythmic, imaginative, and emotional, for the artist was completely absorbed in the effort to explain his struggle against madness and his comprehension of the spiritual essence of man and nature.
Vincent VanGogh (1853-1890)

Born: 1853 in Holland

How he became interested in art: Van Gogh was the oldest of 5 children. He was influenced by the faith of his father, who was a pastor and dreamed of helping poor people. He studied to enter the seminary to become a minister but was not accepted. Although he never studied art, he drew all the time. Van Gogh’s brother, Theo, encouraged him to paint so he moved to Paris to live with Theo and discovered the Impressionist painters. He was fascinated by their bold paintings that burst forth with light and strong colors.

First major work: The Potato Eaters at age 32.

Primary influences: 1885 in Antwerp he studied 17th century painters Rembrandt and Rubens learning figure drawing and shading with lights and darks. In Paris he studied the Impressionists use of bright, bold colors to create energy and movement. He also saw Japanese prints for the first time. In 1888 Van Gogh moved to southern France dazzled by the warm light. Here he mixed his colors less and less using pure pigments.

Most famous works: Sunflowers, his self portraits, Starry Night. Although now so many of his paintings are recognized as major works, Van Gogh only sold one painting during his lifetime. There is a story of how he gave his doctor a painting as a gift, the still life “Irisées” and the doctor did not care for it so he used the painting to plug a hole in his chicken coop. Van Gogh suffered from mental illness throughout his life. Perhaps his most famous work is a self portrait when after a fit of desperation he cut off his ear lobe. His turbulent inner world is reflected in his bold brush strokes and intense use of colors and patterns.

Last works: His final painting is a picture of the field where he died. A vision of yellow wheat and vivid dark blue sky, the field and sky are empty except for small black wings of several crows.

Died: In 1890 as a result of his mental illness.

“What makes a Van Gogh a Van Gogh?”

1. He placed complementary colors next to one another to increase their power.
2. He laid down thick layers of paint.
3. Van Gogh created shadows and reflections with combinations of colors, not just with black.
4. His brushstrokes are vigorous and form strong patterns.
5. Van Gogh outlined his figures to make them stand out against the background.
Sunflowers (1888)
Vincent van Gogh

Kindergarten

Van Gogh had painted a great many flower studies while he was experimenting with complementary colors in Paris. When he arrived in Arles, he painted several studies of sunflowers as a deliberate experiment in precise form and the use of variations of one color. The juxtaposition of various yellows, with green as the only contrast, the nonspecific light source, and the complete absence of perspective makes Sunflowers an extraordinary painting. The artist has succeeded in creating a work that vibrates with drama, light, and space.

Discussion Questions for Kindergarten Students

How many flowers do you see in this picture? (Answer 15) How many are just orange? (Answer 6)

How many colors do you see in this picture? (Answer yellow, orange, green, blue & black)

Which flower is your favorite and why?

What do you think the blue line is? (Answer – the edge of the table)

Do you see any shadows? (Answer – no shadows)

What kind of mood do you think Vincent van Gogh was in when he painted this picture?

Would you like to have this picture in your house? (Guest room story)

Do any of you have sunflowers in your yard? (Van Gogh had a view from his home in Arles that included sunflowers that edged railroad tracks)

Are these sunflowers moving or still?

Do you think these flowers are friendly?

Comparison to Irises: What colors are in this picture? What color do you see in this picture that you don’t see in the other? Does anyone know the name of these flowers?
Starry Night (1889)
Vincent van Gogh

First & Second Grade

This famous work was painted while van Gogh was a patient at the asylum at Saint-Remy, near Arles. Van Gogh had a reasonable amount of freedom at the asylum and was encouraged to paint. He worked passionately while he was there, producing a great many canvases. This painting is remarkable for its intense, swirling energy and seems a forceful expression of van Gogh's own inner turmoil, as if it had erupted onto the canvas in a great burst of spontaneous creativity. To some degree this is true; van Gogh's letters contain descriptions of a scene of a starry night which was obsessing him and he writes of working well into the night. In these same letters, however, there are several full preliminary drawings that tell us that despite the appearance of complete spontaneity, Starry Night was a well-thought out painting.

The composition is controlled: the great swirl in the sky that moves from left to right curves back on itself in the center of the painting, then moves on again and curls once more to join another river of movement. The halos surrounding the moon and stars accent this movement. The thrust of the cypress tree checks the horizontal rush of the currents in the sky; the vertical accent of the tree is repeated, in miniature, by the church steeple. Although this painting may well have been done in a fervor of energy and inspiration, it was based on careful study and planning, on method and rational thought. It is a tribute to the genius of van Gogh that he has transcended the planned canvas to create a painting that explodes with spontaneous passion.

Discussion Questions for First & Second Grade Students

What is this a picture of? (Discussion of subject matter - movement or color or mood mentioned.)

Is this painting still or moving? Calm or excited?

How would it look different if Van Gogh took a picture of this scene with a camera? (Discussion of normal colors vs. imagined ones, normal shaped trees, clouds, etc., can’t see wind...)

How would you get it to look like this? (Discussion of big blobs of paint, fast, not careful brushstrokes, not caring if things in the painting look real, not caring if the colors are true to life.)

What three colors are used the most? Are they mostly bright or mostly dark? Does that make you think happy or sad?

Compare with The Olive Trees - How are these two paintings the same? (Discussion of color, movement, and brushstrokes). Does The Olive Trees make you think calm or excited?

Which paint brush did Van Gogh use to paint this picture? (Hold up different size paintbrushes.) (Discussion of fine, detailed work vs. bold, fast work)

Show us how you would use this paintbrush to paint this picture. (Have each student stand up, trace their easel in the air, hold their paintbrush and palette and make painting strokes.) Discussion of fast, bold, short brush strokes, emotion and mood of artist.
Van Gogh's Bedroom at Arles (1988)
Vincent van Gogh

Third & Fourth Grade

When van Gogh could no longer bear the pressures of the outside world he returned to this room.

"...Simply my bedroom... only here color is to do everything... rest the brain or rather the imagination," he wrote. He chose his colors deliberately – blues, warm yellows, bright red for the counterpane. Everything in the room has a square solidity, a simplicity that contrast sharply with the complicated movements of his country landscapes.

Discussion Questions for Third & Fourth Grade Students

Which room in the house is this a painting of?

Do you think this bedroom belongs to a child or an adult? Why do you think that?

What objects are on the table in the room? (soap in a dish, a pitcher and glass for water, another pitcher and bowl for bathing, two bottles and a hairbrush)

What do you think these objects are used for?

Why do you think Van Gogh painted two chairs in the room? (Van Gogh painted two chairs in this painting as his friend Gauguin was coming to visit.)

Which items in the painting are there two of? (There are two chairs, two doors, two pillows, and two portraits over the bed.)

Who do you think the people in the paintings over the bed are? (The man is a self-portrait of Van Gogh and the woman is his sister.)

Can you see the other painting above the pillows on the bed? Can you see what the subject is of this painting? (It is an image of Van Gogh's painting, "Rocks with Oak Tree").

Is there a window in this painting?

Can you see anything outside of the window?

What time do you think it is in this painting? Why do you think so?

What shapes do you see in this painting?

What colors did Van Gogh use?

Do you see anything in this bedroom which you do not have in your bedroom?

Would you like to live in this bedroom? Why or why not?
Scituate Schools – Docent Art for Children

The Café Terrace at Night
Vincent van Gogh

Fifth & Sixth Grade

Van Gogh knew of a stylish café in the center of Arles where patrons sat outdoors at night, and he went there to paint this picture. Although it is late at night in the city, van Gogh used bright colors to depict the café terrace. The darkest areas are made up of deep blue, green and purple. Nowhere can pure black be found. His artist friends in Paris taught him that even shadows are composed of a mixture of colors. In the painting, van Gogh created three kinds of light. A gas lamp reaches out from the café wall on a bracket and emits an intense yellow radiance. A second, softer light comes from the window and doors. The third kind of light comes from the stars in the heavens, some of which van Gogh painted with strokes of luminous silver to suggest the way real stars shine. Van Gogh was proud of painting “a night picture without any black, nothing but beautiful blue and violet and green.” His enthusiasm for the colors shows in the generous way he applied them. Even in the reproduction, his thick brushstrokes are apparent across the underside of the awning and in the deep green pine branches opposite it.

Discussion Questions for Fifth & Sixth Grade Students

 Where do you think this café is located? (City? Country? Somewhere close by? Somewhere far away?)

 What time of day is it? How do you know?

 What season is it? What are the clues?

 Look at the sky: What are those dots? (Fireworks, stars) Why do you suppose van Gogh painted them the way he did?

 If you came upon this café would you want to stop in? Why? Why not?

 Use your imagination: What can you hear? (Music, laughter, talking)

 Use your imagination: Do you smell anything? (Food, flowers)

 What is the street made of? How do you know?

 Tell me about the people sitting in the café. (Old, young, men, women, educated, uneducated…)

 Do you think van Gogh feels like he is part of this group in the café or separate and different from them?

 What would it be like to live above the café?

 Look down the street: What do you see? (Church steeple, horse and carriage…)

 Why do you suppose van Gogh chose the colors he did for the café? If you were walking down this street would the café feel warm? Cold? Welcoming? Exclusive or unwelcoming?