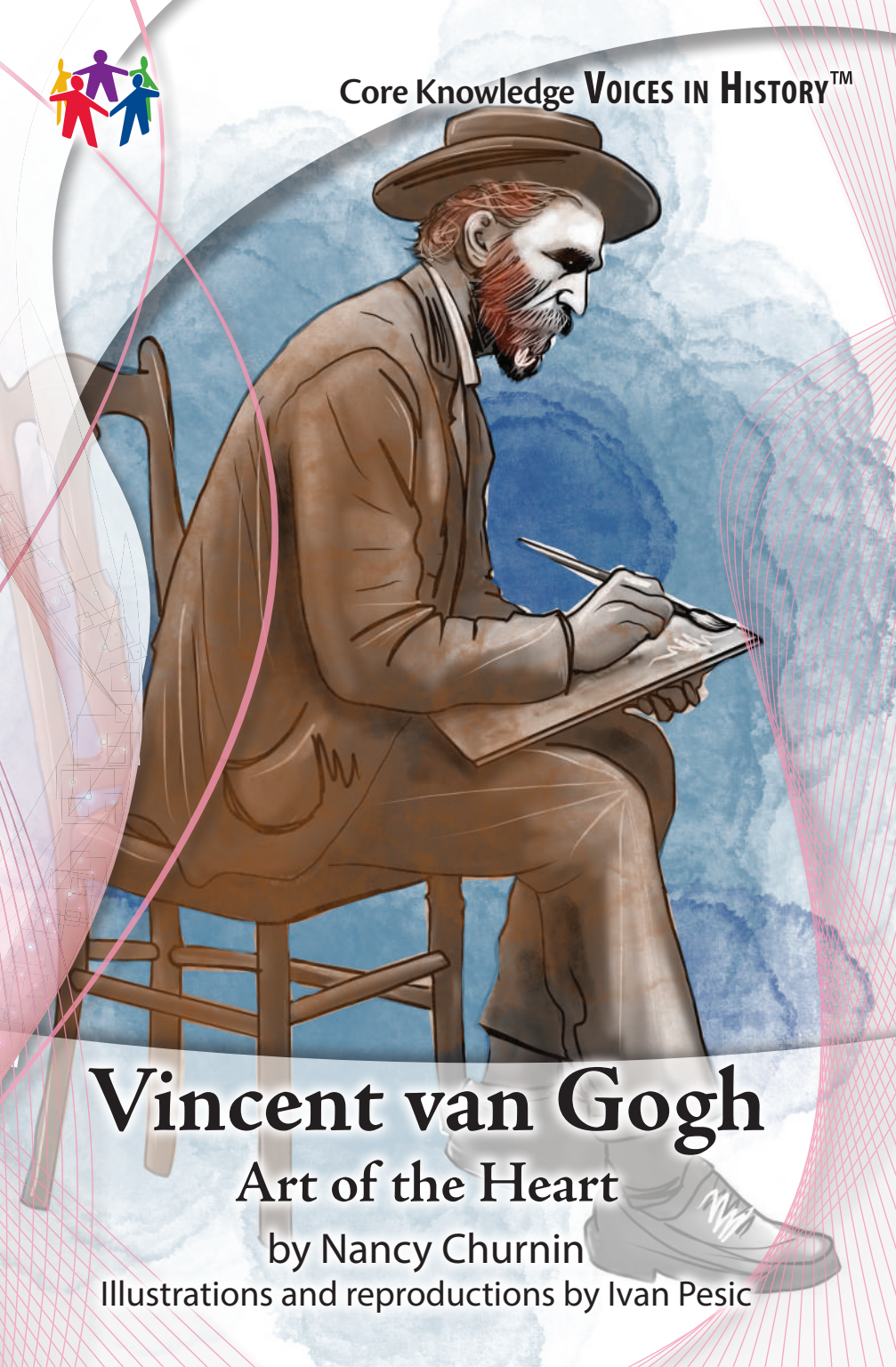




Core Knowledge **VOICES IN HISTORY™**



Vincent van Gogh

Art of the Heart

by Nancy Churnin

Illustrations and reproductions by Ivan Pesic

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VOICES IN HISTORY: BIOGRAPHY SERIES™

ISBN 979-8-88970-325-9

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PRINTED IN CANADA

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1

A Boy Who Loved Nature

Vincent loved to wander in the woods near his family's home in Groot-Zundert, a village in the southern Netherlands. Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Vincent leapt out of bed. He pulled on his pants. He bounded for the door, eager to catch the sunrise. He couldn't wait to be among the trees, the leaves, the wind, and the light that swirled around him, making him feel charged and connected to everything. The world was more amazing than anyone realized!

His younger brother, Theo, rubbed his eyes. Vincent put his fingers to his lips. Theo kept quiet so Vincent could escape without a fuss. Theo understood what Vincent needed, even when others didn't.

With the family's gas lamps and candles unlit, Vincent gripped the banister as a guide down the creaky wooden staircase.

Outside, crisp air filled his lungs. Vincent's cheeks glowed. He whistled back at birds singing in the gray mist. His feet crunched loose twigs and fallen leaves. He saw the morning unfold through the gradual brightening of

the sky—a line of white, followed by a few blue minutes, and then glorious red and yellow strokes of glistening color. Red as his hair, falling on grass as green as his eyes.



When the show was over, he sighed. It had been heavenly! He closed his eyes and used his memory to preserve the bright, brilliant images he loved. Vincent opened his eyes, smelled the fragrance of the flowers, and stuffed his pockets with feathers, sticks, and stones—souvenirs that would spark his memories, giving him a whiff of the woods when he was shut up in his room again.

Later in the afternoon, while Theo was practicing numbers and letters, Vincent carefully arranged bits of rough bark, soft moss, and worn stones on his desk, marveling. There were no words to convey how incredible they were! But . . . was there a way to express feelings without words?

Vincent picked up a stick of charcoal. He began to draw. No, that wasn't it. He rubbed lines that felt out of place. His hands, dusty now, covered faded lines with truer ones.

He drew and drew. Hours slipped by. Theo walked in softly.

Family and friends whispered that Vincent was hard to understand. Theo knew that Vincent just saw things differently—more deeply. Theo understood his brother. Someday, everyone else would, too. Theo was sure of it.

In many ways, Vincent resembled his parents.

charcoal: black carbon used for drawing

His father, Theodorus van Gogh, was a pastor who spoke about loving and caring for people and the world. His mother, Anna Carbentus, enjoyed sketching and painting plants and flowers. They seemed like two very different things—his father’s mission to save souls and his mother’s passion for art and nature. But in Vincent, they were one. He felt a connection between nature and spirit. He tried to capture that in his drawings. Although he didn’t share his father’s ease with people, he hoped that one day his art would uplift others as his father’s sermons did.

But there was one important way that Vincent was different from his parents, and from Theo too. Like Theo, Vincent’s parents had a sense of calm about them. Vincent’s moods swung wildly. One moment, he was boisterously happy. Later, he was sad and angry. Once, he showed his parents a clay elephant he’d made. They exclaimed how lovely it was. Vincent smashed it. It wasn’t good enough to praise, he thought. And he had not created it to be beautiful. He was trying to say something—even if he couldn’t tell them what that was exactly. Another time, he showed his parents a drawing of a cat. They told him they loved it. Furious again, he tore it up. Now his parents were unsure of what to say when he showed them his art. They loved their child, but they didn’t understand him.

For a long time, only one person did. Theo knew that Vincent's heart was good and kind, even if he couldn't control his feelings. He knew that there was nothing Vincent wouldn't do to help someone else, even if it required sacrifice. He could see the way art gave his brother a sense of purpose that helped Vincent feel connected, anchored in a whirling world.

In later years, Vincent tried to persuade his brother to become an artist, too. But Theo always knew that was not where his talent lay. Instead, Theo devoted himself to helping his brother. He became an extension of Vincent's paintbrush, helping bring his brother's art to the canvas of the world—and changing it forever.

Vincent's World

Vincent was born on March 30, 1853, decades before electric lights were commonplace. His family depended on gas lamps or candles that had to be blown out before going to bed so they wouldn't cause a fire. While clocks were around then, an observant child like Vincent who loved nature and spent more time outside than inside may have figured out time by observing the movement of the sun across the sky, noting its position against the horizon. If he lost track of the hours, the clanging of church bells may have helped him determine the beginning and ending of the workday, as well as the time for prayers.

2

A Student Who Struggled

There was only one teacher for two hundred students of all ages in the village. Vincent didn't mind this. When the teacher was busy with other children, Vincent learned in his own way, on his own schedule. But it bothered Vincent's parents. They wanted their children to have the kind of education that would help them earn money one day. They hired a governess to teach Vincent and his siblings. In 1864, when Vincent was eleven, his parents decided he needed more. They sent him to a boarding school twenty miles away, in Zevenbergen.

Vincent's spirits sank as he climbed into the carriage that would take him away from everyone and everything he loved. His parents told him this was part of growing up.

Vincent was lonely at school. His moods continued to swing in a way that alarmed others. When other children and teachers kept their distance, there was no Theo to run to for understanding, no woods to escape to for comfort. But he did discover friends in books.

He read and read. He memorized pages from books by the wildly popular British author Charles Dickens, who wrote with compassion about abandoned children and poor families. He was fascinated by American author Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had written the best-selling *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, about how wrong it was to enslave people. Vincent admired these writers for using their art to inspire people to change things for the better. The characters on the pages were so vivid, they kept him company.

Vincent was relieved when he was accepted at the high school in Tilburg two years later. Maybe things would be better there.

At first, they were. He studied languages—French was a favorite. He had lessons in arithmetic, history, geography, geometry, botany, zoology, gymnastics, and—hooray!—drawing. His mind pulsed with ideas. But his loneliness grew like a whirlpool under his feet, threatening to suck him in. His moods swirled wildly as he grew frustrated with teachers who expected him to memorize facts and answer questions the way they wanted him to. What if the answers on tests weren't right? What if there were more important questions to ask?

geometry: a kind of math that deals with shapes and figures

botany: the study of plants

zoology: the study of animals

Vincent didn't care about tests or grades. He wanted to understand life—his place and the place of others in the world.

In 1868, just before his fifteenth birthday, Vincent took a train to the town of Breda and walked home. He had been a good student, one of only five in his small class to be promoted after the first year. But he refused to go back.

Vincent was happy to be once again with his family and the familiar trees, flowers, and birds he loved. His parents reminded him that he was no longer a child. If he was finished with school, he had to work. But what could Vincent do? His father knew Vincent loved art, so he reached out to his brother, Vincent's uncle, after whom Vincent had been named. Uncle Vincent listened to his brother and nodded. Yes, he could find his nephew a job.

Soon, Vincent was traveling again—this time to The Hague, an important city in the Netherlands. Vincent would be an apprentice in an art firm called Goupil & Co., which sold original paintings, etchings, lithographs, and prints.

At first, Vincent was elated! His job had him studying, sharing, and talking about art all day with customers. After one year, he was commended for his wonderful work in encouraging customers to bring art into their homes.

In January 1873, Theo started working at Goupil's branch in Brussels, the capital of Belgium. Vincent was pleased that he and his brother were now working for the same firm, even though they were in different cities. But all too soon, Vincent's promising start began to sputter. He fell for a young woman who married someone else. He was heartbroken. His uncle tried to help by arranging Vincent's transfer to the London office. Vincent embraced the change. He purchased a top hat and a pair of gloves in his new city. He prepared for his work by exploring London's art galleries and sketching the people he met. He was twenty years old. He had found his way—or so he thought.

Then, in 1874 Vincent was transferred to Paris, France. He was even more deeply enthralled with art, but he became more opinionated about it. It was his job to sell art, but if he didn't think the art was meaningful, he tried to talk clients out of the purchase! His bosses grew exasperated. But Vincent was already thinking about art not as something to sell but as something that could make a positive change in the world.

Vincent thought about the writers he admired. Where were the artists who used their paintbrush to inspire

enthralled: fascinated

exasperated: annoyed and frustrated



empathy toward others, especially those in need? Where were the painters who celebrated the simple treasures of nature, which deserved protection and care too? Where could he find the art that he wanted to see?

Vincent was moved back to London in January 1875, then back to Paris in May. By the time he was fired in April 1876, he was as happy to leave the company as he had been to leave school. But once again, he didn't know what to do next.

Letter from Vincent to Theo, London, 1874

How I'd like to talk to you about art again, but now we can only write to each other about it often; find things beautiful as much as you can, most people find too little beautiful. . . .

Always continue walking a lot and loving nature, for that's the real way to learn to understand art better and better. Painters understand nature and love it, and teach us to see.

3

The Wrong Paths

A series of jobs followed. Vincent became a teacher in Ramsgate, England, then in a town just outside of London. But he didn't like teaching any more than he had liked being a student. He took a job at a bookstore in the Netherlands. But he preferred reading books to selling them. In his spare time, he sketched people and scenes. He translated his Bible into different languages. He wondered what his purpose was. Was he meant to preach like his father?

In May 1877, at the age of twenty-four, Vincent returned to school, this time to study to become a minister. But once again, he felt that school was not taking him where he wanted to go. Was it possible to become a preacher without spending time in a classroom taking tests? He switched to a school in Brussels, Belgium, that was willing to quickly train people and send them to preach in poor communities. After three months, the school sent him to a village of miners called Wasmes. They offered him a soft bed with warm meals in a baker's cozy home.

minister: a clergy member in a Protestant church

preacher: someone who gives religious speeches

But going from the comfort of a warm home to the cold, bare huts of hungry workers didn't feel right. How could he help people if he didn't live like them, didn't truly understand them? To the shock of those who hired him, Vincent moved into an abandoned miner's home. He stopped bathing or caring for his hair. He grew thinner as he ate less and less. The people at the church were embarrassed. Even the miners didn't understand why Vincent chose to live in a way they wanted to escape.

As curious, disapproving stares spread, Vincent was confused. Why didn't they understand what he was trying to do? He knew they wanted him to go back to the baker's home, sleep comfortably, dress well, and represent religion as a path to prosperity. But that didn't feel right. And Vincent was never very good at doing what didn't feel right. When his contract as a preacher ended after about six months, it was not renewed.

Once again, Vincent was lost, broke, and alone. He wandered and wondered, surviving as best he could. In 1880, he did what he often did when he was perplexed. He reached for paper and charcoal. He sketched, and the images blossoming on the page filled him with a sense of peace and purpose he hadn't felt since he was a boy.

The more he drew, the more he knew he needed lessons to improve. He studied with Wilhelm Roelofs, with artists at the Academie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, and with his relative, the artist Anton Mauve, in The Hague. As his confidence grew, he wrote to Theo that “everything has changed for me, and now I’m on my way.”

For Vincent, however, it was not enough to improve his technique. As always, he hungered for a sense of purpose. In 1885, he found a way to bring the things he loved together—painting, people, and nature. He painted poor farmers as they sat around their dining table, eating a simple potato dinner they’d harvested themselves. He called it *The Potato Eaters*.

Love and care filled every stroke. As he painted, it came to him slowly, like the sun dawning on the early mornings of his childhood, that this was what he was meant to do. His purpose was to draw people and nature. His mission was to show them in all their beauty so those who saw his paintings would value workers and the world.

Vincent knew from that moment that he would paint not the rich, the famous, or the legends that were popular in the art world but the people who struggled. He wanted to bring pictures into the world that inspired

technique: a particular way of doing something that requires skill

empathy for people and nature. He drew a sketch of *The Potato Eaters*. He mailed it to Theo, sharing his idea and hopes for the painting. He also wrote to Theo about his dreams of what he wanted his life as a painter to be. He shared, humbly, that he didn't have money for canvas and paints. Would Theo help?



canvas: strong cloth used to paint on, usually stretched on a frame

4

A Painter's Journey

Theo felt the passion in Vincent's sketch. Vincent's new path wouldn't be easy. Many would think Vincent crazy to become a painter without money for supplies or housing or food. But Theo understood. He always did. Luckily, Theo had become a successful art dealer in Paris, having followed Vincent into the career his brother had left behind. Theo sent his brother money.

Vincent was happier than he had been in a long time. But he worried. His skills kept improving, but Theo kept telling him he didn't think Vincent's work was ready to sell. Vincent didn't want to be a burden. He hoped his art would make money so he could pay Theo back. Letters flew back and forth between the brothers. He saved as much as he could from what Theo sent him to pay for paint, brushes, paper, and canvas.

art dealer: someone who buys and sells artwork

Theo, knowing that it could take years before Vincent's work sold, urged his brother to take care of himself. Vincent mailed new sketches and paintings to Theo. Theo, aware of new trends in art, urged his brother to lighten his colors, to try bright ones like the new, exciting artists in Paris who called themselves impressionists were doing. Vincent thought *The Potato Eaters* would be his breakthrough. Theo felt its power, but he also knew the market well enough to disagree.

Then Vincent had an idea. What if he moved in with Theo? That way Theo wouldn't have to send Vincent money for rent. And once Vincent was in Paris, he could learn from these impressionists Theo admired. Theo agreed. But he told Vincent to wait for the summer. He needed time to prepare. Theo began looking for a larger apartment. He checked off lists of what Vincent would need. He called on artists who could help his brother.

Then, months before Vincent was scheduled to arrive, on February 28, 1886, Theo received a note. Vincent was in Paris at the Louvre Museum! "My dear Theo," Vincent wrote, "Don't be cross with me that I've come all of a sudden." Vincent told his startled brother that he had decided waiting was a waste of time. He would visit art exhibits while he waited for Theo to pick him up.

impressionists: painters in the late 1800s who used dabs of primary colors to represent light



Impressionism

Today, impressionism is a beloved style of art known for its focus on real, everyday life; its bright, vibrant colors; short, quick brushstrokes; and attention to light and color. This style creates a feeling, instead of detailed, realistic, idealized scenes found in classical painting. But the name was not originally a compliment. When a founder of impressionism, Claude Monet, exhibited his painting Impression, Sunrise in 1874, it was criticized as an "impression" rather than a finished painting because it didn't represent the painting traditions of the time. Theo, however, immediately loved impressionism and urged Vincent to learn from it. When Vincent moved to Paris, he befriended and studied with painters whom Theo recommended and Vincent grew to admire. Ultimately, because Vincent did things his own way, he created his own distinct style and methods that were different enough to get him labeled a leader in a brand-new category: post-impressionism.

5

Vincent in Paris

Even though Theo wasn't as ready as he'd hoped, he was looking forward to seeing Vincent. But when Theo set eyes on his brother at the Louvre, he was startled. While Theo was neat and carefully dressed, Vincent was skinny and dirty, with torn clothing and a battered hat.

The contrasts continued after they were settled in Theo's apartment. Theo enjoyed dining, talking, and laughing with friends. Vincent argued about everything. Theo was steady and even-tempered. Vincent had wild mood swings and needed time alone to think and create.

Theo realized they needed more space to get along. He moved them to a larger apartment where Vincent had a study of his own to sleep in, next to a small room with a window to paint. Slowly, Vincent began to eat better, look better, and have more energy. But Theo, exhausted from worrying about Vincent and about the cost of supporting them both, grew tired and thin.

In other ways, things improved. As time went on, Theo began to enjoy the heated discussions about art and life. They made him think more deeply. As he'd promised, Theo showed Vincent paintings by the impressionists. Vincent was amazed by the colors and the brushstrokes, how they used dabs and dashes rather than smooth, classical lines.

Vincent worked on his art in the studio of Fernand Cormon. He copied images. He worked on shape and perspective. He corrected his drawings over and over, sketching long after everyone else had left.

But as always, after Vincent got to a certain point in his learning, he knew he had to stop doing what had been done and find his own way. After three months, he quit the studio to study on his own. He began to paint.

He loaded his brush with bright colors. He stroked thick, wet blobs of paint onto the canvas. He tried feathery strokes. Gazing in the mirror, Vincent painted himself. Gazing outside his window, he painted the nature he had loved since he was a boy. He painted simple treasures inside as well, including a worn pair of boots, one boot standing upright and the other sagging lopsidedly. Were they just shoes, or were they, perhaps, his feelings about the two brothers, alike and different as a pair of shoes in two different positions can be?

perspective: point of view



Theo didn't think Vincent's paintings were ready to sell, but other painters, drawn to the feelings thrumming through his work, were happy to trade their paintings for Vincent's. Through these trades, Theo and Vincent developed a great collection. Best of all, Vincent finally began to make friends. He had finally found his people—artists who understood his childlike wonder with the world. His friends sent him flowers every week, which inspired his paintings of roses, gladioli, and—his favorite—sunflowers.

While Vincent grew happier, Theo struggled. Theo wanted to sell work by new painters he admired, but his bosses wanted him to keep selling work by the same painters they had always sold. Theo didn't feel he could argue with them or walk away when Vincent and his parents were depending on his salary.

Plus, there was something else—or rather, someone else—on Theo's mind. Theo was in love with a young woman. Her name was Johanna Bonger, but everyone, including Theo, called her Jo. Theo wanted to marry her, but only if she were willing to commit herself to Vincent too, just as Theo had. He knew that was a lot to ask. But he would never give up his brother—not even for the woman he loved. Would she understand? Would she agree?

Theo waited a long time for Jo's response. In the meantime, he felt glimmers of the sunlight Vincent was working into his paintings. Theo gazed at his brother's paintings from different angles, studying them with the eyes of an art dealer. He began to wonder. Could it be? Yes, it wasn't his imagination or wishful thinking. Vincent was becoming a great painter!



Letter from Theo to Jo,
July 26, 1887, Breda, Netherlands

As you know, I have a brother . . . & it is to him that I owe my love of art. . . .

Perhaps you'll think that what I am telling you about him has nothing to do with us, at least when it comes to giving you a glimpse into my heart. But having been through so much with him & having pondered his views on life, I would feel I were concealing something important were I not to tell you about my relationship with him from the start.

6

A Friend and a Partner

After two years in Paris with Theo, Vincent was restless once again. He told Theo he wanted to move south to a place where it was sunnier and warmer than Paris. As hard as it had often been for Theo to live with Vincent, it was harder to let him go. Still, Theo understood, as he always did. Vincent was compelled to move to where his art could grow. On February 19, 1888, Theo took him to the train to Arles.

The brothers wrote each other often. Vincent shared his excitement about painting outdoors among the trees. Away from the community of artists and their competing styles, Vincent created his own style of swirling strokes glistening on the canvas, with a passion and methods that were all his own.

Theo mailed him one hundred tubes of paint in different colors. Vincent was grateful. When he wasn't painting, he read. He discovered a new favorite poet, Walt Whitman. "Give me the splendid silent sun with all his beams full-dazzling," Whitman wrote in *Leaves of Grass*. Vincent dreamed of painting the sun like that.

But Vincent grew lonely. He found a little yellow house with rooms available. He rented the right side of the house, which had four rooms—enough space to have a studio and still share with a roommate. It would be wonderful to have company! But who would join him?

Vincent thought about an artist he had met in Paris, Paul Gauguin. Paul was talented but poor. What if Vincent invited Paul to move in with him? The two artists could save money while working side by side, inspiring and encouraging each other. Vincent asked Theo what he thought about the idea. Theo agreed that it would be good for Vincent to paint with a friend. Vincent was happy when Paul said yes!

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903)

Like Vincent, Paul Gauguin was a post-impressionist artist whose work became famous after his death. Paul lost his job as a stockbroker when the French stock market crashed in 1882, but he welcomed it as an opportunity to pursue his passion as a painter. He particularly loved painting the people and landscapes of Tahiti, where he spent the end of his life.

Vincent bought Paul a bed and added a mirror so they could work on self-portraits. He hoped that Paul's presence would help steady his mood swings. But Paul was not calming like Theo. When Paul craved quiet,

stockbroker: someone who buys and sells shares of companies for other people

stock market: a system for buying and selling shares of companies



Vincent wouldn't stop talking. Paul was neat. Vincent was sloppy. The two men clashed.

They had good moments, too. Vincent and Paul learned from each other, just as Vincent had hoped. Paul encouraged Vincent to work from his imagination. Vincent pushed Paul to study nature and the people around them. Paul studied and painted Vincent painting sunflowers. Vincent tried to paint the images in his mind.

But in December 1888, Paul had had enough of Vincent's arguments, clutter, and mood swings.

He packed his bags. Vincent pleaded with Paul to stay longer. For a time, they seemed to have made up.

Meanwhile, in Paris, Theo heard from Jo. She loved him! She wanted to marry Theo, and even though she had not yet met Vincent, she wanted to be Theo's partner in supporting and caring for his brother. Vincent was about to have a second person in the world who loved and believed in him.

Father of Free Verse

Walt Whitman (1819–92), called “the father of free verse,” is one of the most influential poets in American history. Whitman’s poem “Song of Myself” inspired Vincent when he painted The Starry Night.

7

The First Mystery

There are things we know about the time Vincent and Paul spent together and things we don't. We know that they argued. We know they loved and hated each other's work. On Christmas Eve 1888, while Theo celebrated his engagement with Jo, he received a telegram from Paul saying that Vincent was dying.

Panicked, Theo threw clothes into a suitcase. Jo, who was also worried, embraced Theo before he left for a night train. At home, she prayed for Vincent to recover.

On the train, Theo read Paul's words again. Paul wrote that Vincent had been angry when Paul left the yellow house and that the next morning, on December 24, he returned to find neighbors and police officers gathered at the house. They told him that Vincent's left ear was badly wounded and that Vincent had been rushed to the hospital. Paul was waiting there for Theo to arrive.

Who Knows?

Some historians wonder if Paul was telling the truth. While many people believe that Vincent injured himself, was it possible that Paul, who was an expert fencer, wounded Vincent's ear? Was it an accident? Or was it an argument gone terribly wrong? Vincent never talked about the incident in the many letters he wrote to Theo. Is it possible that Paul had hurt him and Vincent kept that to himself, not wanting to get his friend in trouble?

No one would ever really know what happened in the yellow house on Christmas Eve 1888. It would be the first of two tragic mysteries in Vincent's life.

One thing was for sure, however. Vincent was very unwell. Theo's train arrived in Arles on Christmas morning. He hurried to the hospital.



8

Healing and Hope

Theo slipped into the bed beside his brother, just as he had as a child. Theo hoped his brother knew how much he loved him, how much he needed him to survive. No one had ever understood Vincent the way Theo had. And now Theo had a special gift for his brother: Jo. Theo told his brother that in Jo, he would have a sister who would love, understand, and care for Vincent just as Theo did.

The doctors worried about Vincent's wounds. But they worried even more about his mind. Vincent's outbursts scared the other patients. At the same time, Paul made it clear he wanted to leave and go back to Paris. Theo asked Vincent's doctor to keep him updated on Vincent's condition. Then Theo left with Paul, taking him back to Paris.

After Paul was gone, Vincent began to heal physically and mentally. Soon Vincent was writing to Theo, reassuring him that he was doing better.

Still, doctors worried about Vincent's mood swings. When Vincent was better, he tried to go back to the yellow house to paint. But he was lonely. His neighbors

stared. They complained to the police about him. Vincent, who never wanted to upset anyone, grew sad. He stopped eating. He stopped speaking. He cried. He went back to the hospital. He wrote to Theo, asking for paint.

When the tubes of paint arrived, Vincent painted orchards. He was not well enough to go to Theo and Jo's wedding, but painting helped ground him. He thought of what he should do next. He didn't feel well enough to live on his own, so he looked for a special hospital where doctors cared for people with troubled minds. He found one where the doctors would keep him safe and fed, providing him with the time and energy to paint.

Theo sent canvases, paints, brushes, and chocolate. Vincent enjoyed painting in the hospital garden. Theo and Jo both wrote encouraging and loving letters. And Vincent worked with passion, pouring everything he had into his work.

Masterpieces in the Hospital Garden

Vincent's bedroom had views of golden wheat fields that he loved to paint, with lovely olive groves and mountains in the distance. He was given an extra room in the clinic to use as studio space and was allowed to paint in the hospital's walled garden—and later, as he progressed, outside the hospital. In this time, Vincent created about 150 paintings. Many of these were the greatest of his career, including his masterpiece, The Starry Night.

One of the many things that Vincent and Paul had argued about was how and what painters should paint: Vincent thought they should paint things they observed, and Paul thought they should rely on imagination and memory. In *The Starry Night*, Vincent did both. He painted a real night sky but one that felt like a dream with a message. He used more somber, dark, and deep ultramarine and cobalt blue colors than the bright ones that he loved using for flowers and daytime images. The darkness made the yellow swirls of light stand out even more with a message of hope and possibility, as if they were saying, *Listen*. Using swirling brush strokes, he seemed to be saying that everything—the buildings, the trees, the stars, the moon, and everyone—is interconnected in one brilliant, blinding force of energy.

There were no people in the painting, not even Vincent, and yet he was everywhere.



9

The Final Mystery

Vincent's art had never been bolder and more confident. His canvases glowed with energy, light, and life. As his paintings arrived in Paris, Theo and Jo were dazzled. They marveled as they covered their walls with them, feeling the vibrancy of Vincent through his work. Vincent began to work on a painting for their new baby, his nephew and namesake, baby Vincent, born January 31, 1890. Soon the couple unwrapped a new masterwork, *Almond Blossom*, a celebration of delicate white almond blossoms against a blue sky.

Vincent hoped they might hang the painting in the child's bedroom. But Theo and Jo, knowing Vincent's paintings were made to be shared with the world, proudly arranged it above the piano in the drawing room so that it was the first thing visitors would see.

The world was catching on to the brilliance of Vincent's work. An exhibit by the group Les Vingt (The Twenty) in Brussels in early 1890 featured Vincent's paintings alongside works by impressionist Alfred Sisley and fellow post-impressionists Paul Gauguin and Henri

de Toulouse-Lautrec, among others. The same works were shown again later that year at a major exhibition in Paris. Theo finally sold one of Vincent's paintings, *The Red Vineyard*, which he had painted in Arles in November 1888. And Vincent received his first major review—a rave by a critic who loved his work.

A Community of Impressionists and Post-Impressionists

It was a breakthrough for Vincent when his work was exhibited alongside that of Paul Gauguin, Alfred Sisley, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. To be included with respected impressionists and post-impressionists was a sign that finally, Vincent was being taken seriously as an artist. Alfred Sisley, an impressionist focusing on landscapes, had studied in Paris with impressionists Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet. Despite creating around nine hundred paintings and one hundred pastel drawings, Alfred, like other painters of this period, struggled financially in a world that didn't appreciate impressionist art.

In May 1890, Vincent, encouraged, felt strong enough to leave the hospital. He wanted to live closer to Theo and Jo. Together, they found an inn in a village twenty miles outside of Paris that would rent him a room. Best of all, it was near a doctor who admired his paintings and offered to keep an eye on him.

pastel drawings: drawings done with special crayons called pastels, formed from a paste made with ground pigment

On the way to his new home, Vincent stopped to spend time with Theo, Jo, and baby Vincent at their apartment. It was blissful! Afterward, when Vincent settled into his new attic bedroom at the top of the stairs, it reminded him of his beloved childhood home in Groot-Zundert, where he had shared a bed with Theo. He was excited to paint there, he wrote to Theo and Jo.

Theo, Jo, and baby Vincent visited Vincent in his new home. Vincent visited his family again in their apartment. After ten years, Vincent's dream of inspiring people through his art was coming true. Even the painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec became a fan as well as a close friend.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901)

Comte Henri-Marie-Raymonde de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa, a post-impressionist like Vincent, met and befriended Vincent in 1886 in Paris, at a studio where they both were taking lessons. Henri preferred to paint women, dancers, and bohemians and was famous for the posters he created for the Moulin Rouge cabaret. Henri was a fierce champion of Vincent's. When another artist criticized Vincent's work before an exhibition in Brussels, Henri challenged him to a duel! The artist apologized, and the duel didn't take place.

And yet something troubled Vincent. Theo's health wasn't good, and he was struggling to provide for his growing family. That made Vincent anxious to sell more paintings, even though Theo urged him not to worry.

But Vincent couldn't stop worrying. He painted in a fury, canvas after canvas. He created more than seventy paintings and thirty drawings in his new home.

And that's why what happened next is such a mystery.

In July 1890, Theo received a letter from the doctor looking after his brother, saying that Vincent might be dying. Once again, Theo got on the first train he could find, hoping to save his brother as he did before.

In a World of Men

Most of the well-known artists of the time were men. Years later, the genius of impressionists Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Eva Gonzalés, and Marie Bracquemond would be recognized. But for decades, their work was not featured in major public exhibitions. Anna Boch was the only female member of the invitation-only artists' group Les Vingt, whose 1890 show featured Vincent's work. Anna created around 913 paintings in styles that encompassed impressionism as well as pointillism, a technique in which small, distinct dots of color are applied in patterns to suggest an image. Anna promoted and supported Vincent and other artists of her time by buying their works. She was the only person to purchase a painting by Vincent in his lifetime: The Red Vineyard.



10

The Starry Night

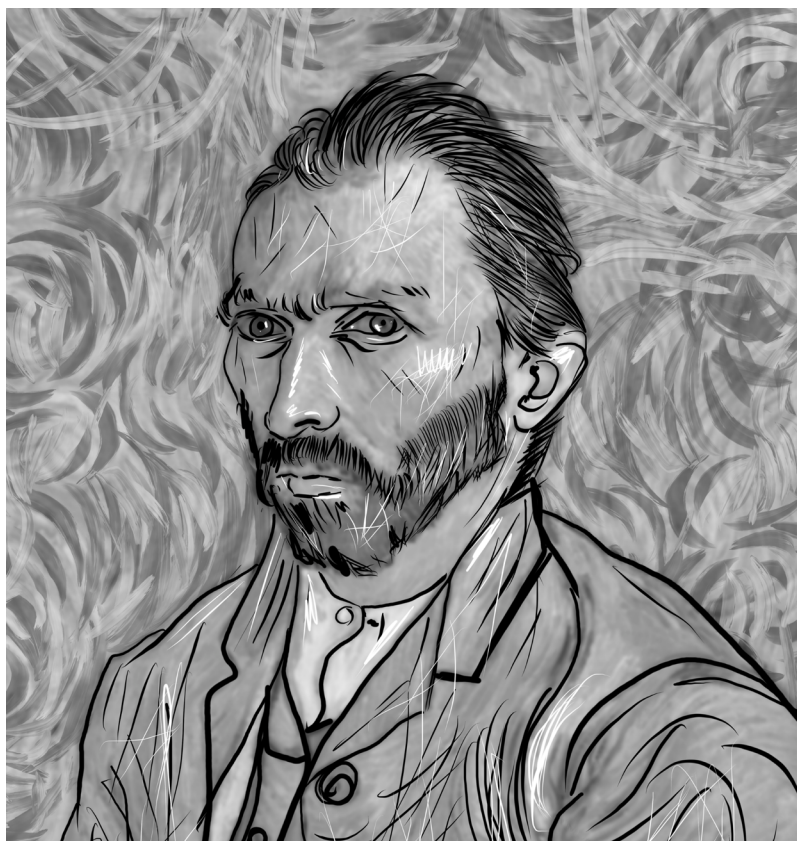
When Theo reached his stop, he raced to the inn where Vincent lived. Surely Vincent couldn't be that sick if he was at home instead of in a hospital! Theo was encouraged to see Vincent sitting up in bed. Vincent told Theo he had wounded himself in his stomach with a gun while painting in a field.

Theo didn't understand. Vincent didn't have a gun, and the police didn't find either a gun or canvases, brushes, or paint in the field where Vincent said he had been painting. Was it possible someone else shot him, intentionally or accidentally? Could he have been protecting someone who hurt him, as he might have once protected his friend Paul?

Whatever had happened, the only thing that mattered was that Theo was once again by his brother's side, holding him, willing him to survive.

But medicine was not very advanced in 1890. The doctor told Theo that the bullet was in too dangerous a place to remove. They would have to wait and see if Vincent would recover.

Theo talked and sat with Vincent for hours. But Vincent's pain increased as the sun went down. When the moon and stars came out, Vincent's face lost color, like the somber tones in *The Starry Night*. His breathing grew ragged. Theo held him tightly as Vincent closed his eyes for the last time. Vincent died on July 29, 1890, in the arms of the brother he loved, the brother who loved him. He was thirty-seven years old.



Letter from Vincent to Theo,
April 9, 1885, Nuenen, Netherlands

And I say, let's paint a lot and be productive, and be ourselves with faults and qualities—I say us—because the money from you that I know causes you trouble enough to provide for me, gives you the right, if anything good happens in my work, to consider half of it as your own creation.

11

Vincent's Legacy

Theo dreamed of making the world see Vincent's genius. But Theo grew ill. Jo took him to the hospital in October 1890. The doctors couldn't help. Theo died on January 25, 1891, at thirty-three years old, less than six months after his brother did. He left behind his beloved Jo and baby Vincent, who was just six days shy of his first birthday.

Jo and baby Vincent were alone in an apartment they could no longer afford, surrounded by Vincent's paintings and drawings. Friends urged Jo to leave or burn the paintings and move on with her life. But Jo, who loved the van Gogh brothers with all her heart, refused to abandon Vincent's work. She couldn't afford to stay in the apartment, but she was determined to carry on Theo's mission to help others see Vincent's genius. She moved to the Netherlands and opened a boardinghouse, taking in renters to support herself and baby Vincent.

Jo exhibited Vincent's art in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Paris. She gathered the letters that Vincent wrote to



Theo and published them. Slowly, over the years, people began to see what she and Theo saw in Vincent's work.

Baby Vincent grew up to become an engineer who would find the long life and happiness that eluded his father and uncle. He married, had four children, and helped found the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam in 1973.

Today, Vincent van Gogh is known as the genius Theo and Jo always knew he was. His paintings, found in famous museums, sell for millions of dollars. Those riches wouldn't have meant much to Vincent, although he would have been pleased to have enough money to buy canvases and paints and help his brother. What would have brought Vincent the deepest joy is that people are finally seeing the swirling and wondrous forces that connect us all—forces that build compassion and understanding for fellow humans and nature. That finally, people are seeing what Vincent saw.

Jo

Jo, whose full married name was Johanna Gesina van Gogh-Bonger, was born on October 4, 1862, and died on September 2, 1925, in the Netherlands. She was a multilingual Dutch editor, translator, and teacher. She was married to Theo van Gogh from 1889 until his death in 1891. Jo never felt burdened by her mission to continue Theo's work of supporting Vincent's art and vision. She felt joy and a sense of privilege living in the circle of their love. She admired their hope of making the world kinder and more beautiful. "In thought I am living wholly with Theo and Vincent, oh, the infinitely delicate, tender and lovely [quality] of that relation," she wrote. She said that her quest and her goal that she ultimately accomplished—making Vincent's genius known to the world—gave her a welcome sense of purpose. "It was [Vincent] who helped me to accommodate my life in such a way that I can be at peace with myself. Serenity—this was the favorite word of both [Vincent and Theo], the something they considered the highest. Serenity—I have found it." If not for Jo, the world may have never heard of Vincent van Gogh.



Johanna Gesina van Gogh-Bonger
(1862–1925)

multilingual: able to communicate in multiple languages
serenity: a state of calm and peace

Timeline

1853	Vincent is born on March 30.
1857	Vincent's brother, Theo, is born on May 1.
1869	Vincent becomes an art dealer in The Hague.
1873	Vincent is transferred to London.
1876	Vincent is fired as an art dealer and takes a series of other jobs.
1877	Vincent studies theology.
1878	Vincent quits school and moves to Brussels for evangelist training.
1879	Vincent starts work as an evangelist. The church fires him after six months.
1880	Vincent turns to drawing as a vocation. Art will be his passion and purpose for the rest of his life.
1885	Vincent paints <i>The Potato Eaters</i> .
1886	Vincent moves in with Theo in Paris.
1888	In February, Vincent moves to Arles. In October, the painter Paul Gauguin joins him. In December, Vincent is injured and becomes gravely ill. Theo goes to see Vincent in the hospital. He leaves Vincent with his doctors and takes Paul back to Paris.
1889	Vincent leaves the hospital in January but returns in February. Theo marries Johanna "Jo" Bonger in April. In May, Vincent checks into an asylum, where he will paint some of his greatest masterworks.

1890	In January, Vincent gets the first rave review for his art. His nephew, Vincent Willem van Gogh, is born on January 31. His paintings attract praise, and he makes a sale—the only one during his lifetime. In May, Vincent leaves the asylum and moves to an inn outside Paris. In July, Vincent suffers a gunshot wound. He dies on July 29 and is buried the next day.
1891	Theo dies on January 25.
1892–93	Jo organizes exhibits of Vincent's work.
1905	Jo organizes a successful exhibit of Vincent's work in Amsterdam.
1914	Jo publishes a collection of Vincent's letters to Theo.
1925	Jo dies on September 2.
1973	The Van Gogh Museum, founded in part by Vincent's nephew and namesake, opens in Amsterdam.



Discussion Questions

1. If you met Vincent, would you have been his friend? If you were his friend, how would you have helped him?
2. People bullied Vincent because they thought he looked odd or said things they didn't understand. Have you ever seen anyone bullied because of their appearance or because they seem different from other people? What can you do to help people who are bullied?
3. Have you ever been bullied? What can you do to stand up for yourself?
4. Would you have been Theo's friend? How would you have helped him?
5. Theo believed that artists need support and time to develop their craft. Vincent felt guilty about needing help. How can you support artists? If you are an artist, do you think you can and should accept help without feeling bad about it?

6. Do you ever have ideas that are hard for you to get other people to understand? When people don't understand, do you give up on your ideas, or do you try to find other ways of expressing them, as Vincent did?
7. Vincent said things in his paintings that he couldn't say in words. But words and art aren't the only ways to communicate. What are some of the other ways people can say things? Could some of them be music, dance, sports, cooking, baking, and building? Anything else? What are some of the ways you like to say things?
8. Do you know others who express themselves in ways other than words? Does Vincent's story make you want to understand them better?
9. In Vincent's time, scientists didn't realize or talk about how energy and matter are connected. When you look at Vincent's paintings, do you think he might have had an idea about that?
10. Vincent cared a lot about people who labored and people who were poor. He also cared a lot about nature. Look at his paintings to see what he might have been feeling and thinking when he created them.

11. Draw a picture that expresses your feelings and what you think about the world and our place and role in it.
12. Draw the same picture using different styles—impressionism, post-impressionism, classical, pointillism, modern, your own invention. What styles best help express what you are trying to say with your picture?

To the Reader

If possible, go see Vincent's actual paintings displayed in galleries and museums, or view them online, to get a true sense of his amazing work.

Meet the Author



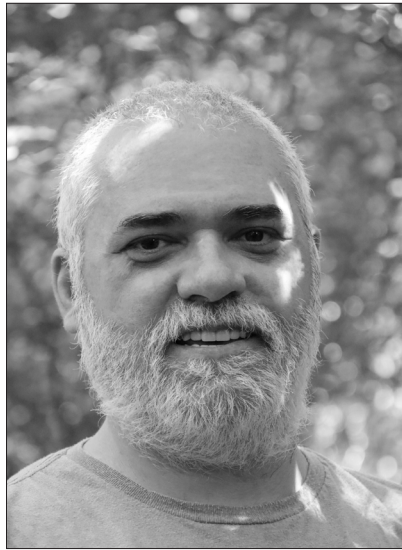
Nancy Churnin is an award-winning children's book author who writes about people who have made the world a better place and who inspire children to be heroes and heroines too. She admires Vincent van Gogh for his compassion and love for people and nature, for the beauty he captured in his dazzling art, for his courage in living an authentic life, and for his devotion to his vision and mission.

Nancy won a 2021 National Jewish Book Award, a 2022 Sydney Taylor Honor Book award, and a 2022 National Communications Contest award from the National Federation of Press Women for *Dear Mr.*

Dickens, a true story that inspired the creation of an educational program at the Charles Dickens Museum in London. She has also won two Sydney Taylor Notable Book awards, for her works *Irving Berlin: The Immigrant Boy Who Made America Sing* (2018) and *A Queen to the Rescue: The Story of Henrietta Szold, Founder of Hadassah* (2021).

Born and raised in New York City, Nancy lives in North Texas, where she enjoyed being a theater critic for the *Dallas Morning News* before becoming a full-time author. Her books come with free teacher guides, resources, and projects she hopes you'll try on her website, nancychurnin.com.

Meet the Illustrator



Ivan Pesic was born in Blace, Serbia, in 1975. In 2000, Ivan moved to Belgrade, Serbia, where he studied graphic design in college. Unhappy with the political and economic situation in Serbia, Ivan emigrated to Virginia, USA, in 2005. Ivan and his wife, Alisa, have two children, Tara and Luka. His work can be seen in many galleries in Virginia, Washington D.C., North Carolina, and Georgia. Ivan has also donated his paintings to public schools and charity organizations. The primary medium Ivan uses is acrylic and oil paints; however, he also likes to experiment with different mediums and techniques.

Aside from painting, Ivan has done pencil drawings, wall murals, mixed media art, photography, graphic design, and more. In his work, he reconstructs dreams, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, lullabies—the pieces of our lives and memories that are a part of us. Every piece of his artwork tells a story, stories with a hero, a villain, with action, movement, and other elements that give his work life and energy. Ivan's work can be viewed on his website: **www.ipartstudio.com**.

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