

# Truth in Art

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## *Introduction*

“Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth” (Cook, 22). With this statement, Picasso expresses his view of the function of art for human beings. Before we jump to careless conclusions about the truth, art widens and metaphorically illumines the road we are traveling. The arts themselves are not the truth, but they help us travel a road to the truth.

In conformity with this statement of Picasso, this project intends to investigate the relations between human beings and truth in art, especially as far as theological and ontological truths are concerned. In order to do so, we will focus on a specific artist, Vincent van Gogh, and one of his well-known paintings, “Starry Night.” Our examination seeks to reveal the relations among the painter, the painting, the viewer, and the Ground of Being. This project will briefly sketch his life, and then examine this particular painting for its theological and ontological implications.

## *Vincent Willem van Gogh: A Brief Biography*

Vincent van Gogh was a prolific painter who became famous after his death. He was born on March 30, 1853 in The Netherlands. He was the oldest of six children and his father was a Protestant pastor. He was raised in a religious and cultured environment in the countryside, where he naturally formed a close attachment to nature.

In 1873, at the age of 16, he worked in a London branch of Goupil art dealers, which was his first direct encounter with arts. During this time, he had contact with the works of famous artists such as Rembrandt and Frans Hals. He did not like the business of art dealing, however, and he was made more miserable by the heartbreak of a failed romance.

He left Goupil and began wandering through a number of possible careers. As a school teacher, a bookseller, a student, and even a devoted preacher, he did not succeed in finding his true vocation. In 1880, he began to draw and paint seriously, which he felt may be his true vocation and his best way to serve humanity. It was the beginning of his short but passionate artistic career of ten years.

As a painter, he worked hard. In the beginning, his technical ability and knowledge was limited, but after contacting other artists and viewing their works, his artistic skill and understanding of paintings grew rapidly. Van Gogh understood the power of color, brushwork, and especially the painter’s creative way of interpreting objects. He did only accept visual information; he transformed it into an intensified image through his creative imagination.

Unfortunately, he was unhappy in himself and his relations with other painters were not exactly delightful. On December 24, 1888 he cut off a part of his own left ear after arguing with artist Paul Gauguin. Due to his mental instability, he placed himself in the Asylum of St. Paul at St. Remy in Provence. While staying in the asylum, he continued to paint and draw passionately.

When he felt better in the Spring of 1890, he traveled to Paris in order to meet his dear brother Theo and other friends. However, his mental health failed again. On July 27, 1890, in despair over his mental illness and his financial and emotional debts to his brother Theo, van Gogh tried to end his life by shooting himself. A day and a half later, he died of the gun shot wound.

His life was not easy. He could not escape poverty at any time during his life, and suffered from serious mental health problems. Although his life was not full of happiness, it was extremely intense, and he burned out his last ten years for the sake of his paintings, drawings, and writings. Almost all of his remaining paintings are from those years. Like other Impressionists, he knew the power of colors, and did not hesitate to use them boldly. He did not stay with what he saw through his eyes, but tried to put on the canvas the meanings he derived from what he saw. As a Post-Impressionist, he greatly influenced subsequent Expressionism.

### ***Vincent van Gogh's "A Starry Night"***

“(I wish) to express the love of two lovers by a marriage of two complementary colors, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibrations of kindred tones. To express the thought of a brow by the radiance of a light tone against a somber background. To express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance. Certainly there is nothing in that of stereoscopic realism, but is it not something that actually exists?” (Cook, 41).

The quote above illustrates van Gogh's desire to use paintings to express facts about the world that went beyond the merely visual. His style of painting is famous for striking and intense colors as well as the strong impression of motion produced by his brushwork. These are mere methods and tools that van Gogh used for the paintings of his late years in order to express the reality he encounters through what he sees. He believes that it is a duty of artists to convey an idea through their art. Thus, he does not remain content to imitate objects he sees, but he advances to add colors and shapes that express how he comprehends the reality that he sees. Hence, his early paintings show his effort to copy objects as they are, but his later paintings reflect his thoughts, which translate emotional and conceptual realities onto canvas. Here the reality may not be something objective or public, but perhaps just what he believes it is. He seems to know *something* that comes through him and his paintings. He did say insist that an artist translates what he sees with his own eyes onto canvas. But this translation is creative: “Van Gogh was convinced that an artist had to interpret what he saw in nature through an intensification of color and form” (Homburg, 39). This is the reason that his paintings are sometimes easy to understand and sometimes complicated to understand, depending on whether we are prepared to register what he seeks to convey on the canvas.

Let's look at one painting for a concrete explanation. This is from his later works, and one of the most famous paintings. Its title is “Starry Night.” This painting is loved by many people, and yet a puzzling painting as well. Its subject is still nature, as many of his paintings are, but the painting shows no plausible scenery such as one could possibly expect to see in reality. Eleven stars are glimmering, and the moon is luminous yellow, bright like the sun. The sky is swirling around the stars and the moon looks as though it is moving without a break. Something akin to a tree overwhelms the small town and reaches up to the sky and even to the stars. It looks almost like a huge castle. The church in the middle of the painting has the relatively high steeple, but

looks somewhat shabby. The deep and dark night sky of the painting is exaggerated. The swirling sky contrasts sharply with the peaceful town. *The Starry Night* is one of the most complicated and controversial paintings of van Gogh, judging from that fact that it is subject to such a wide variety of interpretations. He painted this in 1889 when he was at the asylum in Saint-Remy. However, the scenery of the painting cannot be seen from any place in Saint-Remy.



(This is free wallpaper from [www.vangoghgallery.com](http://www.vangoghgallery.com))

Some people try to connect this painting with biblical meanings by arguing that the moon and the stars indicate Jesus and the apostles. However, as seen from the painting, the church is overwhelmed by the tree-look-alike. If the painting stands for Christianity, the church would not be portrayed in such a way, unless perhaps it is under criticism or threat. Besides, van Gogh's own statement on this painting confirms that he did not try to make either biblical or religious meaning out of it. He wrote, "When you have looked at these two studies for some time, and that of the ivy as well, it will give you some idea, better than words could, of the things that Gauguin and Bernard and I sometimes used to talk about, and which we've thought about a good deal; it is not a return to the romantic or to religious ideas, no... Whether it exists or not is something we may leave aside, but we do believe that nature extends beyond St. Ouen. Perhaps even while reading Zola, we are moved by the sound of the pure French of Renan, for instance" (Kodera, 87). The "two studies" refer to *The Starry Night* and one of his other works, *Olive trees with the Alpilles in the Background*. *Ivy* is also one of his works. He clearly points out that *The Starry Night* is not an attempt to "return to religious ideas." By saying that, he seems to rule out the

interpretation that he is painting a religious subject. Rather, he is painting nature. Indeed, the overemphasis on the tree-look-alike suggests that nature is the subject, not religion. What is van Gogh trying to do?

Noting that the concept of nature in nineteenth century was understood as lying somewhere between science and religion, Kodera argues that van Gogh was grappling with a conflict between Christianity and nature. His research into van Gogh's comments on Zola and Renan suggest that Renan, a controversial French philosopher and theologian, is a character opposite both to the French novelist Zola's naturalism and to dogmatic Christianity (Kodera, 87-90). He continues to note that the concept of nature in the nineteenth century, which influenced van Gogh, was "a synthesis of elements derived from science and religion: the scientific notion of regular and universal laws, the religious notion of divine providence" (Kodera, 89). In between science and religion before they are integrated in consistency, van Gogh pours out his ambiguous mind and his most prominent thoughts onto canvas. This line of interpretation is strengthened when one takes into account van Gogh's letter to his brother Theo a few months later: "I am astonished that with modern ideas that I have, and being so ardent an admirer of Zola and de Goncourt and caring for things of art as I do, that I have attacks such as a superstitious man might have and that I get perverted and frightful ideas about religion such as never came into my head in the North" (Kodera, 90). With Kodera's explanation in mind, we can draw a plausible conclusion about what van Gogh is trying to do in *The Starry Night*.

Van Gogh is trying to remove the irrational elements of religion, to put on scientific ideas of the universe, and to translate the result into painting. This would explain the painting much better. The sky covering two of third of canvas represents nature and the universe. Nature has its own law and the universe swirls to follow. The deep blue colors mixed with light white and grey colors signify the unknown parts of the world. It is mysterious, but does not require superstitious beliefs. The tree-look-alike attests to the power of nature. It overwhelms the small town, where human beings reside. As one can feel from its color, it has dark sides and can be scary, and yet its brushwork illustrates that it is growing and alive. The church in the middle of the town represents the superstitious religion, which must be and is being overcome by nature in the painting. The church is relatively high compared to the size of the town. Although the top of the church is high, it is not high enough to compare with nature.

Van Gogh feels deeply connected to nature, which forces him to decant his thought, ideas, and even feelings out onto canvas. The result in this instance is *The Starry Night*. This interpretation might sound atheistic, but that is a total misunderstanding. One still can make theologically positive statements about this painting because it expresses the existential meaning of van Gogh's being as it connects to *something greater*, and van Gogh knew that. It is a dark and quiet night, and yet it is an animated and lifelike night. For him, nature is not atheistic, but it is that through which divinity comes to appear. Nature is full of life. Our lives are just small parts of it.

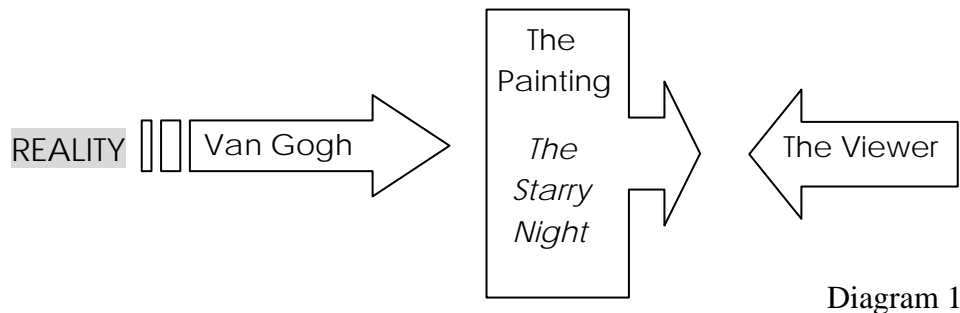
This explanation is certainly not entirely satisfactory. A fully satisfactory explanation of any painting is never possible. If it were possible to explain it in words, he would have written those words instead of using a palette with deep blue colors and strong brushwork. Again, he obviously wanted to make visible something invisible by translating it onto canvas. Whether he succeeded or not, it was his initial aim and desire to express the reality he felt, thought, and

breathed (Dixon, 29-41). He seemed to be convinced that there is something beyond his understanding, beyond his being, to which he felt connected somehow even though it was a partial connection. His painting was the result of his connection to *the greater being beyond his being*, and it was *nature* that mediates the connection for and to van Gogh. Although he could not articulate this in words, he does articulate it through his painting. It was the moment of self-transcendence for him, and he transmits this self-transcending moment to the viewer, who is able to stand with van Gogh through the painting. This is a transference achieved by the painting.

**Interpretation**

How is this transference and connection possible? Before going further, it should be noted that we as viewers of the painting might vaguely feel that van Gogh was expressing something more than mere scenery. For some people this “something more” might be strongly appealing while for others not so. This occurs because people are differently sensitive to artistic interactions. This project focuses on the more intense forms of appreciation and the way they are promoted by the interpretative structure that links van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, and its viewers. Two main points need to be made about interpretation.

First, the painting positions itself between the painter and the viewer and functions to engage both into each other. The painting is the expression of the painter. As van Gogh used to say, it is a translation of the painter’s reality, which draws viewers into the painter’s interpretation of the world. The painting engages the viewer with the painter and the reality in potentially different ways from those in which the viewer is used to being engaged. The painting becomes a sort of magnifying glass or at least reading glasses that permit the viewer to see a greater reality. The closer the viewer reaches toward the painter’s focal length for understanding to painting, the more the viewer can see and feel the connection that the painter has with the subject matter through the painting. Diagram 1 schematizes this.



There are two relational processes in Diagram 1. The first is the relation of van Gogh to the reality. The second one is the relation of the viewer to the reality through the painting and the painter, van Gogh. These processes should not be considered only phenomenological process. There is more than that going on. These two processes are strivings to achieve unity. In the first process, the painter sees the reality, but the reality engaged is not the reality that is visible. Van Gogh connected to *something greater* than him, something rooted in reality. It was partial, but he somehow tasted this overcoming of his limited being through nature, and it came out as *The*

*Starry Night*. This will be discussed later. When one sees the painting, one might feel the same way that van Gogh did, or one might not; both reactions are possible. But van Gogh said that it was his duty to let people know what he tasted and to what he connected.

What about the viewer? The viewer's process of seeing the painting is similar to van Gogh's engagement with nature. As van Gogh sees beyond nature, so the painting allows the viewer to see what the painting is actually trying to say. Sometimes the viewer needs an explanation in order to see, and sometimes it comes naturally. Through the painting, the viewer can learn to see what van Gogh sees, and eventually perhaps grasps his point and his own connection to nature. This sort of interpretation can be compared to reading a book. Instead of reading words in the book, one reads colors and brushwork in the painting.

The painting is a window to see the world, or better yet it is the canvas within which the whole world is contained. However, there is still more: the thought of the painter and the interpretation of the viewer. Van Gogh tries to connect or to combine what is out there and what he sees and feels. The viewers try to combine the intention and meanings of the painter and their understandings of the world. These processes all work together in what we call interpretation.

Second, what van Gogh ultimately expressed in *A Starry Night*, at least in part, is neither nature, nor his connection to nature. Instead, it was the connection to *something greater* than him. There is a suitable phrase and an explanation of this "something greater" in Paul Tillich's theology, namely, *the Ground of Being*. The Ground of Being is the ontological ground of every existing being. Interpretative processes seek out connection with this Ground, and eventually even unity. This yearning for unity seems entirely natural among beings—it is, after all, a longing to be united with their own Ground. According to Tillich, our being is always dependent and fragmentary, and thus our being yearns for unity with Being Itself, which is totally *Independent* and *Perfect*, and that is why it is the Ground of Being. In order for being to be, it must stand upon the Ground of Being. Thus, whether we feel it or not, we must be intimately connected to the Ground of Being as long as we exist. However, since we cannot achieve unity with the Ground of Being, our being is always fragmentary, and thus anticipatory. Normally, as beings, we do not even recognize the connection. Even if we feel connected to the Ground of Being it would be just partial as said above. Something similar happens between beings as well. When one being encounters another being, by recognizing the other being, one tries to make the connection and eventually unity with the other. In this process, sometimes we turn the opposite subject as an object. In either direction—between a being and its Ground or between one being and another—unity is never entirely possible. Having said that, we can return to explaining van Gogh and *The Starry Night*.

What happens to van Gogh is that he becomes aware of the connection with the Ground of Being and paints it, driven by the yearning for unity. Is it possible? It is possible partially. Note that some people do not feel this yearning strongly. Nature helps van Gogh feel the connection to his Ground and mediates this connection to him. He feels his being transcending himself and moves forward to be more deeply connected. His anticipatory yearning for unity comes out through the painting. This is the partial moment of transcendence, that is, self-transcendence, which is the feeling of penetration from, or toward, the Ground of Being.

He might have been feeling despair at the same time because of the realization that he cannot fully unite with the Ground of Being. This is a total despair from which there is no way out because one cannot overcome this feeling in any possible way. How unsatisfactory, depressing, and hopeless when your whole being wants something for its very life, and yet knows with certainty that it is never possible. Regardless, he knows that it is his duty and responsibility to serve humanity by expressing this beautifully. Another diagram will help to explain this process of engagement with the Ground of Being through painting and viewing a painting.

Diagram 2 uses stars to indicate contact points, which suggests partial possibilities for connection. Diagram 2 illustrates two dimensions of being: static and dynamic. Two big oval figures illustrate the static dimension of being, which is the connection to the Ground of Being that things have just by virtue of existing. Two big arrows indicate the dynamic dimension of being, which arise most forcefully in encounters with other beings. The dynamic dimension of being expresses and receives signals from other beings, things, nature, or any object, and even from the Ground of Being. It does not mean that the dynamic dimension of being always responds to the signals. As said earlier, people are sensitive in different ways. The dynamic dimension of being is deeply rooted to how we respond and react to the world outside.

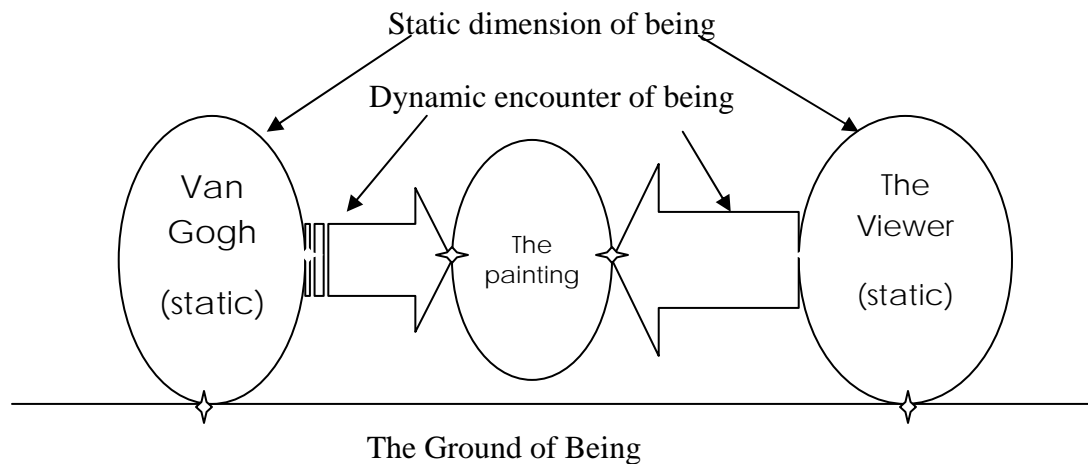


Diagram 2

The two arrows in Diagram 2 express two different functions of the dynamic dimension of being. Of course, there should be more than one arrow for each person. Van Gogh's arrow illustrates the way his connection to the Ground of Being is expressed in the painting. The painting shows van Gogh's being, but it might be still partial as his connection to the Ground of Being is partial. The viewer's arrow explains how the viewer's encounter with the painting might lead to the Ground of Being through the painting and the painter. The viewer also has a connection to the Ground of Being and through this connection the viewer can rouse and reflect on one's own connection in the light of van Gogh's as manifest in the painting. In this way, the viewer can reinforce the feeling of the connection and the yearning for the unity. In effect, the painting and the painter function as amplifiers that enlarge and transform the viewer's connection to the Ground of Being, making it understandable and graspable to some degree. This dynamic dimension of being always searches for media that activate and reinforce connections to the Ground of Being.

### ***Conclusion: Implications for the Theme of Truth in Art, and Further Thoughts***

There can be many different implications for the theme of truth in art based on how one looks at the relations between theology and art. As Tillich sees things, art is a medium for the expression of existential being. As John Dixon argues, art is a medium for the expression of the artist's reality. In this section, this project will state two major implications, which are also suggestions for further investigation: creativity as imagination and transcendence as unity.

Consider the narrative of Creation in Genesis. God created the world and human beings based on God's image, which has been expressed through art; indeed, it seems as if God's image in our experience is creativity itself. Human beings have created language, music, paintings, and various kinds of art. Certainly human creativity is separated by a huge chasm from God's creativity. These are qualitatively as well as quantitatively different. Human creativity is merely the image of God's creativity, and thus essentially different, for the image is what is reflected and not the thing itself. However, human creativity still shares the generic character of divine creativity.

In many cases, human creativity is expressed through imagination. The imagination engages beings with the world and with each other by drawing differences together into one common ground. For instance, looking at paintings, listening to music, or reading literature draws people into one subject, where they can engage one another. There they can pursue their feelings, thoughts, and even the meaning of their being and doing. They encounter one another. It is creativity as imagination that moves a person's dynamic dimension of being forwards so that it can respond and react.

Where does this creativity come from? Is it a built-in aspect of human being? If so, is it an endless force? If not, how does it reside in a human being? I propose that it is quasi-built-in. More accurately, it comes out through our being. This leads to a second implication, concerning the meaning of being. As argued above, our existence as being consists of both static and dynamic dimensions. The ontological question must be addressed to both dimensions at the same time. It is a very complicated topic, and needs further investigation in detail.

The static dimension of being indicates that our existence is deeply and firmly rooted in the Ground of Being, which being what it is. It is interior and static and we do not control it. The Ground of Being radiates its essence of being, which penetrates through every being. Our fragmentary beings cannot achieve perfect unity with the Ground of Being because we cannot fully receive the essence of the Ground of Being.

The dynamic dimension of being involves tools with which we shape ourselves and our environments, such as imagination, desires, and so on. These encounter and interact with reality dynamically. This kind of being is exterior and exposed on the surface of our existence, whereas the static dimension of being is interior and potential.

The moment of the Transcendence is the penetration of the Ground of Being through the static dimension of being to the dynamic dimension of being. This is how the unity with the Ground of Being is experienced, to the degree that this is possible in each case. As said above, this unity is



always partial. It can be reinforced by encounters with other beings, which also have the connection to the Ground of Being. Here the arts accelerate theological thinking. Because being is expressed through art, an encounter with art can also become encounter with the Ground of Being. This can sometimes causes a conflict, and sometimes it increases harmony, which is realizing potential unity with the Ground of Being.

Art has been with us from the beginning of our history. Before we came up with language in terms of communication, there were sounds, drawings, and paintings to express what people had in their minds. The arts are ways to express humanity as being, and participating in the Ground of Being. Sometimes these expressions are beautiful and relatively direct. For example, these expressions can make melodies and rhythms and harmonies—music that makes people sad and delighted, miserable and happy. Not only does music have an emotional function, but it also makes another world for listeners, engaging them with the Ground of Being and introducing them to deeper life meanings. Music leads human beings to express their feelings and these can be spiritual acts.

Paintings function in a similar way. Paintings make visible what is not visible. As van Gogh knew, the colors and shapes can be enormously compelling. A painting such as *A Starry Night* expresses what cannot be explained in words. For van Gogh, paintings are the evidence of his existence and of the power of his being, and they speak of that beautifully, engaging us in the Ground of Being as they do so.

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