Vincent van Gogh

Working with Line

Drawing with Paint

"They call a painter mad if he sees with eyes other than theirs."
—Vincent van Gogh

In the eyes of the world, Vincent van Gogh (van GO) was a complete failure. He had no income, no job, no family. He couldn't even keep the few friends he was able to make. He died a terrible death at the age of 37 after a life of loneliness and suffering. How did this "misfit," who dreamed of being a minister like his father, become one of the greatest artists of the modern era?

Van Gogh was born in a small Dutch village in 1853. He spent much of his childhood by himself, sketching outdoors. Vincent went to boarding school at 12, where he was described by his teachers as "serious" and "intelligent," but also as "withdrawn" and "bad tempered." After finishing school, Vincent entered the family art dealership. But he neglected his work and forgot meetings with clients. Hoping he would take more of an interest, his uncle sent him to the Paris office. Vincent did take more of an interest—in galleries and museums, but not in business. So he was fired.

Vincent then decided to become a preacher. But he spent more time reading and drawing than he did studying for the entrance examination required by the seminary. He failed his exam miserably. By the time he was 27, Vincent

"Vincent is like two people— one gifted and sensitive, the other selfish and violent. He is his own worst enemy."
—Theo van Gogh

Self-Portrait, Spring 1887. Oil. 17 3/8" x 14 3/4". Rijksmuseum, Vincent van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam.

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had failed as an art dealer, a teacher, and a pastor. He decided to follow the only profession he felt was left to him. He would become an artist. He received support from his younger brother, Theo, now an art dealer.

In 1886, Van Gogh moved in with his brother in Paris. Paris was the center of the art world, and Vincent's art progressed rapidly. Influenced by the Impressionists, a group of French painters who were challenging traditional ideas, Van Gogh began to develop his own unique style marked by **brilliant colors** and **thick, swirling brushstrokes.** Theo put up with Vincent's thoughtless and rude behavior until both brothers agreed Vincent had to leave. In February 1888, he went south to Arles where the light was brighter and the colors more intense. Van Gogh was at the beginning of a career that would last only ten more years.

The Potato Eaters (above) was painted while Van Gogh was working as an unpaid preacher in a poverty-stricken, Dutch coal-mining area.

The Potato-Eaters, 1885. Oil. 32" x 45". Rijksmuseum, Vincent van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam.

Van Gogh used line to express the personality of his doctor (right).

Dr. Gachet, 1890. Oil. 26 1/4" x 22". Private collection.

> "Gauguin is a great artist. I have every confidence that together we shall create wonderful things."
> —Vincent van Gogh

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hen Vincent arrived in Arles, a town in the south of France, he was disappointed. Instead of finding a tropical paradise, the ground was covered with snow. But spring soon arrived and Van Gogh began to work. He used the bright, sunlit days to paint the fields, orchards, gardens, and people that surrounded him. He spent the evenings at the local café. In *Café Terrace at Night* (top right) the **yellow parallel receding lines** of the terrace pull the viewer's eye down the street into the composition's dark-blue center.

That summer, Vincent moved into a small apartment he called the "yellow house." Theo sent him money to furnish it. Vincent had always dreamed of forming an artists' colony, a place where artists could live and work together. He had met painter Paul Gauguin (Go-GAN) in Paris and knew Gauguin needed a place to live. So he invited him to move in. Happy to have a companion at last, Vincent spent the fall preparing the house for Gauguin's arrival.

The two artists painted together, but soon became competitive and began to fight. Finally, Gauguin

> "It is more worthwhile to work in flesh and blood itself than in paint."—Vincent van Gogh

LEFT: *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, January 1889. Oil on canvas, 23 1/2" x 19 1/4". Courtauld Galleries, London.

wrote to Theo, "Vincent and I cannot live together peacefully. It is imperative that I leave!" The situation came to a crisis on the night of December 23. Gauguin heard footsteps behind him. When he looked back, he saw Van Gogh following him with a razor in his hand. Vincent turned and went home and Gauguin went to a hotel. When Gauguin went back to the yellow house in the morning, he saw a crowd outside. The police told Gauguin that Van Gogh had cut off part of his own ear and had given it to someone at the café. He then went home to bed, as if nothing had happened. Vincent was taken to the town hospital. Gauguin left Arles, and never saw Vincent again.

When he recovered, Van Gogh painted this self-portrait (left). The **scratchy lines, wide, vertical brushstrokes, cool greens** and **purples** add to the artist's sad, unstable appearance. He has hidden himself in a fur hat and thick coat. The alarming bandage over his right ear contrasts with the bright, cheerful colors of the Japanese print in back. Compare Van Gogh's self-portrait with Gauguin's (below right). Both figures are defined by

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linear outlines. But large, solid shapes express Gauguin's overbearing personality, while Van Gogh's difficult, sensitive nature is captured by lines of varying thicknesses, curvatures, lengths, and textures.

Van Gogh was released from the hospital after he realized he couldn't live on his own. So he voluntarily entered an asylum. Vincent was diagnosed as suffering from epileptic fits. He would be fine for a few weeks. He could live and work normally until a fit came on. Then he hallucinated, became violent, and couldn't work at all. And the fits were getting longer and closer together. The great intensity of Van Gogh's works during this period may have to do with his frenzy to create while he was still able to.

Van Gogh and his friend, artist Paul Gauguin (right), had some of their most violent arguments in this small café (above).

TOP RIGHT: *Café Terrace at Night*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 31 3/4" x 25 3/4". Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.

"For the last few weeks, Vincent has been acting so strangely that I hardly dare breathe anymore." —Paul Gauguin

RIGHT: Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). *Portrait of the Artist By Himself*, 1888. 17" x 21 1/4". Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Forces *of* Nature

Toward the end of 1889, life was becoming harder and harder for Vincent. Only in his art could he deal with a world he found overwhelmingly hostile. In spite of his illness, he managed to do his best work during the last 15 months of his life. It was through his art that Van Gogh was able to express the intense connection he felt with nature. He found that he could best capture nature's energies through his brushstrokes, so **line** became increasingly important to him.

In early landscapes like *Fishing Boats on the Beach* (below right), Van Gogh used **straight lines, black outlines,** and relatively **empty spaces.** In later works, he filled every inch of his canvas with activity. The artist painted *Irises* (above right) while he was confined in the asylum. The **tightly packed, claustrophobic composition** filled with spiked leaves, bright flowers, and chunks of dirt suggest the artist's very restricted life. The cool blues and greens **contrast** with the warm reds of the earth. In these late paintings, Van Gogh paints with a vocabulary of linear marks usually used in drawing. These lines take the form of **scratches, jabs, coils, specks, dots,** and **dashes.** They are **woven, elongated, curved,** and **hatched.** His brushstrokes are **thick, thin, long, short, wide,** or **narrow.**

"I'm all right when I completely immerse myself in work, but I'll always remain half crazy."—Vincent van Gogh

Self-Portrait, September 1889. Oil on canvas. 25 5/8" x 21 1/4". Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Art Resource.

The Starry Night, (pages 8-9), one of Van Gogh's most important images, is based less on nature and more on the artist's inner feelings and emotions. He has used **line, color, distortion, exaggeration,** and the **direction of his brushstrokes** to express his unique concept of nature. A cosmic vision of swirling heavens and towering cypress trees whirls above the tiny geometric forms of the town below. The **continuous spirals** and **sweeping band of light** on the horizon contrast with the **short, sharp dashes** of the village. The same spiraling blue shapes can be found in one of Van Gogh's last self-portraits (left). The restless lines of his clothing echo and continue into the swirling brushstrokes of the background.

In 1890, Van Gogh left the asylum and put himself in the care of a Dr. Gachet (Ga-SHAY). Vincent was lucid enough to realize that Dr. Gachet was "as ill and distraught as I am." The artist has expressed this visually by using **broken lines** to paint *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (page 3). The doctor's instability is further communicated through his **troubled expression** and the **diagonal, off-center composition.**

An especially severe seizure in the spring of 1890 made Van Gogh afraid for the first time to go outside to paint. On the evening of July 27, 1890, he went into the fields and shot himself in the chest. Two days later, with his brother Theo at his bedside, he died. Vincent van Gogh's entire art career had lasted barely ten years.

The spiked flowers, twisted leaves, and packed composition (above) reflect Van Gogh's troubled state of mind while painting an ordinary garden.

Irises, 1889. Oil. 28" x 36 5/8". J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, CA

Straight and horizontal lines add to the calm, peaceful feeling created by Van Gogh's scene (right) of fishing boats.

Fishing Boats on the Beach, 1888. Oil, 25 1/2" x 32". Rijksmuseum, Vincent van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam.

The Starry Night

by Vincent van Gogh

"You can feel the stars and the infinity of the sky since life, in spite of everything, is like a dream." — Vincent van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). *The Starry Night*, 1889. Oil on canvas. 29" x 36 1/4". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. Photograph © 1999 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Different Stroke

As you can see on these pages, today's artists use lines in surprising ways.

Lines of the Mind

The piece on the left, created by contemporary European conceptual artist Mona Hatoum, is called *Van Gogh's Back*. Can you tell what materials the artist has used to create this work?

Since the *idea* behind a work of conceptual art is more important than its beauty or the way it looks, everything about this work is very unconventional. Most pieces of conceptual art contain familiar objects presented in unusual and thought-provoking ways. Few of them are meant to last for a long period of time.

Mona Hatoum feels that the human body is the most familiar "object" of all. Many of her works show how similar the energies in nature are to those of the body. Her photo *Van Gogh's Back* expresses these energies through the image of a man's hairy back. Before taking the photo, the hair was soaped into **curved lines** and **swirls** that look like brush strokes. The title is a reference to the **whirling patterns** Van Gogh used to capture natural forces like wind, blossoms, clouds, stars, and currents of water.

Mona Hatoum, b. 1952. *Van Gogh's Back*, 1995, Color-print; 19 1/4" x 15". Tate Gallery, London. Photo, Stephen White.

"Hair represents the energy of nature as found in the human body."
— Mona Hatoum

Exploding Lines

Many of today's painters use lines to express powerful emotions. The stronger the feelings, the thicker and faster the strokes are put down.

What does this bright, **thickly painted** image (right) suggest? The **long, curving lines** radiating upward suggest a burst or explosion. The title of Japanese-American artist Helen Oji's painting makes its meaning clearer. *Mt. St. Helens* refers to an American volcano that erupted and caused great destruction in 1980, the year this work was created.

This piece is shaped like a *kimono*, a traditional dress worn for centuries by Japanese women. By giving a kimono volcanic qualities, the artist may be suggesting the eruption of female power in both Eastern and Western worlds.

"My paintings stand for the beginning.... or the end of the world."
— Helen Oji

Helen Oji, *Mt. St. Helens*, 1980, Acrylic, Rhoplex, glitter on paper, 60" x 72". Collection Home Insurance Co., NY, NY.

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988). *Made in Japan,* 1982. Oilstick and acrylic on canvas, 60" x 36". Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis, MO.

Lines of Emotion

Both Vincent van Gogh and modern artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (BASS-kee-at) had short, difficult lives. And both used art as a way of dealing with emotional turmoil. What do you think of when you look at Basquiat's painting *Made in Japan* (left) — a monster-like head with **lines, scribbles,** and **marks** scrawled all over it? What does this work's title have to do with the way it looks?

Born into a middle-class Puerto Rican and Haitian family, Basquiat left home for New York City, where he planned to become famous as a street artist. During the early 1980s, Basquiat began exhibiting in galleries. His art suggests the conflict and violence he saw all around him. His works combine words of poetry and street phrases with elements of pop culture, jazz history, and images from the mass media. The **jagged network of thin red and black lines** in this skull-like head suggests wires or electric circuits. The **thick blue lines** are like those in subway maps. The title of this robot-like humanoid may be a reference to Japan's rapid development of electronic gadgets during the 1980s.

Like Van Gogh, Basquiat created by working at top speed with great intensity. He died of a drug overdose in 1988 at the age of 27.

"Expressionism— that's in the past, isn't it? Well, art should be expressive or something or other."
—Jean-Michel Basquiat

Vincent Edwards

Emotional Lines

Vincent plans to major in fine arts to "prepare for a job that merges computers and art."

Vincent created this powerful image as a senior at Haddam-Killingworth High School in Higganum, Connecticut. In addition to creating art, Vincent plays saxophone, and works several part-time jobs. This fall, he'll attend Indiana University in Bloomington.

When did you first become interested in art?

I grew up with art because of my mom and dad. My father's an architect. My mother sculpts and teaches weaving.

How did you create this award-winning piece?

Our school doesn't support computer art, so I got a Mac and worked on my own. I knew of a couple of programs I wanted to use. With one, you paint using big digital brushes with textured bristles.

Did you have a definite idea in mind when you began?

No. The piece took shape as I was doing it. I like creating art with computers because they're so fast. You can use large amounts of imagery and change everything quickly. And you're able to create more spontaneously. You can radically alter a picture's color, brightness, and mood in an instant.

Is this a portrait of anyone?

No one specific. I associated this face with war, but that doesn't necessarily have to be the case. A soldier was a definite possibility, but I didn't want that to be the only possibility.

Where did the image come from?

It's totally imagined. I didn't use any photographs for this piece. I think the idea came after looking at a book of Picasso paintings. I was fascinated by all the styles he developed. I noticed in his work that there's an emotional tension when you can't see someone's entire face, or what he's looking at.

How did you begin?

I started with the basic shape of the face, drawing the features freehand with a digital tablet and brush. Then I started painting. First, I filled in the right side with black. Then I used white to create the streaks coming toward the face from the right. After that, I used the rake brush to apply color over the whole face. I wanted to increase the

The portrait on the right, created by 18-year-old Vincent Edwards, is as emotional as those you've seen by Vincent van Gogh. But this work was created on a computer!

> "There's an emotional tension when you can't see someone's entire face, or what he's looking at."

emotional impact, so I changed my hues frequently and kept working until it looked right. On a computer, you can undo up to 30 brushstrokes at a time, so I was able to experiment freely.

How did you pick your colors?
Greens and yellows suggest camouflage and war. The blues bring sadness and regret to the expression. The reds add vibrancy and a hint of aggression. The white highlights reflect what the figure is looking at outside the frame.

How were you able to get the effect of brushstrokes?
I used a program called [Metacreations] Painter 5.0. That program has 350

tools, including 100 different paintbrushes. This particular brush is called the scratchboard rake. I liked its sharp edges and multi-bristle look.

Do the brushstrokes add to the figure's emotional impact?
I think the harsh, sharp edges and the complex textures add to the figure's sense of mystery and conflict. This brushstroke has gaps in it that allow underlying colors to show through. The small lines enhance the texture. I liked the rough, complex surface it produced.

Why didn't you just draw it?
I definitely couldn't have achieved any of this by hand. I couldn't have done it

as freely. Part of the power of the image comes from the spontaneity of its creation. The technology also gave me textures, colors, and a sharpness of image I couldn't have gotten by hand.

Do you have any advice for aspiring artists like yourself?
For me, experimentation is critical. As for computer art, people shouldn't get frustrated by a lack of ideas or a lack of technical ability. Start with whichever you have, and let the other come when it's ready. Be patient. In spite of the fact that you can create images quickly, it takes a long time and a lot of experimentation to be able to achieve the kind of effects you're aiming for.

Drawings by: Nora J. Pruis; Kimberly A. Deets; Shanna L. Diephuis; Matthew Jay Dykstra.

Creating Linear La

"How much can be done using lines that are expressive!"

Vincent van Gogh painted some of the most powerful images ever created. Van Gogh made a number of portraits, but the subjects of many of his most emotional works were landscapes.

The artist felt an intense connection with his surroundings, and the vocabulary of marks he developed helped him to visually capture the movements and energies of nature. By emphasing the elements of line and color, Van Gogh transformed the scenes he saw around him into masterpieces.

In this workshop, you'll use linear drawing techniques to turn an ordinary landscape into an expressive work of art.

MATERIALS

- Variety of magazines with landscape imagery. *National Geographic*, outdoor, travel, and nature magazines.
- 18" x 24" 80lb white sulfite drawing paper
- Sharp No. 2 school pencil with eraser
- 18" ruler
- 12 color set water-based color markers
- White scrap paper

STEP 1

Bring in magazines featuring good, clear, color photographs of landscapes. You can find large, dramatic landscape photos in publications like *National Geographic*, nature, and outdoor magazines. The image you select should be **large**, **sharply focused**, **visually interesting**, have a **center of interest**, and clearly show **foreground**, **middleground**, and **background** areas. Avoid landscapes that include animals, people, architecture, and mechanical forms.

ndscapes

—Vincent van Gogh

STEP 2

Select three landscape images you feel may work. Carefully remove from the magazines. Pick the best one, then using a dark marker and a ruler, put 1" grid lines on the photo. With a pencil and ruler, place 2" grid lines on the 18" x 24" paper. Your drawing will be twice the size of the photograph. The grid lines on the photo should be dark; the grid lines on the paper should be very light. By using each square in the grid as a guide, do a very light contour drawing of your composition. Since this drawing will serve as a guide for the finished water-based marker drawing, details are not necessary.

STEP 3

On a piece of scrap paper, experiment with all the line techniques you can think of: dots; dashes; swirls; outlines; continuous scribbles; straight/curved lines; long/short; wide/narrow; woven/cross-hatched; vertical/horizontal/diagonal. Begin work on your landscape drawing. You can create movement, rhythm, mood, feeling, and visual texture by the way you use lines. Limit colors and techniques to give your work unity. You can put red and yellow lines next to or on top of each other to create the impression of orange. Blue next to yellow creates green. Red and blue creates purple. Put down light colors first. Do not leave white paper; use light colored lines. You can use repeated lines or shading to make forms look three-dimensional.

SOME SOLUTIONS

You can use only part of the photo in your drawing. Your marks can be **widely spaced** or **close together**. Lines can be **round/curved** or **sharp/jagged**.

Contour lines that describe the edge of an object can be **repeated inside the form** to make it appear solid. Curves can be **loose and shallow** or wound into **tight spirals**. Curved lines can **interlock**. You can **repeat marks**—circles, semi-circles, radiating dashes—to create textures. Repeating and overlapping the same mark in two different colors suggests a certain atmosphere. Overlapping different marks of different colors creates another feeling. Outlines around objects don't always have to be black. Powerful effects can be achieved by using **bright colors** to outline objects.

Fragmented Faces

Does this self-portrait look familiar?

During his brief career, Vincent van Gogh painted many revealing and important self-portraits. In each, the artist used line in a unique way to express his feelings at the time.

All the self-portraits that make up the composite below were featured in this issue. Can you identify the linear techniques that Van Gogh used to make them?

1. Fill in the letter of the portrait that best illustrates each of the following linear techniques. (Hint: each portrait best exemplifies two of these techniques.)

____a. Swirls

____b. Dots

____c. Horizontal brushstrokes

____d. Heavy black outlines

____e. Dashes

____f. Lines that follow contours

____g. Woven lines

____h. Vertical brushstrokes

2. Beside each of these statements made by van Gogh, write the letter of the self-portrait which seems most appropriate.

a. "Heavy black outlines can often convey a mood of despair."_____

b. "I much admire the work of the Impressionists, especially their methods of breaking up colors into small dots."_____

c. "The swirling deep blue sky was filled with clouds of a blue deeper than that of intense cobalt."_____

d. "I am trying to work in watercolor so my strokes will become a little lighter and more open."_____