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Self-portrait with Straw Hat, 1887

Twenty-Three December



When people saw him walking along the cobblestoned streets of the village, they would turn away to avoid looking into his piercing eyes. Eyes that looked as if they burned with a fever. Eyes that saw colors that no one else saw. Eyes that some of the old women of the village whispered were haunted.

This day was no different, even the charitable feeling of the season did not bring a greeting to the hearts of the people as he approached them. One woman scurried into a shop, the tobacconist's, which sold things for which most women had no need. A man finding him in his path suddenly recalled that he needed to turn and go the other way.

Even the village priest shook his head and whispered, "There comes that fool again," and then remembered some errand of service so pressing that he could not spare but a moment to say a grace filled, "Good day."

Dressed in well worn clothes of an ultramarine blue with a tattered yellow straw hat, the man may have indeed looked like a fool. Or a vagabond. Beneath the hat whose brim gave no shade, the man's face was unshaven, and his nose was tinted red with the cold. On one cheek bone he had a smear of yellow paint where he had thoughtlessly scratched an itch that irritated him.

At the end of one arm he carried his wooden box of paints and an easel fabricated of scrap wood from the village lumber auctioneer. And under the other arm he carefully carried the two canvases he did that day somewhere beyond the village borders before the sky clouded over and he lost the light he so desired to capture. Thus he

Yet he needed to create. It was a discipline he had trained within himself. A habit he had nurtured. Paint everyday. At least one canvas. A landscape. A portrait. A still life. A *mise-en-scène*.

There was a hunger. That was what he had named it. And everyday he had to break the fast of that hunger.

He set up his easel, angled to reflect the light from the window. Opening his work case, he glanced over its contents. Many of the paint tubes were dented and rolled, most of the life squeezed out of them. His inventory of colors was severely lacking. He shuffled through them. Very few brights. Mostly earth colors — the umbers, the siennas, a tube of yellow ocher. These would do for what he had in mind.

One last canvas remained. He had been saving it for a landscape, yet today he would paint inside. And he would paint what was inside. An idea from the night before.

He prepared his palette — extruding the base colors onto the thin board, mixing one with another on an open spot to create a new tone. He gathered his brushes — the broad fans, the fine points. Holding the palette in his left hand, thumb securely clamped through its hole, the body of the board balanced on the table of his forearm, he wrapped the brushes in his extended fingers. Having stalled the tick of time with his habitual starting ritual, he addressed the waiting canvas.

White. An eternity of blankness from edge to edge. As he gazed at it, it seemed to glare back at him with a bold accusation. His mind fled to a thought. Was this blend of anxiety and anticipation like that that confronted God when He first looked upon the void? Did He also know what to do but feared where to start? The plan before Him, the outcome already foreseen, and yet the moment of the very beginning hesitant.

The canvas continued to stare back at him. He sought the idea he had at the de Groot's the night before. The gloom and grace of the space. He desired to create a portrait of a family of the lower class. The workers, the people who supported the lives of those so often painted by the greats in the past — the subjects of history. The kings and queens and princes within the gold leaf frames. Even Rembrandt, the master who was a fellow countryman of his, although he preceded Vincent by hundreds of years, tended to paint the wealthy, hiding them in classical and biblical scenes.



When they would arrive, they would go on the wall above his bed — hung there to inspire his sleep. He eagerly awaited them.

Bedroom in Arles, 1889

No. Vincent wanted to capture the common people. And in the de Groot's he believed he had found the ideal subjects. The work worn hands of the men. The wearied heart of the matriarch, reflected in her face. The need to provide when, day in and day out, there was little to give. The boiled potatoes in the bowl, wan and not enough. And yet, the eager reach of the forks, men and women and children around the small table gathered.

The children.

It all came back to him.



Vincent entered the other room. There, sitting before a window to utilize the natural light, sat the seamstress, an elderly woman in a red blouse and a red cap, a white shirt spread across her lap.

Woman Sewing, 1881

back to Paris. Vincent had them facing against the walls to protect the colors from sun fade. Quickly he went through them, selecting out the summer scenes. Landscapes. Portraits of farmers, cows, fields, orchards in blossom, people he had done studies of. He set them up on display around the bed. There were a dozen or more. Which to choose?

He paced the room, eyeballing each canvas in turn.

What would she like? He decided against one he pulled it from the collection. Back and forth. What did a woman like? A question that had plagued men for centuries. Theo had touched on the same thought in his letter. What would appeal to one of the female eye? Not cows, and he pushed them out of the group. They were well done, and although they were painted in the summer, he did not believe they would remind the seamstress of that season.

He was down to a final five when he remembered one he had not selected. He tried to recall where he had put it. Had it gone to Paris? Had he given it to someone already? He should be more organized, he lectured himself. Again he sorted through the canvases against the wall until he found the one he sought. He took the blank canvas he had previously tried to start from his easel and replaced it with his new candidate.

He stepped back to appraise it.

A medium canvas. A still life. A white porcelain water pitcher stuffed full of wildflowers. Golds, yellows, whites, pinks, oranges, and reds, a great explosion of colors that cascaded down over the greens of ferns and leaves upon the table the pitcher sat upon.

This was it, he thought. The old woman would like this. Flowers symbolized summer. They would remind her of warmer, brighter days. They would remind her of her youth. And perhaps even blossom some memory of a bouquet gifted from a beau.

He tucked it beneath his arm and hurried back to the shop of the seamstress.

“That is better than I had hoped for,” she remarked when he presented it to her.

“Then it will do?”

“Quite.”