

LISTENING TASK: Van Gogh

You will hear a talk about Vincent Van Gogh. Fill in the gaps with the information you hear.



Many people today are _____ with Van Gogh's paintings.

To the people of Van Gogh's time, his paintings were not _____ enough.

Van Gogh's father was a _____.

Van Gogh was rejected by two _____.

Van Gogh lived in _____ for 2 years before moving to Arles.

Van Gogh was poor and received financial support from _____, Theo.

A friend of Van Gogh's _____ when she received a piece of his left ear.

Van Gogh's paintings demonstrated his love of _____.

Van Gogh died at the age of _____.

Van Gogh only managed to sell _____ during his lifetime.



Key: familiar / realistic / minister / women / Paris / his brother / fainted / nature / 37 / one painting

Script: (from Update for FCE)

In today's programme in our series about great painters, we will talk about one of the greatest artists of all time, Vincent Van Gogh. I think that many people are familiar with his work and some of his famous paintings like *Sunflowers* and *Starry Night*.

Have you ever wondered why it is so easy for us to recognize a painting by this artist? Well, that's because he simply had his own unique style. He's a great favourite and many people all over the world love his work... but you may be surprised to learn that, to the people of his time, his paintings were strange and confusing. People were used to more realistic painting and they couldn't understand why he didn't paint details, or why he used such bright intense colours. And, worst of all, you could actually see his wild thick brushstrokes and that made his work seem very rough and unfinished.

But why did Van Gogh paint the way he did? In order to understand his paintings, it helps to learn a few facts about his life. Van Gogh was born in Holland in 1853. He was the son of a minister. He had a rather difficult - we could even say stormy - personality and that quite often caused problems in his relationship with his family. Van Gogh failed in several careers, including trying to be a minister himself and trying to work in the family business. There were also problems with women: he fell head over heels in love twice, both times with women who not only didn't love him back, but actually wanted nothing to do with him. Then, when he finally discovered that painting was his true calling and he devoted himself to that, his work was rejected and he was considered to be a failure as an artist.

It was in 1888, after living in Paris for 2 years, that Van Gogh moved to Arles, which is in southern France. Arles has a warm Mediterranean climate and he was very inspired there by the sun and the bright colours of the landscape. He painted for 2 years without rest. In fact, this was his most intensive period and during this time he produced many of his most beautiful and famous works, but he couldn't sell his work and was forced to live in poverty. He had to depend on his brother Theo to send him money. Theo was generous and loving but he couldn't afford to send a lot, so Van Gogh was sometimes close to starvation, living mainly on coffee and this was more often than not because he preferred to spend the money from Theo on paint and canvas rather than on food!

Now if that weren't enough, Van Gogh was quite lonely and often felt depressed. He began to suffer from attacks of mental illness that got worse and worse. Once, in a moment of total madness, he took a knife and cut off a piece of his left ear, wrapped it up and gave it to a girl he knew. As you can imagine, the poor thing fainted on the spot. He spent the last year of his life in a mental hospital, but even there he didn't stop painting because he had periods of time when his head was clear. The great wonder is how he could create such beauty while living a life so full of pain and trouble.

You see, Van Gogh painted with his heart and soul, not with his mind. He loved nature and we can see how he expressed this love, this joy and wonder at everything he saw: flowers, field, trees, the sky and stars, and also simple working people... but the stormy brushstrokes in his paintings that look so rough and unfinished, they also express his terrible suffering, feelings of rejection, loneliness, anger and despair.

Finally, when he was only 37, Van Gogh committed suicide. Though his career was short and lasted only 10 years, Van Gogh painted 2,211 marvellous pictures. How many of these had he managed to sell? You're going to be shocked: one. Yes, the great Vincent Van Gogh sold only one painting in his entire lifetime. Yet after his death, the art world slowly but surely began to realize his greatness and genius. The only problem in selling an original painting of his today is finding someone with enough money to pay for it - a portrait of his sold some years ago for 82.5 million dollars -, the highest price ever paid for a painting. Poor Van Gogh, unrecognized and unappreciated while he was alive, is today one of the world's best-loved and most popular artists.