

LESSONS LEARNED FROM LOVING VINCENT

by Charlene Kwiatkowski



Vincent van Gogh, *Garden at Arles*, 1888

"It is observing things for a long time that gives you greater maturity and deeper understanding."

WHEN I FIRST SAW THE POSTER for the 2017 film *Loving Vincent* outside my hotel in Amsterdam, I read the title like a verb. Then, when reading Vincent's letters to his brother Theo, I noticed he signs off almost each one with "Ever yours" or, as the movie portrays it, "Your loving Vincent." While the film's title plays off this adjectival signature, I think my initial interpretation is closer to what this stunning animation achieves.

Certainly, in form, this movie is all about loving Vincent. You don't make a movie with 65,000 hand-painted oil pictures in the style of an artist if you don't love his work. But the content, contrary to what you expect, is not about Vincent's story as much as what the viewer does with it.

Because the movie begins a year after Vincent's death, he only appears through flashbacks. Instead, the central figure is a young man named Armand Roulin who reluctantly investigates how Vincent could go from stable to suicidal in six weeks. Marguerite Gachet, daughter of Vincent's last doctor, asks Roulin, "You want to know so much about his death, but what do you know of his life?"

I left the theatre feeling like Roulin at the end of the film, challenged to figure out my journey

in light of Vincent's. Why do I love Vincent so much? What could I learn from his life?

While watching the movie didn't exactly help me answer these questions, reading his letters and viewing his art in the Van Gogh Museum led to more nuanced insights about his life and, in turn, the artistic vocation. Here are some of them.



BETTER TO FIND THE THING THAT MAKES YOU COME ALIVE SOONER RATHER THAN LATER.

Vincent worked for an art dealer before teaching at a boy's school. He tried following his father's footsteps as a preacher and even pursued theological studies. After about a decade of these "mistakes," as he later called them, he decided to be an artist. He quoted his painting idol, Eugene Delacroix, to refer to his journey in coming to painting: "I discovered painting when I had neither teeth nor breath left."

While there is something beautiful about this eventual discovery, it strikes me more as tragic that Vincent came to painting already exhausted from years of trying to live up to other people's expectations of himself—namely his father's. You can see the tension in their relationship in *Still Life with*

Bible, painted after Vincent's father died. His father's large Bible sits next to one of Vincent's favorite books, *La Joie de Vivre (The Joy of Life)* by Émile Zola, which was a "kind of 'bible' for modern life," according to the Van Gogh Museum. While the juxtaposition of these books illustrates the differing worldviews of Vincent and his father, their sizes also seem



Vincent van Gogh, *Still Life with Bible*, 1885

to indicate how Vincent felt in his father's presence. There are a lot of dark shadows on the canvas. The candle is out; there is no going back in time for another conversation. This painting lands as heavy on the chest as the mighty tome lying on the table.



TAKE YOUR TIME ONCE YOU FIND THAT THING.

Despite Vincent coming to painting comparatively late, he didn't rush the arduous process of learning technique to create the brilliant works we are so familiar with today. Primarily a self-taught artist, he produced sketch after sketch, adding color only after he

perfected his drawings. Rather than spend money to hire models so he could master the anatomy of the human body, he spent time with peasants to learn their movements in scattering seed, using a plough, and digging a field. In our culture of overnight YouTube sensations, to read about a tedious, labor-intensive crawl towards achievement sounds so unappealing it's refreshing. Vincent wrote, "It is observing things for a long time that gives you greater maturity and deeper understanding."



START SMALL.

When looking at Vincent's art, it is evident that no thing was too small or lowly for him to paint. He wrote, "My ambition reaches no further than a few clods of earth, sprouting wheat, an olive grove, a cypress." Ever humble, Vincent was an artist of the people, painting everyday peasants most artists ignored. Impressive figure paintings like *The Potato Eaters* came after hundreds of sketches of hands and heads.



Vincent van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*, 1885



PURSUIING YOUR PASSION HAS A PRICE.

There is so much talk today about doing what you love. Vincent's story reveals a dark underside to this common millennial message that left me conflicted.

He frequently expressed his dislike at being financially dependent on his younger brother Theo, an art dealer, while continuing to ask for more money like a scratched CD stuck on the same refrain. Theo was poor himself and later had a wife and child to take care of. At one point, Vincent became mistrustful of how much his brother is actually trying to sell his work. He couldn't even do his art without Theo's support, so these particular letters were difficult to read, especially since Theo gave so ungrudgingly and was one of his only friends.

It is well known that Vincent sold only one artwork during his lifetime. We are meant to feel inspired by this; after all, if someone like Vincent van Gogh had such a rough time but persevered to leave the legacy he did, perhaps we can overcome our challenges and find success too. But the other side of this anecdote seldom talked about is that Vincent didn't have to work under such strain, consumed with anxiety about money and dragging Theo down this road too. He was so dedicated to his vision that he would refuse to do even one painting in the style of the day that people were buying. Obviously no one likes a sell-out and Vincent's unwavering commitment is the reason I am writing about him in 2019, but I began to ask while reading: At what point is your integrity to your passion worth it when

it jeopardizes your relationships and health? The film highlights this question in a heated argument between Vincent and Dr. Gachet, as well as with Paul Gauguin. I also wonder how much Theo's sickness and death, just six months after Vincent's, was wound up with his brother's.



SO YOU THINK YOU KNOW WHAT YOU WANT.

When Vincent's work was finally being recognized and he received a favorable review from an art critic, he couldn't stand the pressure it put on him and ended up writing the critic with a list of other and better painters he should have praised instead. This episode is so frustrating it is almost laughable. It's so human. We complain about not getting what we want and then when we get it, we discover we don't want it after all.

Vincent gets increasingly reflective near the end of his life as he's dealing with mental illness. After all the labor put into his paintings, he wrote, "The strain of producing pictures will have taken my whole life, and it will seem to me that I haven't lived." Vincent never married and had few friends. He battled severe loneliness, often commenting that he'd rather be with a bad whore than be alone. When describing one of his paintings to his brother, he wrote, "They are vast stretches of wheat under troubled skies, and I didn't have to put myself out very much in order to try and express sadness and extreme loneliness."

That being said, during his "mad" years, he produced some of his best work, including *Starry Night*, *The Reaper*, and *Cypresses*.



DON'T WRITE OFF REALITY

A sentence introducing one of Vincent's last letters by Ronald de Leeuw, Director of the Van Gogh Museum, has stuck with me. He wrote of Vincent, "Sometimes he felt like turning his back on reality and creating a 'melody of tones with color' but he knew he had to stick to the real world if only for the sake of his health."

In the late nineteenth century, the Impressionists' work (which van Gogh mostly fit into) wasn't at all like the realism of Jean-Francois Millet or Gustave Courbet. But when you stand at our current moment and think about what abstract art became after van Gogh, you realize that Vincent did stick to representation. His starry sky might be swimming with swirls, but we still recognize it as a sky. In art today, it seems the poem or painting that is really obscure is praised on principle, as if the further

it is from reality, the higher the level of being of its creator. Reality can get dismissed so easily under the labels of "ordinary" or "boring," but de Leeuw's sentence about Vincent reminds me that reality still plays an important role in art and in life, even a saving one. Besides, a good artist notices the small, ordinary things and has a way of making you feel they are extraordinary after all.

Neither the film nor Vincent's letters led me down the road I expected. Loving Vincent grew more complicated when I paid more attention to him as a person than as the artist I had put on a romantic pedestal. Sometimes this resulted in realizing I may not love Vincent as much as I thought, or at least not for the reasons I had thought. My relationship to him was like watching his animated paintings in the movie shimmer and morph into new scenes just when I was beginning to feel settled. ❖



Vincent van Gogh, *Daubigny's Garden*, 1890



Vincent van Gogh, *Garden at Auvers*, 1890



Vincent van Gogh, *Flower Garden*, 1888