

## The Unappreciated Artist

According to the Doctor from the wildly popular British time travel show, *Doctor Who*, “In 900 years of time and space, [he had] never met anyone who wasn’t important.”

As someone who travels around the world and to various other planets throughout the universes, the Doctor truly has encountered some amazing individuals. Ranging from famous historical figures such as Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, or Rosa Parks to aliens to his own human companions, the characters in this show are full of potential, even if they are unaware of their significance when they first meet the iconic Time Lord.

Vincent van Gogh is one such figure whom the Doctor meets during his exciting adventure in “Vincent and the Doctor,” but unlike in other historical episodes, the artist needed saving not just from a threatening alien creature, but also from his perceptions of himself.

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As soon as I spotted van Gogh’s dying sunflowers from across the gallery room, I immediately went into ultimate fangirl mode - heart rate quickening, whole body trembling, squeals of delight threatening to pour out of me. I clutched my iPad closer to my chest, as I

stood, admiring from afar. I could barely wait until the crowd of tourists moved on to the next room.

It was early in my London study abroad semester, and at that time, I didn't know if I was allowed to take pictures in the National Gallery. I certainly didn't want to get into any trouble like I did that one time in Balboa Park...but that is another story.

So I contented myself with staring at the piece from a short distance, barely perceiving that I was face to face with the real thing. *This is it*, I thought. *I'm in the actual presence of a masterpiece.*

I could have gone into full-blown art student mode, noting the individual strokes of the artist's brush, the layers of yellow paints, the shapes, the colors, the works, but there was plenty of time for all that during the rest of the semester. In that moment, I only wanted to take it all in and recognize the genius of my favorite artist--an artist who, thanks to the director's depictions in "Vincent and the Doctor," helped me recognize that despite the pain and the disappointments in this world, there is still beauty to find within it.

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In my junior year of high school, my art teacher announced that we were to research our favorite artist so that we could present on said artist a few days later. At the time I wanted to focus on whatever art project I was working on since I knew I needed all the time in the world to finish everything. But I learned to see the assignment more as a learning experience than as a simple school assignment which happened to come with a grade. I didn't actually know of too many artists--only the most famous ones--so I racked my brain and picked whoever came to

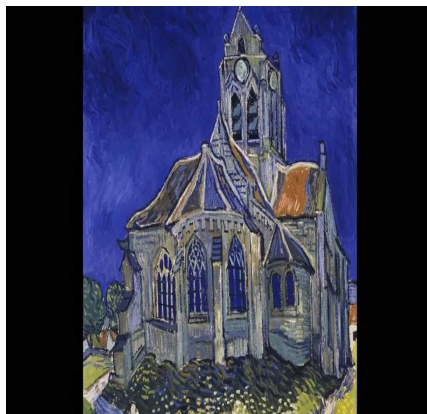
mind first. I ended up going with Vincent, but I was not mentally prepared for what I was going to find out about this tortured artist.

The night after my presentation, I joined my group of Whovians for our biweekly *Doctor Who* night, a tradition which involves us first eating at El Pollo Loco and then driving to an old church couple's home in Mira Mesa to watch a couple episodes. And, to my surprise and utter excitement, who should appear on the TV screen but ol' Vincent himself? I, of course, was immediately enthralled, as I watched my research come alive in the most "timey wimey" way possible.

I didn't know it at the time, but that episode was to become my favorite *Doctor Who* episode of all time.

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"Vincent and the Doctor" begins when the Doctor and his human companion, Amy, take a trip to the Musee d'Orsay, where they pay a visit to an exhibit filled with Vincent van Gogh's work. As Amy finds herself geeking out over her favorite artist's paintings, the Doctor suddenly becomes concerned after viewing one painting in particular:



*The Church at Auvers* (1890)

He draws Amy's attention to the window at the right, as he spots a face which he claims does not look friendly. The Doctor doesn't know who or what exactly the face belongs to, but he does know that he and Amy need to talk to Vincent about it, as he claims this is "a matter of life and death." After the Doctor asks the curator, Mr. Black, for the exact date on which the piece was painted and compliments him on his bowtie ("Bowties are cool"), he and Amy take a trip on a time machine known as the TARDIS to 1890 Auvers-sur-Oise, where they find the famous Dutch artist in a cafe featured in one of Vincent's other paintings:



*Cafe Terrace at Night*

When the two travellers first meet him, Vincent is desperate for a drink, but all he has with him is one of his self portraits which he hopes is of a tradable value.



The cafe owner is convinced that the painting will scare off his other patrons and thus refuses to take it as payment. Like everyone else in the town, he thinks that van Gogh is a drunk madman who lacks any real talent as an artist.

Van Gogh's public image surprises Amy. How can people think this way of one of the world's most famous artists?

After Amy buys a bottle of wine and shares it with Vincent, the painter brings our two heroes to his studio. As the Doctor and Amy look around, they find paintings hanging from clothespins outside and covering the walls and tables inside. Many they recognize from having seen them in the future. Vincent apologizes for the mess and even calls his work "clutter," but his two new friends try to convince him otherwise, calling the pieces precious.

"I've come to accept that the only person who's going to love my paintings is me," Vincent says.

Unaware of his future legacy, van Gogh goes through life thinking he will never amount to anything. No one seems to appreciate his work now. Why would that ever change?

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When people today think of the artist responsible for masterpieces such as *Starry Night* or *Sunflowers*, they would probably recall him as the man crazy enough to cut off his left ear.

Although little is known of Vincent's mental illness, it is clear that at some point, he did, indeed, become mentally unstable. After getting into a heated argument with fellow artist Paul Gauguin, he was said to have chased his friend with a razor and then later used it to cut off his own ear. Following this event, Vincent was treated by Dr. Felix Rey in a hospital in Arles, France. The doctor believed the artist was suffering from a form of epilepsy which could have

come about partly because of Vincent's partaking in too much coffee and alcohol and too little food, although he never made an official diagnosis.

Vincent returned home two weeks later, but it didn't take long before the artist started having more breakdowns, attacks which left him confused about what he was even doing or saying. His neighbors came to think that he was a danger to the public good and organized a petition to have him leave the Yellow House in which he was staying.

Vincent's life never got any easier. He eventually voluntarily admitted himself to an asylum and stayed there for a year. After that period, he moved to Auvers to live near his brother Theo, his only true supporter, but after four months, he committed suicide.

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When the Doctor and Amy witness Vincent swinging at the air with his pitchfork, they begin to see why everyone else believes him to be a madman. Little do they know, at least at first, that their new friend is not having a fit, but instead is reacting to an invisible monster known as a Krafayis that only he can see. It's not until some invisible force knocks the Doctor off his feet that the two time travellers realize the truth: The monster is real, and only Vincent and his amazing mind have the power to see it.

This is not to say that Vincent doesn't have his low moments in this episode. At one point, after too much coffee, he boldly exclaims how he can "hear colors" and he tells the Doctor how the world would scream at him to capture those colors on canvas. He becomes too impassioned and the Doctor offers him some tea to calm him down.

This moment not only shows the artist's mental instability, but also his need for understanding. Vincent wishes other people could see the world in the way that he does, and

while his perception might be different, it's also beautiful. Towards the end of the episode, once the three have defeated the Krafayis and ultimately have saved the day, they lie down on the grass, and, while holding hands, look up at the sky. The Doctor and Amy listen as Vincent describes what he sees and suddenly the viewer watches as the night sky begins to transform into *Starry Night*, with its swirls of blues and yellows.

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It's a wonder to think that van Gogh, an artist who was only able to sell one painting in the entirety of his lifetime, has become so famous and so respected.

I could try to explain this artist's significance today, how his art has come to captivate the minds of millions of people around the world, but really Mr. Black explains it best:

[T]o me Van Gogh is the finest painter of them all. Certainly the most popular, great painter of all time. The most beloved, his command of colour most magnificent. He transformed the pain of his tormented life into ecstatic beauty. Pain is easy to portray, but to use your passion and pain to portray the ecstasy and joy and magnificence of our world, no one had ever done it before. Perhaps no one ever will again. To my mind, that strange, wild man who roamed the fields of Provence was not only the world's greatest artist, but also one of the greatest men who ever lived.

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Despite their success in giving Vincent renewed joy and pride in his work, Amy and the Doctor could not prevent Vincent from killing himself. (It was a fixed point in history.) Amy had hoped that perhaps they *could* have changed history, that perhaps they could have allowed Vincent to create even more paintings than the close to 900 he had already painted.

But all is not hopeless. Vincent's work might not have found the popularity he was looking for while he was alive, but modern audiences, myself included, now get to give it the appreciation it deserves.

I returned to the National Gallery at least once more after my first visit, but that second time, I made sure to actually take pictures of not only his *Sunflowers*, but also of some of his other paintings there, including *Yellow Chair* and *Two Crabs*. I watched as crowds briefly acknowledged the famous paintings in front of them. They looked and then moved on without giving the pieces much thought. Not that I blamed them. I did the same thing with many of the other paintings within the galleries I visited. But with Vincent's work, it was different. I was lucky enough to not only be able to appreciate the beauty within the art, but also the beauty within the artist. Despite the naysayers, Vincent continued to paint. In fact, he couldn't help but paint, even though he could never make a living off his work. That, I believe, is the mark of a true artist. But of course, it would have been nice if a Time Lord and his companion could have actually saved him. I know I, like Amy, wouldn't mind having a few more Van Gogh masterpieces to geek out over.

