

Analyse the extent to which artist painting styles change with their changing mental health

Mental illnesses are defined as the inability to cope with everyday life, they take over a person's mind so they are unable to think rationally. Artists with mental illnesses reflect their true feelings in the techniques and colour they employ even though they may not be purposefully doing so. This is especially clear in the early periods of art when mental illnesses were not accepted or even fully understood. Artists like Vincent van Gogh used art as a platform to both express themselves and cry for help. When those who do not have a mental illness try to illustrate one, do they capture it accurately? They may have researched each illness, its causes and triggers, but they may not be able to capture the true nature and emotion in art, that comes with an unstable mind. Conscious of the need to be authentic in my own portrayal of mental illness and raise awareness about it through art, I felt I had to inhabit the mind of several artists with mental illness by studying their work, thereby giving my own work authenticity.

Vincent van Gogh was a post-impressionist artist who described his work as "obsessive passion" showing that his work went deeper than just painting his own self-portrait. Impressionism was the movement that focuses on the depiction of light and its changing qualities. Typically, artists within this movement use minimal yet visible brush strokes to emphasise light. As he was a post-impressionist artist, meaning he was progressing towards a period of braver artists, creating a new movement. This is called Expressionism. Van Gogh was not completely at this point, but he knew he wanted to pull away from the traditional fine strokes of the ordinary subject matter. This means he did not want to paint the natural colours of the world but how he saw colour and light. Before his incident, many of his paintings represented happiness by using vibrant colours, for example, 'Cafe Terrace at Night'.



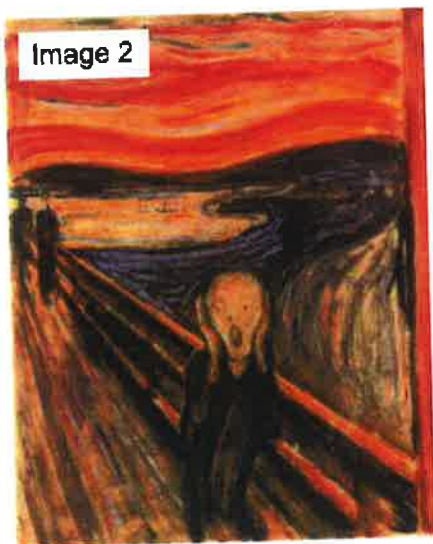
He recognised he was mentally ill and asked himself "My only anxiety is, how can I be of use in the world?"¹. He wanted to make something of himself through his art and by asking himself this question, it shows he wanted to use his mind to his advantage. He suffered greatly from what was seen as bipolar disorder, anxiety and depression which was intensified by the last two years of his life. In a period of insanity, he began to hallucinate which led him to pick up a knife. This was one of the most important events in his life; cutting off his own ear in 1888, something he is largely remembered for. This was the episode that gave birth to his more sombre pieces. Image 1 is an example of this as the neutral tones used, portray sadness. There are many possibilities as to why he did this however the most plausible reason is his mental state. During the time of insanity, he thought he could escape this by cutting off an organ that was responsible for hearing. He wanted to avoid the voices around him and to live in harmony. Many saw this as an artistic movement however, as there was a lack of knowledge about insanity during the late 1800s, no one really knew how deep his hurt was.

One year before he committed suicide, he painted the 'Van Gogh portrait' in 1889 (Image 1). He would often paint himself as he could not afford models. When he finished the piece, he sent it to his brother and wrote: "I hope you will notice that my facial expressions have become much calmer, although my eyes have the same insecure look as before, or so it appears to me." The look on his face portrays an emotionless blank stare, with

¹ Vincent Van Gogh by Victoria Charles (Vietnam) page 192

cold grey eyes illustrating the anticipation of his death. Furthermore, the use of cold colours can be interpreted as illustrating depression. The swirls create a sense of serenity, bringing movement into the portrait and allowing the eyes to follow the piece chronologically (from the background to the clothes to the face). His misery was his serenity and by ending his own life he realised he could reach eternal serenity. This image is significant as every part represents his mental state. The blues defining his depression, the swirls in different directions show his indecisiveness which represents his bipolar disorder or the swirls could illustrate haziness and a dream-like image showing his hallucinations and abnormal view of the world. This drastic change between colour palettes emphasises how his changing mind led him to create different pieces.

What is unusual about his painting style compared to other artists during the same time period, is the brush strokes. There are no straight lines within his pieces which could resemble how he is not like everyone else. By using curves and swirls he is illustrating the way he saw the world. He chooses to see himself that way for a reason and that could be due to his distorted mind. These lines create beautiful textures giving the audience a guideline, allowing them to follow the piece and really examine every detail. Van Gogh quotes "I put my heart and soul into my work, and lost my mind in the process"² as he was devoted to his art and this is what took him over the edge. All he knew was art and once he had expressed himself in a way that presented who he was, his art journey finished. Van Gogh indirectly initiated the movement towards expressionism as he is expressing his personal journey from colourful portraits with a hint of optimism to a bleak self-portrait showing his final feelings.



Edvard Munch is a Norwegian artist who is famous for his autobiographical illustration based on his own hallucination, known as The Scream (Image 2). The most painful experience in his life was the passing of his mother from tuberculosis when he was a child, which then was followed by his sister, who took the place of his mother when he was a teenager. These two deaths occurred in the critical stages of his development, creating an emotional impact that had consequences in his adult life. His father then became emotionally unavailable as he was diagnosed with agitated psychotic depression. This trauma was intensified by the poverty he grew up in. All these factors influenced his painting style of loneliness and withdrawal. However, his artwork before the Scream used colder colours and emphasised being in the dark. This is significant as it shows that the scream was a psychological turning point for his artwork.

He began to express his tormented thoughts through artistic creations, giving birth to an art style which progressed away from Impressionist towards a period of Expressionism. The original painting was created in 1893, with multiple variations created afterwards using different media, such as oil paintings, pastels and numerous prints of the image. The Scream was created after taking a walk along a pier with two friends. Hallucinations took over his sight and he said the "air turned into blood" and the "faces of my comrades became a garish yellow-white". He also heard "a huge endless scream course through nature" hence the name of the piece. Munch was clearly wracked with anxiety and uncertainty. The painting of a sexless, twisted creature with mouth and eyes open wide in a shriek of horror was created to represent how ugly he sees a beautiful sunset. He became obsessed with this traumatic event and this showed in his artwork

² <https://artsandculture.google.com/usergallery/xqLyEzX8LSiCJg>

following. All his pieces began to look more disturbing and influenced by his mental state. This shows that the walk along the pier acted as an external trigger as it was when he became flooded with irrational thoughts and views of the world. This piece is a true reflection of how symbolism is used to create an expressionist piece as he indirectly shows his suffering through a simple body screaming, in an abnormal environment. Edvard Munch was plagued with mental illness including anxiety and hallucinations which is used to explain why he painted in the style that he did.

Munch created this piece as a "Self-Portrait in hell" as that is how he thinks people see him. I believe that illnesses take over the body, showing no emotion and defining people as having anxiety or as having hallucinations, not for being the person that they are. An emotionless face portraying a horrified expression shows the dark nature of how the brain thinks. The brush strokes are used to define the body in the picture. They move smoothly around the creature, allowing the audience to follow the lines, drawing the main focus on him. Although the background uses warmer colours, the darker more defined lines physically outline the body to make it bold but also metaphorically outlines himself being isolated and alone in the world. The colour of the creature defines how blank he felt, the feeling of horror took over his body and could not feel anything else. The colourless clothing as well does not draw away the attention of the person and therefore highlights the blank nature of the person. It is significant that he sees himself this way as it shows how mentally unstable he is to believe that he is the emotionless creature.

There are only four years between the creation of Van Gogh's portrait and the Scream yet both have very contrasting techniques. Both artists try to create a self-portrait illustrating how they saw themselves, and both using their illnesses as inspiration for their pieces. It is clear that Munch was inspired by Van Gogh as lines play an important role with both pieces. Using swirls and curves to their advantage, to bring the focus back to the main portrait. Furthermore, using these lines show their mental state as straight lines represent sanity were as curves show more of a freeness. Their similarities expand deeper than just a portrait on a page, the uncertainty of emotion and display of distortion shows how they are both uncertain about themselves, a feeling of insecurity and isolation. This emotion is what Munch was influenced by as Gogh gave him the courage he needed to express himself with no boundaries.

Louis Wain became known for his paintings of cats, giving birth to the new popular art movement of anthropomorphism. This then quickly developed into a more psychedelic movement. The importance of this is how he emphasises the traumatic event of losing his wife and how this affected his mindset to change and produce unusual geometrical patterns.

He began this concept after bringing home a stray cat called Peter when his wife was diagnosed with cancer. He started dressing Peter in clothes and presenting him in social situations that only humans are in, for example, gambling or drinking (image 3). He then produced drawings and paintings based on this concept. Shortly after their marriage, Wain lost his wife to cancer which struck him with deep depression.



His original paintings used cynical colours which would suggest a dark undertone, however, this was not the case. He wanted to depict the reality of human life but in ways which are amusing, hence why he uses cats. Image 3 is called the Bachelor Party. There is no clear evidence as to what inspired Wain to create this piece, whether it was from

his own bachelor party or just his imagination, however, the emotion of the cats feels real. Each cat has its own unique personality from the hyperactive and cheerful cat in the middle to the upsetting cat next to him. These cats could also be interpreted as his inner feelings, an indirect indicator of his mental state and how it will slowly develop into schizophrenia. Although the external trigger of his wife dying psychologically pushed him over the edge, he could have been predisposed to the disease or had gradual feelings of insanity building up to his wife passing.

After his wife passed, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia which affects a person's way of thinking as well as their behaviour. Schizophrenia is a mental illness that can cause an individual to hear multiple voices in their head, which could be argued as to why Wain changed his painting style. With his aggressive nature, he began to change his style into geometric and colourful emotionless cats which he created whilst in an insane asylum. This is significant as the one traumatic experience of losing his wife acted as an emotional trigger where he lashed out with his art. The multiple voices inside his mind could be interpreted as the multiple faces shown in image 4, each with a different colour and personality.

His artwork is almost cartoon-like which was important in this time period as the Victorian era focused more on vibrant colours of high society in England. Much like van Gogh and Munch, he went against the norms of society within art and wanted to create pieces that brought out emotions in the audience. This was successful in both types of art he created, from the amusement of the anthropomorphic cats to the confusion and fascination created from his colourful patterns of the geometric cats. His next movement brought a shock to society as there is no dull or bland colour which juxtaposes his original artwork. Image 4 is the perfect painting to show this transition from calm human-like cats to geometric patterns. I am first drawn to the main portrait in the piece and the longer I look at it, the more detailed the piece becomes. The main portrait has a hysterical element to it (laughing) which could be an indicator of his insanity. He is displacing his deep depression in the form of ironic hysteria. The use of neon colours itself shows that his way of thinking has changed and that he could be forcing himself to think more optimistically by creating ironic art. However, psychologically, the drastic change between his pieces could be interpreted as begging for help. He is using art as an escape from the real world and his mind but also as a way to show his audience that he is suffering.



Most of the cats within his piece are illustrating in detail and look as if they were created electronically. However, some cats look more simple and plain. This again could be interpreted as the many emotions racing around his head, from feeling simple to feeling hysterical. Furthermore, the simplicity of these cats could be seen as Wain having a sense of no hope. Their faces are emotionless and blank interpreting the way he feels. This is similar to both artists mentioned previously as they are all struggling with reality and need to displace their feelings of confusion and hurt somewhere else. By creating blank portraits they are presenting their own feelings but also crying for help, as mental illnesses were not understood or even accepted during their art periods, it was difficult to express themselves. Art created a new way of life, giving them no limit to their imagination and creativity.

Van Gogh portrays his anxiety. Edvard Munch portrays his disturbing view of the world. Louis Wain portrays his loneliness. All these artists portray a different emotion and illness with their use of lines, colours and styles. However, they all reach the same conclusion; a feeling of isolation and helplessness. No matter their mental state or differing illnesses, they all represent themselves or others as expressionless and devoid of emotion. The rupture we see in their work after the onset of mental illness illustrates the transformative 'power' of mental illness and how it can inform a new, some would say frenzied style. This conclusion is what I intended to develop in my piece, indirectly showing the struggle of the individual, and the changes brought by mental illness.

My piece is based around dogs with perceived mental illness. People generally assume that other mammals do not suffer from mental health issues beyond loneliness resulting from separation from an owner or companion animal. My goal through the piece was to use it to raise awareness that mental health affects many species, in many ways, changing personalities and forms of expression. The mental schism experienced by Van Gogh, Munch and Wain saw them produce very different art from earlier periods of mental stability. I strove to capture that change within my composition, by reflecting dogs in different states of mental health, ultimately showing how mental illness brings about significant changes in expression. Drastic changes in lines and shapes defined this abnormality for me, highlighting the move from mental stability to mental instability. The piece is in many ways 'art as advocacy', showcasing the impacts of mental health, and the need for awareness.

Books

Author	Year	Title	Published	Quote
Victoria Charles	2011	Vincent Van Gogh	Parkstone Press	<p>"My only anxiety is, how can I be of use in the world?"</p> <p>'Over the course of the next 10 years, it seemed that van Gogh had gotten closer to finding an answer to that question: through his art, he could leave a lasting impact on the world and find personal fulfillment in the process.'</p> <p>'He continued to suffer from what many have speculated to be bipolar disorder and epilepsy. Especially during the last two years of his life, van Gogh experienced bouts of high energy and euphoria following bouts of periods of deep depression.'</p> <p>'He falls into a depression and severs all ties with his family for nine months.</p> <p>After many failures, Van Gogh begins his artistic career'</p> <p>- Page 192</p>
Enrica Crispino	2008	Van Gogh	Oliver Press INC, Minneapolis, 2nd Edition	<p>'Van Gogh had a serious mental collapse in the summer of 1889 at Saint-Remy and would continue to suffer periodic attacks in Auvers. In spite of his illness, he found the strength to continue painting.'</p> <p>Emily Bernard wrote, "perhaps he had never painted too well."</p> <p>- Page 56</p>
Norbert Wolf	2004	Expressionism	Uta Grosenick, Taschen (company)	<p>'What would be gained by taking Expressionism at its word and raising the expression of emotions to the main criterion of good art?'</p> <p>- Page 7</p>
Sue Prideaux	2005	Edward Munch: Behind the Scream	Yale University Press, New Haven and London	<p>It is the only point from which one can look across and see the city Munch now hated, spread across the water, as Christ saw the city spread before him from a high place when the Devil tempted him.</p> <p>The main slaughterhouse for the city was up there. The screams the animals being slaughtered in combination with the screams of insane were reported to be a terrible thing to hear.</p>

				<p>If every self-portrait is a portrait of the soul to some degree, The SCream was the portrait of the soul stripped as far from the visible as possible - the image on the reverse the hidden side of the eyeball as Munch looked into himself. Another interpretation is that The Scream is the fundamental starting point for the creative artist. It is the panic-chaos that is the source and necessity of all creative inspiration. Strindberg's interpretation was 'A scream of fear just as nature, turning red from wrath, prepares to speak before the storm and thunder, to the bewildered little creatures who, without resembling them in the least, imagine themselves to be gods.</p> <p>- Page 151</p>
Teri Shors	2009	Understanding Viruses	The University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh Jones and Bartlett Publishers	<p>Louis Wain was a highly successful British illustrator of humorous pictures of cats. Wain's illustrations have been connected to schizophrenia in psychology textbooks for the past 20 years. Authors infer that these pictures show the progression of his mental decline, suggesting a relationship to a schizophrenic condition. There is, however, no concrete evidence to suggest that Wain did indeed suffer from schizophrenia, nor is there evidence that dates the drawings; hence there is no way of determining the order in which they were produced.</p> <p>His mental status appeared to have gone unnoticed for a time and towards the end of his life, he was certified insane and placed in a pauper's ward of Springfield Hospital. Guardians at the hospital noticed his talent.</p> <p>- Page 258</p>
Judith Miller	2016-2017	Miller's Collectables Handbook and Price Guide	Miller's, a division of Octopus Publishing Group LTD	<p>To amuse his wife when she was dying of cancer, he taught their cat, Pater, to wear spectacles and pretend to read. He began to sketch the cat which led to his obsession with all things feline.</p>

Internet

Author	Website	Notes
Caroline Keenan	https://artsandculture.google.com/usergallery/xqLVEzX8LSiCjg	<p>I put my heart and soul into my work and lost my mind in the process" - Van Gogh</p> <p>Van Gogh was said to have suffered from depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder. In a fit for madness, he infamously cut off a piece of his own ear. He was belittled and ridiculed in his lifetime.</p> <p>Van Gogh's posthumously famous painting, Starry Night was created when he was incapacitated for his mental health. Starry Night is said to depict the view from his window in the asylum he was in'</p>
Artnet	http://www.artnet.com/artists/louis-william-wain/	<p>"He has made the cat his own. He invented a cat style, a cat society, a whole cat world," the author H.G. Wells said of Wain. "English cats that do not look and live like Louis Wain cats are ashamed of themselves."</p> <p>Wain and his family had difficulty with mental illness. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia as an adult and spent much of his childhood truant from school wandering the streets of London. He went on to study at the West London School of Art. Wain's obsession with cats stemmed from an emotionally intense period of his life. During this time, his wife who was dying from cancer was comforted when Wain brought her home a stray kitten they named Peter. Peter was the subject of Wain's first cat drawings and the impetus to his later work.</p>
Tumblr	http://bethleaeie.tumblr.com/	<p>This image depicts a portrait that has been manipulated, using sewing to stitch two portraits together. The first one is a normal portrait; however, the second one overlapping the first one is not full. This could show personality, or a personality disorder, where you feel like you are two different people. This could fit in well with my project, linking with a person's Identity.</p> <p>This image is clearly a portrait as the image is showing the models face and shoulders. He does a few images showing the same thing but with a range</p>

		<p>of different models and people. The angle of the shot is quite straightforward, just a simple portrait. It has a wide depth of field; I know this because the whole image is in focus. The models are in the centre of the image and quite close up, this helps keep the focus on the marks made from the sewing. The first image is in full colour, however, the second image that is on top is in black and white, mostly greys and blacks. It has a slightly raised contrast; this brings out some more of the shadows in the models face, which helps show more of the details. The lighting seems quite natural; however, I think it has been taken in a studio environment. I think he has hand stitched the sewing details on to the image himself, linking some of the features together, it almost looks like the image is being pulled away.</p>
CNN	<p>https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/Van-gogh-ear-slash-motivetrnd/index.html</p>	