

## Vincent van Gogh

### Self-Portraits

Through self-portraiture Vincent van Gogh arrived at his most complete expression of how he considered his marginal status as an artist with regard to society.

He thought of himself as **an outsider who, because of this distance, was able to see farther**; for him being an artist meant generating energy and truth albeit with all the limits of a deeply human existence. It is interesting to note that every stage of his artistic development is highlighted by at least one self-portrait.

One of his first works is **Self-Portrait with a Pipe**, painted in 1886 according to a realistic approach.

Soon after his first encounter with Impressionist art he executed his **Self-Portrait with a Felt Hat** (1887), using an unscientific divisionism that was derived from a consideration of Seurat's work. Although he portrays himself in his Parisian dress (hat, jacket and tie), his determined gaze clearly shows that he has other thoughts on his mind. This can be seen in the kind of contour of light surrounding his head, which recalls the halo of saints or the bright stars painted on church vaults. The same effect can be seen in **Self-Portrait (dedicated to Paul Gauguin)**, 1888, which he painted in Arles to exchange for his friend's self-portrait.

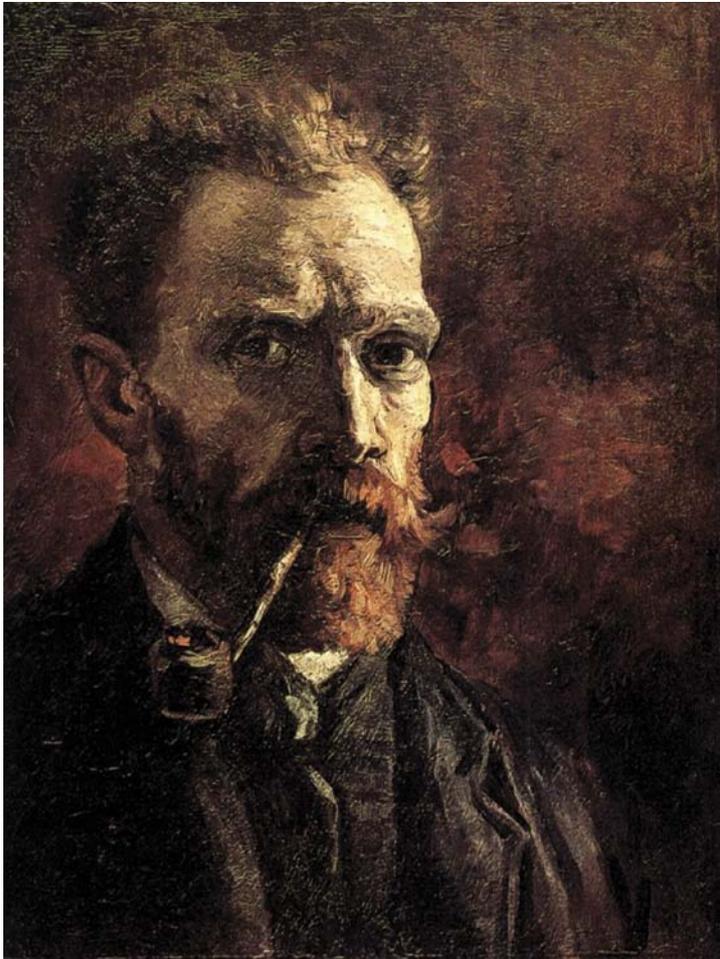
In this composition the artist situates himself almost in the centre of the completely empty space. In this unreal and un-

definable void the artist's head and his gaze become the activating elements of the composition. The opacity of the figure from the beige of his face to the brown of his clothed body is barely lightened by the light-blue outline of his vest and jacket. Thick brush strokes impetuous and broken radiate outwards and vibrate around the entire body. The neck-tie, an element of social inclusion that had been seen in the 1887 *Self-Portrait*, has here been substituted by a symbolic medallion. Here also the facial features seem oriental and his shaved head suggests a monk-like search for what is essential.

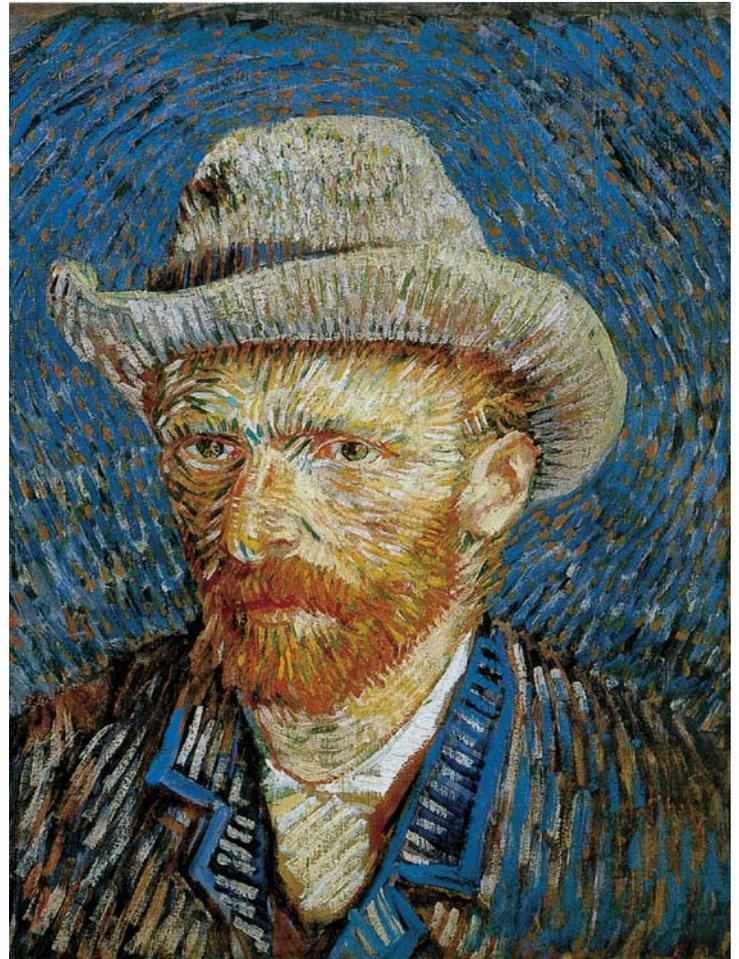
Van Gogh comments on this almost ascetic figure in a letter to his brother Theo, «*I would like to paint men and women with an eternal something about them. Once they used to be symbolized by an aura but nowadays we are trying to render that sensation through irradiation itself, through the vibration of our coloured paints.*»

In another letter addressed to Gauguin the Dutch artist described this self-portrait that his friend was about to receive: «*There's a portrait of mine, all ashes. The colour of ashes caused by mixing cyan with orange on top of a very light cyan background, painted in a unified way and veiled with reddish brown. But since I exaggerate my looks somewhat I was trying to capture the character of a bonze, a simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha.*»

**Fig. 1 Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Pipe*, 1886.**  
Oil on canvas, 46x38 cm. Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum.



**Fig. 2 Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with a Felt Hat*, 1887.**  
Oil on canvas, 44x37,5 cm. Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum.



Over time the painting changed hands and the bonze/van Gogh portrait was sold in German territory and was included in the *Degenerate Art* exhibit organised by Adolph Hitler in order to denounce the aberrations of modern art. In the Swiss sale following the exhibition the painting was acquired and eventually bequeathed in 1951 to the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University.

In van Gogh's fourth **Self-Portrait** (1889) considered here, the halo of light has been replaced by a vortex of brush strokes, a clear sign of the disorientation he felt after four serious nervous breakdowns.

He described these collapses in a letter to his sister Wil: «*I was completely unaware of anything that I was saying or doing.*»

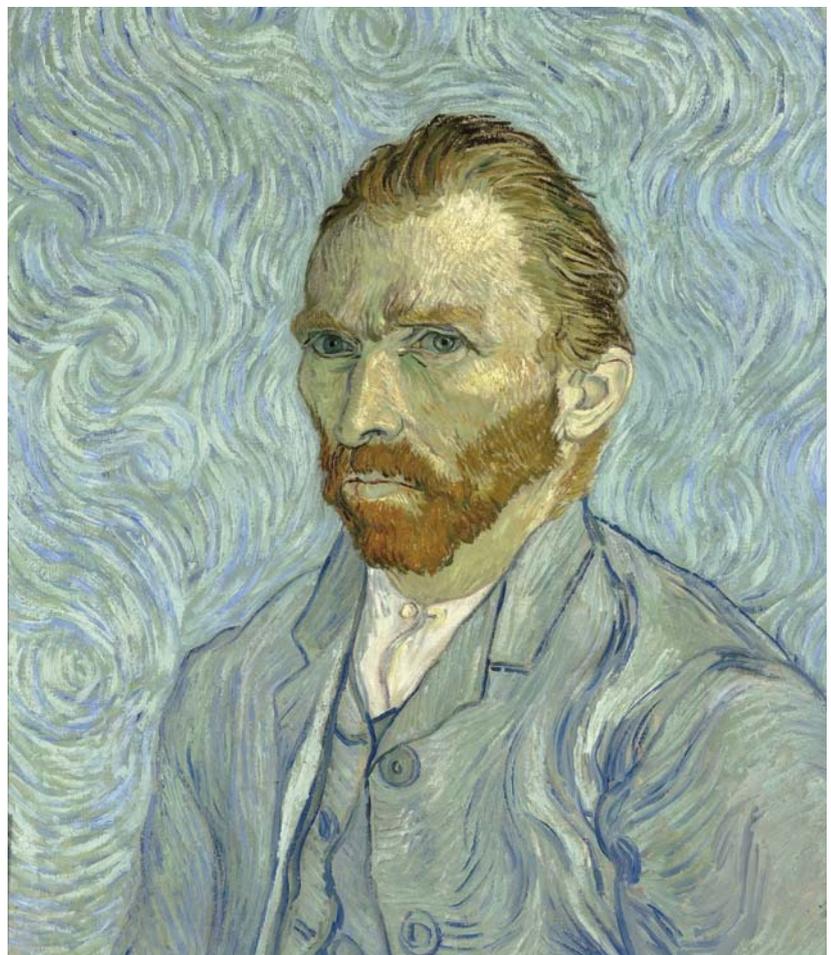
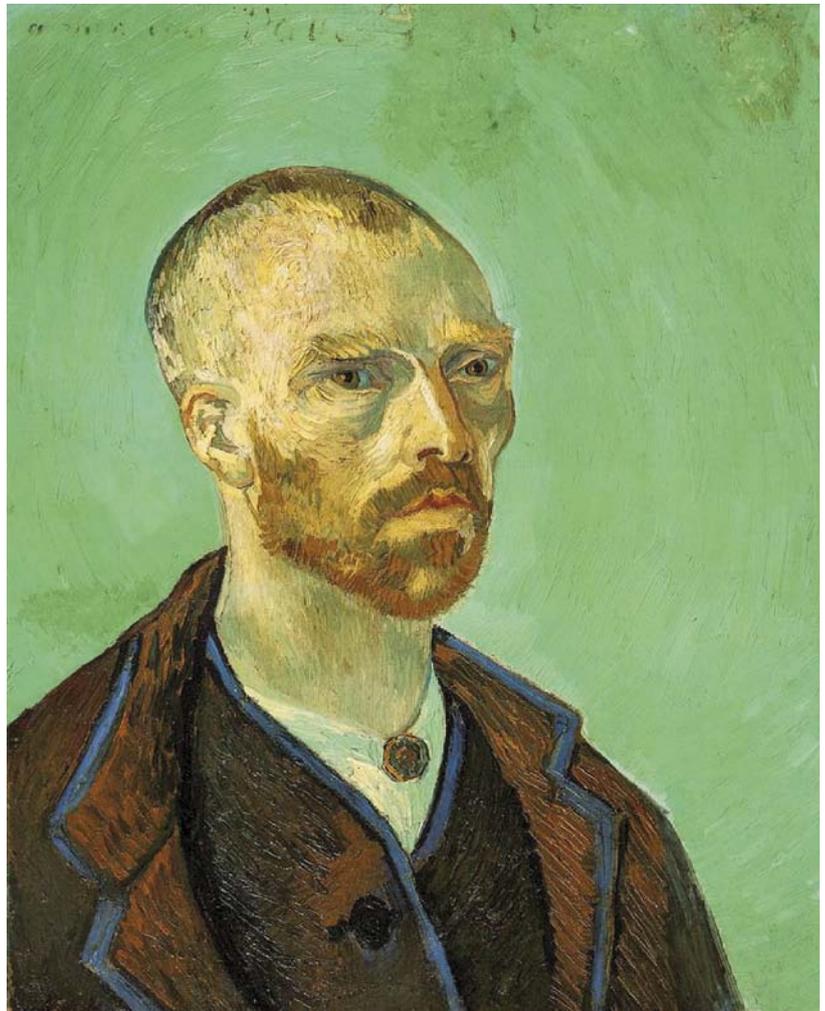
It is clear from this painting that the artist cannot interpret the energy of the absolute as something under his control – rather it is a kind of labyrinth that hangs over him.

So here it is fitting that divisionism – or the ability to dominate all colours – has disappeared. In its place there is a composition made up entirely of variations on tones of blue-green with hints of red.

However all four of the self-portraits that we have discussed share a dominant theme: **the individual is not situated inside the world but rather is the world himself.**

This allows us to see how – in the whole series of these and other self-portraits – **Vincent van Gogh** presents himself as **a subject with multiple personalities**, who oscillates between the awareness of himself as a shepherd of mankind and the fear of being misunderstood.

Each time he turned to the mirror to paint his own likeness, we see how he applied his paint differently to the canvas; his constant search for himself led him to recount the deepest feelings and fears of his divided and fragmented ego in the very moment of their perception.



**Fig. 3 Vincent van Gogh,** *Self-Portrait dedicated to Paul Gauguin*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 62x52 cm. Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University.

**Fig. 4 Vincent van Gogh,** *Self-Portrait*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 65x54 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.