

John Dickson (Studio)

What if Vincent Van Gogh—or Van Go!; we'll have that argument later—one of history's best-known artists, was, on one of his darkest days, transported into the future to see the incredible effect his paintings had on art history?

Well, Director Mark informed me ... it's already happened - thanks to Doctor Who ...

I've seen a lot of Doctor Who over the years—secondhand, as my darling Buff and daughter Josie have watched it—and I reckon that's one of the sweetest moments ever. Who cares that Van Gogh has a Scottish accent, instead of a Dutch one!

There is something poignant about a man of such sorrow and meagre acknowledgment in his day learning that his work meant something ... meant a lot!

Then again, I wonder what he would make of the way some of his best-known works have been commercialised. You can buy 'Starry Night' tea towels, 'Fifteen Sunflowers' socks, and even his self-portrait fridge magnets.

The German cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, reckons every reproduction detracts a bit from the original. In his 1934 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he calls it the 'destruction of authenticity' - when a famous object loses its aura due to mass duplication.

The Guardian newspaper reviewed the 2017 Van Gogh biopic *Loving Vincent* in similar terms: "... an insult to the human struggle in his original works," it said. And with gusto it proclaimed: "To turn these charged monuments to artistic struggle into a cliched style rendered by hack painters and animated for our amusement is to lose all contact with the true power of his art."

That's a little too 'over-righteous' for my liking. But there's something in it.

When you're drying the dishes with your 'Starry Night' tea towel, it's hard to appreciate the beauty and agony the artist was trying to convey. A self-portrait fridge magnet doesn't really invite us to contemplate the brutal honesty and longing of that work.

With all due respect to those who like their Van Gogh socks—including members of my family—there are lessons to learn about loss and hope, the ugly and the sublime, if only we would let the artist speak to us.

I'm John Dickson and this is Undeceptions.

INTRODUCTION

This season of Undeceptions is sponsored by our friends at Zondervan Academic. You can get discounts on their special MasterLectures video courses and free chapters of many of the books we talk about here on the pod by going to zondervanacademic.com/undeceptions.

Every episode of Undeceptions explores some aspect of life, faith, history, science, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we're trying to 'undeceive ourselves', and let the truth 'out'.

John Dickson (Studio)

Pablo Picasso once told the French newspaper L'Intransigeant, "One's work is a way of keeping a diary." He meant that an artist's creations emerge from their own experiences - Picasso painted what he had learned about life.

Russ Ramsey is an author, theologian, pastor, and art critic. Way back in episode 70, we had him on the show with artist Makoto Fujimura to talk about beauty in art. Link in the shownotes for that.

His newest book takes a very different tack. It's more about the way art exemplifies struggle—how there's a fine line, often, between beauty and ugliness, hope and despair. And artists—whether musical or visual artists—are able to capture that in a way that is meaningful to all of us.

Russ titled his book *Van Gogh Has a Broken Heart*, which kind of lays the cards on the table from the beginning.

But before we get too sad, I asked Russ to justify his obsession a little.

John Dickson: Russ, thanks for joining us again. I want to ask you, uh, to defend your passion for art, uh, against the, the typical, um, perception that art is stuffy, lefty, academic, esoteric, not the real world.

Russ Ramsey: Have you seen it? It was when I think I was maybe 14 or 15 years old and, and had an art teacher showing us Van Gogh in particular and connecting to it without knowing a thing about technique or impressionism or post impressionism without knowing anything. I just knew that I was seeing something that was saying more to me than just the compositional elements on the canvas. I mean, when you look at Van Gogh's work as, as an example, when children are shown Van Gogh paintings and asked to describe them, one of the words that kids use when they see Van Gogh paintings is *sad*. And they're looking at pots of sunflowers, and starry skies at night, and wheat fields.

And there's something about the way that the Lord has created people to construct, um, images that say so much more than just this is a painting of a town in a little village at night, uh, or, you know, and so, I don't know, since

the time I was young, I've had the experience of having works of art just kind of stopped me in my tracks...

Um, for me defending my, my appreciation and my love for art would be a little bit like defending my appreciation and love for music is, uh, it, it says more than it says. It takes me places that nothing else in the world can take me.

John Dickson (Studio)

That's the great thing about art. You don't have to know any of the technical stuff about colour, perspective, brushwork, or whatever. Good art is immediate. It grabs you, even if you're not sure why.

Leonardo da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' is a good example.

Director Mark wanted me to give you this long-winded explanation of Da Vinci's use of the 'sfumato' technique—which has something to do with colour and haze and glow or whatever ... But we all know it's that intriguing smile on the woman's face that we find so compelling. What is she thinking!!! The painting connects with us on a direct level—which is why Napoleon grabbed the Mona Lisa for himself and hung in his bedroom ... so he could see it every day.

The Mona Lisa was later moved to the Louvre in Paris so everyone could look at it. But it was stolen (again) in the summer of 1911. The police actually suspected it was pinched by another artist. Pablo Picasso was a suspect, if you can believe that!

And, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, The 'Mona Lisa' has its own mailbox in which the painting receives fan mail and flowers addressed to it!

The point is: even if we can't justify art in the scientific or technical sense, everyone—almost everyone—feels good art when they come across it. That feeling can be happy or it can be sad. Or both at the same time.

Russ Ramsey: I think one of the things that I discovered when I was writing the book that came before this, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, is I was just wanting to write stories about art that would help people not be afraid of it. You know, to, to, For those who may feel like, gosh, I don't know enough about art to feel like I can really engage with it.

I think, well, you do. You, you, you know enough about being a person to engage with art. And so I started collecting these stories that kind of had these themes that are part of the human experience. And one of the things that I noticed as I was writing is that almost without fail, to tell these stories well gets into suffering, and almost without fail, the reasons that we connect with art in the way that we do is because there's something that it's telling us that's true about art. Uh, the brokenness of the world that we live in and the brokenness inside of us. And, that is an unavoidable, inescapable part of living in this world.

John Dickson (Studio)

In his book, Russ has stories about Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Degas - but also about some lesser-known artists who strike the same themes.

John Dickson: I want to talk about, uh, some particular artists and, and what, and what you feel they, they can teach us. Um, I want to focus our interview on Vincent van Gogh. Um, as we say in Australia and Britain, I know it's Vincent van Gogh here, right? We'll, we'll, um, we'll focus on him in a minute, but, um, tell me something about, uh, the German American painter, um, Albert Bierstadt.

Um, what can we learn from him? Tell me something of him and what we can learn from him.

Russ Ramsey: So Albert Bierstadt was, uh, one of the painters who was in a group that was referred to as the Hudson River School, um, and these were painters who, not all of them knew each other. In fact, many of them didn't know each other at all, but what made them a group was that they were, um, immigrants to America before the West had been, um, uh, civilized by Europeans and the, um, Uh, their job, and they all, so they all kind of lived in the Catskills area around New York, and so near the Hudson River. So the Hudson River was kind of their, their, where they lived. And, and, but they would go on these expeditions into the wild, untamed landscapes of America, and they would paint what they saw and then they would bring these paintings back and put them on display for people to see what this new land was.

What it is that, that the, the settlers were going to try to, um, settle. And so his job, so he was, he was an artist who, if you made movies about him, they would be some kind of combination of Indiana Jones and, um, Maybe with a lot of swagger, uh, and a lot of theatrics, but also a lot of courage to, to just go into places where, um, Europeans had never been before and, and to paint it.

And so he would, he would do this and that chapter that I have about, uh, Bierstadt and the Hudson River School painters is really a focus on a distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, um, is that what they were bringing back were these scenes of, of mountains, uh, Zion National Park, uh, Yosemite, the Rocky Mountains, where, and they would paint them in these, you know, 12 foot tall canvases and they would frame them in curtains so that it was like you were immersing yourself in the place by standing in front of the work.

John Dickson (Studio)

Bierstadt's paintings were showing Americans their own wilderness and the First Nations people who lived in it.

In the same period, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Grant Act that established the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove as protected wilderness areas.

Bierstadt's 'The Last of the Buffalo' paintings, and his double portrait of a Shoshone chief and an American frontier officer on even ground, invite the viewer to contemplate a threatening and changing world.

Researcher AI will put a link to Bierstadt's paintings in the show-notes.

Russ Ramsey: And part of the effect of the painting was they were on the one hand beautiful, but they were also terrifying, and they were showing people a world where if you want to enter this, it has the power to destroy you. And that's kind of the definition of what the sublime is in the art world is there's the beautiful where we look at something and we say, this is desirable. This is attractive. The sublime is beyond that. And, and sublime means under the ceiling, basically under the, under the threshold where it's as high as you can get before you break forth into something that is uncontainable. And, uh, that was what they were doing.

And that's, and so he, so I got into kind of exploring what it was that they were doing as a way of kind of chasing down that thread of ... we were made for a kind of a, of a glory and a, and a magnificence that we don't really fully experience in this world because of the limits that we have in us and the brokenness of the world itself.

And yet seeing these places that are just, um, like magnificent, but also terrifying in many ways is, is an acknowledgement of a kind of a, glory that we were designed to inhabit and we were designed to be a part of, um, the limit resides in us, um, not in the greatness of the place. And so I'm, I'm really, really, that was a fun chapter to, to work on and to kind of think through the implications of, we weren't just made to be entertained by pretty

things. Uh, we were made to have beauty pull our hearts toward this sort of place that that we can't really inhabit here, but we were made for forever.

John Dickson (Studio)

Now, before we get to arguably the biggest name of all, I asked Russ if there was one lesser-known artist he wished people would pick up on, who would it be?

Turns out it's Artemisia Gentileschi.

Artemisia worked in Italy in the early 17th century at a time when there were very few opportunities for women to work as artists.

She was trained by her father, Orazio, who was a famous Renaissance artist and a friend of Caravaggio—love Caravaggio. Artemisia painted alongside him and became quite the talent.

Her painting emerged from a very difficult life. There were legal and financial problems, the death of three of her children, as well as sexual assault and torture.

And, of course, there was the ongoing battle of being a gifted female artist in a male world.

She was pretty open about this in a letter to her last major patron, Don Antonio Ruffo, in which she complained about having to haggle over the price of her paintings and defend the originality of her art.

“... a woman's name raises doubts until her work is seen,” she wrote to her patron Don Antonio Ruffo. “If I were a man, I can't imagine it would have turned out this way.”

She didn't receive the recognition she deserved, until 20th century - when she was the first woman to have a major exhibition dedicated to her in the 200-year history of London's National Gallery.

Russ Ramsey: And just, just that alone, that there is a celebrated female Renaissance painter from Italy in the 1600s. is exceedingly rare. Uh, and her work, um, is, is like the work of, of so many of the other Italian Renaissance painters, a lot of biblical themes and themes of mythology, which is typically what people did, and portraiture. But she painted a lot of scenes that have a lot of, uh, uh, that are very violent. Um, so like the beheading of John the Baptist, um, there's a lot of blood, uh, and there's a lot of, uh, and, and, We live in a cultural moment right now where people look at her work and they say, look at this woman, this female painter who's making this really strong commentary on, um, the anger women must have had in that era for their mistreatment in, you know, in the system by, by, um, the men who held all the power.

John Dickson (Studio)

A lot of her art is graphic and shows violence directed towards men. Some commentators see this as 'revenge painting'. Russ isn't sure.

Russ Ramsey: And I have a friend who's a professor of art, um, Dr. Elisa Weichbrodt in, at Covenant College in Chattanooga, Tennessee, um, who's a, uh, a bit of a scholar on, on Artemisia, and she said it's not a fair way to talk about Artemisia, um, because the truth is, she probably wasn't trying to make a social commentary, and the reason she probably wasn't trying to make a social commentary is because, um, people in that era, that's not what they were intending with their art, typically.

: It was, it was commission based, often, and, and it, and it was what it was. And, um, and, And so it became this interesting thing where we live in a moment that really wants to try to figure out how to honor and hold forth a painter like Artemisia, who is an outlier, a female in a man's world with every bit of skill that all of her contemporaries who are male had.

Yeah, she, she suffered incredible indignities. She would be asked to do commission work and to provide some sketches. She'd provide sketches. And then they would take her sketches and hire a cheaper male artist to use her sketches, to create work. But the other thing in the story is one of the things that she is known for. And one of the reasons why people say she's trying to make a social commentary is because, Uh, when she was a young woman, she was assaulted and raped by, um, a man who was her art teacher in her father's house. And um, she and her, her father actually took this man to court for assaulting his daughter. And in the process of her going through that, she had to testify. And this was, you know, kind of a medieval time where, where, uh, In order for the court to believe the testimony of a woman, they had to subject her to torture, uh, to verify that her story wouldn't change.

And so she was subjected to thumbscrews, um, while she was being asked a series of questions that she had been asked before. And in order for her to be believed, she had, in order for her to be believed that she had been assaulted, she had to. endure torture to if she wanted to be believed at all. Um, and so this was the kind of world that she was working in. And I think that the way that we honor her and her work is by not putting on her a whole bunch of ideals that may or may not have been hers, but to actually look at this is, this is the difficulty she endured in order to be somebody whose name we know now.

John Dickson (Studio)

It's hard to get Artemisia out of your head once you learn about her.

After the break ... one of the most celebrated artists of all time ... A man who tortured himself.

BREAK 1

John Dickson: Well, it's time to move to Vincent van Gogh, and I will henceforth call him Van Gogh, out of deference to you my American friend.

Russ Ramsey: I'll start calling him Van Gogh now and we'll just kind of flip the script.

John Dickson: Or we could be really pretentious and go Van Goghhhh -

Russ Ramsey: Yeah, there you go. Let's do that. No, I'm just kidding.

John Dickson: Um, we've got a couple of Van Goghs. down at the Chicago Art Institute. We always go down there and take our Aussie friends who come visit us. We got this little trip. We go down, we look at the 29 Monets that they have, and then we go to the section, uh, with Van Gogh.

GALLERY TAPE

John Dickson: I've just entered the first room of the Chicago Art Institute and you're immediately greeted by a Claude Monet on the bank of the Seine, followed by a Passario, the Crystal Palace, and then you're greeted by some Renoir. That's amazing.

John Dickson (Studio)

The Art Institute houses iconic works of art - Edward Hopper's Nighthawks, Grant Wood's American Gothic, Marc Chagall's Stained Glass Windows, Georges Serat's A Sunday on La Grande Jatte.

And, like I said, the Monet room is definitely one of my happy places. But this is what makes the Chicago Art Institute so cool because there are also ... of course ... a whole bunch of Van Goghs.

GALLERY TAPE

I'm standing in front of a bunch of Van Gogh's, Van Gogh's, Grapes, Lemons, Pears and Apples, 1887. Just the colours are amazing.

And here's the famous self portrait from 1887.

And what I find so striking about it is its Beautiful use of color. His mustache and beard are so orangey. Beautiful spotted coat. So the image is beautiful but he's brutally honest about his own face.

He's quite ugly and he's happy to show you.

TAPE - RUSS RAMSEY

John Dickson: Van Gogh. What, what's his significance as a painter?

Russ Ramsey: Van Gogh's significance as a painter is it's no understatement to say he changed the world of art and he didn't do it by inventing something that was completely other. He did it by being so who he was in his work, and he was a tortured soul, um, that he, his work has just been arresting to people. You could not know who he was and see his work, and it just is different than anything else you're going to see in a museum. Uh, people who imitate his style, uh, tend to, uh, themselves to be often, um, kind of, uh, tribute bands, uh, to, to the great, because there's something in his, I don't know what it is, uh, but, but he, he was, He came along at a time when the world of art was changing pretty drastically. So there were the romantics who were painting, um, and they were painting very realistic scenes, and mostly they were painting indoors, and then this man came along who invented the tin tube, uh, which we use for toothpaste and hair products, but we also use for paint, and, uh, when the invention of the tin tube came along, all of a sudden, paint became portable in a way that it never had been before.

John Dickson (Studio)

The inventor of the tin tube for storing paint was John Goffe Rand, an American portrait painter. His 1841 creation allowed art to come out of the studio and into the open air.

TAPE - RUSS RAMSEY

Russ Ramsey: So if you go into an art museum, you will notice a difference between art that was created roughly before 1830 and after in, in the 1840s and beyond. And that is, it becomes much brighter. Uh, it becomes much

more, um, um, Colorful and one of the reasons for that is a lot of art before that it was painted in studios So somebody would go outside and sketch and then they would bring it back into their Studio, which was lit by candle and window light and that sort of thing and they would paint indoors but when the the paint tube was invented, um, manufacturers started to be able to make colors that were consistent, uh, that were portable, that were bright, everything became more affordable, and all of a sudden these artists could put these things in a paint box, whereas before it would have been in glass jars or pig bladders, and they would take these tubes outside and, and paint outside, so the impressionists came along and they sort of broke open, um, this idea of all of a sudden there's now color and light and a kind of a sense of motion and energy into the paintings and so this is Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, those folks. And then Van Gogh was copying but also doing his own thing. And, but he was, but he was, he, He would describe his work as, like he painted a picture of a bridge, just an iron bridge. And what he said about it in a letter to his brother, is he was describing the color of the bridge and the silhouettes and the sky and the color of the water.

And he said, I am trying to get at something utterly heartbroken, and therefore utterly heartbreaking. And that was something that was in his work. It was just a picture of a bridge in the evening. But what he was trying, what he knew he was trying to do was capture something that to him was, was full of the, the weight and the gravity of all of the pain of everybody in the picture.

John Dickson (Studio)

Van Gogh wasn't really successful during his lifetime—he only sold a few of his paintings at the time. He relied on his art dealer brother Theo for necessities and art supplies.

He died in 1890, completely unaware of what history would make of his art.

Russ Ramsey: By the time the century ended in the 1900s, he was globally famous, um, and his art was everywhere, and it was touring around, and, um, and, and a whole world of possibility for how to try to speak through the compositions we make, and how to try to interpret them. lean into the the truth of the things that we struggle with and the things that we hope for And all of that he just had this way of being so brutally honest. He was not holding anything back. He didn't he didn't try to Paint anything he could not handle trying to paint anything. That was just this ideal that he didn't believe

John Dickson: The self portrait is, is down in, uh, the Art Institute and it's, it's so, um, he's not trying to make himself look pretty.

Russ Ramsey: No, no, no, no. In fact, I'm pointing right now on my wall right in front of me is a self portrait with bandaged ear. Um, and you know, we, in this new book, um, Van Gogh has a broken heart there's a chapter, uh, called the yellow house, he wanted to start an artist colony in the south of France.

His brother was an art dealer and he got to know Paul Gauguin through his brother. And he wanted Paul Gauguin to come live with him in the south of France in this, in this house in Arles that he, uh, that's called the Yellow House. And it is a famous painting called the Yellow House. And, um, And to start an artist colony.

GALLERY TAPE

It's interesting right next to the Van Gogh's are some, um, Paul Gauguin's wood tankered and metal picture, woman strolling, and then, and then the van Goghs begin. Speaking of Paul Gauguin, there's a, um, another room full of his paintings, which he did in Tahiti, um, after Van Gogh died, he, Paul Gauguin took off to Tahiti and painted a whole lot of French Polynesian Islanders. But he was quite abusive of the young girls of the region and painted them incessantly. And what's really interesting is the Chicago Institute of Art, um, names it instead of removing his

paintings in a kind of cancel culture way, they display them and then there's a really interesting explanation of what he did that just sort of lays it out. And, um, it critiques Gauguin's, uh, rejection of Christianity and capitalism, which he was famous for. Um, but really it was just a cover for his own abuse of Polynesians.

Well, that's what they say here.

The sign, uh, reads in part, 'He fancied himself an anti colonialist. It prompted him to invent A version of Tahiti that conformed to his assumptions about primitive non Western culture. One that catered to his sexual fantasies about native women and girls.

As such, it ends, as such, the works in this gallery likely reveal more about Gauguin than they do about the people and lands that inspired him.' Well put. I like that approach. Reveal it all in its ugliness. Don't hide it.

John Dickson (Studio)

Paul Gauguin - one of the fathers of modern art - joined Van Gogh in his "Yellow House" artists retreat for just over two months in 1888. They had an explosive friendship which eventually led to the famous cutting off of the ear incident.

I asked Russ to tell us the facts about this and how we should interpret it.

Russ approaches this, like you'd approach the troubles of a good friend. In fact, Russ calls other artists by their surname. Van Gogh he calls 'Vincent'.

Russ Ramsey: Gauguin lived with him for, for maybe 70 days. It was a short-lived partnership, and it was tumultuous from the beginning. Um, and Gogan was this larger than life personality who was kind of a, a type a, uh, alpha.

And Vincent was a submissive person who just really wanted Gogan to like him. And they, they, they made rules for their house about how they would paint and how they would share expenses and, and all of these things. And, um, and, and. It got to a point where Gauguin was, was just saying, I can't do this much longer. He's driving me crazy. And, um, and that terrified Vincent that Gauguin would abandon him because it would be abandoning his dream of this artist colony, but it would be something that he knew would be happening because there was something Gauguin just couldn't tolerate with Vincent himself. And, um, and so they got into a fight where, um, Van Gogh, they were in a, in a bar, in a restaurant.

It actually is the restaurant, if you've ever seen the painting with the pool table in the middle, it's that restaurant, uh, which was right around the corner from the yellow house. And, um, they got into some kind of an argument and Vincent threw a glass of Abyssinth at, uh, Gauguin's head. And Gauguin ducked and it missed him. But they got into just a big argument. They got into a big fight about that and Van Gogh went, er, Gauguin went and just stormed, they went back to the, that yellow house and Gauguin took some things and stormed out and Van Gogh thought he was leaving. Um, and he was really just kind of going to walk it off and he, and so he, he kind of chased Gauguin carrying, uh, a razor blade and, uh, and, er, a knife.

He was carrying a knife. And Gauguin turned around and saw him, and Vincent got scared and ran back into the house. And when he ran back into the house, he took the razor blade, um, looked himself in the mirror, took a razor blade, and cut off his ear, and then he tore up the strips of, of the bed sheet that he had, which were also yellow, uh, which he had chosen, and he, uh, And he pressed them to his, wrapped them around his head and then he wrapped up the ear and he went around the corner to the, um, basically the brothel that he and Gauguin would visit.

And he gave this mutilated part of his ear to a prostitute there named Rachel and he told her to hold on to it for him. And then

John Dickson: The poor girl painted for, uh, fainted, didn't she?

Russ Ramsey: Yeah, yeah, yeah, she started screaming then she fainted, um, and then, you know, a big commotion happened, and then the, the, if you've ever seen Van Gogh's painting of The Mailman, um, The Mailman, his friend, um, came and took Vincent back to his house, and laid him in bed, uh, and tried to, um, staunch the wound, and, um, of course, Gauguin now was gone, and, um, and eventually the police were there and there was a big commotion when go, when Gogan came back to the yellow house, there was a big crowd outside.

There were police there. Um, somebody asked him what he had done to Vincent and he went in and found the, went inside and, and saw Vincent who was just on the edge of death, uh, and was lying very still in, in the bed. And, and the, and there was a doctor there. And, and they basically said, we're, we're. taking care of him but he's lost a lot of blood and Gauguin said if he wakes up, um, don't tell him I was here. It'll, it'll, it'll be too much for him. And, um, and so Vincent was then taken to a hospital to recover and while he was in the hospital recovering, uh, he was put into an asylum. Uh, Gauguin moved out, um, and then his neighbours put together a petition to ask the police to remove Vincent from the community, um, and cause him to have to go live someplace else.

And so he ended up in an asylum for a long time. Some of the most beautiful works we have from Vincent, his irises, uh, were painted in the garden in the asylum. Uh, and, um, and he eventually did get released from the asylum, but he was there for a year. Uh, and this would have been, uh, 18, basically the most of 1889 and then 1890 is the year in July of that year is when he died. Um, and the first three months of that year, he barely painted anything. Like he didn't paint that many paintings. And then the last three months of his life, he painted 140 canvases, uh, which is insane, but he, no pun intended. I don't mean that in that way, but he, he, um, but he, so that's the story of him cutting off his ear is there was this, this desperation, this manic drive this misunderstanding culturally of mental health, this, um, uh, this, this, the, the terror and the fear he must have felt about the fragility

of his place in the world, um, is, um, is something that should break our hearts.

And when we see his self portrait with bandaged ear, what's profound, after I've said all of that, is he painted this self portrait within days of the episode. And he paints the bandage and he lets us see the wound. And he's covered in a coat that kind of hides his whole body. And he's wearing a winter cap that has a kind of a fur lined bill.

And all you really get is his face because the bandage is covering his ear. And he's sort of draped in this, in this shroud. And that's the kind of thing that Vincent did that other artists didn't do is he told the truth about himself in a moment of great weakness.

John Dickson (Studio)

Van Gogh died at 37, leaving behind 900 paintings, and many more sketches.

Yet it's the severed ear many of us remember—the lowest point in his life.

Russ Ramsey: I think about like, People in scripture that we know, how many people in scripture do, is the thing that we know about them the worst thing about them or the most broken thing about them?

Simon the leper. Um, you could make a case for the rich young ruler, the woman caught in adultery, uh, the, you know, there's so many, Matthew the tax collector. We have so many people, uh, in the Bible that the way that they're identified is by their greatest need. for healing. And, um, Vincent in his, um, in his transparency, in his guilelessness, in his passion to get at something utterly heartbroken, showed us a world as he saw it rather than trying to scrub it into something that would look good hanging over our sofas.

John Dickson (Studio)

What did Vincent know about the beyond, about the sublime over the horizon?

That's next...

BREAK 2

John Dickson (Studio)

As a young man, Vincent wrote to his brother Theo,

READING

“Sorrow is better than joy - and even in mirth the heart is sad - and it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasts, for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. Our nature is sorrowful, but for those who have learnt and are learning to look at Jesus Christ, there is always reason to rejoice.

“For those who believe in Jesus Christ, there is no death or sorrow that is not mixed with hope - no despair - there is only a constantly being born again, a constantly going from darkness into light. They do not mourn as those who have no hope - Christian Faith makes life to evergreen life.”

John Dickson (Studio)

Van Gogh, it seems, didn't always maintain this hope of 'evergreen life'.

TAPE - At Eternity's Gate

John Dickson (Studio)

That's Willem Dafoe in the 2018 film of Van Gogh's life, *At Eternity's Gate*.

Here Van Gogh is speaking to a priest in an asylum, wondering about God's purpose for his life.

Willem Dafoe is always worth watching. This one is profound, as it explores both the colourful joys of Van Gogh's life, as well as the problem of pain.

Christianity haunted him all the way to the end, especially at Christmas time. One of his sketches hangs at the Chicago Art Institute—which Buff and I frequently visit. The sketch shows an elderly man giving thanks to God for his meager Christmas meal.

On the wall next to the sketch are the words Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo about the image.

John Dickson: I want to read what Van Gogh said about that sketch, and then ask you to sort of tell me more about this aspect, this spiritual aspect of Van Gogh. He wrote, um, My intention here is to express the special mood of Christmas. At that time, there's always a religious element, and for my part, I can fully share in it and even feel a need for it.

At least in the sense that just as much as an old man of that kind, I have a feeling of belief in something on high, even if I don't know exactly who or what will be there. I like what Victor Hugo said, religions pass, but God remains. Can you tell us something about Van Gogh's sort of spiritual journey?

Russ Ramsey: Yes. I, I can tell you some, but he's a mystery, I think, in a lot of ways. I think he's a person who had a high view of Christ, had a belief in Christ, Um, experienced pretty significant mistreatment by the organized church in his, um, uh, in the Netherlands. Um, and, and, uh, and I think when you, when you look at the kinds of stuff that he chose to paint, um, he is a man who is averse to, um, to kind of high church, high holy scenes.

Um, his paintings, you don't find a lot of paintings of saints. Um, his biblical scenes are the raising of Lazarus, or the, the, the good Samaritan being loaded onto a horse. They're people who are, who are beaten and downtrodden. Um, and when he was a missionary, Uh, he, he was a missionary before he was a painter, uh, and he was stationed at this appointed by the church to be the minister in this coal mining town. And he was given a stipend, uh, which was to be a place where he, to, to basically afford food and a place to live and run the church. And he. The people that he was called to minister to, uh, worked in coal mines and they died from working in coal mines. They were constantly filthy. Um, they couldn't breathe. They were working all the time, um, to try to make enough to make ends meet. And so he started using his stipend to basically support the miners and started living in a, basically in a bit of a hovel on a straw mattress, uh, started spending his days down in the mines, um, as part of the community and, uh, and tried to serve the, the public in poverty by becoming one of them. Uh, and when he was visited by the higher ups in the church that had positioned him there, they were aghast at how he looked, uh, and what he was doing with the resources they were providing for him, and they removed him from his position of ministry. And he broke with the church at that point.

And I look at that and I think, I don't blame him one little bit, you know, but what he turned to was he turned to a life of trying to still capture the wonder of being a human being in a broken world and the dignity of the people who were impoverished. And so one of his masterpieces is the potato eaters um, which is in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. If you ever get a chance to go to that museum, it's, um, it's amazing. Um, but it's this, painting of a family of five sitting around a meal of potatoes. Uh, and they're poor, and they're miners, and they're farmers, and it's dark, um, and they're just salt of the earth type of people, but there's so much dignity and presence, um, in what he made and in what he captured there.

I think that Van Gogh never He never talked about God negatively. He never talked about Christ negatively. He always spoke of himself as having faith. Um, he always spoke of, of beauty as something that was divine. Uh, and he always spoke of the brokenness of people as, uh, not a problem to kind of fix out of them by way of moralism.

Um, but as something that really just. mattered to him on a level that, that he, he, that hurt him. Uh, and so I don't know what his relationship with Christ was like. Uh, I think he was, he was a man, all these people that I write about in this, in this book, um, you know, be careful getting to know your heroes, um, because you may discover that they visited brothels, um, and, you know, uh, You know, used bad language or whatever and drank too much.

And, um, but there's something about the truthfulness of the work that Van Gogh created consistently, um, that gives me just a tremendous amount of, of instruction for how to live my own life as a Christian, uh, in the world. And also a lot of confidence that, uh, that I will meet Vincent, uh, one day. And neither of us will be broken.

FIVE MINUTE JESUS

Let's press 'pause'. I've got a five-minute Jesus for you.

One of Vincent Van Gogh's gifts to the art world was his ability to portray sadness alongside joy, ugliness next to beauty.

And he seems to have done this not to say, "Life really sucks, even when it seems happy." Rather, it looks more like ... hope ... or, at least, ... longing ... a longing that there is more, that, despite everything, there is "a feeling of belief in something on high," as he wrote to his brother about his famous Christmas sketch. "God remains" in the midst of everything.

Only two religions have confronted ugliness and pain head on. Buddhism and Christianity.

As our Buddhist scholar from episode 72 told us, the Buddha so keenly felt the pain of the world that he meditated day and night until he could see a way through. His enlightenment was essentially the insight that pain is caused by our longings for pleasure, comfort, intimacy, joy, and so on. If we can learn *not* to long for the things of this fleeting world, but to detach from them, we will experience what he called 'equanimity', the peace of experiencing neither pain nor bliss, but perfect stillness in the midst of hardship.

That's one way of approaching the sadness of the world: detaching from the things we get sad about.

Van Gogh would have made a terrible Buddhist. He wanted to name both joy and pain. He wanted to depict them, and invite the viewer to feel them deeply. Detachment is the last word you'd associate with the life and work of Vincent Van Gogh.

But, as I've probably said before, Jesus too would make a terrible Buddhist.

He named both joy and pain. In fact, he experienced and inhabited joy and pain.

He was passionate against injustice when he overturned the tables of the priestly money-makers in the temple.

He wept at the funeral of his friend Lazarus (the Greek word used in that scene in John's Gospel, *dakruō* implies not just lament but actual tears).

The book of Hebrews in the NT goes so far as to say, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears." (Heb 5, if you want to check that out).

And, of course, the climax of the whole Gospel account is called The Passion—Jesus' arrest, trial, torture, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Like Buddhism, Christianity talks a lot about pain. Unlike Buddhism, Christianity encourages the full acknowledgment of human anguish—tears and all—combined with a deep longing for the mending of all things. The end of suffering comes not from our detachment from desires but from God's own future intervention in the kingdom. And the resurrection of Jesus is what makes that intervention more than wishful thinking, more than pie-in-the-sky when you die. The resurrection of Jesus is the proof and pledge that God can and will bring life where there is death, and joy where there is sorrow.

And in the meantime—according to the Christian tradition—we aren't promised equanimity amidst the chaos, but we do have the consolation of knowing that God himself (in Christ) knows our pain, has experienced our pain, and even weeps with us at our funerals, until he makes all things new.

As the poet Edward Shillitto wrote following the devastation of WWI.

*"The other gods were strong—but Thou wast weak.
They rode—Thou didst stumble to a throne.
But to our wounds, only God's wounds can speak.
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone."*

You can press 'play' now.

John Dickson: You talk about transcendence, but you just mentioned transcendence. And, um, I have quite a few more sceptical listeners, uh, with Underceptions. I want to, uh, read back to you something you wrote about art and transcendence. And then I'd just like you to reflect on it, give us something of a commentary on it, especially for my, uh, for my more skeptical listeners.

You write, "Many artists explore the perilous seam where suffering falls off into despair, where affection wells up into passion and where the winds of heaven blow through the stuff of earth. They provide high relief compositions of the ordinary and the matter of fact portrayals." Help my sceptical listeners, what is transcendent in art?

Russ Ramsey: I think it really has to do with this, getting back to this idea of the sublime, is that there is a crease, um, in human experience. Where on the other side of the crease is Glory untold is our conditions that would be too extreme for us to imagine being able to endure. Um, and yet that longing, that feeling that we were, that we were somehow made for that, you know that there's a, there's a C. S. Lewis talked about this, um, longing that we have for a home that we've never visited, uh, that we somehow know intrinsically that we were, we were made for something magnificent and glorious that we haven't ever really put our finger on yet. And so, you know, even the way that the world is made, um, is that there are places that we will give up time and money and travel great distances to go to because they are Transcendent.

They're, they're at the crease. They're, they're, they take your breath away. And so you stand at the rim of the Grand Canyon or as many people do now, they, they, they attempt to ascend Mount Everest or they, they, you

know, you, you climb a mountain or you, or you go deep into a jungle or you go to these wild places.

And you don't feel like you're visiting a foreign planet where you don't belong, but instead you feel like, I do belong. Connect. I connect to this somehow. Um, and what you're feeling is this connection to glory and greatness and magnificence and wonder. And it's an itch that we have that nothing in this world can scratch.

Lewis said it. He said, If I find in myself a longing, that nothing in this world can satisfy, then the only reasonable explanation is that I was made for another world and art. That's one of the things that art does is, and it's one of the things Van Gogh does by presenting the impoverished brokenness of the world in a way that is, you know, Um, is, is hung on, on prominent walls in art museums in the finest cities in the world because there's something about the human experience where we collectively say, this painting of five people eating a meal of potatoes belongs as the centerpiece of the first floor of this museum that is dedicated entirely to the artist who painted it.

Explain that to me pragmatically. It is a glorious waste of money and inefficiency. It is, it is, it makes no sense. And yet, when you buy a ticket, you gotta buy it online in advance to get in, because the lines are too long and, and I think that that is something that Every human being experiences in one sense or another. And the explanation, the only explanation that makes sense to me about that is that I am a created being. Um, is that I'm, I'm made. Uh, and there's an instinct in me for something that I was made for. Uh, and what I was made for is something that was made by, somebody clearly greater than me, uh, because I am at a loss when I stand in the foothills of what could be. Uh, it takes my breath away. And, um, and it's the reason why we have art museums and symphony halls is because we, we want to put ourselves in the path of this created work that tells us that There's something more beautiful out there than we can really imagine.

NEXT EPISODE

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See ya...

CREDITS

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne and directed by Mark Hadley.

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