

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 7-7470

TALK ON VINCENT VAN GOGH GIVEN ON THE WOMAN'S RADIO
REVIEW (STATION WEAJ-NBC NETWORK) BY ALFRED H. BARR,
JR., DIRECTOR OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART.

Forty-five years ago last July a painter named van Gogh shot himself in despair and died a hopeless and unhappy man. One week ago an exhibition of van Gogh's paintings opened its doors in New York. Before the end of the week 17,000 persons had come to see the paintings. When van Gogh died probably not more than 20 people in all liked to look at his pictures - a dozen of his fellow painters, a lieutenant in the French army, an old dealer in paints and canvases, a postman and his wife, one single lonely art critic, and his devoted brother Theo. Today, a half century later and 2,000 miles away, an exhibition of his works in the course of six months will probably be seen and enthusiastically admired by 200,000 to 300,000 people.

Once in a letter to his brother van Gogh confessed modestly that he thought that one of his paintings of sunflowers ought to bring 500 francs if sold to some Scottish or American collector. Several years ago one of his paintings of sunflowers brought \$50,000. and last year a dealer here in New York was asking \$75,000 for another -- possibly for the very picture van Gogh had thought might be worth \$100.

Van Gogh's fame girdles the earth. His paintings are treasured in museums all over the world -- in London, Munich, Paris, Berlin, Stockholm, Moscow, Vienna, Tokyo; and here in our own country in Chicago, Buffalo, Kansas City, Toledo, Detroit. He has become the most popular as well as one of the most highly valued artists of the last hundred years -- this man who once lived for a week on dry bread and 23 cups of coffee in order to buy some cheap frames for his pictures.

Who was van Gogh, and why does his tragic life contrast with his fame after death with such appalling irony?

Vincent van Gogh was born in Holland in 1853, the son of a clergyman in the little town of Zundert. We know very little about his childhood but at the age of 16 he entered a firm of art dealers

at The Hague. At the end of 4 years he had done so well selling pictures that he was transferred to the more important branch of the firm in London. In London he fell in love with the daughter of his landlady. She led him on but when he proposed marriage she disclosed to him that all along she had been engaged to someone else. To van Gogh who throughout his life behaved with passionate single-mindedness this disappointment was a shock so serious and lasting that it changed the direction of his life. He grew despondent, turned to religion, and became fanatically, morbidly devout. In 1876 at the age of 23 he wrote to his brother: "If I should find something it will probably be a position between clergyman and missionary in the suburbs of London among the working people." Soon he found himself, a young Dutchman in London, without means of support, passionately eager to serve as an evangelist but without equipment, training or money.

Disheartened and disappointed he returned to Holland determined to prepare himself for the ministry, but he was not temperamentally able to plug away for 7 years studying Greek, Hebrew and Theology. After 6 months he gave up in despair and found a position among poverty-stricken coal miners in the south of Belgium. There he toiled for a year/ ^{as an evangelist} trying not only to save the souls of the miners but to bring some comfort into the miserable conditions in which they lived. This practical Christianity met with disfavor on the part of the authorities, who finally dismissed him.

So, at the age of 27, he again found himself at loose ends, a disappointment to himself, to his parents, to his friends, even to his devoted brother Theo. To Theo he wrote: "Now for more than 5 years already, I don't know exactly how long, I have been more or less without employment, wandering here and there, and yet my only anxiety is: how can I be of use in the world, cannot I serve some purpose and be of any good...There is something inside me, what can it be?" A few weeks later the answer came to him and he again wrote his brother: "In spite of everything I shall rise again, I will take up my pencil, which I have forsaken in my great discouragement, and I will go on with my drawing; and from that moment everything seems transformed for me."

This moment, in the year 1880, was the beginning of one of the most amazing careers in the history of art. Van Gogh had 10 years

of incredible hardship, starvation, ill health, spiritual dejection, often a social outcast, forsaken by everyone save his brother. As if this were not enough, toward the end of this decade he was afflicted with epileptoid attacks which deranged his mind for brief periods every few months and which led to an accumulation of despair culminating in his suicide.

In spite of all these difficulties he devoted himself with incredible energy and persistence to the study of art, working for 6 years in Belgium and Holland mostly by himself among peasants and workingmen. His great picture of this Dutch period is the "Potato Eaters" of 1885. I'm sorry all of you cannot see this picture now on exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, but van Gogh has left a description of it so vivid that I want to read you a few sentences from it, taken from letters to his brother Theo. Theo was then working in Paris and sending him each month a little money with which to buy food and paints. Van Gogh writes: "I am working again at the picture of those peasants around the dish of potatoes in the evening. During these few days in which I have been working on it, it has been a regular battle. I have tried to make clear how these people eating their potatoes under the lamplight have dug earth with those very hands they put in the dish. I have wanted to give the impression of quite a different way of living than that of us civilized people. Therefore I am not at all anxious for everyone to like or admire it right off. It would be wrong, I think, to give a peasant picture conventional smoothness. If a peasant picture smells of bacon smoke, potato stean, all right, that is not unhealthy. If a stable smells of dung, all right, that belongs to the stable. If the field has an odor of ripe corn or potatoes or guano or manure that is healthy, especially for people from the city. To be perfumed is not what a peasant picture needs."

Today this picture is hung at the Museum in a place of honor but 50 years ago when it was painted it seemed crude, dark, incomprehensible. People were not used to such directness and ruggedness and even now the gloom of the interior of the peasants' cottage seen in this picture repels people who love and appreciate van Gogh's later work.

A year after the painting of the "Potato Eaters" van Gogh went

to Paris to live with his brother. In Paris he saw the work of the Impressionists such as Claude Monet and Renoir. Like a butterfly emerging from the gloom of its chrysalis van Gogh sloughed off the murky darkness of his Dutch paintings. He dipped his brush in the brilliant colors of Impressionism and within 2 years had completely transformed his art so that in 1888 when he left Paris for the south of France he was prepared for his last 2 astounding years of work.

From Arles in the south of France, van Gogh wrote to Theo: "Nature here is so extraordinarily beautiful everywhere, and over all the vault of the sky is a marvelous blue and the sun sheds a radiance of pale sulphur. I cannot paint it as lovely as it is but it absorbs me so much that I let myself go, never thinking of a single rule. Today from 7 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock in the evening I worked without stirring except to eat a bite a step or two away because these colors about me are all new to me, give me extraordinary exultation. I have no thought of fatigue. I shall do another picture this very night and I shall bring it off."

A few months after he wrote this van Gogh was stricken by the first of his epileptoid attacks. For several days he lost control of himself and although he regained complete sanity he decided a few weeks later to enter the asylum at Saint-Rémy near Arles. Today he would have been cared for in a very different way for epileptics are in no sense insane although they may become irresponsible at the moment of their attacks. In the asylum of Saint-Rémy van Gogh painted one of his most beautiful landscapes, the "Cornfield" with a man reaping. Let him describe it: "I am struggling with a canvas, a reaper, a study in yellow, terribly thickly painted but the subject fine and simple. I see in this reaper a vague figure fighting like a devil in the midst of the heat to get to the end of his task. I see the image of death in the sense that humanity might be the corn he is reaping. But there is nothing sad in this death. It goes its way in broad daylight with a sun flooding everything with a light of pure gold. It is all yellow except a line of violet hills, a pale, fair yellow. I find it queer that I saw it like this between the iron bars of a cell."

A year later, after having finished a hundred more canvases, van Gogh was dead by his own hand. His life had been desperately unhappy. For 10 years he had felt himself a burden to his brother Theo. He had

not been able to support himself, having sold only 2 paintings for a total of about \$100. But his life, though tragic, had not been a failure. Even during his moments of anxiety and despondency he produced pictures so joyous, so brilliant, so full of vitality and color, so triumphant that almost they make us forget that they were painted with the sweat and blood of a man's agony.