

## Exploring Vincent van Gogh's Painting's Iconography: An Aesthetic Criticism

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### Abstract

This research attempts to investigate iconography in Vincent van Gogh's painting "The Garden of the Asylum," as well as its connection to themes in art that are purposefully or inadvertently altered by artists in order to exhibit their work. The method used was art (aesthetic) criticism which provides a methodological umbrella for iconographic analysis. The emphasis placed on the formal elements of art as the initial phase in the analysis is where the art criticism technique and Panofsky's iconographic analysis connect in this study. The results demonstrate that expressionism and fauvism were later creative movements that derived from Vincent van Gogh's unique use of color, texture, and the emotional portrayal of the human condition. A meandering path across the garden draws the viewer's attention farther into the image. The asylum's very existence has multiple meanings and implications. It is intended to convey van Gogh's feelings of both mental and physical captivity throughout his stay. The asylum can be seen as a metaphor for the state of humanity, representing the limitations and suffering that come with being human as well as the struggle to find inner peace and spiritual transcendence in the face of hardship. In conclusion, the examination of the iconography of "The Garden of The Asylum" provides a deeper understanding of the artist's symbolism and aims, as well as the historical context in which they are displayed, their personal and cultural significance.

**Keywords:** aesthetic criticism, iconography, post-impressionism, symbol

### Introduction

Painting enthusiasts are no new to post-Impressionism. The term "post-impressionism" refers to an art trend that flourished for a brief time in the late 19th century and was primarily associated with French artists. Post-impressionism movements include a broad spectrum of diverse artistic styles (post-Impressionism, n.d.). Each variant emphasizes the artist's vision. Painting changed from a window into the world to a window into the artist's mind and soul. This occurred during the movement's peak.

Literature states that Vincent van Gogh was a key figure in the post-impressionist movement. Van Gogh was seen as a "mad" artist, the man who painted in frenzy or the wounded soul who cut off his ear (Vincent van Gogh's Paintings and Life, n.d.). Van Gogh was not as insane as people think. None of these ways of looking at it are right. People who see his works as nothing more than visual representations of his troubled mind often do not see how good an artist he was. In May 1889, Van Gogh went to the Saint-Paul de Mausole hospital in Saint-Rémy, France, because he was getting panic attacks. For the first few

weeks, he could only work inside or in the fenced-in yard. After that, he was able to work outside of the school as well. He painted the wheat fields, olive trees, cypress trees, and rocks in the area, and the painting became known as “The Garden of the Asylum.” The subject matter of the painting is a symbolic depiction of the events, conditions, and information depicted in paintings. Artists worldwide explore similar issues or concepts (DeWitte, Larmann, & Shields, 2015, p. 560).

This current research aims to examine variations in Vincent van Gogh’s icon in his painting “The Garden of The Asylum”, as well as its relationship to art themes that are consciously or unconsciously manipulated by artists to present artistic expression. This artistic analysis on van Gogh’s “The Garden of The Asylum” is an aesthetic criticism. It explores an artwork into analytical work and an analytical process into an artistic work. The importance of this research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of visual images, symbols and their meanings in van Gogh’s paintings. This way of understanding answers the urgency in terms of learning about classical visual art appreciation.

This current research exercises iconography theory, which is founded on Panofsky’s approach, which has complimented this approach over time, and is extremely consistent with the three stages of critique (description, explanation, and judgment). Panofsky, according to Esfandiari (2021), Panofsky defines the three degrees of comprehension to all artistic images: first stage pre-iconography, second stage Iconography (iconographic analysis), and third stage iconography (iconological analysis). Because of this, we can better comprehend the distinctiveness of other cultures and artists by contrasting the meanings of various works of art. While a symbol may have a common meaning for one group, it may be utilized differently or have a different meaning for another (Libretext, 2021).

While many exciting things are happening in stage one of perception, directed perception is where the very intimate aspects take place. Because it is guided by a general sense of what one can see, directed perception based on one’s personal history and knowledge—is sometimes referred to as “top-down” processing by cognitive scientists. You will “see” this painting in a way that no one else does. We direct our attention (or focus) to areas of a picture that are compelling, worthwhile, or familiar (Solso, 1933, p. 2).

## Method

This research used the method of art (aesthetic) criticism which includes two formal aspects: elements and principles. Observing the formal aspects of art signifies a scientific approach in analyzing artwork. It highlights what the researcher sees independently from emotional impact of a work. Formal aspect-based art criticism explains visual artwork, not meant to evoke the thoughts on the work but to elucidate its visual structure, the arrangement of visual elements, and its composition function (Getty, 2011; Munsterberg, 2009). According to Glatstein (2009), the formal aspects of art refer to components that form a structure and explanation of how these components are combined with each other. The formal aspects of van Gogh’s “The Garden of The Asylum” include line, value, shape, form, space, color, texture, balance, contrast, movement, emphasis, pattern, proportion, and unity.

The method of art criticism (aesthetics) provides a methodological umbrella for iconographic analysis. The intersection between the art criticism method and Panofsky’s iconographic analysis is the prioritization of the formal aspects of art as the first step in the analysis. Panofsky’s iconography in art criticism used in this research begins by looking at the formal aspects of art. At the first level, looking at an image is to extract factual and expressive information (Panofsky, 1972).

The steps in the analysis procedure are as follows. First, identifying general information about van Gogh’s paintings. Second, writing a description of the painting

regarding what the subject in the painting is, the aspects that are emphasized, and the dominant elements. Third, correlating the art elements and design principles in the painting to create stages of iconological interpretation.

## Findings and Discussion

### Findings

Vincent van Gogh was a post-impressionist painter active in the Netherlands between 1853 and 1890. Throughout his life, he battled mental illness and lived in abject poverty. However, he still produced fantastic work that motivates and enthralls audiences worldwide.

Van Gogh checks in for treatment at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum at Saint-Rémy, close to Arles, on May 8, 1889. He is prohibited from leaving the property for the first month, but a garden filled with overgrown pine trees inside the walls serves as a tremendous source of inspiration for new studies and motifs. And because of that, his one-year stay at the asylum was quite fruitful because he created at least 150 new paintings and it titled “The Garden of the Asylum.” Hendriks & Tilborgh (2001) claim that the picture was once owned by eccentric Auvers-sur-Oise physician Paul Gachet Sr., who became a close friend of Van Gogh around 1890. His children Paul and Marguerite, who acquired the collection in 1909, intended to spread as little awareness as possible about what would eventually turn out to be a very valuable treasure. As a result, neither both “The Garden of the Asylum” nor any other pieces in their collection was ever donated to an exhibition, nor no one was ever permitted to photograph them. “The Garden of the Asylum” now has two different iterations. One is housed in Essen’s Folkwang Museum. The other is housed at Amsterdam’s Van Gogh Museum (Velde, 2021).

The work of Vincent van Gogh had a significant impact on the development of modern art. His singular approach to color, texture, and the emotional representation of the human condition laid the groundwork for subsequent artistic trends such as expressionism and fauvism. This helps ensure that his artistic genius will continue to be recognized for generations.



Figure 1. The Garden of The Asylum at Saint-Remy (Glaser, n.d.)

An approach to iconography focuses on the interpretation and analysis of symbols and visual images inside works of art. It refers to Panofsky’s method, which was created by art

historian Erwin Panofsky. This approach seeks to elucidate the cultural context and underlying meanings of the symbols and motifs employed by artists. According to Muralha (2023), the Panofsky technique divides analysis into three levels:

According to Muralha (2023), the Panofsky technique divides analysis into three levels. The first stage is pre-iconographic analysis. In this stage entails recognizing the fundamental visual components, such as shapes, objects, and colors, without giving them any particular interpretations of the work. It concentrates on outlining the formal features of the artwork and laying the groundwork for further examination. The first thing is about the composition of the painting. It has a primarily horizontal composition and is framed in a rectangle style. The garden and its different parts take up the lower part of the painting, while the sky in the upper part is a vivid blue color with strong hues to create a rich, expressive color scheme. Greens, blues, purples, and yellows are among the many hues present in the garden. Intense blue hues dominate the sky. The emotional effect of the artwork as a whole is enhanced by these vibrant colors.

Van Gogh's brushstrokes are short and dense, and they are dynamic and noticeable. The painting's dynamic and emotive quality is enhanced by the strokes' impression of spontaneity and movement. A variety of natural components, such as trees, flowers, and plants, can be found throughout the garden. The dominant feature of the image is a tall cypress tree that rises steeply and commands attention. Additionally, there are smaller plants, grassy clumps, and trees. Irises and poppies are among the flowers that can be spotted all across the garden. The viewer's attention is drawn further into the picture as a winding path meander through the garden. The route is painted with rough brushstrokes and a variety of earthy tones.

On the next stage is iconographic analysis. At this stage, the emphasis is on figuring out and deciphering the symbolic meaning contained in the piece of art. It entails recognizing the topic matter and the conventional or traditional meanings connected to the elements represented. The realization that form may correspond to themes and concepts in addition to visual experiences required both an accurate pre-iconographic description and an understanding of the literary sources as prerequisites (Hasenmueller, 1978). Understanding the historical and cultural setting in which the artwork was made is frequently necessary for this phase.

In the "Garden of the Asylum" painting the tall and lean cypress trees has a considerable impact on the overall look of the composition. Cypress trees frequently serve as a metaphorical focal point in Vincent van Gogh's paintings. Caldarone (2010) mentions that in a letter to Theo, Van Gogh states that the green of cypress trees has a quality of such distinction. They can be interpreted in several different ways, such as symbols of eternity, spirituality, and the link between heaven and earth (Cypress Trees, 2022).

The path that winds its way through the garden can be interpreted as symbolizing a journey of some kind. It might be interpreted as a metaphor for the journey through life, complete with all the forks in the road, decisions to be made, and obstacles to overcome. The route encourages the observer to investigate and contemplate their unique path in life as they walk along it.

Irises and poppies are only two of the many kinds of flowers that may be found strewn about the garden in the image. Van Gogh had a strong appreciation for the natural beauty that surrounded him, and flowers frequently carried significant symbolic meaning for him. Irises, for instance, are known to represent enlightenment and spirituality, whereas poppies are known to represent beauty, ephemerality, and even death. These flowers are meant to symbolize the cyclical aspect of life as well as the transient quality of existence.

The earthy tones of the garden provide a contrast to the bright blue sky that is always there. It conjures up feelings of optimism, liberation, and expansiveness. It may offer a sight of the transcendence or the spiritual realm, symbolizing the boundless possibilities and ambitions that lie beyond the bounds of the asylum.

The very existence of the asylum carries with it several connotations and meanings. It is meant to reflect both the physical and mental imprisonment that van Gogh felt while he was there. In light of this, one may consider the garden to be a haven, a place of peace and refuge amidst the challenges associated with maintaining one's mental health. It is meant to represent the artist's connection to the natural world as well as his quest for rest and recuperation.

The last stage is iconological analysis. It entails putting the symbols and their meanings in a larger cultural, historical, and philosophical context. It investigates the artwork's underlying symbolic meaning, including any allegorical or metaphorical interpretations. Instead of relying solely on analysis, Panofsky proposes that one might arrive at an understanding of a text by the practice of iconography, which involves thorough evaluation of all of the text's symbols. The term "graphics" refers to more than just visuals. Instead, this is done through the use of metaphors, allusions, and anecdotes. It should come as no surprise that similar forms can be found reflected in the realm of painting (Zimran, 2003).

Van Gogh held a profound reverence for nature and recognized it as a wellspring of inspiration for his spiritual life. The garden can be seen as a manifestation of the divine and a depiction of the harmony that exists between humans and the natural world when viewed through the lens of an iconological interpretation. It is a reflection of van Gogh's conviction in the possibilities for spiritual connection via the contemplation Panofsky proposes that one might arrive at an understanding of a text by the practice of iconography, which involves thorough evaluation of all of the text's symbols. The term "graphics" refers to more than just visuals. Instead, this is done through the use of metaphors, allusions, and anecdotes. It should come as no surprise that similar forms can be found reflected in the realm of painting (Zimran, 2003).of natural beauty as well as the curative power of nature.

On the other hand, the expressive brushwork and vibrant colors that Van Gogh used are consistent with the ideas of Romanticism. Romanticism was a movement that placed an emphasis on profound emotions, individualism, and a connection to the sublime. In the iconological analysis, the painting can be understood as a reflection of the artist's inner struggle and his endeavor to convey his feelings and his subjective perception of the world through the language of art. This is because the artist was attempting to communicate these things through art.

Again, the existence of the asylum itself carries a certain amount of symbolic weight. It is a representation of the difficulties and confinement that van Gogh experienced throughout his battles with his mental health. The asylum can be viewed as a metaphor for the human situation; the constraints and suffering that are inherent in existence, and the search for inner peace and spiritual transcendence in the midst of adversity, according to the iconological study.

The iconological study takes into account both van Gogh's interest in spirituality and his pursuit of philosophical ideas. Both of these aspects are important to the artist. It is possible to interpret the painting as a representation of his search for meaning, his yearning for transcendence, as well as his desire to find peace and connection via his art. This demonstrates his faith in the transformational capacity of the creative process as well as the ability of art to express more profound truths.

## Discussion

The evolution of modern art was greatly influenced by the works of Vincent van Gogh. His innovative use of color, texture, and the emotive portrayal of the human condition set the stage for later creative movements like fauvism and expressionism. This makes it more likely that future generations will acknowledge his creative brilliance. Van Gogh used short, thick brushstrokes that are both lively and striking. The impression of spontaneity and movement in the strokes adds to the painting's dynamic and passionate appeal.

Finding and interpreting the artwork "The Garden of the Asylum" symbolic meaning is the main focus of the work. It requires understanding the subject matter as well as the customary or traditional connotations associated with the elements shown. As precondition, an accurate pre-iconographic description and a knowledge of the literary sources were necessary to realize that shape may relate to themes and concepts in addition to visual experiences (Hasenmueller, 1978). The natural beauty that surrounded Van Gogh was greatly appreciated, and flowers often held deep symbolic significance for him. For example, iris is often associated with spirituality and enlightenment, while poppies are associated with beauty, transience, and even death. The asylum's very existence has multiple meanings and implications. It is intended to convey van Gogh's feelings of both mental and physical captivity throughout his stay. Given this, one could view the garden as a safe haven—a peaceful, safe haven amid the difficulties of preserving one's mental health. It is intended to symbolize both the artist's desire for rest and recovery as well as his relationship to nature.

Panofsky suggests that the discipline of iconography, which entails a careful analysis of every sign in the text, may lead one to an understanding of it. There is more to "graphics" than just images. Rather, anecdotes, allusions, and metaphors are used to accomplish this. The fact that comparable shapes are represented in the field of painting is not surprising (Zimran, 2003). Van Gogh's pursuit of philosophical ideas and his interest in spirituality are both taken into consideration in the iconological research. For the artist, these two elements are crucial. One interpretation of the artwork could be that it symbolizes his quest for transcendence, purpose, and tranquility, as well as his hope to find these things through his art. This indicates his belief in the power of art to convey deeper truths and the transforming potential of the creative process.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, by examining the iconography of "The Garden of The Asylum," it results in a deeper comprehension of the artwork's symbolism, as well as the aims of the artist, the historical context of the artwork, as well as the personal and cultural relevance of the artwork. It enables a more profound engagement with the painting's themes and messages, as well as a greater understanding for the depth of the painting's subject matter.

The painting depicts spirituality, human experience, and nature's transformation. The picture captures the essence of Renaissance and Post-Impressionist iconography without overtly following them. It expresses humanistic appreciation for nature, personal feelings, symbolism, and subjective expression. "The Garden of The Asylum" depicts the relationship between nature, spirituality, and humanity. Van Gogh painted it while in a hospital for mental. The reflection of his mental state and aesthetic choices in his painting needs further studies. Letters and writings written during this period may reveal van Gogh's personal experiences and how they shaped his work.

The results of this study are limited to the iconography of "The Garden of The Asylum," which does not represent the entire meaning of all van Gogh's paintings. The

application of the results of this research is as a reference for the creation of visual artworks that prioritize techniques in post impressionism in creating icons and meanings.

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