

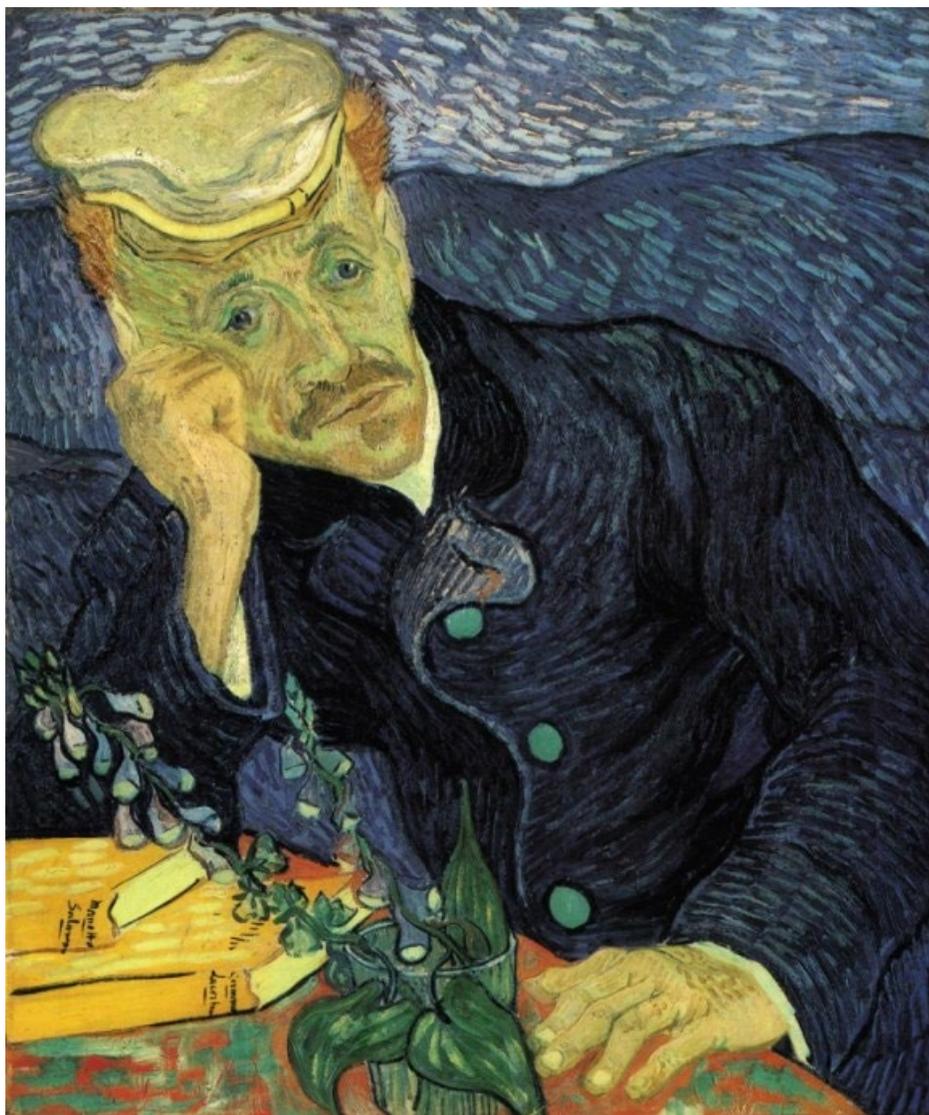
Laurene Craig

Dr. Margaret Dikovitskaya

ARTS 105-B04 LUO

July 5, 2018

The Portrait of Dr. Gachet



Vincent Van Gogh | 1890

Oil on Canvas | 23.4 in × 22.0 in

Private Collection

The Portrait Dr. Gachet is a painting by Vincent van Gogh, a Dutch painter who lived from 1853 to 1890, a short 37 years. For the last ten years of his life, he dedicated himself to painting. Van Gogh painted *Dr. Gachet* in the spring of 1890, months before his suicide. Paul Gachet was Van Gogh's friend and homeopathic physician who treated Van Gogh after leaving Saint-Remy, a sanitarium in France. Van Gogh considered Gachet to be a close friend, writing to his sister, "I have found a true friend in Dr. Gachet, something like another brother, so much do we resemble each other physically and also mentally" (Van Gogh, 6/5/1890). Van Gogh painted two versions of the portrait; the second version Van Gogh gifted to the doctor. The most famous version shown above has prominent lines throughout the painting, while the gifted picture has a more solid blue background, does not include the yellow books, and the flowers are not in a glass but held by the hand (Aronson and Manoj).

The original painting was sold by the Van Gogh family after his death for 300 francs or about \$58 and ended up at the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in 1912, where it hung for 21 years. In 1933, when the Nazi regime took over, Hermann Göring, a Nazi high official, arranged to have the painting sold to Franz Koenigs, a German banker, who quickly sold it to a Jewish philanthropist, Siegfried Kramarsky. With increasing dangers to Jewish people, Kramarsky shipped the painting, and his family, to the United States. The picture hung in their New York apartment until 1984 and was on indefinite loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1990, after a change in art tax codes, *The Portrait of Dr. Gachet* was auctioned and sold for a record-breaking 82.5 million dollars to a Japanese businessman, Ryoei Saito. For decades, rumors flourished that Ryoei had the painting cremated with him upon his death. These rumors were the topic of many articles by people trying to find the whereabouts of *The Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (Kakutani).

Mixed reports abound on the internet as to the current location of the painting, but the current consensus is it was auctioned and is in an unknown private collection (Rosenbaum).

Vincent Van Gogh was part of the second generation of Impressionists, or Post-impressionists. These artists decided to make more personal art, tapping into their feelings instead of a static picture of the world (Getlein, 480). Van Gogh attempted this with *The Portrait of Dr. Gachet*. In the painting, Dr. Gachet is leaning to his left with his head resting on his closed fist; his sad eyes gaze just past the viewer. His face looks long, and his unhappy expression gives a feeling of depression. Van Gogh wrote to his friend and fellow artist Paul Gauguin, "I have a portrait of Dr. Gachet with the heart-broken expression of our time" (Van Gogh, 6/17/1890). His left elbow is resting on two yellow books. "The two novels are depressing in content—*Germinie Lacerteux* is about a young servant who lives a debauched life and dies miserably in the workhouse, and *Manette Salomon* describes the lives of four more or less unsuccessful painters" (Aronson and Manoj). The table is a bright red color and in front of the doctor is a glass of foxglove flowers. These flowers were used to combat depressive moods by homeopathic physicians such as Dr. Gachet.

In a letter to his sister, Van Gogh said he wanted to paint portraits that did not resemble photographic resemblance but use color to show the person's character. He describes Dr. Gachet's face as the "colour of an overheated brick, and scorched by the sun" (Van Gogh, 6/5/1890). He painted the doctor's hair a reddish color with a contrasting white cap. The background looks like a stark countryside with hills painted in different shades of blue and accented with white. Van Gogh tells his sister the doctor's clothes are "ultramarine – this brings out the face and makes it paler" (Van Gogh, 6/5/90). The blue tints around his eyes suggest

sadness. Working with complementary colors, Van Gogh painted the books a bright yellow that makes them stand out. The garden table is red with green accents.

Along with color, Van Gogh used very distinctive lines in his paintings. Towards the end of his life, he would often create paintings in just one day, and the use of lines helped him paint faster. Van Gogh is known for using thick lines of paint, often applying the paint straight from the tube. Using heavy brush strokes adds texture to the painting and makes it look realistic. Implied diagonal lines allow the viewer's eyes to move around the painting (Getlein, 82). In the portrait, Van Gogh leads the viewer's eyes from the doctor's face down to the lower right to his hands and then back up through the flowers and to the yellow books. In the background, the brighter white lines on the upper half of the hills give the illusion of wispy clouds and the setting or rising sun. On the doctor's face, the lines take the viewer's eyes down, following his downcast eyes, and a small frown formed by his mouth. All of these give the impression of depression or sadness. Van Gogh also used lines as a contour. "Contours are the boundaries we perceive of three-dimensional forms, and contour lines are the lines we draw to record those boundaries" (Getlein, 79). These contour lines are found defining the brim on the hat, the spine of the books, and the leaves on the foxglove plant.

Drawing opinions of the painting before research, the eye was instantly drawn to the doctor's sad eyes. It is understandable how the doctor is feeling just by looking at his vacant stare and his relaxed, unpoised posture. The vacant stare is like he has mentally removed himself from this world for a few moments as he contemplates his life. His relaxed posture is a pose many people have mimicked on any given bad day. After researching Van Gogh and this painting, his talent is inspiring, especially how he captured a fundamental and familiar feeling of pensive sadness. The subtle, layered shading of blues and the brushwork in the doctor's jacket is

remarkable. They give the impression that there is movement in the clothes, and the buttons on his jacket help to stop the visual flow and draw the eyes both up to the face or down towards the hands. The background is a perfect contrast to the facial colors and helps make the face stand out from the rest of the portrait.

Vincent Van Gogh successfully achieved his goal of capturing the "heart-broken expression of our time" when he painted *The Portrait of Dr. Gachet*. Using bright colors, he was able to bring out the doctor's personality and feelings. Through Van Gogh's stylistic linear brush strokes, the painting comes alive with texture and movement. What he captured in this painting not only reflects the expression of the 1890s but can also apply in current day.

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