Down to Work with Vincent

Ceciel de Bie
With illustrations by Georgien Overwater

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1 Discovering by doing

Vincent van Gogh at the age of nineteen, 1872

Whenever you paint, something unexpected always happens. As you mix the paint, you create a colour that you've never seen before, but which still fits perfectly into the piece you're painting. Or you swish your brush across the paper – and a frog appears. When you paint a wall or a door at home, you know exactly what you're going to get, but not when you're doing a painting. This is why it's always handy to find out a little more about painting and drawing materials and to experiment with them. It helps you to get a better idea of how to use them. When you're learning, it never hurts to ask for a little help from an artist. And why not go straight to one of the best-known artists in the world? Then you know you're off to a good start!

You've probably heard of Vincent van Gogh. He was twenty-seven years old when he decided to become a professional artist. That's over a hundred years ago now. Vincent was passionate about his art, sometimes painting all day long. You probably don't have the time or the energy to do that, but that's not a problem. If you look closely at Vincent's work, you're sure to learn a lot. Vincent was always trying out all kinds of new things. He kept on experimenting and practising with different drawing and painting materials.

Mad about nature

Vincent had three sisters and two brothers. He got along best with his younger brother Theo. The brothers often played together outside. They roamed through the fields and the forests near the town of Zundert in the south of the Netherlands, where they lived. Vincent was very fond of plants and birds.

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Vincent took painting lessons from the artist Fernand Cormon. This photograph shows Cormon sitting at his easel, with his students all around him. Vincent met lots of new artists there and made some friends, but he isn't in this photograph.

There are only three photographs of Vincent in existence. He didn't like being photographed. This is the last picture that was taken of him. Vincent is sitting with his back towards us. He is talking to an artist friend, Emile Bernard, somewhere in Paris.

Self-portrait as a painter, 1887–1888
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Vincent made over forty self-portraits, so we know more or less what he looked like. More or less? Yes, because for Vincent a self-portrait didn't have to be a perfect likeness. He thought it was more important to capture his mood.

The influence of Vincent's new artist friends can be seen in his palette. Compare the colours on the palette in this picture with the colours on the palette he used for the 1886 self-portrait with the dark felt hat (page ...). Can you see the difference? There are more bright colours on the palette now.
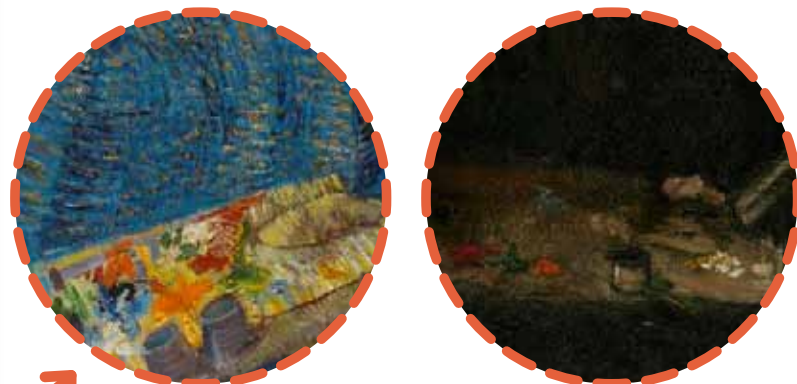
Down to work!
Make a self-portrait.

You'll need a mirror for this. You can try out all kinds of expressions and poses in front of the mirror. You could laugh, look sad, or pull funny faces. Painting at the same time as posing might be a bit tricky, though. If you're really finding it difficult, you can always base your work on a photograph instead, but of course that's not as much fun.

You can also work with a friend and make portraits of each other. Then it'll be a portrait, not a self-portrait. Don't show the portraits to each other until you're both finished. And don't be upset if the picture doesn't look very much like you!

Full face. Three quarters. In profile.

From head to toe.