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## Art Masterpiece: *The Starry Night* (1889) by Vincent Van Gogh

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**Keywords:** movement, line, color

**Grade:** 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup>

**Activity:** landscape-Watercolor resist

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### Meet the Artist:

- Born in 1853 in the Netherlands.
  - Attempted to be a preacher, a schoolteacher, and an art dealer before embarking on his art career.
  - He spent first 2 years honing his drawing skills before he allowed himself to use color or paint. He was almost entirely self-taught.
  - His closest friend and relative was his brother Theo, an art dealer, who also supported him financially. Vincent spent his life in poverty, choosing to spend money on paints rather than food to eat.
  - His early paintings portrayed the lives of poor farmers and coal miners. The colors he used were dull and dark.
  - Later, he was strongly influenced by the impressionists of the day. With time he became much bolder in his paintings. He began to use slashing brush strokes and clear, bright colors.
  - He was a pioneer for expressionism. Expressionists profoundly show their emotions through their paintings.
  - He would paint continuously; even when the sun would go down he would continue to paint by sticking candles in the brim of his hat.
  - Van Gogh never felt that his art was appreciated, which pained him very much. It wasn't entirely true; many of his fellow painters saw him as a genius. He was a prolific painter and near the end of his life, painted 70 paintings in 70 days. His career lasted only ten years; he created approx. 875 paintings and 1100 drawings.
  - However, he only sold 1 painting in his lifetime, for \$80.
  - His paintings today are some of the most expensive in the world, some have sold for up to 50 and 60 million dollars.
  - After Van Gogh's death (1890), it was his brother Theo's wife that made ensured that Vincent Van Gogh got the attention he deserved. The letters Vincent had written to Theo gave much insight into his mind and his art.
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- **“Give me a museum and I’ll fill it.” There is now a Vincent Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.**
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**Looking at the Print:** Vincent was inspired for this work of art by the clear air and sky in the south of France on June 19, 1889. This work shows the predawn sky filled with stars that resemble fireworks. On the far right the moon glows encased in a halo, which is made up of dabs of colors. In the lower part we see glowing lights of the village of Saint-Remy. The church spires point upward like the cypress trees that seem to make contact with the heavens.

Vincent had an interest in astronomy. On that June night the planet Venus (called the morning star), was at its most brilliant and is seen in the artwork as the large glowing white circular shape near the cypress tree. At the time powerful telescopes had enabled an English scientist to discover an important spiral nebula. Vincent most likely saw renderings of this discovery in scientific journals.

The blues and yellows are rich and vibrant. The paint was thickly applied in his familiar Van Gogh style. The swirling brushstrokes curve and spiral as they lead our eyes in various paths through out the composition.

Vincent once wrote to his sister “putting little white dots on a blue-black surface is not enough.”

#### **Discussion:**

**Most of us have had the experience of looking up in wonder at the night sky. Have the students close their eyes and recall this image. Now reveal the print, “Starry Night”**

- **What appears to be moving in Vincent Van Gogh’s sky? Everything! (point out the rings that form halos around the moon and stars,**
- **Can you see the wind sweeping through the sky? (point out the swirling movement of the brush strokes)**
- **Which way is the wind moving? (show the path of the wind using your arms).**
- **Have the students use their hands in the air to show rolling, swooping and spiraling motions. Tell them that when they work on their project today to remember how this action feels. They will recreate this rolling motion onto their paper.**
- **What is the dark image in the middle of the painting? (Cypress tree. Van Gogh loved to paint cypress.)**
- **Do you see the village? How can you tell people are living in these houses? (Lights)**

- Ask students how Van Gogh benefitted by studying science to create his masterpieces.
- Ask if they have ever been to a planetarium or visited the science center. Tell them to draw on what they have learned there to create today.
- What do you know about space?
- Did you know that: (share a couple of these fun facts)
  - The Sun is a star!
  - The Sun will eventually turn red. It will swallow Venus, Mercury and maybe the Earth. But not to worry. Scientists do not expect that to happen for another 5 Billion years!
  - The footprints made by the astronauts who walk on the moon will be there 1000 years from now. Why? Because the moon has little or no atmosphere. No wind or rain to destroy the footprints.
  - The Hubble Space telescope orbits above the Earth's atmosphere, making it possible to see objects that are far away from Earth. When it was first put into place the images came back blurry, but the shuttle astronauts were able to repair it.
- What do you think Van Gogh would think today of being able to see into outer space with the use of our modern technology?
- How do you think Van Gogh felt when he painted *Starry Night*?

### Activity: "Starry Night" landscape

#### Objectives:

- Students will show how to incorporate movement into their art through curved, rounded, dashed and swirling lines
- Students will learn how color can create feeling, and line for movement

#### Supplies Needed:

- White construction paper
- Oil pastels
- Blue tempera paint, watered down. (2 parts water to 1 part paint)
- 4-5 3" inch sponge brushes
- Black construction paper
- Scissors
- Glue sticks
- Paint cups

**Process:**

1. Pass out one sheet of construction paper and oil pastels to each student. Have the students recall from memory their starry night sky.
2. Advise the students that their starry sky should take up at least two-thirds of their painting. The bottom third will have a silhouette of a hill.
3. Students will only use the pastels in white, orange and yellow. Instruct them to apply the oil pastel heavily for most dramatic affect. Show how the oil pastels can be layered for dramatic color blending affects.
  - a. Begin with adding a moon. Full or crescent. Remind them how Vincent added dabs of color to form a halo around the moon.  
Next, add several stars. (Direct students to draw stars as points of light not cowboy style stars. This will look more like the style of Van Gogh and look more realistic.)  
Add Halos. Add dabs of color to form a circular motion around the star points.
4. Lastly, Add WHITE pastel swirling lines to show the movement of the sky. The pathways of shooting stars, floating clouds or turbulent winds. Use solid lines and broken lines. Lines should weave through the sky between the stars. See below.

Remind students that any strokes they make in white will “pop” out once the paint is washed over their sky. Apply heavily for best affect.

**\*\*\*Adding the Paint Wash at a paint station in the back of classroom. A few students at a time can go back and apply the wash to their paper.**

5. At the painting center students should be shown how to use the sponge brush to sweep the brush of diluted blue paint ( 2 parts water/ 1 part paint) over their sky. The brush should move in spirals and rolling motions across the paper. Paint the entire piece of paper. Demonstrate at the center.
6. Let the artwork dry.
7. Students can then cut from black paper a rolling hill. Cypress trees and house can be added.
8. Glue these onto the starry sky-scape.

9. Make sure they sign their work.

See Samples below.



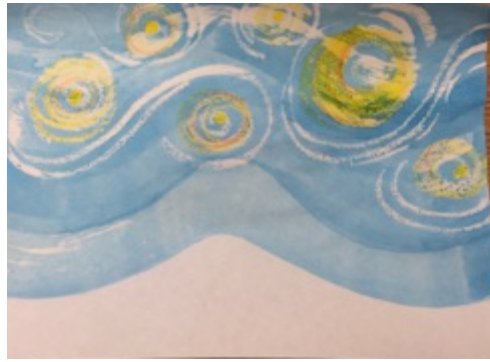
Finished project.

Step by Step visual for art guide. Series with the black lines is to show you the movement of the lines students are to imitate. In the project these are actually done in white pastel which does not photograph. Recreating these samples for your classroom is highly recommended.





**Shows star/sun creation.**



**Shows brush motion when adding wash.**

## Parent Letter

**Brief info about the artist:** Vincent Van Gogh was born in 1853 in the Netherlands. He was strongly influenced by the impressionists of the day. With time his works became much bolder than in his early paintings. He used slashing brush strokes and clear, bright colors.

**Brief info about the project:** The students studied the movement of the night sky in the art print “Starry Night”. They created their own starry night using a water-color resist.

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