



# Immersive **van G****GH** Exhibit

## Pre-Show Audio Guide

**Listen and learn about the background of the show,  
voiced by Toronto's acclaimed Stratford actor, Colm Feore.**

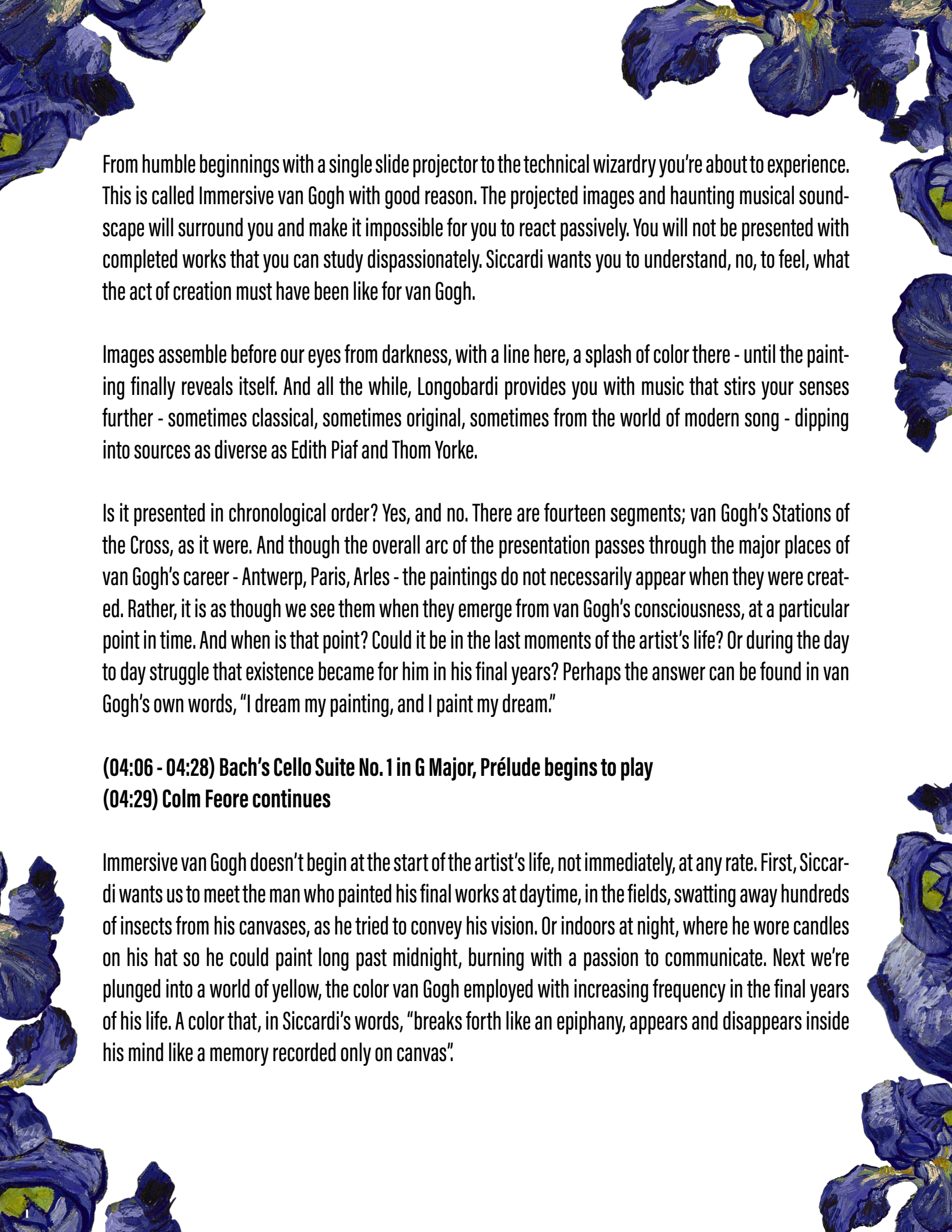
**(00:01 - 00:30) Narcissus by Luca Longobardi plays quietly**

**(00:31) Colm Feore speaks**

If you asked ten people at random what they know of Vincent van Gogh, they would probably tell you ten different things: He was an artist - Don McLean wrote a song about him. He loved sunflowers; he lived in a yellow house. Kirk Douglas played him in *Lust for Life!* He fought with Paul Gauguin. He cut off his ear. He went to an asylum. He painted the *Starry Night*. He committed suicide. All of these facts are true, but they only begin to sketch the broadest outlines of the tortured story behind the existence of this man, who remains one of the central figures in Western Art.

Van Gogh didn't begin painting until he was twenty-seven and died ten years later. But during that brief lifetime, he created over 2000 works of art, including the nearly 900 oil paintings on which his reputation rests. There have been many biographies of him, which try to make some order of his life; assigning blame to his family and his strict religious upbringing. And there are numerous catalogues of his art, where you can look at the works in chronological order and try to use them as a key to break the code of his lifelong mental unrest.

But what Massimiliano Siccardi and Luca Longobardi have brought here is something completely different. To begin with, it's not a conventional art exhibition where the paintings hang on a wall, while you walk by them and connect the dots in your own mind at the end. It is a unique combination of art, music, cinematography, and immersive theatre that Siccardi has been developing for nearly 30 years.



From humble beginnings with a single slide projector to the technical wizardry you're about to experience. This is called Immersive van Gogh with good reason. The projected images and haunting musical soundscape will surround you and make it impossible for you to react passively. You will not be presented with completed works that you can study dispassionately. Siccardi wants you to understand, no, to feel, what the act of creation must have been like for van Gogh.

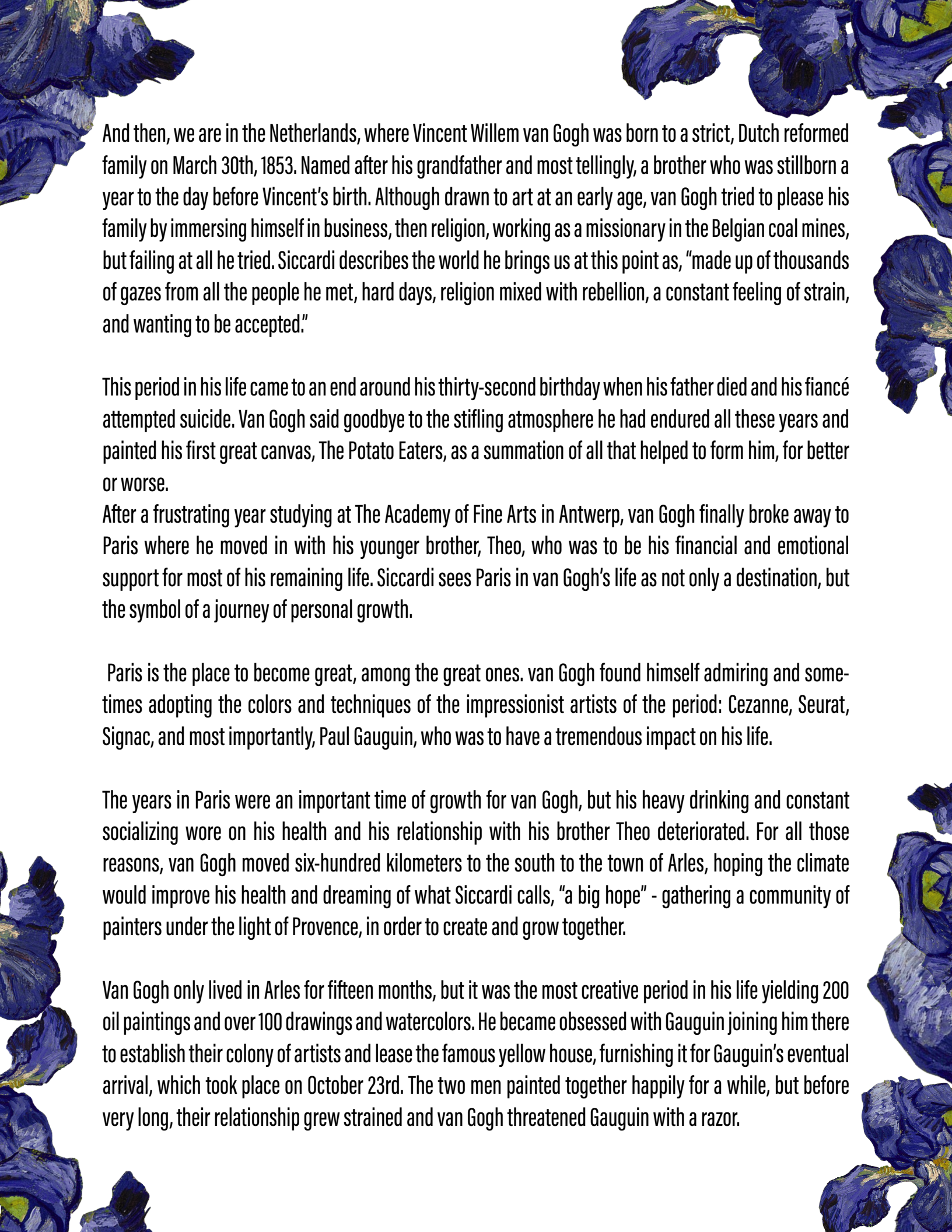
Images assemble before our eyes from darkness, with a line here, a splash of color there - until the painting finally reveals itself. And all the while, Longobardi provides you with music that stirs your senses further - sometimes classical, sometimes original, sometimes from the world of modern song - dipping into sources as diverse as Edith Piaf and Thom Yorke.

Is it presented in chronological order? Yes, and no. There are fourteen segments; van Gogh's Stations of the Cross, as it were. And though the overall arc of the presentation passes through the major places of van Gogh's career - Antwerp, Paris, Arles - the paintings do not necessarily appear when they were created. Rather, it is as though we see them when they emerge from van Gogh's consciousness, at a particular point in time. And when is that point? Could it be in the last moments of the artist's life? Or during the day to day struggle that existence became for him in his final years? Perhaps the answer can be found in van Gogh's own words, "I dream my painting, and I paint my dream."

**(04:06 - 04:28) Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major, Prélude begins to play**

**(04:29) Colm Feore continues**

Immersive van Gogh doesn't begin at the start of the artist's life, not immediately, at any rate. First, Siccardi wants us to meet the man who painted his final works at daytime, in the fields, swatting away hundreds of insects from his canvases, as he tried to convey his vision. Or indoors at night, where he wore candles on his hat so he could paint long past midnight, burning with a passion to communicate. Next we're plunged into a world of yellow, the color van Gogh employed with increasing frequency in the final years of his life. A color that, in Siccardi's words, "breaks forth like an epiphany, appears and disappears inside his mind like a memory recorded only on canvas".



And then, we are in the Netherlands, where Vincent Willem van Gogh was born to a strict, Dutch reformed family on March 30th, 1853. Named after his grandfather and most tellingly, a brother who was stillborn a year to the day before Vincent's birth. Although drawn to art at an early age, van Gogh tried to please his family by immersing himself in business, then religion, working as a missionary in the Belgian coal mines, but failing at all he tried. Siccardi describes the world he brings us at this point as, "made up of thousands of gazes from all the people he met, hard days, religion mixed with rebellion, a constant feeling of strain, and wanting to be accepted."

This period in his life came to an end around his thirty-second birthday when his father died and his fiancé attempted suicide. Van Gogh said goodbye to the stifling atmosphere he had endured all these years and painted his first great canvas, *The Potato Eaters*, as a summation of all that helped to form him, for better or worse.


After a frustrating year studying at The Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, van Gogh finally broke away to Paris where he moved in with his younger brother, Theo, who was to be his financial and emotional support for most of his remaining life. Siccardi sees Paris in van Gogh's life as not only a destination, but the symbol of a journey of personal growth.

Paris is the place to become great, among the great ones. van Gogh found himself admiring and sometimes adopting the colors and techniques of the impressionist artists of the period: Cezanne, Seurat, Signac, and most importantly, Paul Gauguin, who was to have a tremendous impact on his life.

The years in Paris were an important time of growth for van Gogh, but his heavy drinking and constant socializing wore on his health and his relationship with his brother Theo deteriorated. For all those reasons, van Gogh moved six-hundred kilometers to the south to the town of Arles, hoping the climate would improve his health and dreaming of what Siccardi calls, "a big hope" - gathering a community of painters under the light of Provence, in order to create and grow together.

Van Gogh only lived in Arles for fifteen months, but it was the most creative period in his life yielding 200 oil paintings and over 100 drawings and watercolors. He became obsessed with Gauguin joining him there to establish their colony of artists and lease the famous yellow house, furnishing it for Gauguin's eventual arrival, which took place on October 23rd. The two men painted together happily for a while, but before very long, their relationship grew strained and van Gogh threatened Gauguin with a razor.





On December 23rd Gauguin checked into a hotel fearing for his safety and that night, van Gogh severed his own left ear with the razor. Gauguin left Arles soon after; van Gogh spent weeks in and out of the hospital suffering from delirium. As Siccardi says, "lines shatter, perspectives distort themselves lighting up the dark night sky pervading us with imaginative power." On May 8th, 1889 van Gogh committed himself to the Saint Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy.

**(08:55 - 09:16) Pictures at an Exhibition: the Great Gate of Kiev by Modest Mussorgsky plays**  
**(09:17) Colm Feore continues**

Van Gogh seemed to improve during his initial months in the asylum and painted some of his most famous works including *The Starry Night*. In Siccardi's words, "locked up behind high walls, in a round and always repeating path, the trapped body wanders relentlessly. The mind is frozen inside the void, but a thought breaks forth like a kaleidoscope - multiplying the colors, the matter, the spaces." His condition soon declined, but he still left the asylum after a year and moved to the Paris suburb of Auvers-sur-Oise to be treated by Doctor Paul Gachet who had worked with other artists. He found himself drawn to the wheat fields, writing to his brother, Theo, that he related to their sadness and extreme loneliness, "The canvases will tell you what I cannot say in words."

Finally, on July 27th, 1890 Vincent van Gogh shot himself in the chest with a revolver and died just over a day later from an infection. According to Theo, the final thing he said was, "The sadness will last forever." But Vincent was wrong. Within a decade, international exhibitions had made him a highly esteemed figure in world art and, as more became known about the tragic circumstances of his life, his painfully empathetic work served as an inspiration for millions of souls. He shows us that even the darkest night can be bright with stars.

Siccardi concludes that the lasting power of van Gogh's work is that we are witnesses to a life filled with passion and unstoppable desire, and we abandon ourselves into this timeless beauty.

**(11:13 - 12:10) Adagio for Strings (Recomposed) by Luca Longobardi plays**