

Van Gogh's Popularity

April 10, 2010

At the recent exhibition of the modern Dutch artist, Vincent Van Gogh, soon to close at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, there have been continual queues of people waiting for hours to get in. How is such popularity to be explained? Certainly Van Gogh is modern without being too modern, a combination that appeals to many souls anxious today to make some sense of the crazy world around them, but surely there is also in him an even more attractive combination – he is religious without being religious – religion for apostates!

He was born in Holland in 1853, the eldest son of a Protestant pastor. For nearly three quarters of his short life all he thought of was giving himself to the service of religion, because only at the age of 27 did he discover his outstanding talent and vocation as an artist. However, from then on he devoted himself with a religious intensity to the mastery of drawing and painting, so that he would be able to express in art what he had found himself unable to express in any outwardly religious form. He said, "In all of Nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul."

He made that soul almost tangible in the painting chosen by the Royal Academy for their Exhibition flyer, "Hospital at St. Remy." Gnarled tree trunks point upwards to their dark foliage which crowds over the bright yellow hospital building below, and interlocks with the dark blue sky above. The few human figures seem insignificant amidst a whirling dynamic of Nature, all the more dramatic for the picture's brilliant colour-scheme, typical for Van Gogh. The same dynamic is still more visible in his famous painting, "Starry Night" (not included in this Exhibition), where landscape, cypress-trees, mountains, stars and sky are all locked together in a wild, rhythmic, yellow and violet dance, seeming to make the whole cosmos whirl.

Both paintings date from Van Gogh's intensely productive last five years, between his move to Paris in early 1886 and his death in France in the summer of 1890. One may not like modern art, one may not like Van Gogh, but nobody can deny that his paintings from this period represent a profoundly individual and human reaction to what Wordsworth called "something far more deeply interfused" in the world of Nature that surrounds us human beings. What else is "art"? Only, whereas at the beginning of the 19th century that "something interfused" had inspired the English poet to "reflect in tranquillity," on the contrary by the end of that apostatizing century the Dutch artist, who had also left overt religion behind him, found beauty but little peace, which makes him that much more sympathetic to our own still more restless age.

Alas, Van Gogh paid a heavy price for recognizing the prime movement in Nature without identifying the Prime Mover. The movement without the motionless Mover, the fierce dynamism without the King of Peace, ended by overwhelming him, and he died of a self-inflicted gun-wound. Divine Lord, have mercy, have mercy, on millions and millions of souls who sense you and need you, but cannot – or will not – find you. You alone know just how dangerous is their religionless religion without you!

Kyrie eleison.