

The Superpower of looking: [Vincent Van Gogh, a selfie and a bandaged ear](https://artuk.org/learn/learning-resources/the-superpower-of-looking-vincent-van-gogh-a-selfie-and-a-bandaged-ear)

**Contextual information of the artwork**

**Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear, 1889**

Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890)

Van Gogh shows himself in his studio in Arles (in the South of France). He painted this portrait of himself just after leaving hospital, where his injured ear was bandaged. His friend and fellow artist Paul Gauguin had been staying with him and it is thought that, when Gauguin suddenly decided to leave, the already troubled artist became very upset and wounded his ear.

Van Gogh has either just come in from outside (there is an open door to the right), or his meagre studio is very cold, as he is wrapped up in an overcoat and fur-trimmed hat. On the left is a canvas with a hint of work in progress, possibly interrupted. On the right is a favourite Japanese print with the familiar triangle of Mount Fuji. Japanese art was an inspiration to Van Gogh, and Japan, like his home in Arles, was a place that fired his imagination.

**Look, describe and discuss**

[**Open a full-screen version of the zoomable image in a new window.**](https://storiiies.cogapp.com/viewer/b22ii/SelfPortrait-with-Bandaged-Ear)

Ask your students to describe the artwork, encouraging them to simply say what they can see.

You can start by showing the whole image, and then use the zoom feature to explore details of the painting.

Or you might like to start by using the zoom feature to show a detail from the image, and then zoom out to see more.

Encourage your pupils to look carefully, this is their superpower! It’s best to not give too much background information about the artwork at this stage, so pupils can develop their own ideas and opinions.

**Nudge questions**

Now when looking at the zoomable painting, ask more specific ('nudge') questions:

* What is Vincent Van Gogh wearing in this self-portrait?
* Can you use his clothing to guess where he has been or what he has been doing?
* Where do you think he is sitting?
* Which colours are used most in this painting?
* What can you see in the background? If you were transported into this painting, what might you see, smell or hear?

**Watch this video**

In this video, Paralympian, broadcaster and children's author Ade Adepitan uses his own 'Superpower of Looking' to explore Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear.*

Content note: this film makes reference to Van Gogh wounding his own ear. Background to this incident is provided in the context box and on the [Van Gogh Museum website](https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/art-and-stories/stories/van-goghs-illness).

Ask your students these questions before watching the video to support close looking and listening:

* Does Ade see anything you hadn't spotted yet?
* Ade says that one of the women in the picture in the background is carrying a tray. What do you think the women are carrying?
* Why might we all see different things when we look at the same picture?

You can also [watch the video on YouTube.](https://www.youtube.com/embed/ypbF9N1W1go)

**Questions from the Superpower of looking kit**

Now we can start to explore the 'elements' of the painting.

For this artwork, you will focus on **Figures**- **Expression, Composition and Colour.**

Ask your students to evidence their points;

* where exactly are they looking when they make a statement?
* can everybody see what they see?
* slow down, take time to really look closely

You can introduce knowledge from the contextual information of the artwork while asking these bespoke questions with helpful responses in below.

**Figures**- **Expression**

* What is Vincent Van Gogh’s expression in this self-portrait?

*His expression has been read in different ways, and interpretations are often informed by what the viewer knows about his life. Some read his expression as sad or hopeless, and he had recently fallen out with close friend and fellow artist Gaugin and his dream of them opening a studio together is over. Others read it as a brave, almost defiant face, perhaps painted for his doctors to see that he was able to look after himself (keeping warm in his hat and coat) and so well enough to go home.*

* Is Vincent looking at the viewer? Why do you think he has made this choice?

*Vincent is not looking out of the picture frame but not directly at the viewer. He might be looking at himself in a mirror because to paint a self-portrait, he would have used a mirror to see.*

* How would you describe his pose?

*Vincent Van Gogh has painted himself in the popular three- quarter turn pose. The height of objects behind him suggest he is sitting down and his body fills most of the picture plane.*

* How old do you think Vincent Van Gogh is here?

*Van Gogh is 36 years old here, and sadly he died only a year later. This* [*video*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zy3K2Lcw7hQ) *tells an age-appropriate story of his life and death (by suicide).*

**Composition**

* Is this painting landscape or portrait?

*This painting is portrait, which means it is taller than it is wide. Most portraits, pictures of people, are portrait!*

* What dominates (is most important) in this painting?

*Van Gogh himself is most important. He fills the picture frame. The print and easel behind him are also large. They have been read symbolically to represent his inspiration (Van Gogh was very interested in Japanese art) and his painting practice.*

* Is this painting symmetrical?

*This painting is not symmetrical but it is balanced; Van Gogh is central and the easel on the left side is balanced by the painting hanging on the right. The blue door and door frame are strong vertical shapes, mirrored by the upright shape of the easel and visible, loose brushstrokes.*

**Colour**

* How would you describe the colour palette in this self-portrait? Light, dark, bright/intense, dull/subdued?

*The painting is mostly yellow, green and blue with some white. The colours used to paint the background, for example the walls and door and easel, are lighter while Van Gogh wears darker colours. We might expect this to be the other way around; often backgrounds are darker and the subject of the painting is lighter and brighter.*

* Do the colours used make Vincent appear healthy or unhealthy?

*Vincent’s skin is made up of lots of different colours. The red rings around his eyes, blue marks under his eyes and whiteish lips make him appear tired and perhaps cold.*

* What colour are his eyes? How is this colour emphasised in the painting?

*His eyes are green, the same colour as his coat.*

**Everyone Learning**

You can find out more about The Superpower of Looking ® SEND/ASD/ALN approach on the [Superpower homepage](https://artuk.org/learn/the-superpower-of-looking).

Now it's time to explore the artwork in different ways. This list of sensory activities encourages students to apply their learning and can suit a variety of learning needs.

Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear

**Make:**

* Draw your own self-portrait, using a mirror to help you like in this [video](https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/art-and-design-draw-self-portrait/z6ytscw). Pupils could explore other examples of [self-portraiture on Art UK](https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/view_as/grid/search/category:self-portraits-56533).
* Use oil pastels and explore making Van-Gogh's vertical marks. You could try to draw your own coat with this technique, how many different colours can you find and use?

**Listen**

* Vincent Van Gogh liked music by German composer Richard Wagner. One of his most famous pieces is '[The Rise of the Valkyries'](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7rQFnb2wrk) which you might recognise from films and TV shows.

**Feel**

* Textures from the painting: fur, cotton, canvas. Objects from the painting: a fluffy hat, a coat (perhaps wet and cold as if you've just come from outside).
* Use a mirror and try to copy Vincent Van Gogh’s facial expression in this portrait. How does it feel? Do you remember the last time you felt this way? This activity could be adapted so that one pupil makes the expression, while the other pupil uses their fingers to trace or describe their facial expression.

**Move**

* Van Gogh appears to be sitting in this portrait. Play a game of musical chairs, and everytime the music stops, find somewhere to sit like Van Gogh!
* Look carefully at the print in the background of this portrait.  What activities do you think the people depicted here are doing? Try and recreate their poses.

**Communicate**

* Learn the Makaton sign for “my name is” A black and white image of a person pointing at their face

  Description automatically generated… and then encourage your pupils to learn their own names in Makaton using the [alphabet](https://i.pinimg.com/736x/37/ac/83/37ac831432af04d052c821e6ef08ca0b.jpg).
* Talk about selfies! This could be an opportunity to talk about when we take selfies, why we take them and how we share them.  BBC Teach has some useful videos and guidance to support teaching about [online safety](https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/safer-internet-day-resources/z6bbhbk).

**Final stage review**

Ask your students to:

* Share their sketchbooks in groups and discuss the 'elements' they have identified
* Choose an element/aspect they find most interesting about the artwork and record it in their sketchbooks
* Choose their own name/s for the title of the artwork
* Think of a question they would like to ask the artist

**Congratulations!**

You have now completed The Superpower of Looking lesson resource.

There are more \*\**(insert theme here)* themed resources to try in the next lessons section below.

**Next Lessons**

[*Queen Elizabeth I and the Spanish Armada*](https://artuk.org/learn/learning-resources/the-superpower-of-looking-queen-elizabeth-i-and-the-spanish-armada)

[Vincent Van Gogh *| Vincent Van Gogh, a selfie and a bandaged ear*](https://artuk.org/learn/learning-resources/the-superpower-of-looking-vincent-van-gogh-a-selfie-and-a-bandaged-ear)

[Lubaina Himid | *Lubaina Himid’s portrait of a tailor*](https://artuk.org/learn/learning-resources/the-superpower-of-looking-lubaina-himids-portrait-of-a-tailor)