

Listening to the Voice of the Other

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The *Van Gogh: the Flaming Soul* is on exhibition in the National Museum of History. As a newly appointed Director, Vincent van Gogh, whom I have loved since my youth, is dear to my heart.

I like this person! Even if he was a loser!

From the secular perspective, Vincent van Gogh was good for nothing. He failed as a son, brother, lover, friend, and student – the five important aspects of life. However, his flaming spirit transcends time and space, telling youth of generations to come that with perseverance and holding on to one's dream, eventually, one reaches the star hanging in the night sky.

The 27 years old man, being unemployed for five years, had failed as a gallery sales person, teacher, bookstore clerk, and missionary, and he even fancied that his real career would be in painting! Such a character is not only intolerable in the 19th century, even in the contemporary society, he would also be viewed as a failure.



Fortunately, the lonely Vincent had family support. Without the unwavering support from his brother Theo and Theo's family, the Van Gogh story would have evolved into a very different scenario.

The strong bondage lasted through all unfavorable conditions between the two brothers is vivid shown in the 800 letters Vincent wrote to Theo. Theo's empathy and financial aid were the most powerful support for Vincent throughout his lifetime. Theo's wife, Joanna, spent 24 years editing Vincent's letters after both Vincent and Theo passed away. Vincent Willem van Gogh, Theo's only son, founded the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and initiated the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam to archive van Gogh's masterpieces.

George Berkeley, an 18th century British philosopher, mused that “*If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, did it really fall?*” Viewing the Van Gogh Exhibition, I felt as if seeing the giant sound of falling. Being perceptive to the nature of everything, van Gogh was capable of being a trail blazer, not being confined by established frameworks. If van Gogh could live in the 21st century, he would have become the hottest talent for the culture and creative industries. What a pity that he had lived in a rigid society where liberty equaled to subversiveness.

Vincent van Gogh's story demonstrates that when one dares to reach for the star, even if eventually nothing is gained, one will not end with a muddy hand. Moreover, though the recognition of his glorious art accomplishments only comes after his death, Vincent van Gogh has established himself as a model of bravery and being true to one's inner voice.

Decentralization and differentiation are two salient features in a postmodern society, and “voice of the other” is in vogue in postmodern museums, challenging the authority of the museum and is brewing new work ethics in this arena.

We must open our heart and mind to listen to others' voices, so we can be receptive and tolerant to multiple perspectives, and hence form a creative society flourishing with diversity. During the past two decades, after the martial law was declared ended, the Taiwanese society has undergone deconstruction, and many social values, family lifestyle, moral judgment have become very different from before. However, often we are still used to employ a unified standard to make judgment.

Van Gogh's paintings delivered “the voice of the other” of the 19th century, which is still communicating illuminating messages. I wonder if we could recognize the dreams behind the paintings if we see his 21st century counterparts?



The Van Gogh: The Flaming Soul is currently on exhibition in the National Museum of History until March 28th, 2010. For more information, please visit: <http://vangogh.ishow.gmg.tw>

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