

The Shape of Things in Vincent van Gogh's Final Paintings

By Felician Stancioiu

Beginning with the famous Sunflowers, a common thread in Vincent van Gogh's last paintings, beyond their intensity and great emotional charge, is the absence of straight lines: almost everything is conveyed via curved contours and lines, all shapes are bended to the point of seeming contorted and this plays a crucial role in expressing the artist's vision and state of mind.

It is as if the straight line (which can be assimilated with normality) is deformed by an unseen pressure. Even though the colors used are hardly associated with menacing thoughts, it doesn't take long for the viewer to feel uneasy. Subtly and at the same time very strongly the artist conveys suffering and tension in a manner that can be equaled by very few other means that don't involve physical contact.

How it is then possible to do such a consequential thing with mostly lines and shapes?

Bending straight lines can lead to the *round, symmetrical* shapes of sunflowers and thus give the banal straight line a beauty of its own, a fulfillment and reward for the deformation resulting in a harmonious shape of the circle – the straight line is bent until its two ends meet and there is a beautiful result after all the tension applied.

But bending a straight line can also lead to curves that do not convey harmony, just tension: and this is the case of the *"psychic down force"* that the chaotic curved lines that shape clouds, wheat fields, etc. seem to exert on the viewer. They seem to represent the thoughts and feelings of an out-of-balance artist tormented by the fecundity of his very own thoughts and feelings. This asymmetrical bending of shape that creates drama and tension is also present with maximum effect in another famous painting: "The Shout" by Edward Munch.

As much as the beauty of the round-shaped sunflowers seems to reside in the symmetrical, purposeful bending of the straight line with a very clear finality, the random and seemingly aimless bending of the straight line produces only tension and deformity; with no finality tension is driven towards an unknown climax, with negative impressions. Suffering is made beautiful and dignifying by its purpose (as in childbirth); in artists' terms suffering is justified only by the ensuing creation.