

DISTURBED STATES

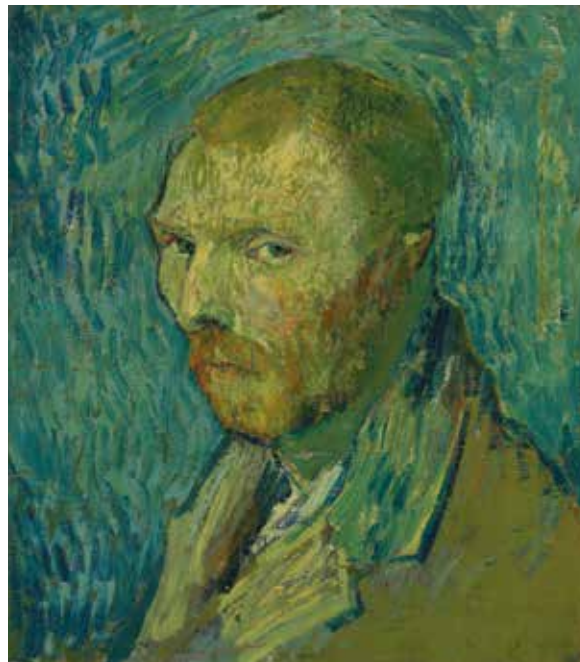
Why do we believe psychological turmoil produces better art?

BY ROB SHARP

One theory of the late 19th century – espoused amidst the discovery of the unconscious – held that the tortured artist is open to a deeper creativity, a richer repertoire of symbols. The psychoanalyst Karl Abraham once treated Italian painter Giovanni Segantini, whose mother died when he was seven. Segantini's 1891 *The Punishment of Lust* – part of his 'Evil Mothers' series (1891–96) – shows four women floating in a barren Alpine landscape. The painting has been widely read in light of the artist's loss – a depiction of the 'bad' mother that functions as an explanatory mechanism for Segantini's abandonment. It provides a snapshot of the painter's psyche, and the psychic patch-up taking place within it.

Abraham's student, the German psychoanalyst Karen Horney, who was among the first analysts to challenge Sigmund Freud's phallicentric theories, reshaped our understanding of neurosis. One of Horney's central ideas, expounded in her *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Towards Self-Realization*, published 70 years ago, was that neurotics construct idealized images of themselves as defence mechanisms against unmanageable internal conflicts. These might include a pathological level of ambition, for example, alongside an uncontrollable need to be liked. You might picture yourself as unrealistically important as a distraction from deeper issues. But such perfectionism only perpetuates a sense of inadequacy.

Horney felt that neurosis killed productive artistic practice. In a 1950 keynote lecture at the New York Academy of Medicine, she made this clear: despite any chutzpah or élan, the neurotic artist lacks self-confidence, 'probably the most crucial prerequisite for creative work'. The artist's work suffers because of their inner turmoil. They might overrate their significance or be overly defensive, causing them exhausting inner strife. They might set their sights too high or believe that their abilities are limited. There is an abject disconnect between their self-perception and reality.



Sound familiar? In the angst-ridden maelstrom of contemporary life, our social-media feeds are frequently filled with neurotic pronouncements from our political leaders down. Yet, with regards to creativity, the leading lights of arts and media often frame neurosis and mental health problems more broadly as a boon. In 1957, T.S. Eliot claimed about his muse, Emily Hale – in correspondence made public this year – that a relationship with her 'would have killed the poet in me', misogynistically linking the 'nightmare agony' of his marriage with Vivienne Haigh-Wood to his authorship of *The Waste Land* (1922). Vincent van Gogh's complicated life resulted in a biographical cottage industry, including the macabre auction last year of a revolver allegedly linked to his death. Marcel Proust's self-loathing and over-analytical mind helped shape the modern novel.

While a work might help us understand the mechanisms at play in an artist's mind, that doesn't necessarily make it good art. 'The creation of a destructive external world is felt by some to give them internal pressure to work creatively,' David Taylor, the organizer

of University College London's annual psychoanalysis conference, told me. Taylor says some artists are wary of psychoanalysis as they think it might take away their inventive spark. 'Some of them fear being content [...] they fear they will lose their creative drive in analysis. I think they will be creative in a different way.'

The late radical feminist and writer, Andrea Dworkin, told the *New York Times* in 1989: '[Horney's work] lacks cultural presence: no one has to know about it'. But this belies Horney's importance and influence. Resentment over her success and retaliation over her criticism of Freud led to Horney's resignation from the New York Psychoanalytic Institute in 1941. Today, snobbishness persists in the reception of her accessible writing, considered too clear to be clever. Neurosis, as Horney understood it, is out of fashion in contemporary clinical psychoanalytic practice. However, this should not detract from the idea that we must know ourselves before we can build on who we are, that neurosis can destroy artistic lives before they have begun, rather than giving them an impetus to continue. 'Art allows the disturbed state to assume some form,' adds Taylor. 'Often, mentally ill people are good artists but there's nothing intrinsically good in being mentally ill.'

By being aware of what our demons distract us from, instead of being enslaved by them, we might find greater self-knowledge and productivity. 'An artist', concluded Horney in her 1950 lecture, 'can create not because of their neurosis but in spite of it.' She added: '[They] can create only to the extent that [their] real self is alive.' ●

Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1889. Authenticated in January, this is the only known work made by the artist while he was suffering from psychosis. Courtesy: Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo; photograph: Anne Hansteen

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