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VAN GOGH'S NIGHT SKY

A WINDOW IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE

In June 1889, a thirty-six-year-old painter looked out through a barred window in the south of France. Vincent van Gogh had checked himself into a hospital for people whose minds were unwell, a place then called an ASYLUM. It sat in a quiet town in PROVENCE, the warm farming country of southern France. His room faced east, over a walled WHEAT field and low HILLS. Before sunrise he watched the stars fade above the hills, and he decided to paint them.

SPELL Spell: WHEAT

WHEAT

SPELL Spell: HILLS

HILLS

KNOWN What is the old name for a hospital where people whose minds were unwell went to live and be cared for?

ASYLUM

KNOWN What is the name of the warm farming country in southern France where van Gogh's hospital sat?

PROVENCE

OPEN Van Gogh's window faced a wheat field and low hills. What would you want to have outside your own window?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

THICK PAINT AND A DARK TREE

He was not allowed to paint in his bedroom, and he could not go out at night. So he built the picture in a downstairs studio, working from memory and from what he had seen at dawn. He pushed the paint on THICK, so every stroke stands up off the canvas. Painters call that impasto. A dark CYPRESS, a narrow evergreen shaped like a FLAME, climbs the left edge. The big glowing star beside it is thought to be the planet VENUS.

SPELL Spell: FLAME

FLAME

SPELL Spell: THICK

THICK

KNOWN What is the name of the narrow, dark evergreen tree, shaped like a flame, that climbs the left edge of the painting?

CYPRESS

KNOWN What is the name of the planet that the big glowing star beside that tree is thought to be?

VENUS

OPEN He painted the night sky from memory, hours after he had seen it. What is one thing you remember noticing earlier today?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

THE VILLAGE HE INVENTED

The view is not really the view. There was no village outside his window. The huddled houses and the tall pointed church tower, a STEEPLE, came out of his head. That steeple leans more toward HOLLAND, the flat country where he grew up, than toward Provence. He was not proud of it. Months later he told a painter friend he had let himself do stars too big again, a setback. He sold almost nothing while he lived, though his brother Theo kept him in money and PAINT.

SPELL Spell: PAINT

PAINT

SPELL Spell: HOLLAND

HOLLAND

KNOWN What is the tall pointed tower on top of a church called?

STEEPLE

OPEN He put a whole village into the picture that was never really there. What would you add to a picture of your own street?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

STANDING IN FRONT OF IT

You can stand in FRONT of it. Since 1941 the painting has hung in a MUSEUM in New YORK, where crowds line up every day for a canvas its maker thought had not worked. You can check the other half yourself. On a clear night, away from streetlights, watch a bright STAR shiver. That shiver is turbulence, the restless churning of air above your head bending the starlight. The sky he painted from a barred window does not hold still for you either.

SPELL Spell: FRONT

FRONT

SPELL Spell: STAR

STAR

KNOWN Since 1941 the painting has hung in what kind of building in New York?

MUSEUM

OPEN He thought this painting had not worked, and crowds now line up to see it. What is something you made that turned out better than you thought?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

MATH Van Gogh painted the night sky in 1889, and the painting reached its New York museum in 1941. How many years passed between the two?

52