THE FIRST MASTERPIECE



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Vincent van Gogh created his first "masterpiece" while living with his parents in Nuenen, The Netherlands, during 1885. The version of "The Potato Eaters" depicted in this image, which Vincent finished in April of 1885, measures 83 x 116 cm. The oil-on-canvas original is maintained at the van Gogh Museum, in Amsterdam.

Vincent preferred practical work to academic study, and he continued to develop his technique in Nuenen. Living with his parents at the vicarage (pastor's home), he convinced his father to turn the laundry (at the rear of the house) into a studio.

Painting the front and drawing the back of the home, Vincent used dark colors which characterized his work during this time frame. He had not yet discovered the vibrant color palette which he later used to create so many masterworks.

Vincent's relationship with his father became strained, especially after his failed attempts to marry Kee Vos. (His parents had strongly criticized his antics at the time.) So ... when his father died, in March of 1885, Vincent was only briefly distracted from creating a series of peasant portraits. This work was the prelude to his first masterpiece: *The Potato Eaters*.

As he sketched and painted the people who lived and worked in Nuenen, Vincent also planned the scene of his famous painting. In one drawing, created during March and April of 1885, he sketched both the inside of a cottage and a group of people eating there. He also produced other drawings, a study for the painting and an early version of it.

Vincent wanted to portray a gloomy environment, but the painting needed enough light for people to comprehend it. He also wanted to do something else: To paint his subjects' faces

> *the color of a good, dusty potato, unpeeled naturally.*

Although van Gogh was pleased with the result, not everyone agreed with his analysis. The negative comments of one artist - Anthon van Rappard - caused Vincent to end their friendship. (For commentary on *The Potato Eaters*, which is owned by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, click here.)

By the end of 1885, Vincent believed he had accomplished as much as he could in his own country. Needing new challenges, and wishing to explore other forms of artistic expression, he spent a short time in Antwerp.

He quickly realized Paris might be a better environment for him. His brother Theo lived there, as did a group of artists we know as the Impressionists.

Vincent's artistic efforts were about to take on entirely new horizons.

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Media Stream



Old Station at Eindhoven - van Gogh

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Parsonage Garden at Nuenen in the Snow

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Back of the House in Nuenen - Vincent's Art Studio

Image online, courtesy University of Seville (a Spanish-language website) and its illustrated biography of Vincent van Gogh.
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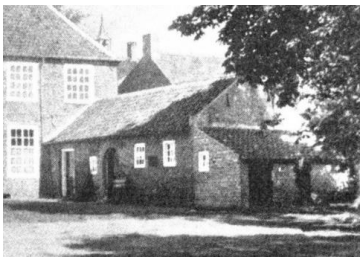

Studio in Nuenen - Vincent van Gogh

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Head of a Peasant Woman with White Cap

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Head of an Old Peasant Woman with White Cap

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The Cottage - van Gogh Painting

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Autumn Landscape with Four Trees

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Sketch for The Potato Eaters

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Four People Sharing a Meal

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The Potato Eaters - An Early Version

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Nuenen Vicarage - Vincent's Drawing

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Study for The Potato Eaters

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The Potato Eaters - Vincent's First Masterpiece

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Vicarage at Nuenen - van Gogh Painting

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