



Marko Polo's Diary

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The light, colors and solitude of Vincent van Gogh Zagreb, April 2006

To travel means to search for beauty and excitement, and there was a lot of both during my journeys, reminiscence of which still enlighten my spirit. However, this spring it was needless to depart since an unforgettable source of art pieces was hosted in Zagreb's museum *Klovićevi dvori*. Amongst those of us streaming to see this treasure of Gemeentemuseum, the strongest aspiration was certainly to see the two most prominent representatives of the Haag school: Modrian and van Gogh. Wandering between the paintings of Modrian, Israelis, Maris, Mauve and others, I noticed the light as their focal component and was immediately caught by its magic. The light entrapped within the paint of the canvases was so vibrant and bright that one could almost become a part of its silver essence. Van Gogh paintings contained at the exhibition were only three: *Bird's nest* from 1885, his *Self-portrait* and the *Vase with flowers*, both from 1886. Looking at them one can easily appreciate the power of art, its eternal influence as well as reminisce about van Gogh's unsuccessful search for appreciation, given the all too familiar incapacity of people throughout history of acknowledgment of real values.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) was a genius whose talent was not recognized and whose paintings were disliked during his life. Created in only one decade, his art was probably the only relief for his misery and pain although obviously not strong enough. He committed suicide losing hope for recognition which came only posthumously. Among many sorrowful destinies of artists there is hardly any so full of pain and deep disappoint-

ment as Vincent van Gogh's. Even his illness was a matter of different analyses and often explained as a vehicle for his talent. Many engaged themselves trying to explain the cause of his behavior, his moods and talent by suggesting epilepsy, alcoholism, neurosyphilis, schizophrenia, lead poisoning etc. as the possible diagnoses. Recent extensive and thorough analysis by W. N. Arnold* has supported the thesis that van Gogh suffered from acute intermittent porphyria responsible for all the symptoms and sequels of his illness. In combination with his specific way of life (from malnutrition to alcoholism, smoking and affinity for terpens) it is explained that the great artist actually suffered from inherited illness expressed by neurological problems and hallucinations, intestinal problems and crises. Arnold finally concludes that Vincent van Gogh was not a mad artist but rather an exceptional man, creative because of intelligence and hard work, and a genius in spite of his illness, not because of it. Although not well accepted by the society, being seen as an odd "red haired mad man", van Gogh did not give up his desire to share and stress the light and color of our reality. He selected to create likeness achieving a realism of his own and certainly one of a deeper sort. I saw his *Twelve Sunflowers in a Vase* at the Neue Pinakothek in Munich several years ago, and experienced the glow of the yellow tones intensively. As the result, every time I see them again in reality I admire their beauty more profoundly. Our capacity to admire the world goes in many directions – art is certainly a precious vehicle in cultivating it and keeping our sight accurate. Within the framework

of medicine/dermatology one could wonder if the knowledge of art or artist intentions give us any guide to our practice? I see it as an important tool for intellectual exploration and exercise of our ability to uncover, detect and develop sensitivity. In the world where sensitivity, respect for each other and empathic clinical care are almost vanishing, art and humanities at large, could perhaps be of some hope.

The world is waiting, sretan vam put!
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*More about van Gogh illness in:

1. Arnold WN. Vincent van Gogh: chemicals, crises, and creativity. Boston, Basel, Berlin: Birkhäuser, 1992: pp. 332.
2. Loftus LS, Arnold WN. Vincent van Gogh's illness: acute intermittent porphyria? *BMJ* 1991;303:1589-91.
3. Arnold WN. Vincent van Gogh and the thujone connection. *JAMA* 1988;260:3042-4.