



TITLE OF ART Project Artist Name

Volunteer:

Date:

Grade Level:

Artist: Vincent Van Gogh

Print/Sculpture: Self Portrait
Starry Night

Art Vocabulary:

I The Artist: Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

VINCENT VAN GOGH heard the name before? What do you know about this artist?

He was a famous painter of the nineteenth century, born in 1853, who died in 1890, at the age of 37. He only painted during the last ten years of his life, but he still left a huge collection of some 800 works.

Many of these works, are hung today in the most prestigious museums of the world. A number have still not been inventoried, that is, they are not on an official list of the artist's works. Two years ago, a small still life by van Gogh was found in a Wisconsin house. The owner of the painting had no idea that she possessed the work of a famous artist. The picture had to be authenticated by experts, that is, proof that it was not a copy of a van Gogh picture had to be given. Then the owner of the painting discovered that she had a little treasure in her living-room: The picture sold for \$1.43 million at a Chicago auction in March of 1991.

Do you have any idea of what you could buy with \$1.43 million. You could buy the most expensive house in Riverside, and probably another smaller one with it! Or you could buy all of these at once: SHOW A POSTER WITH PICTURES OF OBJECTS FAMILIAR TO THE CHILDREN WHOSE TOTAL VALUE WOULD AMOUNT TO APPROXIMATELY \$1.43 MILLION, AS FOR EXAMPLE 50 TO 60 AUTOMOBILES.

In 1990, one of van Gogh's last pictures, a painting of irises, sold for \$82.5 million. Van Gogh's pictures are very hot items on the art market today. There is no way, however, to predict how long this trend is going to last. The pictures of van Gogh may not seem so valuable to another generation of art collectors. In the meantime, they command very high prices.

The irony of in is that van Gogh only managed to sell one picture in his lifetime. People laughed at his work and made fun of the way he applied paint on his canvases, often squeezing paint directly out of the tube onto the picture and spreading it with a knife. (SHOW TUBES OF PAINT.)

Van Gogh was desperately poor. But he never even considered, looking for another job in order to earn a living. It was his younger brother, Theo, who sent him enough money to pay for his rent and buy the little food he needed and tobacco for his pipe. Van Gogh would paint from morning to night, sometimes late into the night; he did not want to take the time to eat or rest. All he cared about was painting his beautiful, sun-filled pictures. He would drink thirty or forty cups of coffee in a period at three days and eat nothing at all.

Do you think that was a smart thing to do?

It certainly was not a reasonable thing to do. In order to stay healthy you need to eat a balanced diet. Van Gogh wore his body out, sapped his energy, and made himself an easy prey to mental obsessions and depression.

II The Painting: Self Portrait (1890) and Starry Night

III Composition of Artwork

IV Artist's Materials or Techniques

Let's look at one of the portraits he painted of himself. Why-do you think an artist might want to paint pictures of himself?

By painting his own face, he might be able to know himself better, to notice things about himself that he had never seen before. Making a self-portrait can therefore be an exercise in self-knowledge. Making a self-portrait might also be a way for the artist to insure that he will be remembered by others as he chooses to be remembered, for a portrait is always an interpretation. It does not show the whole person but only a facet of that person.

Van Gogh painted some forty self-portraits. They show how he was growing, maturing and aging as a human being. They also show how he was developing new techniques as a painter, how he was creating his own unique style. Van Gogh painted his face forty times in part to measure his own progress as an artist. Furthermore, he could not afford to pay for a model and did not have enough friends willing to pose for free. To paint himself was a cheap way to paint a human face: All he needed was a mirror.

What do we learn about van Gogh by looking at his self-portrait? What kind of person was he? The first adjectives that come to mind are intense, high-strung, troubled, anguished, tormented. This is the face of a man who is searching for happiness and fulfillment and not finding them. This is the face of a man who has more questions to ask than answers to give.

Is this the portrait of a person who is easy to live with? No, van Gogh was a very emotional man. He could reach moments of incredible joy and excitement, especially when he was with a friend he loved or had completed a difficult picture. But he could also be terribly depressed. He would swing from one mood to the other very swiftly, and he took everything in life very personally and seriously. As a result, it was difficult for him to keep friends. He ended up living a very lonely existence.

How is this portrait different from a photograph?

The colors are not realistic. They are charged with emotional connotations.

What is the predominant color in the picture?

Blue, of course. It makes up the whole background, but is also the color of the artist's jacket, and it permeates the face as well. The painter's eyes are blue, and it is as if the intense blueness of his gaze were coloring everything on him and around him. The blueness of the picture is an extension of the blue eyes.

Look at the eyes carefully. Do you believe they would appear like this on a photograph?

No. There is no white to the eyes at all. They are completely blue except for the black pupil. That makes the eyes look larger and therefore more anguished.

Why are eyes so important in a portrait?

Eyes are an opening into the soul of the person. Van Gogh's eyes grab you, they won't let go of you, they will haunt you after you walk away from the painting.

What are the other colors in the picture?

Orange and white. Orange stands as a contrast to the blue; indeed in the wheel of colors, orange is the complementary color of blue. Here, van Gogh uses a beautiful bright orange.

Blue is a cool color. It suggests sadness, but also gentleness. What kind of color is orange? What does it make you think about?

It is a warm color. It suggests fire and passion.

Is that orange color picked up, and intensified anywhere else in the picture besides the beard and the hair?

Look at the lips of the artist: they are blue-grey, with a thin line of red running between them and over the fullness of the lower lip. That very small line of red on the lower lip is like a drop of blood. It intensifies the suffering in the face.

Note also the small line of red in the ear lobe: another touch of blood. It reminds us that van Gogh cut a part of his ear off in a fit of depression.

Colors, therefore, make the painting different from a photograph. What else makes the painting different from a photograph?

The swirls in the brushwork are not realistic. They too convey emotions of tension and anguish.

The background is a mass of swirls, an extension of the artist's restlessness. The old wrinkled jacket he is wearing shows the same, somewhat softened curves and swirls. The face, on the other hand, is painted with numerous, small, nervous brushstrokes. Here is a contrast in the brushstrokes which cannot be created in a photograph.

In a photograph, there would be shadows. In van Gogh's painting, there are no shadows, but only dark black outlines around the nose, eyes or ears which make those features stand out more.

If I tell you that Vincent van Gogh was a Dutch artist, can you tell me what country he came from?

He came from Holland, in the North part of Western Europe. Holland, which is also called the Netherlands, is a flat country with many waterways and a great deal of exposure to the sea. In fact, many sections of its territory

are actually below sea level, and the Dutch have spent centuries defending their land against the sea.

What is Holland or the Netherlands well-known for?

It is well known for its dikes along the sea, its windmills, and its fields of tulips. One thing it lacks is sun. It is a cold, rainy land.

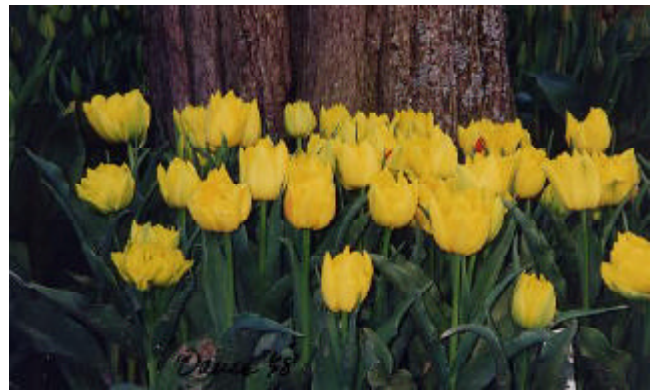
Van Gogh did not even know how depressing that cold, humid climate was to him until he moved South: To Paris first, where he was introduced to the bright colorful works of the Impressionist painters, and then further South to Arles, the city of light. The sun and the heat in the South of France were a revelation to van Gogh.

Springtime was one of the first pictures van Gogh painted upon arriving in the South of France. It is filled with light and the flowering abundance of a warm spring.



Arles France

Notice the brushstrokes the artist used: Short, straight brushstrokes closely juxtaposed together, that is, placed side by side tightly. In Paris, van Gogh had discovered that the Impressionists used little dabs of colors juxtaposed together to create their pictures. Their pictures were made up of little patches of colors. It was only when you stepped back that you could see a landscape or a person emerging out of those patches of colors. In Paris,



van

Gogh also discovered the paintings of Seurat, who used thousands, millions of colorful dots to create an image. His own brushstrokes are an adaptation of the Impressionist dabs of colors and the dots of Seurat. They create a very personal rhythm in the pictures.

Remember also that van Gogh applied a lot of paint on his canvases. His nervous little brushstrokes made ridges in the thick paint he squeezed directly out of the tubes. His pictures show a great deal of texturing. You could experience them by closing your eyes and running your fingers gently over the ridges ... if you

were allowed to touch the surface of



Olive Trees with Yellow Sky and Sun

his original paintings, of course. It would not be a good idea to try next time you go to the Art Institute, however!

After van Gogh came in contact with the sun-filled light in the South of France, yellow became his favorite color. This is apparent in the picture of the sunflowers, in which everything is tinged with yellow.

Look at **Starry Night**. What does this picture represent?

The background shows the night sky, with the moon and stars caught in an incredibly fast swirling motion. The foreground shows a little village nestled against the hills on the right.

Have you ever seen a night sky like this one? Why would van Gogh paint the sky like this?

In the South of France, the nights are very clear, the stars appear so close that you might reach them. If you stand out in the open, you can easily feel wrapped up in the night, physically enveloped by space. Still, it takes a huge leap of the imagination to see the stars swirling and burning themselves out like the big

balls of fire they are. Van Gogh's picture is a poet's rendering of what science has taught us about the cosmos: The cosmos has no beginning and no end, and it is in continual motion and change. If our



Fourteen Sunflowers in a Vase

perceptions of time and space were not so limited, maybe we could see the stars in motion as van Gogh does here.

The painting, therefore, is about man's relationship to the cosmos, about man's place in the universe. It is also about man's relationship to God. In one of his letters to his brother Theo, van Gogh confesses that when he feels "a terrible need of religion, then I go out at night to paint the stars" (The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh, Boston, 1958, Letter 533, September 8, 1888, Volume III, p. 28).

How important is man in this picture?

Man is represented by the little village in the foreground, quiet little village in which there are only a few lights left.

Would it be comfortable to be in 'that little village'?

Most of the villagers are already asleep. They are comfortably sheltered in their small houses. They are safe. They are also terribly tiny in comparison with the universe that surrounds them.

What do you make of that large, triangular shape on the left of the painting?

It is a rather threatening rendering of a tree: it looks more like a flame than a cypress. Its dark mass is outlined with red contours. It is all twisted and filled with swirls and it is disproportionately large in the painting. It provides a stark contrast to the village which seems very orderly and peaceful with its geometrical shapes close to the ground.



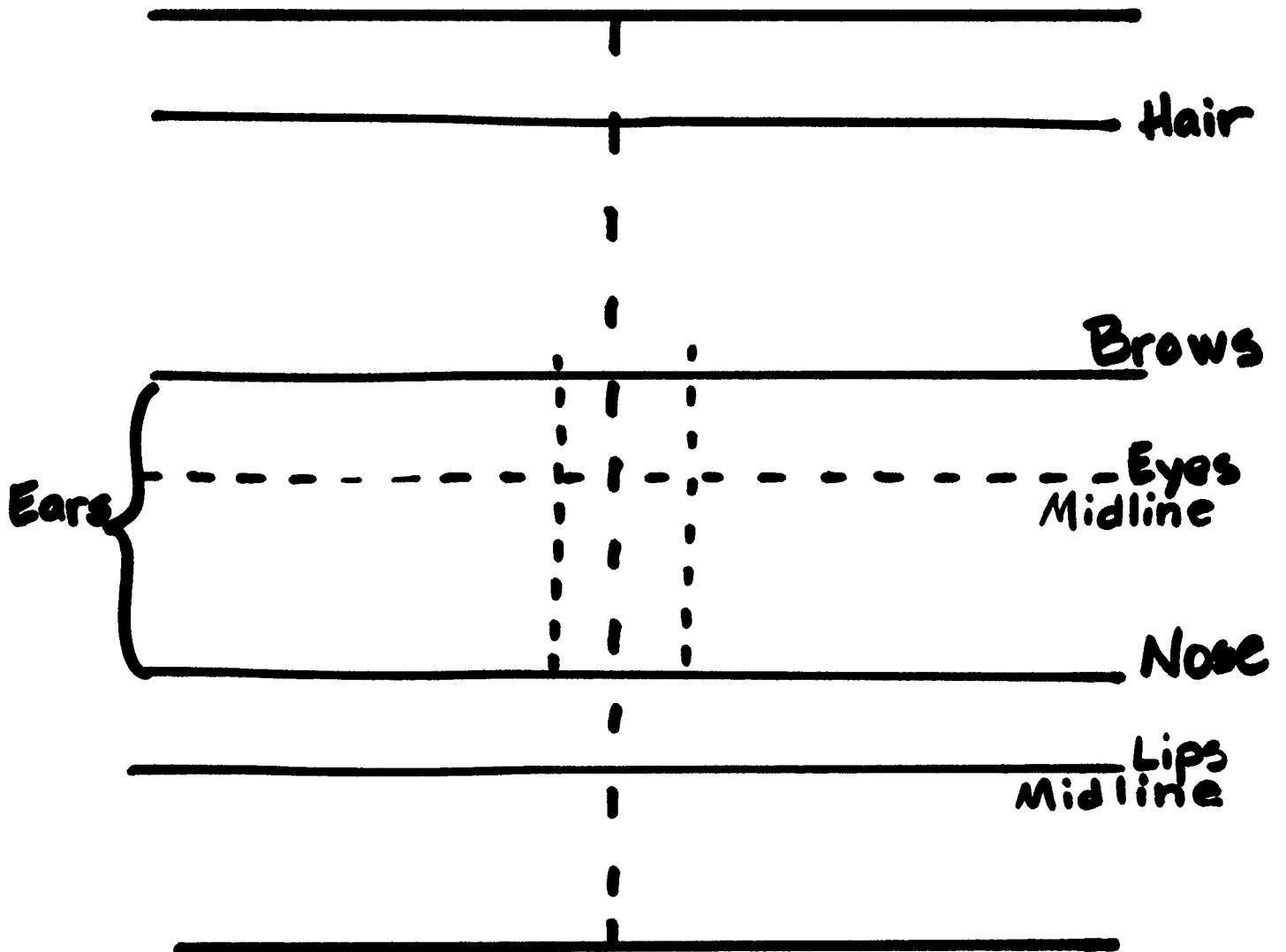
Gaea (also spelled Gaia and Ge)

There is a lot of movement in this picture: Movement sideways, from left to right, and movement upwards with the cypress and the church steeple reaching for the sky. The hills, on the other hand, are in complete repose. The outline of the hills, especially on the right of the picture, looks like the profile of a sleeping giant. Can you see a forehead, a nose, a chin on the far right of the picture? This reminds us that van Gogh was familiar with Greek myths which describe Mother Earth as a giantess.

V Students' Self-Expression: Guided Activity

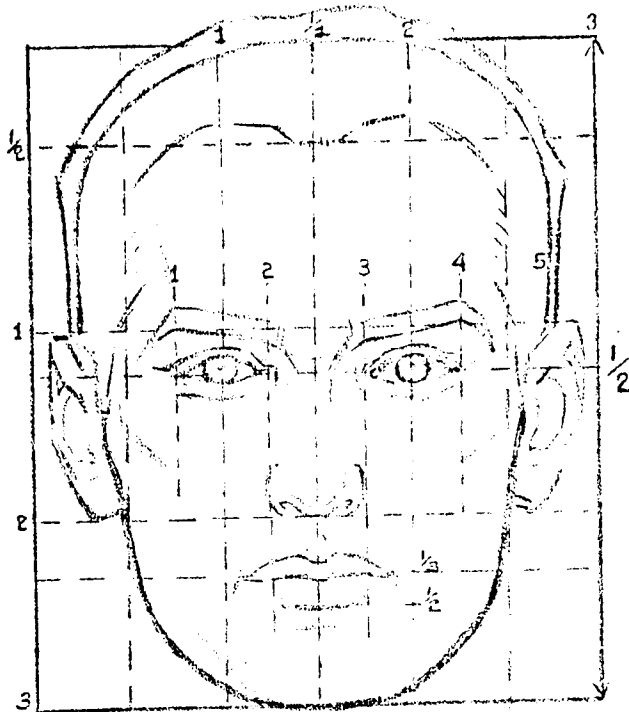
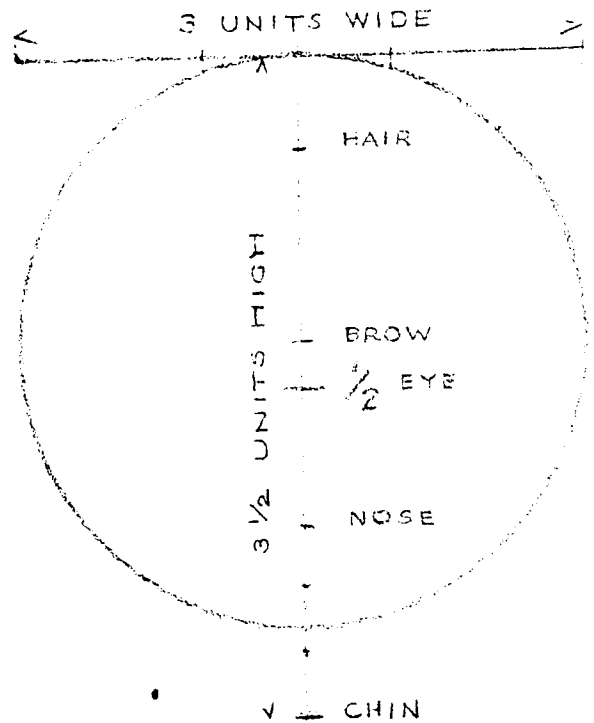
Ask the children to draw a self-portrait. Give them a sheet of white construction paper and a little mirror to look at their faces. (There is a box of mirrors in the supply side of the Cultural Arts storage room.) Give them also a copy of the portrait example, with the median line and proportions. Spend a few minutes explaining those proportions to the children. To make their task simpler a sheet of paper with the proportion lines already printed on it can be handed out instead of a blank piece of construction paper. Remind the children that people generally do not have a perfectly oval or round face. And the right side and the left side of the face are almost never perfectly symmetrical. Let them study the shape of their faces carefully in the mirror before they start drawing.

Proportions of the Human Head



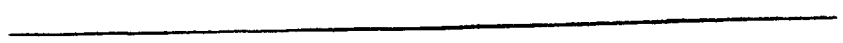
Drawing Proportions of the Human Head

The circle represents the ball, and the width of the head, including the ears. The face is about two units wide and that the eyes fall between the middle halves or at the quarter points of the two units.

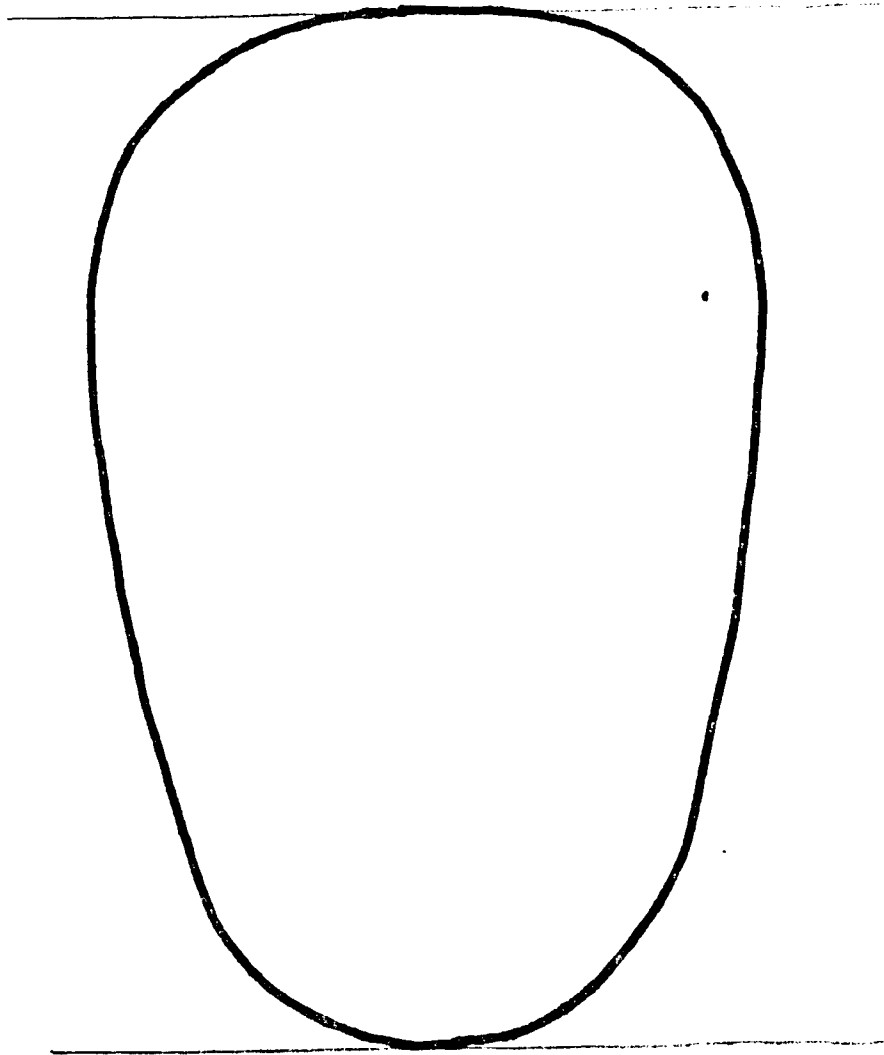


Heads naturally vary in measurement. The front view of the head fits into a rectangle that is three units of measurement wide, and three and a half ^{units} high. This scale leaves a little space beyond the ears on each side. The half measurements of these units locate the eyes and nose and help in placing the mouth and also put the line of the eyes at the halfway division of the whole head from top to bottom.

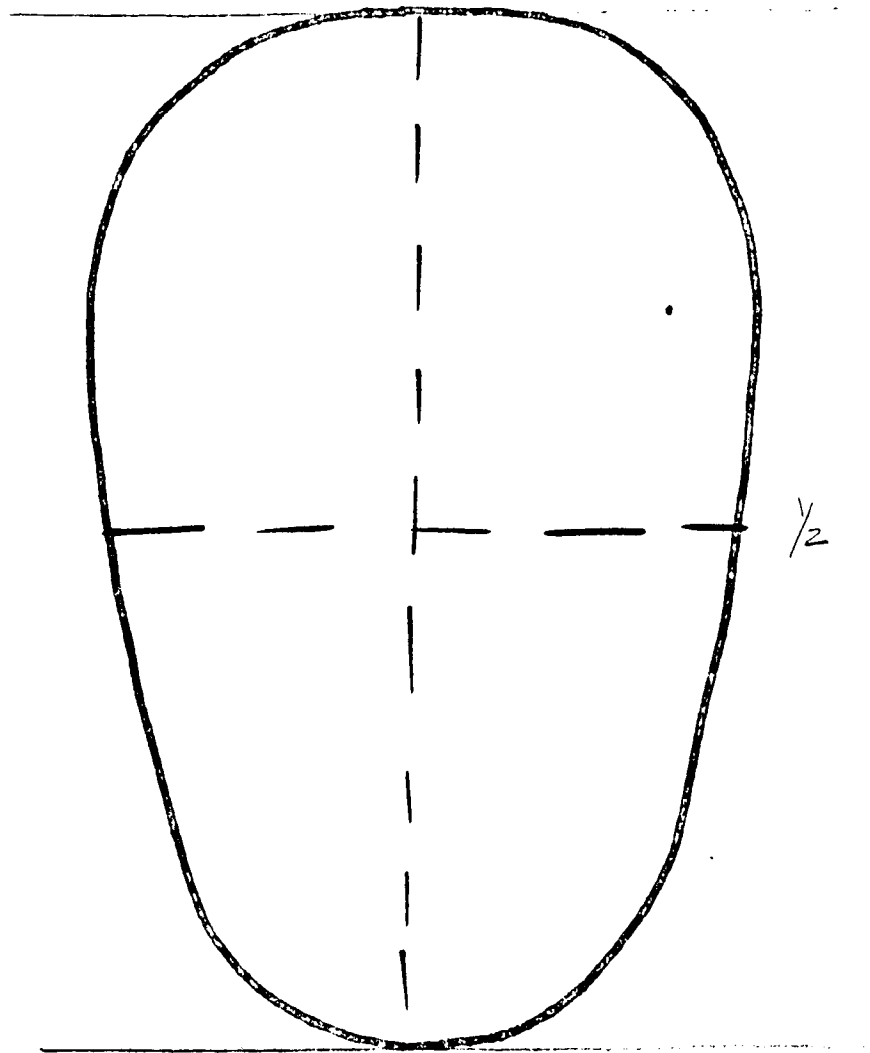
1. Have students mark top and bottom of head. Stress that they should use a light touch with the pencil since these marks serve only as a guide.



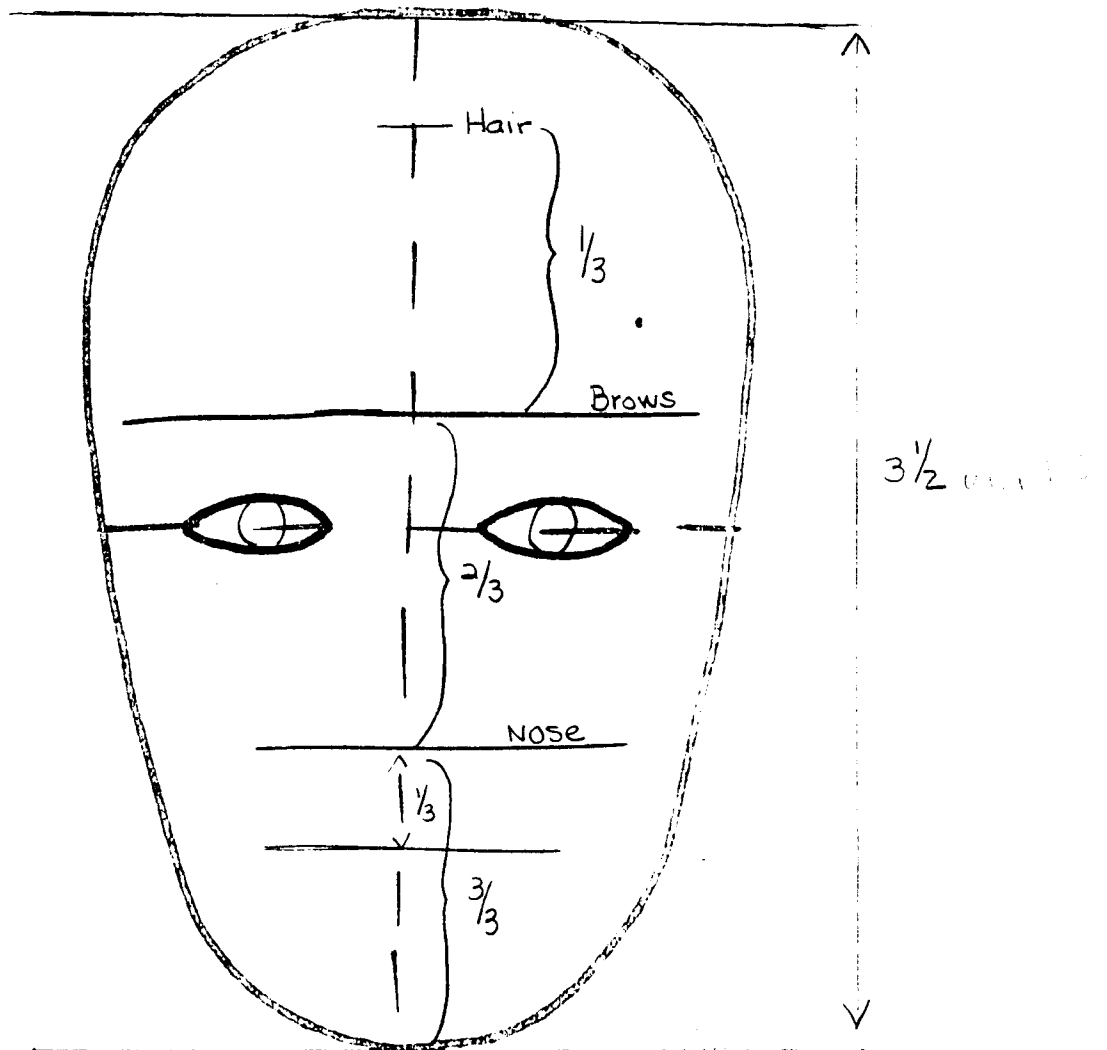
2. Have students draw the outline of the face itself.
Discuss the term assymmetric.



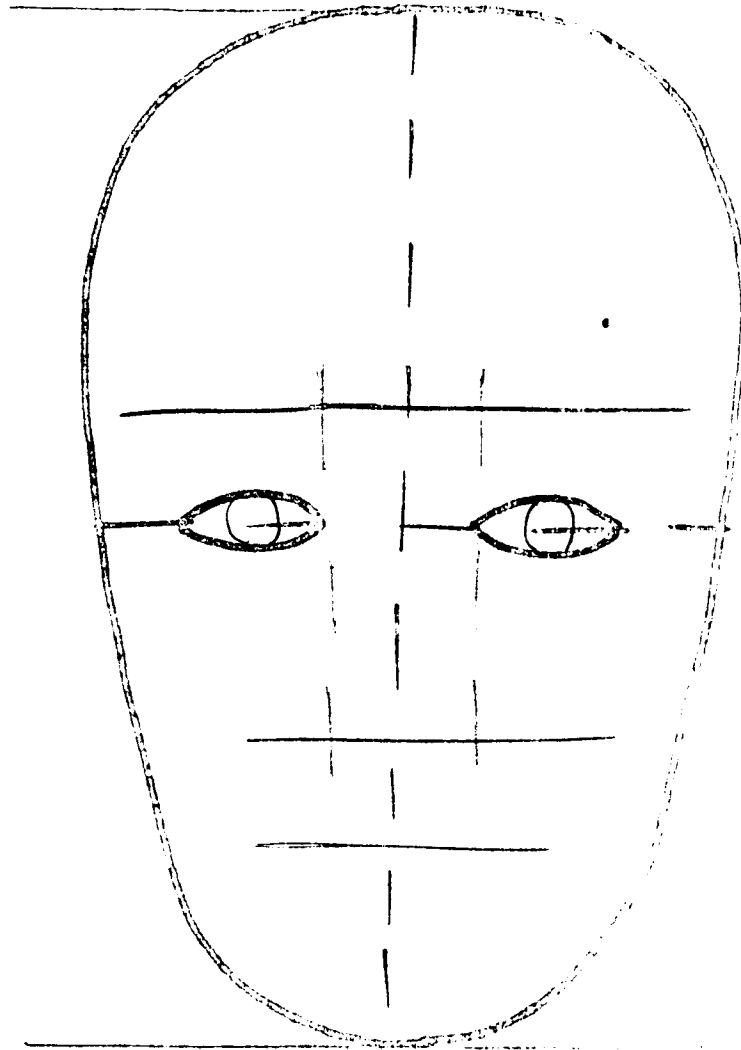
3. Bi-sect the face laterally and longitudinally. Do so lightly.



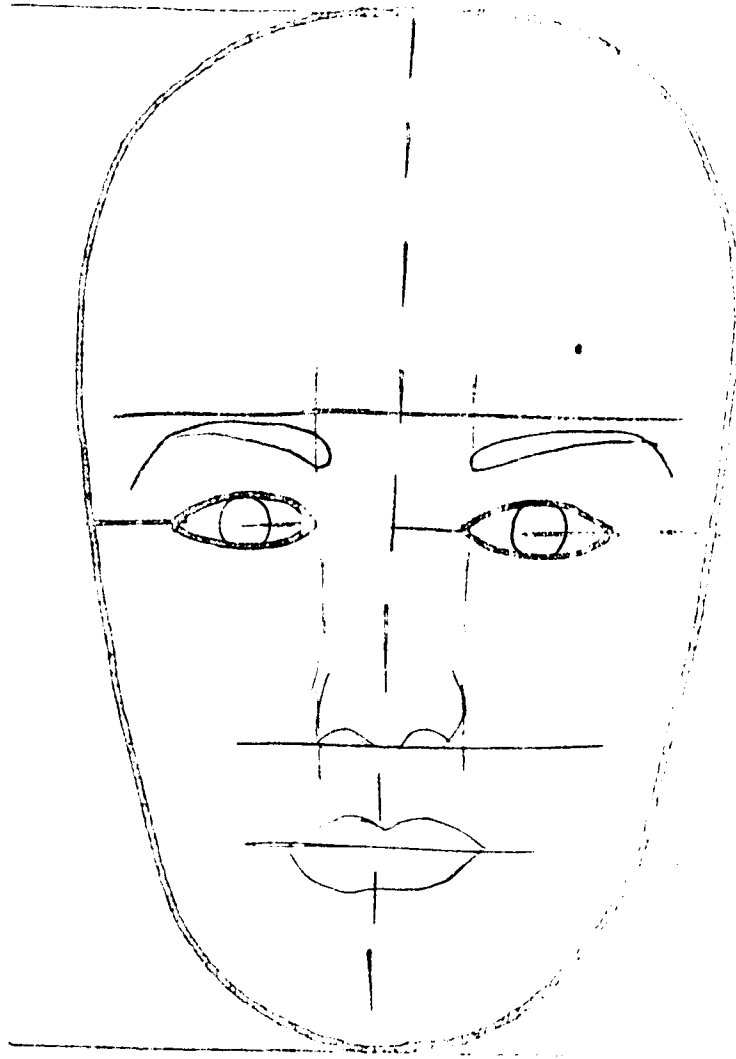
4. Place eye and the center line. Mark brow, nose, and mouth lines.



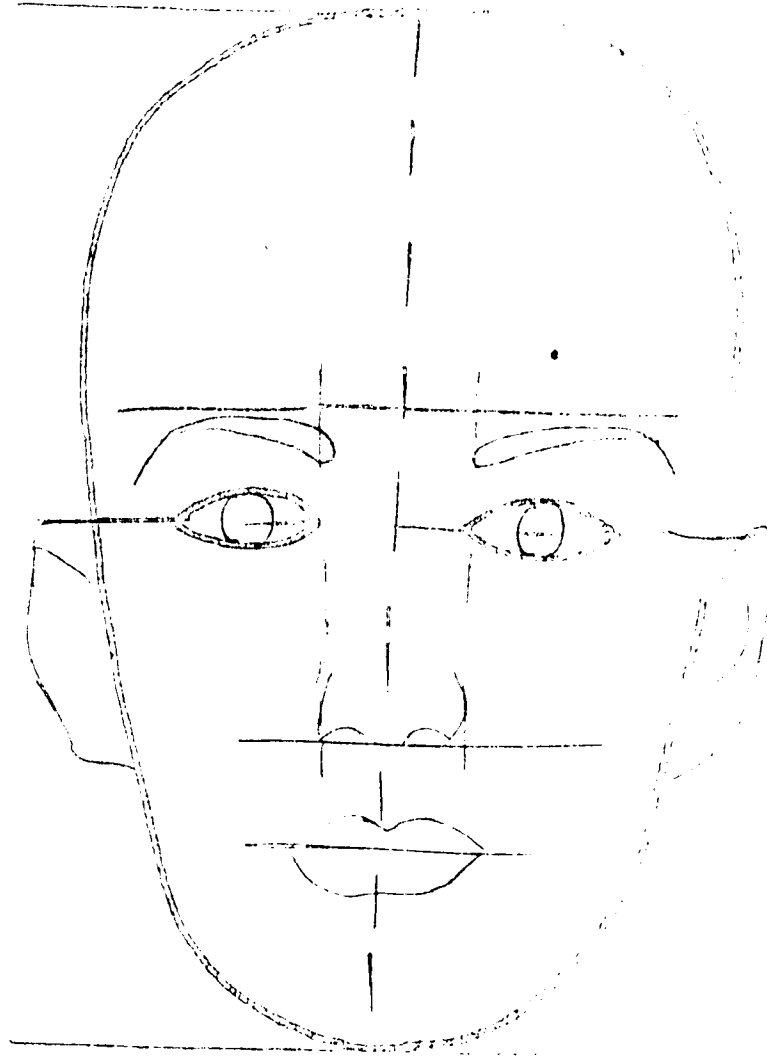
5. Draw parallel lines from the brow line to the nose line.



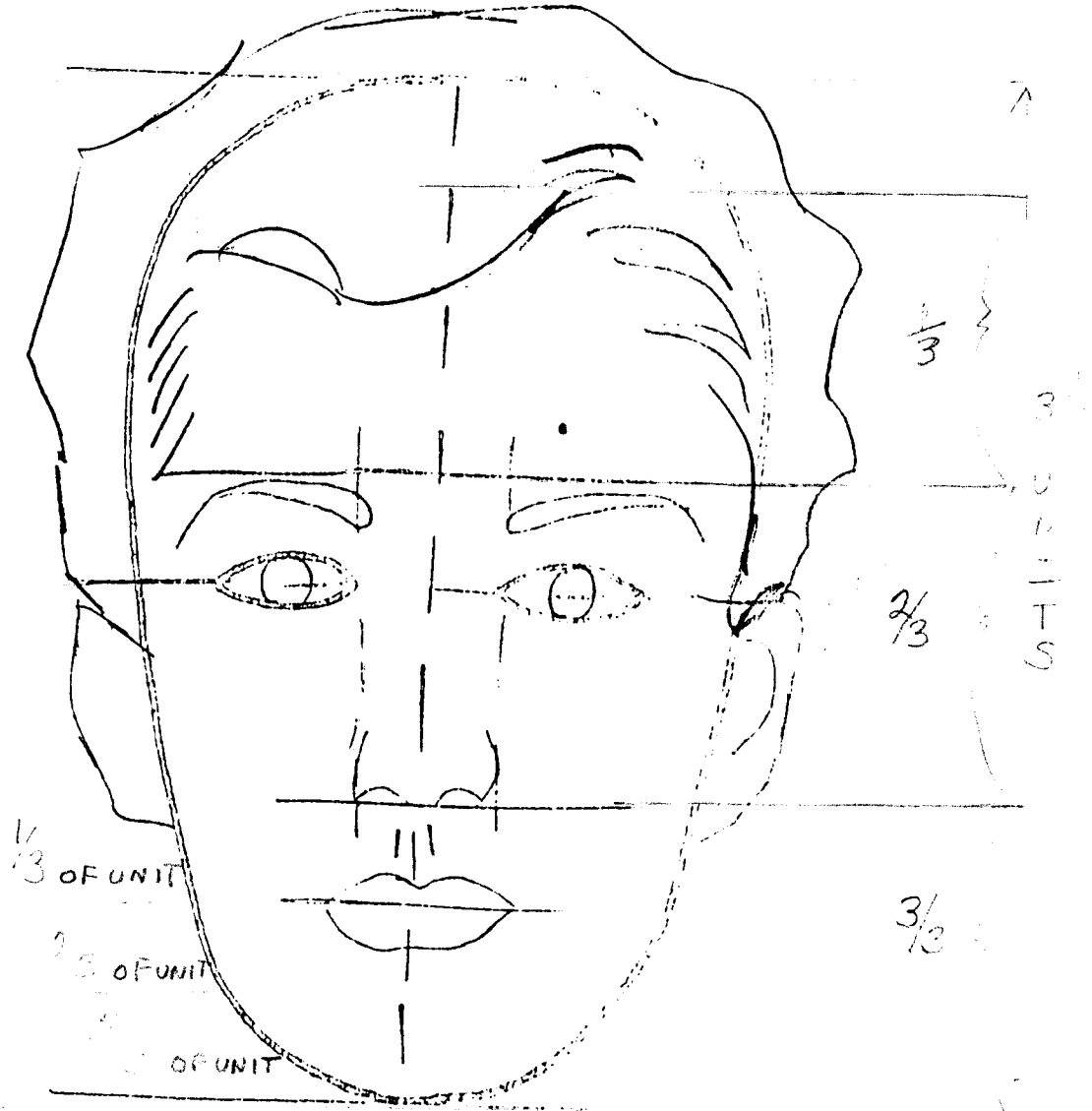
6. Have students draw in mouth, nose phlanges, and brow.



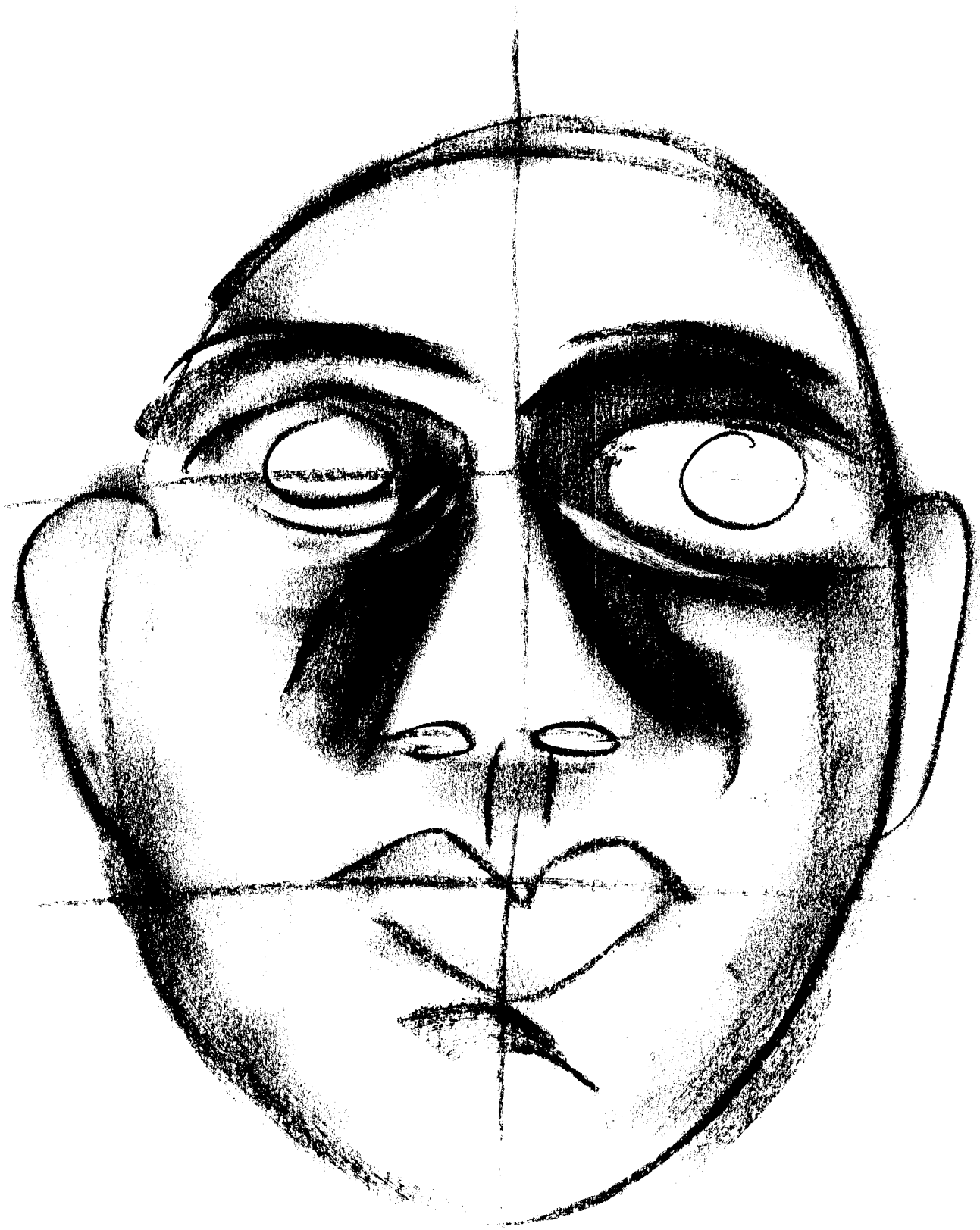
7. Have students draw ears. Top of ears should not be higher than eyes.



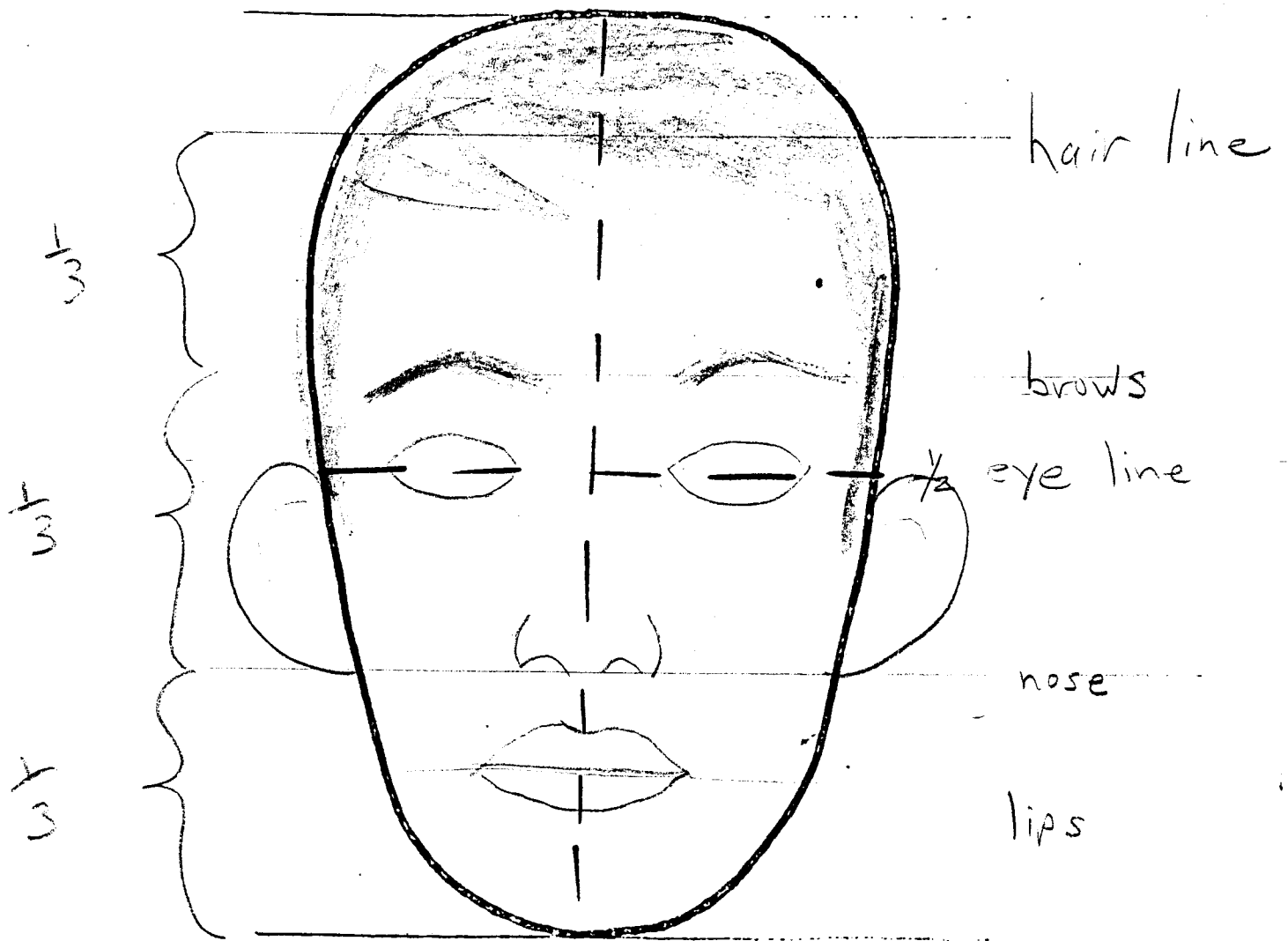
8. Add hair.



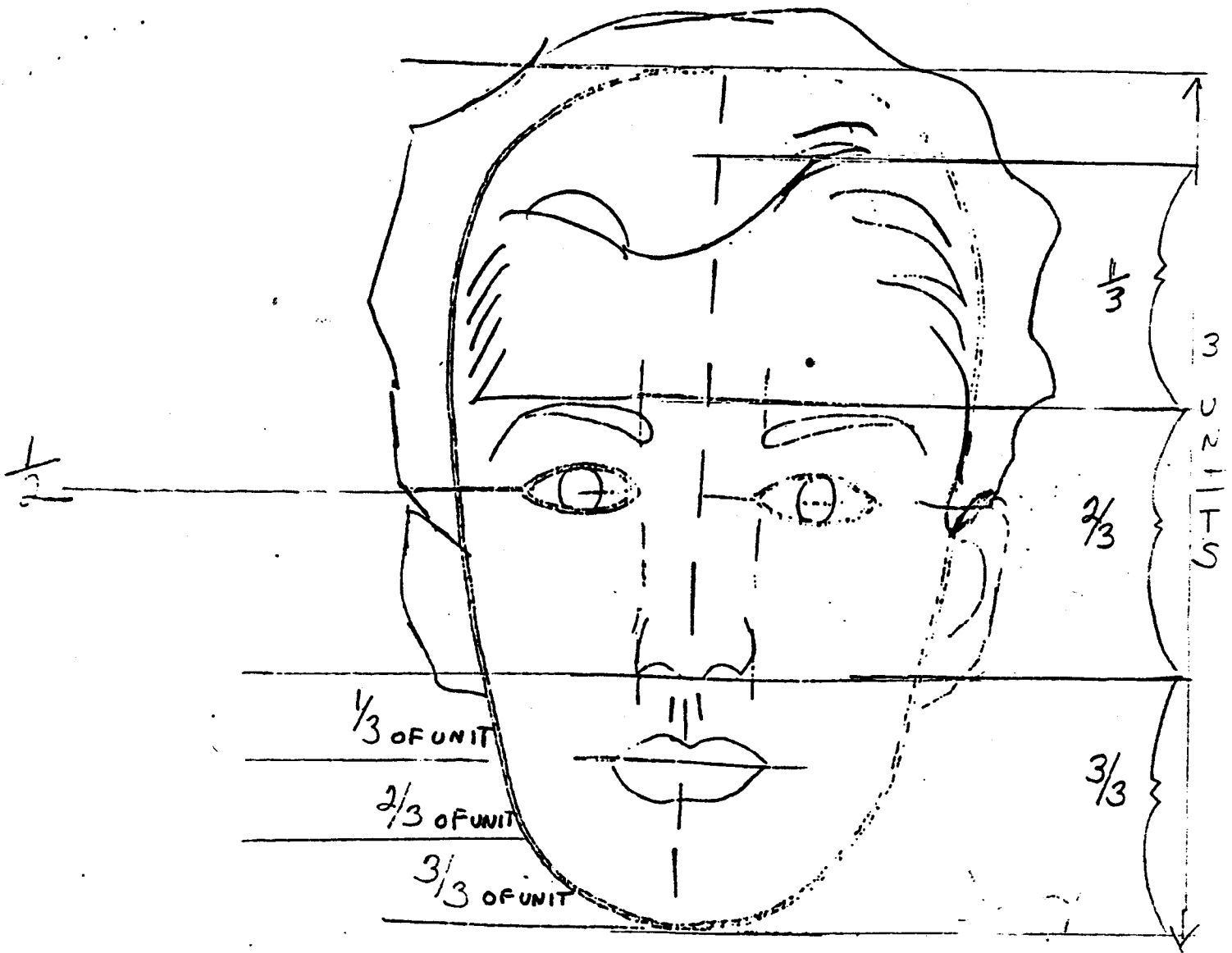
13 1/2 CM



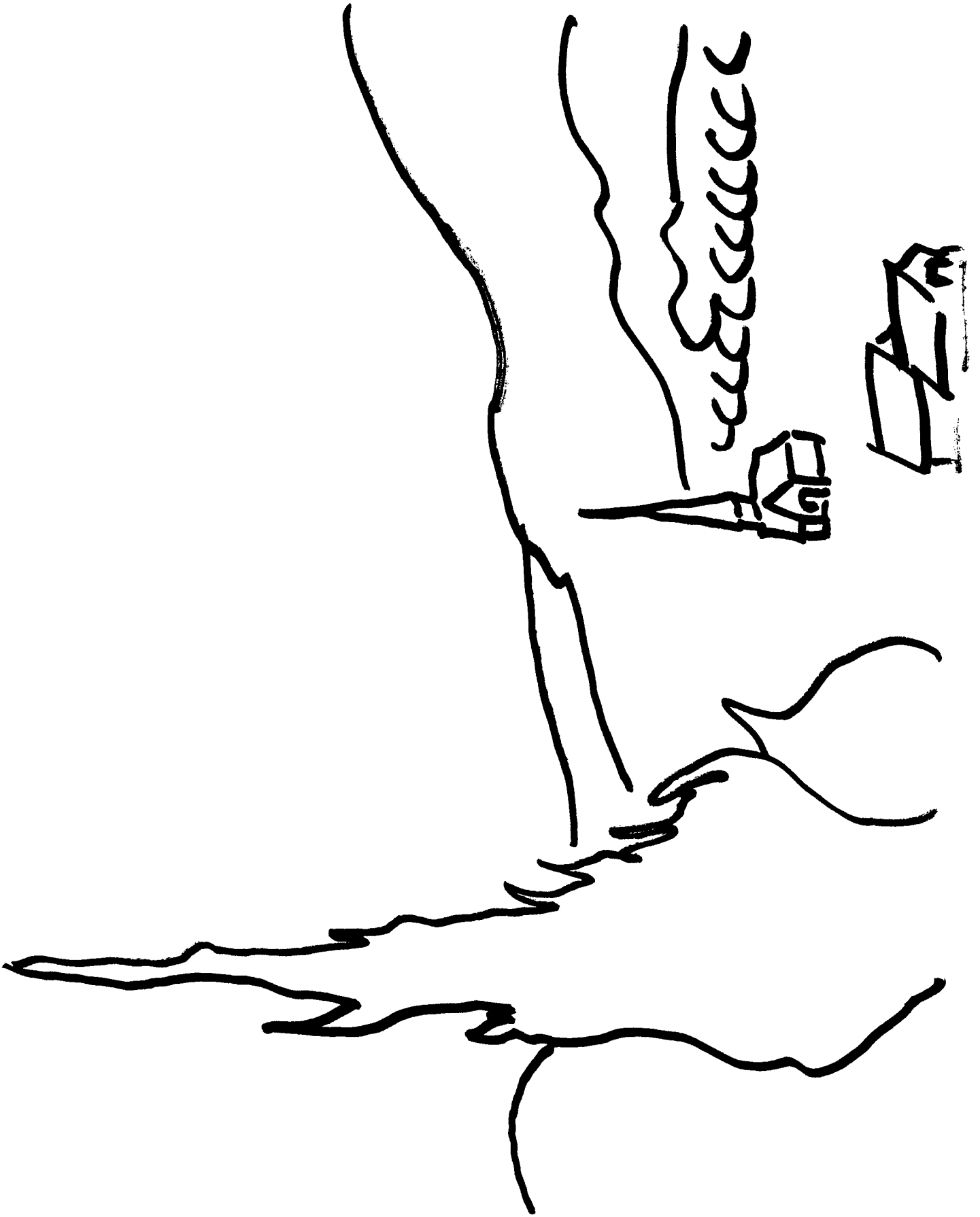
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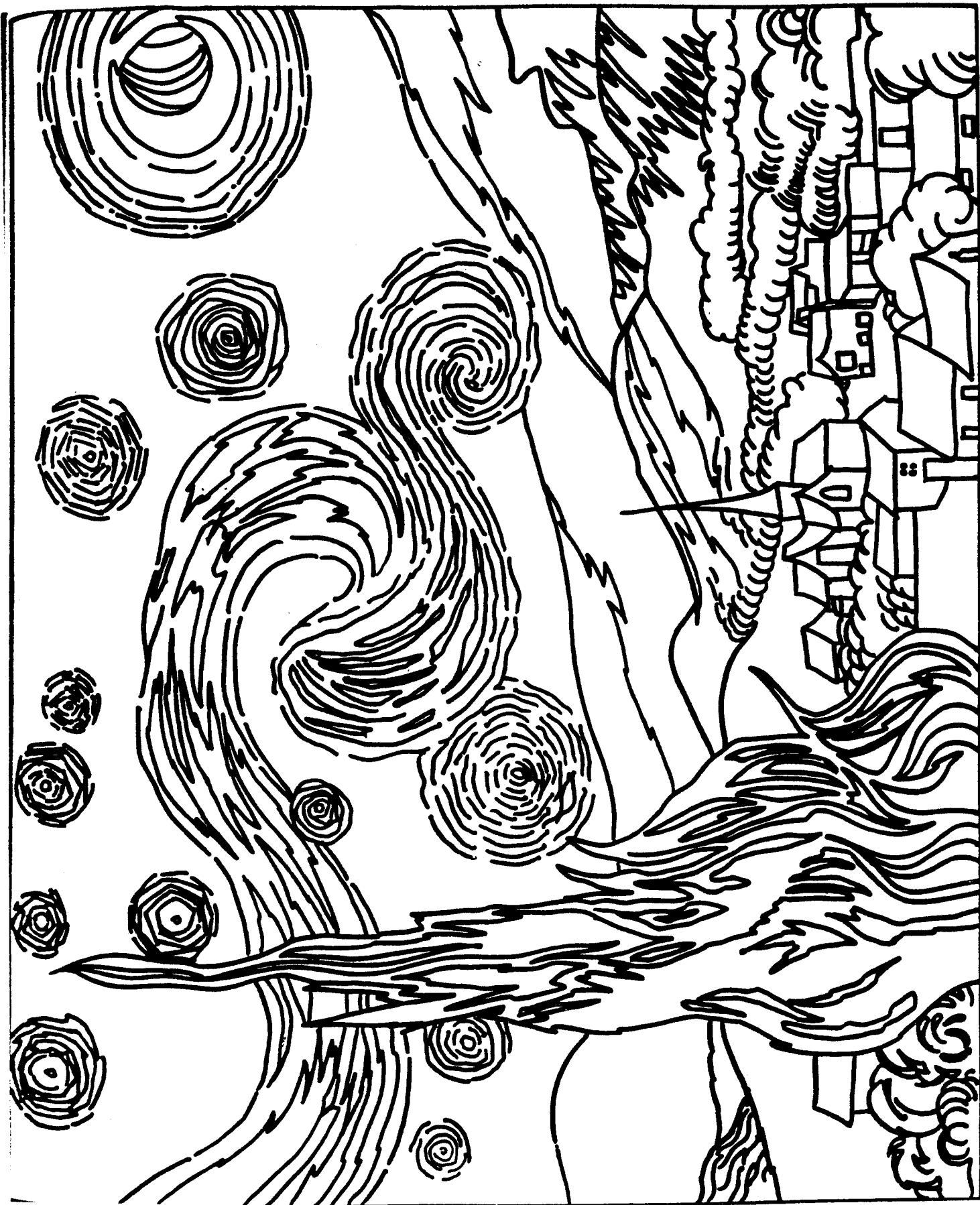


8. Add hair.



13 1/2 cm





STARRY 1886



ROAD WITH CYPRESS
1890



8881

FISHING BOAT (SAILING) IN THE BAY OF HOLLAND

Maries

Holla



Van Gogh's Chair

VAN GOGH'S CHAIR. 1892