

Van Gogh and Gauguin; Arles and the Aftermath

"The heart of man is very much like the sea, it has its storms, it has its tides and in its depths it has its pearls too"

Arrival and First Works February 20th to October 23rd 1888



In 1888 Van Gogh became inspired in southern France and began the most productive period of his painting career, completing 200 paintings and more than 100 drawings and watercolours.

He left Paris ill from drink and suffering from a smoker's cough, in February 1888 with thoughts of founding an art colony in Arles. To begin with he lived at the Hôtel Carrel. In a letter, he described it as a foreign country: "The Zouaves, the brothels, the adorable little Arlésienne going to her First Communion, the priest in his surplice, who looks like a dangerous rhinoceros, the people drinking absinth, all seem to me creatures from another world."

While living in Paris he had met Camille Pissarro, Cézanne and other Impressionists, and influenced by them, lightened his pallet and started painting in broken dashes and dots of pure colour. The dark browns and greys that he had brought with him from his Dutch heritage were gone for good.

When Van Gogh arrived in Arles in February 1888 the ground was covered with snow due to record cold temperatures. In a letter to his brother Theo he describes having completed three paintings in as many days,

Snowy Landscape with Arles in the Background (Feb 1888), one of the first he completed in Arles, is painted in the personal style of Impressionism that he had developed in Paris.

The fragment of ground and fencing in the foreground is rendered in bright colour is separated from the thin line of the town in the background by an expanse of white snow, much in the manner of the Japanese prints which he loved.



In a letter to Theo he said "I am up to my ears in work for the trees are in blossom and I want to paint a Provençal orchard of astonishing gaiety."



Within two weeks the weather changed and the fruit trees were in blossom. Appreciating the symbolism of rebirth, Van Gogh worked with optimism and zeal on about fourteen paintings of flowering trees in the early spring.

His ambition was to create the simple patterns that he appreciated in Japanese woodblock prints saying that he found in Arles "the Japan of the South": the colours were more vivid and intense; describing the colours in ***Orchard with Blossoming Apricot Trees*** (March 1888), such as "the red and green of the plants, the woven highlights of oranges and blue in the fence, even the pink clouds that enliven the turquoise sky"

The Impressionist technique that he had developed in Paris: short dots or brush strokes of colours to represent grass, placing colours side by side, and impasto brushstrokes to represent the colourful blossoms, is evident in his painting of orchards, but the outlining of the bark of the tree and the angularity of the branches indicates the influence of Japanese prints.

Provence was quite different from what he'd known in the Netherlands and Paris. People had dark hair and skin and spoke a language that sounded more Spanish than French. The colors were vivid. The terrain varied from plains to mountains. Here Van Gogh found a "brilliance and light that would wash out details and simplify forms," and where the "effect of the sun would strengthen the outlines of composition and reduce nuances of color to a few vivid contrasts."

Souvenir de Mauve (c.30 March 1888) is dedicated to his cousin, the painter Anton Mauve, with whom he had studied in Antwerp. Van Gogh wrote, "At the moment I am working on some plum trees, yellowish-white, with thousands of black branches." Two days later he wrote of the same painting, "This morning I worked on an orchard of plum trees in bloom; all at once a fierce wind sprang up, an effect I had seen nowhere else but here, and returned at intervals. The sun shone in between, and all the little white flowers sparkled. It was so lovely. My friend the Dane [the artist Christian Mourier-Peterson, his companion for two months] came to join me, and I went on painting at the risk and peril of seeing the whole show on the ground at any moment."



Van Gogh wrote of *Pink Peach Tree in Blossom (Souvenir de Mauve)* that he completed in March, "I have been working on a size 20 canvas in the open air in an orchard, lilac ploughland, a reed fence, two pink peach trees against a sky of glorious blue and white. Probably the best landscape I have done. I had just brought it home when I received from our sister a Dutch notice in memory of Anton Mauve... Something - I don't know what - took hold of me and brought a lump to my throat, and I wrote on my picture, 'Souvenir de Mauve'." He asked that the picture be sent to Mauve's widow Jet. To his sister Wil, Van Gogh explained that he chose the particular painting because of the "delicate palette" to express his deep fondness. "It seemed to me that everything in memory of Mauve must be at once tender and very gay, and not a study in a graver key."

The Langlois Bridge is the subject of four oil paintings, one watercolour and four drawings. To create precise lines and angles he used a perspective frame.

Being one of eleven drawbridges built by a Dutch engineer along the channel from Arles to Port-deBouc it might have reminded Vincent of his homeland.



The Langlois Bridge at Arles with Women Washing (March 1888) depicts common canal-side activities. A little yellow cart crosses the bridge while a group of women in smocks and multicoloured caps wash linen on the shore. Van Gogh skilfully uses his knowledge of colour theory and the "law of simultaneous contrasts" in this work. The grass is depicted with alternating brush strokes of red-orange and green. Yellow and blue complementary colours are used in the bridge, sky and river. Use of complementary colours intensifies the impact of each colour creating a "vibrant and colouristically unified whole."

Naomi Mauer, author of *The Pursuit of Spiritual Wisdom: The Thought and Art of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin* describes Van Gogh's technical and artistic execution of this painting.

"Compositionally, the vertical and horizontal geometry of the bridge and its reflection in the water create a great central cross which imparts a classical symmetry and equilibrium to the canvas. This central geometric framework, which is echoed and enclosed by the bands of sky above and the bank below, is relieved and enlivened by the great undulating sweep of the hill and shore, the round knot of washerwomen amid the circular ripples of the water, and the flexible, slightly curved grasses at the right. Both formally and chromatically, the *Bridge of Langlois* demonstrates Vincent's abstraction of nature to its essential colouristic and formal elements, and his creation from these components of a harmoniously interwoven unity in which humanity and its works are perfectly integrated."

To his friend Émile Bernard, Van Gogh wrote of his enthusiasm of painting orchards, "At the moment I am absorbed in the blooming fruit trees, pink peach trees, yellow-white pear trees. My brush stroke has no

system at all. I hit the canvas with irregular touches of the brush, which I leave as they are. Patches of thickly laid-on colour, spots of canvas left uncovered, here or there portions that are left absolutely unfinished, repetitions, savageries; in short, I am inclined to think that the result is so disquieting and irritating as to be a godsend to those people who have preconceived ideas about technique."

In the same letter he made a sketch of ***Orchard in Blossom, Bordered by Cypresses*** (April 1888) "the entrance to a Provençal orchard with its yellow fences, its enclosure of black cypresses (against the mistral), its characteristic vegetables of varying greens: yellow lettuces, onions, garlic, emerald leeks."

On 7 May, Van Gogh moved from the Hôtel Carrel to the Café de la Gare, having befriended the proprietors, Joseph and Marie Ginoux.

Drawn to Biblical parables, Van Gogh found wheat fields metaphors for humanity's cycles of life, as both celebration of growth and realization of the susceptibility of nature's powerful forces. In the series of paintings about wheat fields, Van Gogh expresses



through symbolism and use of colour his deeply felt spiritual beliefs, appreciation of manual labourers and connection to nature.

Wheatfield also titled ***Wheat Field with Alpilles Foothills in the Background*** (1 June 1888) is a view of the vast, spreading plain against a low horizon. The Alpilles range is just visible in the distance.

On 21 June he wrote to Theo "I have now spent a week working hard in the wheat fields, under the blazing sun." He described the series of wheat fields as "...landscapes, yellow—old gold—done quickly, quickly, quickly, and in a hurry just like the harvester who is silent under the blazing sun, intent only on the reaping."

Harvest at La Crau, with Montmajour in the Background (June 1888) is composed of horizontal planes. The harvested wheat lies in the foreground. In the centre the activities for harvest are represented by the haystack, ladders, carts and a man with a pitchfork. The background is purple-blue mountains against a turquoise sky. He was interested in depicting "the essence of country life." In June Van Gogh wrote of the landscape at La Crau that it was "beautiful and endless as the sea," reminding him of paintings by 17th century Dutch masters, such as Ruysdael.

Vincent did two drawings in preparation for this painting. Writing to Theo he said he painted "quickly one after another but calculated long beforehand. And look, when people say they are done too quickly you'll be able to reply that they looked at them too quickly."



In June he took a trip to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer on the Mediterranean Sea, a 30-mile stagecoach trip from Arles, where he made several paintings of the seascape and town. In just a few days, he made two paintings of the sea, one of the village and nine drawings.

In ***Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries*** (June 1888) the horizon line divides the painting into two. The curved, colourful shapes of the boats, painted in red/green complementaries, are mirrored by the curve of cross bars, and direct the eye into the picture and to the sailing boats in the distance. The verticals of the masts, cut across the horizon linking the two halves.

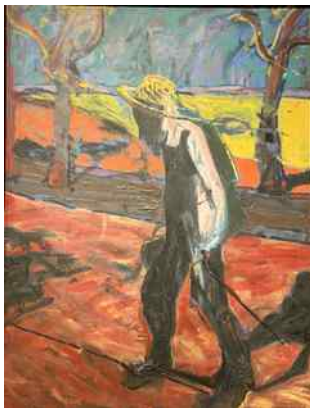


The image of the sower came to Van Gogh in Biblical teachings from his childhood.

Although painted in bright colours, we recognise **The Sower, (after Jean-François Millet)** (June 1888) as an evening study with an immense setting sun blazing in a yellow sky. The sun is a feature of many of his pictures. He invested it with an almost religious significance; referring to "the good God sun" and called anyone who didn't believe in the sun infidels.



His many paintings of sowers was influenced by Millet's paintings, such as **The Sower** of 1850.



Painted in contrasts of primary and secondary colours, this self portrait, **Painter on the Road to Tarascon** (July 1888), is like a personal manifesto of his life and aims. Although the features of his face are almost lost in a deep orange shadow, the tiny dots of his blue eyes seem to glower and direct a challenge in response to a curious stare from a local inhabitant who he passes on the road.

Unfortunately this remarkable painting, unique amongst his self portraits in showing the complete figure, appears to be lost, possibly destroyed in the second world war.

It is a striking and memorable image that has inspired **Francis Bacon** to make a number of variations, such as the **Study for a portrait of van Gogh IV** (1957).

Van Gogh painted a number portraits of the Roulin family, such as the **Portrait of the Postman Joseph Roulin** (August 1888). It was difficult for financial and other reasons for him to find models. So, finding an entire family that agreed to sit for him — in fact, for several sittings each — was a bounty. The family, with children ranging in age from four months to seventeen years, also gave him the opportunity to produce works of individuals in several different stages of life.



He said of portrait studies, "the only thing in painting that excites me to the depths of my soul, and which makes me feel the infinite more than anything else." Van Gogh wrote further of the meaning he wished to evoke: "in a picture I want to say something comforting as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to communicate by the actual radiance and vibration of our colouring."



Joseph Roulin became a particularly good, loyal and supporting friend. To represent a man he truly admired was important to him. They became good friends and drinking companions. Vincent compared Roulin to Socrates: "such a good soul and so wise and so full of feeling and so trustful." When the local people turned against him Joseph Roulin and his wife were among the few people who stood by him. He visited Vincent in hospital, accompanied him back home, and kept Theo informed of his progress.

He made several versions of this portrait of Augustine Roulin where she is shown holding a cord used to rock the unseen cradle. He said that the title, **La Berceuse** meant "our lullaby or the woman rocking the cradle." The colour and setting were intended to set the scene of a lullaby, to give comfort to "lonely souls."

The interior depicted in *The Night Café* (September 1888) is the *Café de la Gare*, in the Place Lamartine, run by Joseph-Michel Ginoux and his wife Marie.

In August he wrote to his brother: "Today I am probably going to begin on the interior of the café where I have a room, by gas light, in the evening. It is what they call here a 'café de nuit' (they are fairly frequent here), staying open all night. 'Night prowlers' can take refuge there when they have no money to pay for a lodging, or are too drunk to be taken in." Adding that with *The Night Café* he tried "to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad, or commit a crime."

"I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green. The room is blood red and dark yellow with a green billiard table in the middle; there are four lemon-yellow lamps with a glow of orange and green. Everywhere there is a clash and contrast of the most alien reds and greens, in the figures of little sleeping hooligans, in the empty dreary room, in violet and blue. The blood-red and the yellow-green of the billiard table, for instance, contrast with the soft tender Louis XV green of the counter, on which there is a rose nosegay. The white clothes of the landlord, watchful in a corner of that furnace, turn lemon-yellow, or pale luminous green."



He also called it "the equivalent, though different, of *The Potato Eaters*", which it resembles somewhat in its use of lamplight and concerns for the condition of people in need.

Unlike typical Impressionist works, the painter does not project a neutral stance towards the world or an attitude of enjoyment of the beauty of nature or of the moment. The painting is an instance of Van Gogh's use of what he called "suggestive colour" or, as he would soon term it, "arbitrary colour" in which the artist infused his works with his emotions. In that respect van Gogh can be seen as a precursor of Expressionism.



On 1 May 1888, he signed a lease for the eastern wing of the Yellow House at 2, Place Lamartine for 15 francs per month. The four rooms were unfurnished and had been uninhabited for months.

In September he painted *The Yellow House*, showing the view of the house from Place Lamartine. He occupied two large ones on the ground floor to serve as a studio and kitchen, and on the first floor, two smaller ones facing Place Lamartine. The window on the first floor nearest the corner with both shutters open is that of Van Gogh's guest room, where Gauguin lived for nine weeks. Behind the next window, with shutters nearly closed, is Van Gogh's bedroom. The two small rooms at the rear were rented by Van Gogh at a later time.

He indicated that the restaurant where he used to have his meals was in the building painted pink, close to the left edge of the painting. It was run by Widow Venissac, who was also Van Gogh's landlady,

Still Life, Vase with Twelve Sunflowers and *Vase with Fourteen Sunflowers* were painted in August, during a rare period of optimism, as part of the decoration of the the guest room in preparation for Gauguin's visit. He started with sunflowers and later added portraits.

In a letter to Theo he wrote: "I'm painting with the gusto of a Marseillaise eating bouillabaisse, which won't surprise you when it's a question of painting large sunflowers.... If I carry out this plan there'll be a dozen or so panels. The whole thing will therefore be a symphony in blue and yellow. I work on it all these mornings, from sunrise. Because the flowers wilt quickly and it's a matter of doing the whole thing in one go." At this time he had three paintings on the go, and intended to do more; as he explained to his brother: "in the hope of living in a studio of our own with Gauguin, I'd like to do a decoration for the studio. Nothing but large sunflowers"





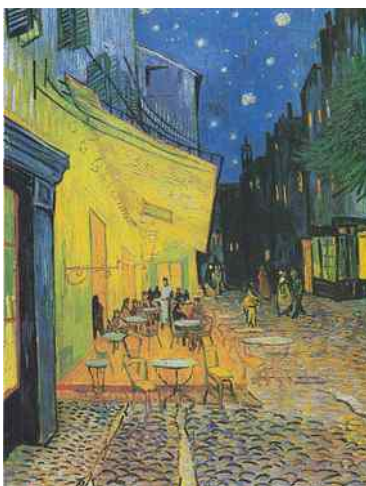
As in many of his letters to Theo he included a sketch of his painting of the house.

There are 903 known surviving letters written (820) or received (83) by van Gogh. More than 650 of these were from Vincent to Theo. Others are to his sister **Wil** and other relatives, or between him and other artists such as Paul Gauguin, Anthon van Rappard and Émile Bernard.

Bedroom in Arles (October 1888) depicts van Gogh's bedroom in the Yellow house. The door to the right, opened on to the upper floor and the staircase; the door to the left was that of the guest room; the window in the front wall looked on to Place Lamartine and its public gardens. This room was not rectangular but trapezoid with an obtuse angle in the left hand corner of the front wall and an acute angle at the right.



Van Gogh painted two versions of his bedroom, starting the first version during mid October and in a long explanation to Theo of his aims said: "This time it simply reproduces my bedroom; but colour must be abundant in this part, its simplification adding a rank of grandeur to the style applied to the objects, getting to suggest a certain rest or dream. Well, I have thought that on watching the composition we stop thinking and imagining. I have painted the walls pale violet. The ground with checked material. The wooden bed and the chairs, yellow like fresh butter; the sheet and the pillows, lemon light green. The bedspread, scarlet coloured. The window, green. The washbasin, orange; the tank, blue. The doors, lilac. And, that is all. There is not anything else in this room with closed shutters. The square pieces of furniture must express unswerving rest; also the portraits on the wall, the mirror, the bottle, and some costumes. The white colour has not been applied to the picture, so its frame will be white, aimed to get me even with the compulsory rest recommended for me. I have depicted no type of shade or shadow; I have only applied simple plain colours, like those in crêpes.



Café Terrace at Night (September 1888) is the first painting in which he used starry backgrounds. After finishing it he wrote a letter to his sister expressing his enthusiasm: "I was interrupted precisely by the work that a new painting of the outside of a café in the evening has been giving me these past few days. On the terrace, there are little figures of people drinking. A huge yellow lantern lights the terrace, the façade, the pavement, and even projects light over the cobblestones of the street, which takes on a violet-pink tinge. The gables of the houses on a street that leads away under the blue sky studded with stars are dark blue or violet, with a green tree. Now there's a painting of night without black. With nothing but beautiful blue, violet and green, and in these surroundings the lighted square is coloured pale sulphur, lemon green. I enormously enjoy painting on the spot at night. In the past they used to draw, and paint the picture from the drawing in the daytime. But I find that it suits me to paint the thing straightaway. It's quite true that I may take a blue for a green in the dark, ...But it's the only way of getting away from the conventional black night with a poor, pallid and whitish light, while in fact a mere candle by

itself gives us the richest yellows and oranges."

Gauguin's visit October 23rd to December 25th 1888

"He [Vincent] is a remarkable man of great intelligence for whom I have a high regard..."

Letter from Gauguin to Theo from Arles

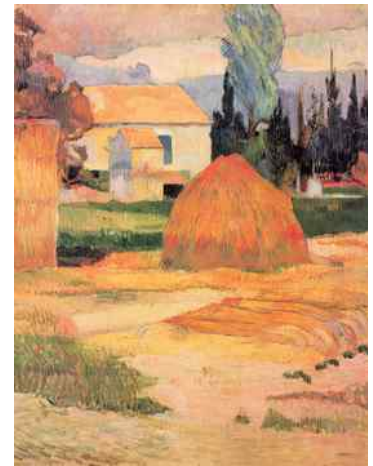
With financial assistance from Theo, Gauguin arrived in Arles on the 23rd of October. The two artists had been exchanging a long correspondence for several months, entrusting each other with the progress of their research towards a non-naturalistic vision of the landscape. Vincent and Gauguin were close friends (on Vincent's part it amounted to something akin to adulation) and they corresponded on art, before and after his visit, a correspondence that was instrumental in Gauguin formulating his philosophy of art.



Gauguin took Émile Bernard's *Breton Women in the Meadow (Le Pardon de Pont Aven)* and his own *Vision After the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling With the Angel)* to Arles. These paintings (which he knew of from Gauguin's letter sketches) made a great impression on Vincent. In their use of flattened shapes, emphasis on line and expressive use of colour, they became a paradigm for art in the early part of the next century.

Farm in Arles (1888) was the first painting Gauguin made during his two months in Arles. The setting was the plains of the Crau one of van Gogh's favourites sites.

It depicts a very typical scene from the area: with a traditional farmhouse, cypress trees and a haystack. Gauguin's treatment of the subject, with the emphasis on geometric forms and the placement of the haystack and farmhouse together, using overlapping rather than shading and atmosphere to suggest depth in the picture, owes much to Cézanne. However, the bright colouration, derives more from the fact that he was painting next to van Gogh.



They quickly made portraits of each other. Vincent painted *Paul Gauguin (Man in a Red Beret)* while his friend was painting, rather than as a posed portrait. It was probably a quickly executed study.

Van Gogh's first impression on first seeing *The Painter of Sunflowers, Portrait of van Gogh* was that Gauguin had depicted him as a madman. He later softened his view. "My face has lit up after all a lot since, but it was indeed me, extremely tired and charged with electricity as I was then".

The Alyscamps is a large Roman necropolis, a short distance outside the walls of the old town of Arles, where the two made a number of paintings. In the 19th century only alleys of cypress trees and a few empty sarcophagi remained, giving the site a deeply melancholy aspect.

In his painting Gauguin chose to almost completely exclude the historical motif by only showing in the background the lantern tower and part of the building of the Romanesque church. No sarcophagus is visible, only fields, woods and a canal along which three figures walk: two women in Arlesian costume and a man. Gauguin, who did not find much charm in Arlésiennes, ironically called his painting *Landscape or Three Graces at the Temple of Venus* when he sent it to Theo.



The juxtaposed masses and its hatched brushstrokes is characteristic of Gauguin's synthetism, and owes something to Cézanne's technique. The saturated colours is a subjective and decorative interpretation of the landscape.



To Émile Bernard van Gogh described the collaborative process as a pooling of thoughts and techniques where each artist creates their own unique work that is different, yet complements one another. Van Gogh believed that his pair of paintings **Falling Autumn Leaves**, depicting the *Allée des Tombeaux*, at the Aylscamps (which had become a lover's lane celebrated through-out France) was just such a collaborative effort influenced by his own ideas as well as those of Gauguin and Bernard.

The high vantage point represented in the work resembled that of Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon*. Creating a composition of landscape viewed through the trunks of trees was used previously by Bernard. The contrasting complementary colours intensify the effect of each colour. The blue poplar trunks against the orange yellow path of leaves. Green used against red. To his sister, Vincent wrote of selection and placement of colours "which cause each other to shine brilliantly, which form a couple, which complete each other like man and woman."

L'Arlésienne refers to a group of six similar paintings of Marie Ginoux by van Gogh.

Marie and Joseph-Michel Ginoux ran the *Café de la Gare*, (subject of *The Night Cafe*) where van Gogh lodged from May to mid-September 1888. while he furnished the yellow house.

Madame. Ginoux was then about 40 years of age. In the first few days of November 1888 after Gauguin's arrival she agreed to sit for her portrait. Within an hour, Gauguin produced a charcoal drawing while Vincent produced a full-scale painting.

Gauguin wrote about the portrait **L'Arlésienne, Madame Ginoux with Books** (Nov. 1888): "I like it better than my drawing. Despite your ailing state you have never worked with so much *balance* while conserving the sensation and the interior warmth needed for a *work of art*."



In a letter to his sister Wil, dated 5 June, Vincent set out his philosophy for doing portraits: "I should like to do portraits which will appear as revelations to people in a hundred years' time. In other words I am not trying to achieve this by photographic likeness but by rendering our impassioned expressions, by using our modern knowledge and appreciation of colour as a means of rendering and exalting character ... The portrait of the Arlésienne has a colourless and matt flesh tone, the eyes are calm and very simple, the clothing is black, the background pink, and she is leaning on a green table with green books. But in the copy that Theo has, the clothing is pink, the background yellowy-white, and the front of the open bodice is muslin in a white that merges into green. Among all these light colours, only the hair, the eyelashes and the eyes form black patches."

Suffering from "nervous crises" herself, Mme Ginoux took care of van Gogh during his hospitalization in December 1888.



Night Café at Arles, (Mme Ginoux) is Gauguin's version of the portrait of Madame Ginoux. The bearded man with a cap on his head sitting at the table with three Arlésiennes is the postman Roulin. This canvas, based on the harmony of large areas of colour, is a clear illustration of the principles of Gauguin's new pictorial system, which he called "synthetism" and which was developed further in his Tahitian works.

In the manner of a Japanese print the composition is informal, and 'off-balance', rather like a snapshot – a possible influence from Degas, who was a friend and supporter of Gauguin. The space in the picture is divided into five distinct bands. Defined by the table in the foreground, the billiard table and the red wall in the background. Distance is suggested by overlapping of the forms and relative scale, rather than by shading and atmosphere.

A comparison with Vincent's earlier painting of the same subject shows that whereas Gauguin emphasises the decorative effect of the composition and colour, van Gogh's colour is more expressive of the mood of sadness and desolation. We sense the desperate isolation of the four customers and the questioning gaze of Monsieur Ginoux.

Gauguin's enigmatic painting *Arlésiennes (Mistral)* depicts the public garden directly across from the "Yellow House." It is carefully planned in marked contrast to the spontaneity seen in Van Gogh's depiction of the same scene, but everything about the painting—its large, flat areas of colour; arbitrary handling of space; and enigmatic silhouettes—also exemplifies the deliberation with which Gauguin sought pictorial harmony and symbolic content in his work. Here four women wrapped in shawls slowly stroll through the garden. The two closest to the viewer avert their gazes and curiously cover their mouths, they seem to express a feeling of worry or anguish. Their somber outlines echo the two orange cones, which probably represent shrubs wrapped against the frost. The bench along the upper-left path rises steeply, defying logical perspective. Equally puzzling is the mysterious bush on the left, in which Gauguin consciously embedded forms that suggest eyes and a nose, creating the impression of a strange, watchful presence. With its aura of repressed emotion and elusive meaning, *Arlésiennes (Mistral)* explores the ambiguities, mysteries, and emotions that Gauguin believed underlie appearances.



Gauguin lines up the kneeling women in *Washerwomen at the Roubine du Roi, Arles* with an almost mathematical precision. The women's dresses are like coloured boulders; and are almost interchangeable with the rounded shapes of bushes and haystacks. The statuesque figure walking out of the picture on the left is nothing but a pillar of abstract shapes linking the two heads in the bottom of the picture to the background shapes of river bank, fields, and trees.

The impression is of a near abstract arrangement of colour and shapes. Primaries, red and blue, and their complementaries, the secondaries green and orange.

Lane at Alchamps, Arles, by Gauguin, may be a representation of an actual scene but the main



In this almost abstract painting, *Blue Tree Trunks, Arles*, Gauguin drags four lines of blue across a brown-orange landscape, linking together the yellows of an evening sky and the yellow and green bands at the base of the composition. In its none descriptive use of heightened colour it foreshadows the Fauvist landscapes of Matisse.



Although full of respect for each other's art, the relationship was fraught from the start; and early in December Gauguin wrote to Theo, asking for money from sales to pay for his return to Paris, saying "Vincent and I find it absolutely impossible to live peaceably in each other's company, our temperaments are incompatible."

Van Gogh painted *The Red Vineyard* in early November during the grape harvest. The natural landscape motif, depicting workers in a vineyard, acquires the nature of a parable. Everything seems to be melting in the incandescent heat of the evening sun, the foliage of the vineyards is full of anxious red tones, turning into the lilac tones of the ashes in the foreground as it burns. The small figures of people bringing in the harvest have become a symbol of life, which is presented by the artist as exhausting daily toil.



In 1890 *The Red Vineyard* was shown at the exhibition of Symbolists in Brussels (Les XX), where it attracted universal attention due to the intensity of the colour and the anxious emotional state that it expressed. Immediately after the exhibition the Belgian artist Anna Boch acquired the picture for 350 francs, and is believed to be the only painting known by name that van Gogh sold during his life-time.



Vincent's *Memory of the Garden at Etten* (November 1888) exhibits some influence from Gauguin in the composition: the forms and positioning of the figures in close-up, the overlapping and the containing of colour in well defined shapes.

Gauguin believed that in his work van Gogh should draw less on reality and more on his imagination. It is an example of Vincent's brief experimentation with Gauguin's theory of "painting from the imagination". However, it did not suit him and he quickly returned to painting from nature, at least in the first versions of his pictures.

Van Gogh had a special interest in sowers throughout his artistic career. All in all, he made more than 30 drawings and paintings on this theme. He painted *The Sower with Setting Sun* in November 1888. The 'abstraction' of the painting shows the influence of Japanese prints.



Van Gogh used colours meant to express emotion and passion. The greenish-yellow of the sky, the purples and blues of the fields form a setting for the bright yellow evening sun which reverberates like a halo behind the head of the anonymous form of the sower, suggesting a saintly status for this dark blue and green and energetic figure.



Painted in December *Van Gogh's Chair* shows a rustic wooden chair, with a simple woven straw seat, on a tiled floor. On the chair seat is a decorated pipe and a pouch of pipe tobacco. In the background is an onion box with Van Gogh's name on it, identifying himself with the workers on the field. It has become one of Van Gogh's most iconic images, to the extent that Van Gogh's cataloger Jan Hulsker noted that "there are few pictures of Vincent's about which so much was written in later years."

Van Gogh's Chair is a product of the artists tumultuous time spent with Paul Gauguin. Both this work and its pendant piece *Paul Gauguin's Armchair* are painted in complementary colours, blue and orange for van Gogh, red and green for Gauguin. The two paintings were painted before Van Gogh cut off his ear, but continued to be refined after he was hospitalised.

The contrasts between *Van Gogh's Chair* and *Paul Gauguin's Armchair*, also painted in December, have led to much analysis of the symbolism of these two paintings. While Van Gogh's chair is a simple and unpretentious chair of the student, Gauguin's is the far more lavish and ornate chair of the master. This has been interpreted in light of their sometimes tempestuous relationship.



The candle and books might symbolise for Vincent the more learned, or enlightened character of his friend, in contrast to the simple pipe of the workman on his own chair;.

The Dance Hall in in Arles

(December 1888) seems to represent a festive evening at the ballroom known as *Folies-Arlésiennes*. The application of syntheist and cloisonnist principles: the flattening and outlining of shapes, betrays Gauguin's apparent influence.

The reference to Japanese art is also perceptible, in the unusual rise of the horizon, or in this strange and decorative foreground where the curves and counter-curves of the hairstyles dominate.

The multitude of characters, the disparity of their outfits and their close interweaving convey the feeling of crowding and saturation with great skill. Madame Roulin, on the right, alone turns her gaze towards the viewer, seeming to express a claustrophobic terror.

Some time after painting this canvas their relationship deteriorated and eventually Gauguin decided to leave. The sequence of events following is not clear. However, it seems that on the evening of 23 December, after a day of rain being cooped up in the house, following an argument Gauguin left the house; according to a much later account of Gauguin's, Vincent confronted Gauguin in the street with a straight razor. Gauguin spent the night in an hotel. Vincent went home where he was assaulted by voices. Later the same evening, he cut off his left ear, wrapped it in newspaper and handed it to a woman who worked at a brothel, (possibly a cleaner rather than a prostitute) and asked her to "keep this object carefully, in remembrance of me".

The Hospital Arles, December 24th 1888 to May 8th 1889

"I put my heart and soul into my work, and I have lost my mind in the process."

Vincent was found by a policeman the following day who took him to the hospital. The ear was delivered to the hospital, but Dr. Rey, the young intern who treated him, did not attempt to reattach it as too much time had passed. Gauguin alerted Theo of Vincent's erratic and disturbed behaviour. Theo, who had just proposed marriage to Jo Bonger, the sister of a friend, boarded the night train from Paris and arrived on Christmas day. He comforted Vincent and seeing that he was looked after returned that evening, accompanied by Gauguin.

Gauguin and van Gogh never saw each other again, but they continued to correspond, and in 1890 Gauguin went so far as to propose they form an artist studio in Antwerp.

One of the many theories about this notorious incident is that the bullfights (or "bull games" as they are called in Arles) made a deep impression on van Gogh, in particular the custom of severing one ear of a defeated bull. The victorious matador circles the arena displaying this prize to the crowd, before presenting it to a lady of his choice. However, there is some doubt as to whether the bulls were killed in this fashion in Arles in van Gogh's time.

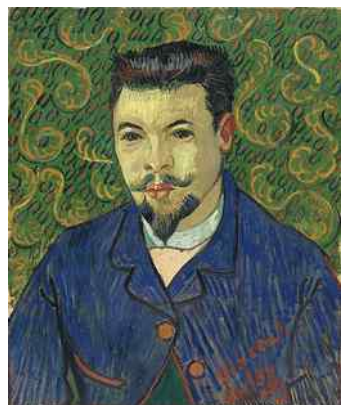
He painted two self portraits while in the hospital. The most well know being **Self-Portrait with a Bandaged Ear, Easel and Japanese Print** (January 1889). A sketch of a painting stands on the easel behind him, while on the wall is a Japanese print. It is as if he is painting a manifesto in which he proclaims that he is still a painter. An open door to the right, on the very edge of the painting, seems to be enticing him to escape into the fresh air. However, it is notable that although his gaze is directed out of the frame, he is not looking out and engaging the viewer. He has a somewhat guarded, almost frightened demeanour.



His other **Self-Portrait with a Bandaged Ear** is set against a red wall, with no 'props' to indicate his calling. He is wearing the same fur hat and green winter coat, and although seems to be lost inside himself appears less distraught as he puffs on his pipe and contemplates the future.

He was hospitalized in Arles twice over a few months. His condition was diagnosed by the hospital as "acute mania with generalised delirium", or possibly "a kind of epilepsy".

Van Gogh made the portrait of the physician who had treated his ear, Dr. Félix Rey, whom he had described in letters to his brother as "brave, hardworking, and always helping people." The **Portrait of Félix Rey** (January 1889) was a remarkable likeness, according to his contemporaries. The simple composition and bright dissonant colours enabled Vincent to bring out the main features in the model: physical strength and self-confidence.





Dr. Rey's medical report with sketches of the cut, indicate that it was a substantial part of the ear which was removed, and not just the lobe as some have suggested.

He gave the portrait as a keepsake to Rey, who was indifferent to art and regarded the portrait merely as an expression of gratitude from an unfortunate mental patient. Rey's mother reportedly deemed it "hideous" and used it to close a hole in the family's chicken coop. In 1900 the artist Charles Camoin, a friend of Henri Matisse, went to Arles, where he found the portrait in Doctor Rey's backyard. By 1903 it was in the possession of the dealer Ambroise Vollard. In 2016, it was installed in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, with an estimated value of over \$50million.

In January 1889, he returned to the Yellow House where he was living, but spent the following month between hospital and home suffering from hallucinations and delusions that he was being poisoned. In March 1889, the police closed his house after a petition by 30 townspeople, who called him "fou roux" (*the redheaded madman*). Signac visited him in hospital and van Gogh was allowed home in his company. In April 1889, he moved into rooms owned by Dr. Félix Rey, after floods damaged paintings in his own home

Vincent described the painting of the **Ward in the Hospital in Arles** (April 1889) to his sister Wil: "In the foreground a big black stove around which some grey and black forms of patients and then behind the very long ward paved in red with the two rows of white beds, the partitions white, but a lilac or green-white, and the windows with pink curtains, with green curtains, and in the background two figures of nuns in black and white. The ceiling is violet with large beams."

Art Historian Debra Mancoff comments, "In his painting, *Ward of Arles Hospital*, the exaggerated length of the corridor and the nervous contours that delineate the figures of the patients express the emotional weight of his isolation and confinement."



Theo wrote of a drawing of the courtyard of the hospital that Vincent sent to him in June: "The hospital at Arles is outstanding, the butterfly and branches of eglantine are very beautiful too: simple in colour and very beautifully drawn."

Around this time, he wrote, "Sometimes moods of indescribable anguish, sometimes moments when the veil of time and fatality of circumstances seemed to be torn apart for an instant."

The vantage point for the painting of the **Court-yard of the Hospital at Arles**, was his hospital room. From his painting and description flowers, such as blue bearded irises, forget-me-nots, oleander, pansies, primroses, and poppies can be identified. The original design of the courtyard as described by van Gogh has been preserved. Radiating segments are surrounded by a "plante bande" now filled with irises. The painting and the garden differ in that van Gogh increased the size of the central fish garden for a better composition. Adept at using colour to convey mood, the shades of blue and gold in the painting seem to suggest melancholy. The yellow, orange, red and green in the painting are not vivid shades seen in other work from Arles, such as *Bedroom in Arles*.



The courtyard of the former hospital, now named "Espace Van Gogh," is a centre for van Gogh's works.

Finally in May 1889, with a desire to leave Arles and having understood his own mental fragility, he went as a voluntary patient to the Saint-Paul asylum in Saint-Rémy- de Provence.

Gauguin, December 26th 1888 to May 4th 1891

“Oh yes! He loved yellow, this good Vincent, this painter from Holland – those glimmers of sunlight rekindled his soul, that abhorred the fog, that needed the warmth.”

In an 1888 letter to his friend the artist and collector Émile Schuffenecker, Gauguin explains the enormous step he had taken away from Impressionism and that he was now intent on capturing the soul of nature, the ancient truths and character of its scenery and inhabitants. Gauguin wrote: “Don't copy nature too literally. Art is an abstraction. Derive it from nature as you dream in nature's presence, and think more about the act of creation than the outcome.”



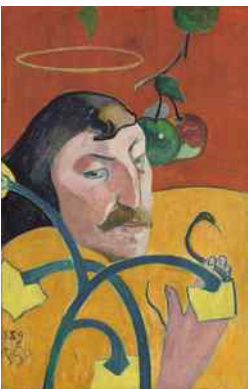
Back in Paris Gauguin lived with Schuffenecker and his family; later, in March, returning to Brittany, and the village of Le Pouldu.

While staying with the Schuffeneckers he painted this group portrait, **The Family of Schuffenecker**, probably located in Émile's studio. His wife Louise Lançon and their two children are in the foreground, while Schuffenecker is pushed back into the corner of the picture. On the wall behind are two pictures; one possibly a still life by Gauguin, the other is a Japanese print, which reflects the fashion for collecting Japanese art and artefacts.

He modelled the **Self-Portrait vase in the Form of a Severed Head** (1889) shortly after his return to Paris. It may be that he was identifying himself with John the Baptist, the gaping cranium and the streak of blood pooling around the neck suggests such an interpretation. Also it is suggested that it was modelled as a reaction to his recent traumatic confrontation with van Gogh when his friend threatened him with a razor. Certainly he had a taste for the macabre: on the 29th December he had attended the guillotining of a convicted murderer, whose lurid case he and Vincent had been following.



No longer comfortable with Pont-Aven, Gauguin moved on to Le Pouldu with his friend Meijer de Haan, who paid for the food and the rent, and a small group of artists. He stayed for several months in the autumn of 1889 and the summer of 1890, where the group spent their time decorating the interior of Marie Henry's inn.



The interior of Marie Henry's inn became their canvas, and they painted their work on the walls, ceilings, and windows.

Gauguin's **Self-Portrait with Halo and Snake** (1889) is painted on a wooden panel for the dining room, on the left of the door. On the other side was his portrait of de Haan as an impish figure with a claw-like hand.

The painting shows Gauguin against a red background with a halo above his head and apples hanging beside him as he holds a snake in his hand while plants or flowers appear in the foreground. The painting is divided into two halves, with the upper section depicting himself in angelic form, while in the lower he holds a snake portraying himself as a sinner. He is

portraying himself as a magus, a priest, as "both seer and demonic angel".

Gauguin believed that he was chosen to be the saviour of modern painting, seeing himself in the role of Christ, as someone who will ultimately be a messenger for his contemporaries, despite being rejected by them.

Christ in the Garden of Olives was painted in Le Pouldu in Brittany, in November of 1889, Gauguin was emotionally distraught due to his recent failures in Paris shows. He continued to sell through Theo van Gogh, but sales were in decline. In a letter to Schuffenecker he stated, "The news I get from Paris discourages me so much that I lack the courage to paint and I drag my old



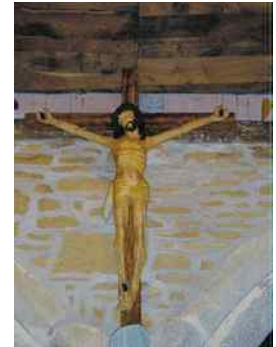
body, exposed to the northern wind, along the sea shore in Le Pouldu. Automatically I make a few studies. But my soul is far away and looks sadly into a black abyss that opens in front of me." The central figure in the image, Gauguin is depicted with his head facing the ground and a face full of sorrow and despair due to the rejection he faced.

Gauguin stated that "it is to symbolize the failure of an ideal, the suffering which was both divine and human, Jesus deserted by all of [his] disciples, and his surroundings are as sad as his soul."



The Yellow Christ (1889) is a symbolic piece that shows the crucifixion of Christ taking place in 19th-century northern France as Breton women are gathered in prayer. Gauguin relies heavily on bold lines to define his figures and reserves shading only for the women. The autumn palette of yellow, red and green in the landscape echoes the dominant yellow in the figure of Christ. The bold outlines and flatness of the forms in this painting are typical of the cloisonnist style.

The almost two metre high yellow crucifixion in the chapel at Trémalo, Pont Aven is the inspiration for the painting.



The official art exhibition accompanying the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris displayed works by invited artists only, and the selection of works to be exhibited had to pass the judgement of official juries. Neither Gauguin nor his friends could hope to enter this exhibition.

The **Volpini Exhibition** was organised by Gauguin and his circle in opposition to the official art pavilion of the Universal Exhibition. Monsieur Volpini, who had the contract for the Grand Café des Arts opposite the exhibition, had a problem: the mirrors he had ordered in Italy to decorate the interior of his café would not arrive in time for the opening of the exposition. Schuffenecker proposed that the gap could be filled with a display of paintings created by

himself and his friends. A poster and an illustrated catalogue were printed, but the show of "Paintings by the Impressionist and Synthetist Group", held in June and early July 1889, was ignored by the press and proved to be a failure.

Bonjour Monsieur Gauguin was painted in response to Courbet's *The Meeting or Bonjour Monsieur Courbet*, which he had seen in Montpellier along with van Gogh. Courbet depicted himself meeting his patron Bruyas, accompanied by his manservant on the road to Montpellier. Bruyas doffs his hat to the artist, and the servant stands with head respectfully lowered. Courbet's self-portrait referred to the changing status of the artist in the nineteenth century and has represented himself in a romantic role, as an essentially misunderstood, creative genius, working outside the norms of bourgeois society.



Gauguin, by contrast showed himself as a misfit, rather than emphasizing his autonomy from society as had Courbet, His cap pulled down into his face, he approaches not a millionaire but a Breton farmer's wife who appears to be running away from him.



Produced when he had been living for two years in Brittany, and on the eve of his first departure for Tahiti, where he hoped to find better working conditions away from European society, which did not particularly value his work, the **Self-Portrait With a Yellow Christ** (1889 or 90) is like a manifesto. It is actually a portrait with a triple face, in which the artist reveals different facets of his personality, standing between two of his own artworks: *The Yellow Christ* and a grotesque ceramic self-portrait, creating a triple self-portrait.

Feeling abandoned by his wife the central figure expresses the weight of his difficulties, but also all his determination to continue his

artistic struggle. On the left is the Yellow Christ, an image of sublimated suffering, contrasts with the red of the self-portrait Pot in the shape of a grotesque head, placed on the right, on a shelf. This anthropomorphic pot that he himself described as a "head of Gauguin the wild".

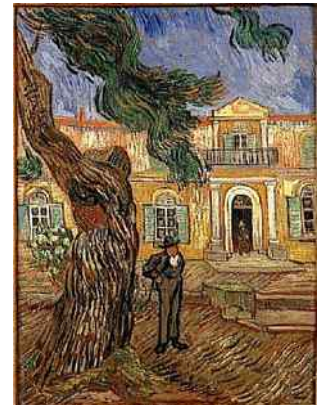
Between the angel and the beast, between synthetism and primitivism, Gauguin anticipates the importance and the gravity of the great artistic and human adventure that he is about to embark on.

Saint-Paul Asylum, Saint-Remy-de-Provence May 8th 1889 to May 16th 1890

"The only time I feel alive is when I'm painting."

Van Gogh entered the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum as a voluntary patient on 8 May 1889. He had two cells with barred windows, one of which, on the ground floor, he used as a studio, now incorporated into the shop. The other is on the first floor and has been reconstructed. The clinic and its garden became the main subjects of his paintings.

He was allowed short supervised walks, during which time he painted cypresses and olive trees.



Vincent started painting *Iris* within a week of entering the asylum. There is a lack of the high tension which is seen in his later works. He called painting "the lightning conductor for my illness" because he felt that he could keep himself from going insane by continuing to paint.

He considered this painting a study although Theo thought better of it and quickly submitted it to the annual exhibition of the Société des Indépendants, along with *Starry Night Over the Rhone*. He wrote to Vincent of the exhibition: "[It] strikes the eye from afar. The *Iris* are a beautiful study full of air and life."

In 1987, it was sold for US\$53.9 million dollars, becoming the most expensive painting ever sold, setting a record which stood for two and a half years.

Enclosed Wheat Field with Rising Sun (May 1889) is one of a number of paintings of the view from the window of his bedroom, representing different times of day and weather conditions. It depicts a steeply raked view of the field enclosed by stone walls; and beyond this enclosure farm land with olive groves and vineyards, running up to the hills at the foot of the Les Alpilles mountain range. He was not allowed to make paintings in his bedroom, so it would be have been painted downstairs in his studio from drawings and his imagination and memory.



In May Van Gogh wrote to Theo, "Through the iron-barred window I see a square field of wheat in an enclosure, a perspective like Van Goyen, above which I see the morning sun rising in all its glory." For van Gogh the rising sun above fields of wheat to represented its life giving energy.

Fifteen canvases depict cypresses, a tree he became fascinated with in Arles. He brought life to the trees, which were traditionally seen as emblematic of death. The series of cypresses he began in Arles featured the trees in the distance, as windbreaks in fields; when he was at Saint-Rémy he brought them to the foreground. Vincent wrote to Theo in May 1889: "Cypresses still preoccupy me, I should like to do something with them like my canvases of sunflowers"; he went on to say, "They are beautiful in line and proportion like an Egyptian obelisk."



In a letter to Theo early in July Vincent wrote about **Wheat Field with Cypresses**: "I have a canvas of cypresses with some ears of wheat, some poppies, a blue sky like a piece of Scotch plaid; the former painted with a thick impasto . . . and the wheat field in the sun, which represents the extreme heat, very thick too."

Another version of the painting has been described: "the field is like a stormy sea; the trees spring flamelike from the ground; and the hills and clouds heave with the same surge of motion. Every stroke stands out boldly in a long ribbon of strong, unmixed colour."

The Starry Night (June 1889) depicts the view from the east-facing window of his bedroom window at just before sunrise, with the addition of an imaginary village.

In June Vincent wrote to Theo, "This morning I saw the countryside from my window a long time before sunrise with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big". Research has determined that Venus was visible at dawn in Provence in the Spring of 1889 and was at that time nearly as bright as possible. So the brightest "star" in the painting, just to the viewer's right of the cypress tree, is actually Venus. The Moon is stylized, as astronomical records indicate that it actually was waning at the time.



The one pictorial element that was definitely not visible from Van Gogh's cell is the village based on a sketch from a hillside above the village of Saint-Rémy. It is thought that the steeple is more Dutch than Provençal, and thus the first of his "reminisces of the North" he was to paint and draw early the following year.



Art historian Sven Loevgren calls *The Starry Night* "an infinitely expressive picture which symbolizes the final absorption of the artist by the cosmos" and which "gives a never-to-be-forgotten sensation of standing on the threshold of eternity."

In mid-1889, and at his sister Wil's request, Van Gogh painted several smaller versions of *Wheatfield with Cypresses*. The works are characterised by swirls and densely painted impasto, and include *The Starry Night*, in which cypresses dominate the foreground.

Cypresses in Starry Night is a reed pen drawing executed by Van Gogh after the painting.

Vincent regarded the painting **Olive Trees with the Alpilles in the Background** (June 1889) the daylight complement to the nocturnal, *The Starry Night*. His intention was to go beyond "the photographic and silly perfection of some painters" to an intensity born of colour and linear rhythms.



The National Gallery of Art, Washington, summarizes the series:

In the olive trees — in the expressive power of their ancient and gnarled forms — van Gogh found a manifestation of the spiritual force he believed resided in all of nature. His brushstrokes make the soil and even the sky seem alive with the same rustling motion as the leaves, stirred to a shimmer by the Mediterranean wind. These strong individual dashes do not seem painted so much as drawn onto the canvas with a heavily loaded brush. The energy in their continuous rhythm communicates to us, in an almost physical way, the living force that van Gogh found within the trees themselves, the very spiritual force that he believed had shaped them.



In early July while painting in the fields near the asylum, he suffered a severe breakdown that could have been a symptom of epilepsy. Incapacitated for five weeks and greatly unnerved by the experience, he retreated to his studio, refusing to go out even to the garden. This **Self-Portrait** (Aug 1889) is the first work he produced after recovering from that episode. In a letter to Theo written in early September 1889, he observed: "They say—and I am very willing to believe it—that it is difficult to know yourself—but it isn't easy to paint yourself either. So I am working on two portraits of myself at this moment—for want of another model—because it is more than time I did a little figure work. One I began the day I got up; I was thin and pale as a ghost. It is dark violet-blue and the head whitish with yellow hair, so it has a colour effect. But since then I have begun another one, three quarter length on a light background."

"I can't change the fact that my paintings don't sell. But the time will come when people will recognize that they are worth more than the value of the paints used in the picture."

He had been invited by Gauguin to participate in the Volpini exhibition. He initially accepted; however, Theo thought that it would be inappropriate.

On September 3rd the fifth exhibition of the Artistes Indépendants, opened; van Gogh contributed two paintings. In November the Belgian art critic Octave Maus, secretary to Les XX invited him to contribute to their seventh Annual Exhibition in Brussels the following January. He exhibited six paintings and sold one; *The Red Vineyard*, possibly the only painting sold during his lifetime.

The invitation was an important testament to the recognition he received amongst avant-garde peers during his own lifetime. Other none members exhibiting included Odilon Redon, Paul Cézanne, Paul Signac, Paul Gauguin, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Alfred Sisley. Vincent's selection of paintings were intended as a summary of his years of work in Provence. Evidently this notion was unrecognised and undermined by the scandal his works provoked.

Two days before the opening the Belgian Symbolist Henry de Groux announced that his works would not be seen side by side with the "abominable Pot of Sunflowers by Monsieur Vincent or any other agent provocateur". At the opening dinner, De Groux once again attacked Van Gogh's paintings and called him "an ignoramus and a charlatan. At the other end of the table Lautrec suddenly bounced up, with his arms in the air, and shouted that it was an outrage to criticize so great an artist. De Groux retorted. Tumult. Seconds were appointed. Signac announced coldly that if Lautrec were killed he would assume the quarrel himself."

That same evening, Les XX expelled De Groux from their association; the next day he apologised and was allowed to resign.

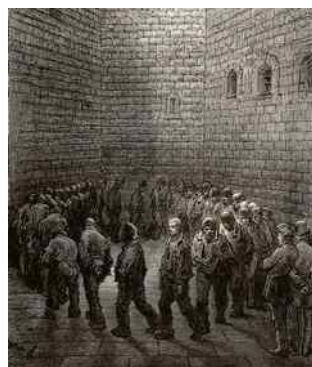
Albert Aurier praised his work in the *Mercure de France* in January 1890 and described him as "a genius"

Later in the year the same works were shown again at the annual exhibition of the Artistes Indépendants in Paris which offered space for an expansion of the display. Claude Monet said that his work was the best in the show.

Between February and April 1890, he suffered a severe relapse. Depressed and unable to bring himself to write, he was still able to paint and draw a little during this time, and later wrote to Theo that he had made a few small canvases "from memory... reminisces of the North". This short period was the only time that Van Gogh's illness had a significant effect on his work. Van Gogh asked his mother and his brother to send him drawings and rough work he had done in the early 1880s so he could work on new paintings from his old sketches



While he was unable to go out, due to his relapses, he concentrated on copies of other artists' paintings, such as *The Siesta* (Jan. 1890) based on a painting by Millet of the same subject.



Van Gogh expressed his state of extreme depression and sense of lacking personal freedom in possibly his most tragic picture *Prisoners' Round* (Feb. 1890). Painted in a gloomy tone of blue and orange-brown, markedly different from his deep, spiritual blues and sunlit yellows, for this work, he derived the composition from an engraving after **Gustave Doré: New-gate Prison Exercise Yard** .

The prisoner closest to the viewer tramping round in a circle inside the well of endless brick walls shows features resembling himself.

In an earlier letter to Theo Vincent had written that cypresses were "always occupying [my] thoughts" and that he found them "beautiful of line" and proportioned like an Egyptian obelisk. He had also intended on painting a nighttime view of the trees since his stay in Arles.

In classical antiquity, the cypress was a symbol of mourning and in the modern era it remains the principal cemetery tree in both the Muslim world and Europe. In the classical tradition, the cypress was associated with death and the underworld because it failed to regenerate when cut back too severely.

Road with Cypress and Star was painted in May 1890 and is the last painting he made in Saint Rémy de Provence. After finishing the work, in June 1890 while at Auvers-sur-Oise, van Gogh wrote to Gauguin that the painting's themes are similar to those of Gauguin's work *Christ in the Garden of Olives*.

It has been suggested that the the prominence of the road and the cypress tree in the painting shows an influence from the Christian allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*. As in many of the paintings depicted trees extend beyond the top of the canvas. According to Kathleen Powers Erickson, *Road with Cypress and Star* strongly reflects van Gogh's belief that he would soon die. She supports this theory by comparing the evening star on the left of the painting, which is barely visible, to the emerging crescent moon on the right side; the cypress tree in the middle, which divides these symbols of the old and the new, is described as an "obelisk of death". She finds the pair of travellers an indication of van Gogh's need for companionship.



The orientation of the night sky objects may have been influenced by a conjunction of heavenly bodies on 20 April 1890, when Mercury and Venus were at 3 degrees of separation and together had luminescence comparable to [Sirius](#).

Auvers-sur-Oise. May 20th to July 29th 1890

"One may have a blazing hearth in one's soul and yet no one ever came to sit by it. Passers-by see only a wisp of smoke from the chimney and continue on their way."



Vincent ascribed his latest relapse to the boredom and monotony of life at the asylum. For months, he had been writing to Theo saying he wanted to leave, and felt sure that if he moved back to Paris he would get well quickly. At the same time he had become something of a celebrity in the art world following a very favourable review of his work by the critic Albert Aurier, who declared him a genius. Despite his misgivings, Theo, on the advice of Pissarro, arranged for Vincent to work at the village of Auvers-sur-Oise north of Paris under the supervision of the homeopathic doctor Paul Gachet, while staying at the nearby Auberge Ravoux.

The thatched roofs of the cottages reminded him of his earlier Dutch paintings, and, in the few weeks left to him, he painted around eighty oils, plus water-colours and drawings. Around thirty were of **Houses at Auvers**. (May)

The painter Charles Daubigny had moved to Auvers in 1861 and in turn drew other artists there, including Camille Corot and Honoré Daumier.

The Church at Auvers (June) — along with several paintings of small houses with thatched roofs — is reminiscent of scenes from his early Dutch period in Nuenen. In a letter written a couple of weeks before his departure from Saint Remy he wrote "While I was ill I nevertheless did some little canvases from memory which you will see later, memories of the North."

In a letter to his sister Wilhelmina he wrote:

I have a larger picture of the village church — an effect in which the building appears to be violet-hued against a sky of simple deep blue colour, pure cobalt; the stained-glass windows appear as ultramarine blotches, the roof is violet and partly orange. In the foreground some green plants in bloom, and sand with the pink flow of sunshine in it. And once again it is nearly the same thing as the studies I did in Nuenen of the old tower and the cemetery, only it is probably that now the colour is more expressive, more sumptuous.



The foreground is brightly lit by the sun, but the church itself sits in its own shadow, and "neither reflects nor emanates any light of its own." The motif of diverging paths also appears in his painting *Wheat Field with Crows*.



Portrait of Dr. Gachet (June) shows Gachet sitting at a table and leaning his head on his right arm.

With this picture Van Gogh sought to create a "modern portrait", which he wrote to his sister "impassions me most—much, much more than all the rest of my work." The van Gogh scholar Jan Hulsker noted "... much later generations experience it not only as psychologically striking, but also as a very unconventional and 'modern' portrait."

Van Gogh developed a close relationship with the doctor who he described as "something like another brother." From the first meeting, though, Van Gogh sensed that Dr. Gachet may have been as ill as he was. To Theo he wrote, "I have seen Dr. Gachet, who made the impression on me of being rather eccentric, but his experience as a doctor must keep him balanced while fighting the nervous trouble from which he certainly seems to me to be suffering at least as seriously as I."

Van Gogh derived enjoyment from gardens, and wrote many letters to Theo and Wilhelmina about gardening ideas, colour harmonies and the benefits of working in a garden. Quoting Voltaire he advised his sister, Wil, to cultivate her own garden, to find joy and meaning in life.

The colours used in his painting of **Doctor Gachet's Garden in Auvers** (May) may have been suggestive of his mood. When depressed, he painted "ghostly white-hooded arums." When he was in a good mood he used bright colours, such as vibrant pink oleanders. During times of inner turmoil, "dark green spire like cypresses writhing with energy and contorted olive trees vibrant with silvery leaves."



"Maison du Dr. Gachet," the house and gardens of Dr. Paul Gachet, was opened to the public in 2004.



In 1878 Van Gogh had written to Theo that he was very sad to hear the news that Daubigny had died because his work touched him very deeply, "A work that is good may not last forever, but the thought expressed by it will, and the work itself will surely survive for a very long time, and those who come later can do no more than follow in the footsteps of such predecessors and copy their example."

Writing to Theo in a letter dated 23 July he said: "Perhaps you'll take a look at this sketch of Daubigny's garden – it is one of my most carefully thought-out canvases."

When van Gogh came to Auvers Daubigny's widow still occupied their house. He painted Daubigny's garden three times: twice with the entire enclosed garden on double-square canvas and an earlier study of a portion of the garden.

Van Gogh completed thirteen double-square canvases of landscapes around Auvers in the last few weeks of his life, such as **Landscape at Auvers in the Rain** (July). These large canvases afforded him an expanse to represent the immense stretches of wheat fields that engulfed the village. He draws in the viewer by illustrating a high horizon line, creating a birds-eye view, but tilting the foreground so that simultaneously we feel that we are within the grassy hills and looking above them. Van Gogh's use of perspective and cropping became bolder and more innovative as he progressed as an artist, showing that he continued to evolve throughout his career.



However, the painting is not simply an expression of hopelessness and despair. Van Gogh wrote to Theo that nature was a refuge from his troubles, and specifically, "when suffering is sometimes so great it fills the whole horizon that it takes on the proportions of a hopeless deluge... it is better to look at a wheat field, even in the form of a picture." To certain critics, his use of the bright yellows to signify the wheat-filled countryside was a symbol of comfort for van Gogh amid his distress because "it embodied the ongoing process of life, the irrelevance of the individual's fate in the overall beauty and harmony of the divine order."



The depiction of the rain with dark, diagonal lines is considered to be inspired by Japanese art, such as the ***Travellers Surprised by Sudden Rain*** by Hiroshige.

In a letter to Theo on about 10 July, van Gogh explains: "I try to be fairly good-humoured in general, but my life too is threatened at its very root, and my step is unsteady too." He then comments on his current work: "I have painted three more large canvases. They are vast stretches of corn under troubled skies, and I did not have to go out of my way very much in order to try to express sadness and extreme loneliness." But he adds, "I'm fairly sure that these canvases will tell you what I cannot say in words, that is, how healthy and invigorating I find the countryside."

Wheat Field with Crows (July) depicts a dramatic, cloudy sky filled with crows over a wheat field. A sense of isolation is heightened by a central path leading nowhere and by the uncertain direction of flight of the crows. The windswept wheat field fills two-thirds of the canvas. Jules Michelet, one of van Gogh's favourite authors, wrote of crows: "They interest themselves in everything, and observe everything. The ancients, who lived far more completely than ourselves in and with nature, found it no small profit to follow, in a hundred obscure things where human experience as yet affords no light, the directions of so prudent and sage a bird." The crows may be seen as a symbol of death and rebirth.



He wrote that he had made a point of expressing sadness, later adding "extreme loneliness" but also says he believes the canvases show what he considers healthy and fortifying about the countryside (and adds that he intended to take them to Paris as soon as possible).



The painting of ***Tree Roots*** is considered by some to be his last painting before his death in late July.

The Dutch art historian Jan Hulsker considers it the most original of his double-square canvases. The viewer thinks he can identify tree roots and trunks, but is hard put to identify the subject as a whole. Others comment that in this painting the painting itself and not the subject is pre-eminent. It seems to presage abstract painting and German Expressionism.

In 1882, while at The Hague, van Gogh had made a study of tree roots. In a letter to Theo at that time he said that he wanted to express something of life's struggle in these drawings.

On 27 July 1890, aged 37, Van Gogh is believed to have shot himself in the chest. There were no witnesses and he died 30 hours after the incident. The shooting may have taken place in the wheat field in which he had been painting, or a local barn. He was attended to by two doctors at the Auberge, but without a surgeon present the bullet could not be removed. The doctors tended to him as well as they could, then left him alone in his room, smoking his pipe. The following morning, Theo rushed to his brother's side, finding him in good spirits. But within hours Vincent began to fail, suffering from an untreated infection resulting from the wound. He died in the early hours of 29 July. His last words, according to Theo, were...

"The sadness will last forever."

Weak from illness and unable to come to terms with Vincent's absence, Theo died on 25 January 1891 and was buried in Utrecht. In 1914, his widow, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger had Theo's body exhumed and moved from Utrecht to be re-buried alongside Vincent's at Auvers-sur-Oise. Their gravestones are surrounded by ivy from Dr Gachet's garden.



After the death of Vincent and her husband Jo was left with only an apartment in Paris filled with a few items of furniture and about 200 then valueless works of her brother-in-law. She worked assiduously on editing their correspondence, producing the first volume in Dutch in 1914. She played a key role in the growth of Vincent's fame and reputation through her donations of his work to various early retrospective exhibitions, and also wrote a Van Gogh family history.