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Vincent

VANGOGH

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Victoria Charles

Vincent van Gogh

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Forward

He sat on that chair. His pipe lies on a reed seat next to an open tobacco pouch. He slept in that bed, lived in that house. It was there that he cut off a piece of his ear. We see him with a bandaged head, the pipe in the corner of his mouth, looking at us.

Vincent van Gogh's life and work are so intertwined that it is hardly possible to see his pictures without reading in them the story of his life: a life which has been described so many times that it is by now the stuff of legend. Van Gogh is the incarnation of the suffering, a misunderstood martyr of modern art and the emblem of the artist as an outsider.

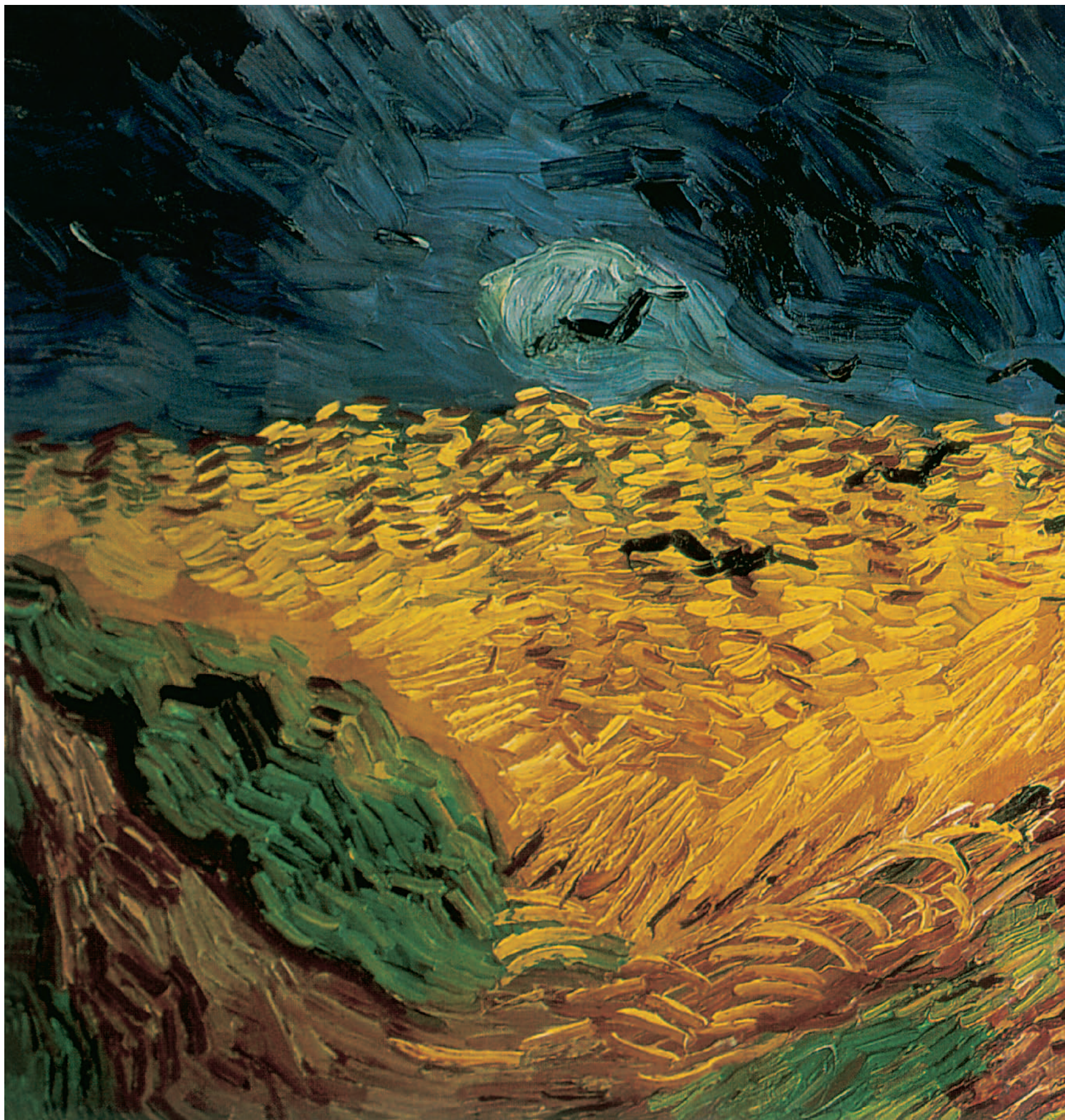
In 1996, Jan Hulsker, the famous van Gogh scholar, published a corrected catalogue of the complete works in which he questioned the authenticity of forty-five paintings and drawings. What concerned Hulsker were not only the forgeries, but also canvases which were falsely attributed to van Gogh. In a similar vein, the British art historian Martin Bailey claimed to have recognized more than one hundred false 'van Goghs,' among them the *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, which exists in two versions. One of these was purchased in 1990 by a Japanese industrialist for 82.5 million dollars: the highest price ever paid for a painting. The new owner then shocked the public by announcing that after his death he wanted to be burned with the picture. Out of respect for the feelings of European art lovers, he later changed his mind and decided to build a museum to house his collection. If someone should prove that the *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* is a fake, however, public interest in this painting would disappear.

It became apparent early on that the events of van Gogh's life would play a major role in the reception of his works. The first article about the painter was published in January 1890 in the *Mercure de France*. The author of the article, Albert Aurier, was in contact with a friend of van Gogh named Emile Bernard, from whom he learned the details of van Gogh's illness. At the time, van Gogh was living in a mental hospital in Saint-Rémy, near Arles. The year before, he had cut off a piece of his right ear. Without explicitly revealing these facts from the artist's life, Aurier nevertheless introduced his knowledge of the apparent insanity of the painter into his discussion of the paintings themselves. Thus, for example, he used terms like "obsessive passion"¹ and "persistent preoccupation."² Van Gogh seemed to him a "terrible and demented genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque, always at the brink of the pathological."³ Aurier regarded the painter as a "Messiah [...] who would regenerate the decrepitude of our art and perhaps of our imbecile and industrialist society."⁴

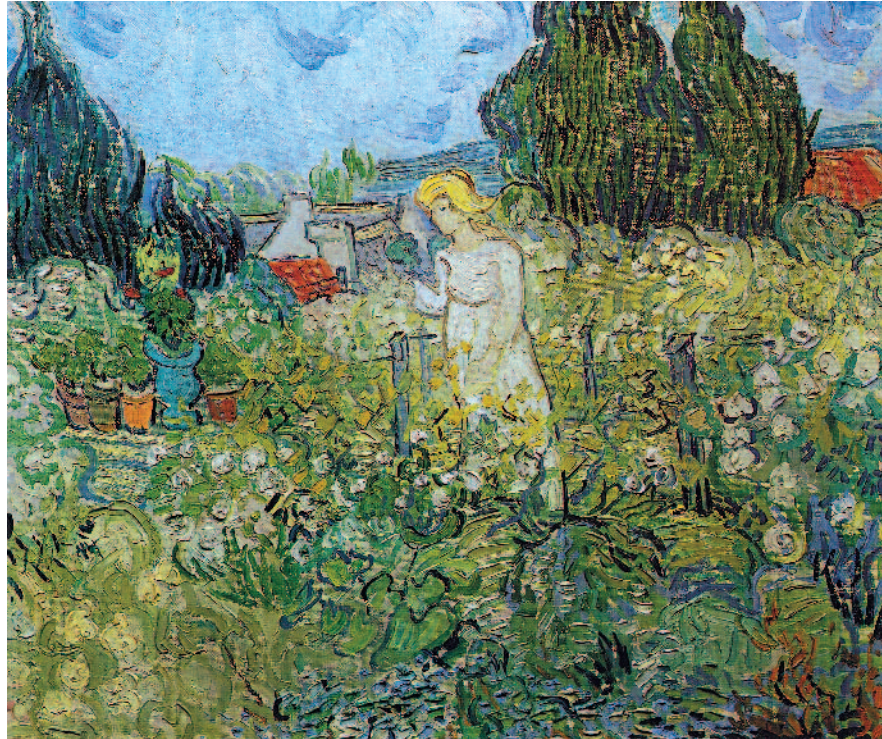
With this characterization of the artist as a mad genius, the critic laid the foundation for the van Gogh myth, which began to emerge shortly after the death of the painter. After all, Aurier did not believe that van Gogh would ever be understood by the general public: "But whatever happens,

Self-portrait as an Artist,
Paris, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 50.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Wheat Field with Crows,
Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890.
Oil on canvas, 50.5 x 103 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(pp. 8-9)







even if it became fashionable to buy his canvases – which is unlikely – at the prices of M. Meissonier’s little infamies, I don’t think that much sincerity could ever enter into that belated admiration of the general public.”⁵

A few days after van Gogh’s funeral in Auvers-sur-Oise, Dr. Gachet, who looked after the painter at the end of his life, wrote to van Gogh’s brother Theo:

This sovereign contempt for life, doubtless a result of his impetuous love of art, is extraordinary [...] If Vincent were still alive, it would take years and years until the human art triumphed. His death however, is, so to speak, the glorious result of the fight between two opposed principles: light and darkness, life and death.⁶

Van Gogh neither despised life nor was he its master. In his letters, nearly seven hundred of which have been published, he often wrote about his desire for love and safety: “I should like to be with a woman for a change, I cannot live without love, without a woman. I would not value life at all, if there were not something infinite, something deep, something real.”⁷ On several occasions he stressed that it would be “more worthwhile to make children than pictures.”⁸

Van Gogh’s rather bourgeois dreams of hearth and home never materialized. His first love, Ursula Loyer, married someone else. His cousin Kee, already a mother and widow, refused him partly for material reasons: van Gogh was unable to care for her and her child. He tried to build up a family life with the prostitute, Sien. He finally left her because his brother Theo, on whom he depended financially, wanted him to end the relationship. Van Gogh’s relationship

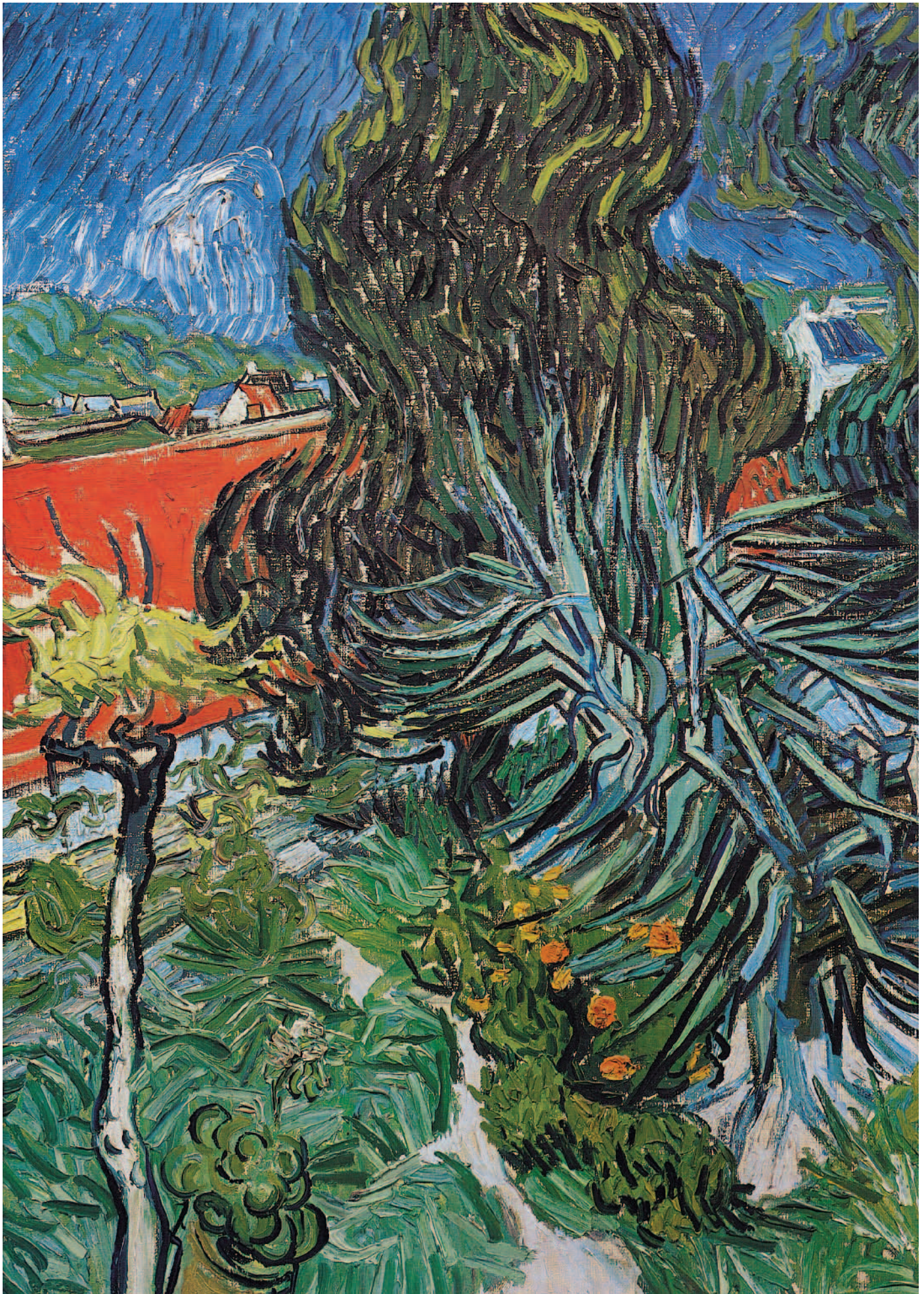
Mlle Gachet in the Garden at Auvers-sur-Oise, June 1890.
Oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm.
Musée d’Orsay, Paris.



with the twenty-one-year-old Marguerite Gachet is only known by rumour: a friend of Marguerite maintained that they had fallen in love, but the usually freethinking Dr. Gachet barred van Gogh from then on.

Van Gogh not only sought the love of women but also that of his family and friends, although he never achieved it in the measure he would have wished. Several days before his suicide, he summed up his lifelong failure to find a satisfying intimacy in the following enigmatic remark: "As through a looking glass, by a dark reason – so it has remained."⁹ The parson's son had taken his analogy from *The Excellencies of Love* in the *First Epistle to The Corinthians*: "For now we see through a glass, darkly: but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." This longing for a place in the community and the struggle for renown are two themes that can be traced throughout van Gogh's life.

Portrait of Doctor Paul Gachet,
Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890.
Oil on canvas, 68.2 x 57 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



***Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh
Auvers-sur-Oise, 28 June 1890***

My dear Theo,

You should send the enclosed order for paints at the beginning of the month, anyway at the most convenient time, there is no hurry, a few days sooner or later don't matter.

Yesterday and the day before I painted Mlle. Gachet's portrait, which I hope you will see soon; the dress is pink, the wall in the background green with orange spots, the carpet red with green spots, the piano dark violet; it is 1 metre high by 50 cm wide.

It is a figure that I painted with pleasure - but it is difficult.

He has promised to make her pose for me another time at the small organ. I will do one for you - I have noticed that this canvas goes very well with another horizontal one of wheat, as one canvas is vertical and in pink tones, the other pale green and greenish yellow, the complementary of pink; but we are still far from the time when people will understand the curious relation between one fragment of nature and another, which all the same explain each other and enhance each other. But some certainly feel it, and that's something.

And then there is this improvement, that in clothes you see combinations of very pretty light colours; if you could make the people you are walking past pose and do their portraits, it would be as pretty as any period whatever in the past, and I even think that often in nature there is actually all the grace of a picture by Puvis, between art and nature. For instance, yesterday I saw two figures: the mother in a gown of deep carmine, the daughter in pale pink with a yellow hat without any ornament, very healthy country faces, browned by fresh air, burned by the sun; the mother especially had a very, very red face and black hair and two diamonds in her ears. And I thought again of that canvas by Delacroix, "L'Éducation Maternelle." For in the expression of the faces there was really everything that there was in the head of George Sand. Do you know that there is a portrait - "Bust of George Sand" - by Delacroix, there is a wood engraving of it in L'Illustration, with short hair.

A good handshake in thought for you and Jo and good luck with the little one.

Ever yours, Vincent

[The original letter is missing; the text here is from a copy of the letter in Johanna's handwriting. The sketch Vincent drew of Mlle. Gachet at the piano, F 2049, is recorded, but its location (presumably with the rest of the original letter) is unknown. Jo's copy has just a blank rectangle in its place.]

*Dr. Paul Gachet's Garden
at Auvers-sur-Oise, May 1890.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 52 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.*



Holland, England and Belgium

1853-1886

 On March 30th, 1852, a stillborn son was born at the vicarage of Zundert, but a year later, on the same date, Anna van Gogh gave birth to a healthy boy.¹⁰ Pastor Theodorus van Gogh gave his second-born son the same name as the first: Vincent. When the second Vincent walked to his father's church to attend services, he passed by the grave where 'his' name was written on a tombstone. In the last months of his life, van Gogh reminisced about the places of his childhood and often wistfully mentioned the graveyard of Zundert.

Very little is known about van Gogh as a child. A neighbour's daughter described him as "kind-hearted, friendly, good, pitiful,"¹¹ while a former servant girl of the family reported that "Vincent had 'oarige' (funny, meaning unpleasantly eccentric) manners, and that he was often punished accordingly."¹² Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, who met her brother-in-law only a few times near the end of his life, also described him as a difficult, naughty, and obstinate child who had been spoiled by overindulgent parents.¹³

Similar inconsistencies appear in descriptions of van Gogh as an adult. Most of the descriptions were collected at the beginning of the twentieth century by van Gogh-Bonger, who took charge of van Gogh's assets after Theo's death in 1891. These accounts are somewhat dubious not only because of the distance of time, but also because the dead painter was by then already a figure of legend.

In general, van Gogh was kind and compassionate toward the poor or sick, and also to children. Another important trait that emerged early on, according to the artist's sister Elisabeth Huberta, was his close relation to nature:

He knew the places where the rarest flowers bloomed [...] as regards birds, he knew exactly where each nested or lived, and if he saw a pair of larks descend in the rye field, he knew how to approach their nest without snapping the surrounding blades or harming the birds in the least.¹⁴

In his last years, van Gogh returned to the landscapes of his childhood through painting. "The whole south, everything became Holland for him,"¹⁵ said Paul Gauguin of the paintings van Gogh made in Arles. In a letter to Emile Bernard, van Gogh compared the heath and flat landscape of the Camargue with Holland. While in the mental hospital of Saint-Rémy he wrote to Theo:

Peasant Woman with a White Bonnet,
Nuenen, February-March 1885.
Oil on canvas, 37 x 45 cm.
Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal.





Potato Planting,
Nuenen, September 1884.
Oil on canvas, 70.5 x 170 cm.
Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal.

During my illness I saw again every room in the house at Zundert, every path, every plant in the garden, the views of the fields outside, the neighbours, the graveyard, the church, our kitchen garden at the back – down to a magpie’s nest in a tall acacia in the graveyard.¹⁶

The references to nests made by both Elisabeth Huberta and by van Gogh himself suggests the extent of the importance of this image for the painter. The nest is a symbol of safety, which may explain why he called houses “human nests.”¹⁷

Van Gogh had to leave his first nest – his parents’ home – at the age of eleven. It is not clear why the elder van Gogh decided to send his son to a boarding school in Zevenbergen, some thirty kilometres from Zundert. Perhaps there was no Protestant school nearby; the neighbourhood of Zundert was almost entirely Catholic. Or perhaps the parents’ nest had simply become too small with the arrival of four more children.

It was an autumn day when I stood on the steps before Mr. Provily’s school, watching the carriage in which Pa and Ma were driving home. One could see the little yellow carriage far down the road – wet with rain and with spare trees on either side – running through the meadows.¹⁸

A few weeks before his death, van Gogh painted his memory of this farewell: a two-wheel carriage rolling through fields on a narrow path.

At the age of thirteen, Vincent went to high school in Tilburg, where the landscape painter Constantijn C. Huysmans taught him drawing. Only one of van Gogh’s works from school has been preserved: *Two Sketches of a Man Leaning on His Spade*. In all, about a dozen of van Gogh’s childhood drawings and paintings have survived. On one occasion, according to van Gogh-Bonger, the eight-year-old “had modeled a little clay elephant that drew his parents’ attention, but he destroyed it at once when, according to his notion, such a fuss was made about it.”¹⁹

Portrait of the Artist’s Mother,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 40.6 x 32.4 cm.
Norton Simon Museum of Art, Pasadena.
(Opposite)

Peasant Women in a Field,
Nieuw-Amsterdam, October 1883.
Oil on canvas, 27 x 35.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 20)

Lane of Poplars at Sunset,
Nuenen, October 1885.
Oil on canvas, 46 x 33 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(p. 21)

During his stay in Tilburg the first of two known photographs of young van Gogh was taken. It shows a soft, boyish face with very light eyes. The second portrait shows van Gogh as an earnest 19-year-old. By then, he had already been at work for three years in The Hague, at the gallery of Goupil & Co, where one of van Gogh’s uncles was a partner. Vincent reports that of the three-and-a-half years he spent in The Hague, “The first two were rather unpleasant, but the last one was much happier.”²⁰ Van Gogh’s master at Goupil’s was the 24-year-old Hermanus Gijsbertus Tersteeg, of whom the artist wrote:

I knew him during a very peculiar period of his life, when he had just ‘worked his way up,’ as the saying goes, and was newly married besides. He made a very strong impression on me then – he was a practical man, extremely clever and cheerful, energetic in both small and big undertakings; besides, there was real poetry, of the true unsentimental kind, in him. I felt such respect for him then that









I always kept at a distance, and considered him a being of a higher order than myself.²¹

Later, when van Gogh had begun his career as a painter, he would continue struggling – always in vain – to win the respect of the highly regarded dealer.

During his apprenticeship, van Gogh came into contact with the paintings of the salons and of the School of Barbizon, whose most distinguished representative, Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), became one of the most influential figures for the painter. As Goupil & Co. also sold prints, the trainee saw reproductions of many masterpieces. Here, van Gogh built his new nest: the gallery, and later the museums, became his “land of pictures.”²²

In August 1872, Theo came to see his elder brother in The Hague. During this meeting the two young men, then 19 and 15 years old, became closer in a way that changes relatives into friends. Thereafter, Vincent regarded Theo as his alter ego. Since the brothers lived most of the time in different cities – with the exception of the two years during which they shared a flat in Paris – they communicated through letters: they discussed art, argued about family problems, and gave one another advice about their illnesses and love affairs. Vincent wrote more than 600 letters to his brother for over eighteen years, who collected them faithfully. Most of these were published after van Gogh’s death. Roughly forty of Theo’s letters survived. The others were the casualties of Vincent’s frequent relocations, in which a large number of drawings and paintings were also lost.

“What pleasant days we spent together at The Hague; I think so often of that walk on the Rijswijk road, when we drank milk at the mill after the rain,”²³ van Gogh recalled wistfully in the summer of 1873. By then his training had come to an end, and the young man found himself working for Goupil’s in London:

The business here is only a stockroom, and our work is quite different from that in The Hague; but I shall probably get used to it. At six o’clock my work is already done for the day, so that I have a nice bit of time for myself, which I spend pleasantly – taking walks, reading and letter-writing.²⁴

Van Gogh forgets to write about another activity in his spare time: drawing. Ten years later, just as he was about to become an artist, he remembered: “In London how often I stood drawing on the Thames Embankment, on my way home from Southampton Street in the evening, and it came to nothing.”²⁵

His favorite reading in London was *L’Amour* by Jules Michelet: “To me the book has been both a revelation and a Gospel at the same time [...] And that man and wife can be one, that is to say, one whole and not two halves, yes, I believe that too.”²⁶ When van Gogh wrote these sentences at the end of July 1874, he had every hope that his revelation would be fulfilled. But his love for Ursula Loyer, the daughter of his landlady, ended in disaster. Seven years later van Gogh summed up the events: “I gave up a girl and she married another, and I went away, far from her, but kept her in my thoughts always. Fatal.”²⁷ This representation of the facts is dubious, at best: Eugénie

Head of a Man,
Nuenen, March-April 1885.
Oil on canvas, 44 x 32 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

was already engaged when van Gogh met her, and it was not his decision to leave London; in May 1875, he was transferred to Paris – against his will.

By this time, van Gogh had already given up his gospel of earthly love and turned instead to the love of God. His religious enthusiasm was perhaps one reason why he had to leave Goupil's in London. The business, moved into a bigger house, was no longer just a stockroom but a public gallery. And the solitary and eccentric van Gogh had difficulty pleasing the clientele. His family may also have wanted to bring an end to his 'affair' with Ursula. Van Gogh himself suspected his father and uncle of being behind the transfer. He retaliated with silence – a weapon that he came to rely on quite often in conflicts. Theo, who had taken Vincent's place in Goupil's office in The Hague, thus became the only member of the family with whom van Gogh maintained contact. The brothers continued to exchange their opinions about art.

Vincent wrote often of his visits to the Louvre, and in particular, of his passion for the paintings of Ruysdael and Rembrandt. Above all else, van Gogh was an enthusiast, not a dealer, and he had little patience for the paintings he was supposed to sell at Goupil's. His parents were informed of his failure in the business. When Vincent came home for Christmas in 1875 – clearly without having obtained permission to leave the gallery during the busiest time of the year – his father suggested that he resign. But by then it was already too late, and the gallery manager dismissed van Gogh immediately after his return to Paris.

Van Gogh decided not to return to Holland, but to go to England. He found work as an assistant teacher in Ramsgate and later as an assistant preacher in Isleworth. In October 1876 he gave his first sermon, whose central thesis was: "We are pilgrims on the earth and strangers – we come from afar and we are going far."²⁸ When he returned to Holland to join his family for Christmas, his parents had already decided to change the direction of his journey through life, by steering him into the bookstore of Pieter Kornelius Braat in Dordrecht. Vincent accepted and took a position in the accounting department of the shop. But his Bible studies continued to be his main interest. On his first Sunday in Dordrecht, van Gogh went to church twice to listen to a sermon about this verse from the first epistle to the Corinthians: "Now we look through a mirror into a dark reason, now I only know in part, but then I shall know even as also I am known myself."²⁹ In his letters to Theo, van Gogh referred to this sentence obliquely: "When we meet again, we shall be as good friends as ever; sometimes I feel so delighted that we are again living on the same soil and speaking the same language."³⁰ Before leaving Dordrecht in April 1877 – since he spent most of his nights engrossed in the Bible, he was too sleepy during the day to be of much use in the bookshop – he heard the same sermon again. In a letter to Theo, he wrote: "After church I walked along the path behind the station where we walked together; my thoughts were full of you, and I wished we might be together."³¹

Van Gogh's understanding of the biblical verse reveals his yearning to be known. This desire persisted through most of his life, manifesting itself in his friendship with Theo, in his love for Ursula Loyer or his cousin Kee, and in his attitudes about religion or art. The common thread in each of these is an intense longing to discover himself in a dialogue with others. The mercantile affairs of an art dealer or an accountant offered no such satisfaction. During his stay in Dordrecht, van Gogh finally arrived at a plan for his future: he set out to become a minister.



Head of a Woman,
The Hague, December 1882.
Lead pencil, ink and black pencil,
47.6 x 26.3 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.





The Potato Eaters,
Nuenen, 1885.
Oil on canvas, 82 x 114 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



P. C. Görlitz, van Gogh's roommate in this time, wrote of him:

He was totally different from the usual type of man. His face was ugly, his mouth more or less awry, his face was densely covered with freckles, and he had hair of a reddish hue. As I said, his face was ugly, but as soon as he spoke about religion or art, and then became excited, which was sure to happen very soon, his eyes would sparkle, and his features would make a deep impression on me; it wasn't his own face any longer: it had become beautiful [...] When he came back from his office at nine o'clock in the evening, he would immediately light a little wooden pipe; he would take down a big Bible, and sit down to read assiduously, to copy texts and to learn them by heart; he would also write all kinds of religious compositions [...] When Sunday came, van Gogh would go to church three times, either to the Roman Catholic church, or to the Protestant or Old Episcopal church, which was commonly called the Jansenist church. When once we made the remark, "But, my dear van Gogh, how is it possible that you can go to three churches of such divergent creeds?" he said, "Well, in every church I see God, and it's all the same to me whether a Protestant pastor or a Roman Catholic priest preaches; it is not really a matter of dogma, but of the spirit of the Gospel, and I find this spirit in all churches."³²

After his failure as a businessman, van Gogh hoped that his father would appreciate his decision to follow in his footsteps. But vicar van Gogh viewed his eldest son's enthusiasm for religion critically: Vincent's belief in the "spirit of the Gospel" deviated from the teachings of the Church. Nevertheless, he asked his brothers Cornelius and Jan, who lived in Amsterdam, to help the young man. Both uncles agreed to support their nephew: one promised to give him money, the other board and lodging.

In May 1877, van Gogh began to prepare himself for university. Since he had left school at the age of fifteen, he had to study mathematics and ancient languages before entering the academy. His language teacher, Mendes da Costa, described his student:

I succeeded in winning his confidence and friendship very soon, which was so essential in this case: and as his studies were prompted by the best of intentions, we made comparatively good progress at the beginning [...]; but after a short time the Greek verbs became too much for him. However I might set about it, whatever trick I might invent to enliven the lessons, it was no use. – 'Mendes', he would say [...] 'do you seriously believe that such horrors are indispensable to a man who wants to do what I want to do: give peace to poor creatures and reconcile them to their existence on earth?'³³

Van Gogh stayed less than one year in Amsterdam before abandoning his studies. He did not lack talent: van Gogh spoke a couple of languages; read German books; and wrote his letters in English and French. But he was impatient: he didn't want to meditate on the Gospel; he wanted to live it.

Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen, Nuenen, October 1884.
Oil on canvas, 41.5 x 32 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(Opposite)

Still Life with a Basket of Apples, Nuenen, September 1885.
Oil on canvas, 33 x 43.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 28)

Avenue of Poplars in Autumn, Nuenen, October 1884.
Oil on canvas on wood, 98.5 x 66 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 29)





He travelled to Brussels to begin training at a mission school. Three months later, he left the school and applied for a job as a preacher in the Borinage, a Belgian mining area. In January 1879, he found a temporary post that might have been renewed, had an inspector of the Comité d'Évangélisation not discovered that the new preacher took the Bible more literally than the authorities of the church.

Vicar Bonte, who also worked in the neighbourhood, reported:

He felt obliged to imitate the early Christians, to sacrifice all he could live without, and he wanted to be even more destitute than the majority of the miners to whom he preached the Gospel. I must add that also his Dutch cleanliness was singularly abandoned; soap was banished as a wicked luxury; and when our evangelist was not wholly covered with a layer of coal dust, his face was usually dirtier than that of the miners. [...] He no longer felt any inducement to care for his own well-being – his heart had been aroused by the sight of others' want. He preferred to go to the unfortunate, the wounded, the sick, and always stayed with them a long time; he was willing to make any sacrifice to relieve their sufferings.³⁴

After he 'failed' as a preacher, van Gogh broke with the church, which was, in his opinion, dominated by Christian conventions instead of a Christ-like love for mankind. This rupture also sent ripples through his relationship with his father, who threatened to have his son committed to the mental hospital in Gheel.³⁵

After his father's death in 1885, van Gogh expressed his resentment against father and church in two still lifes: one shows his father's pipe and tobacco pouch lying next to a vase with a bouquet of flowers, known in Holland as *Silver of Judas*. The second composition depicts a large, open Bible next to a small, well-thumbed copy of Zola's *Joie de Vivre* – '*The Joy of Life*'. Vicar van Gogh disapproved of his son's preference for contemporary French literature, which was, in his opinion, depraved. The Bible in the painting is opened to the Book of Isaiah, chapter 53: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

The correspondence between autumn 1879 and spring 1880 is full of gaps. Van Gogh remained in the Borinage, where he spent most of his time drawing. He had already started to make sketches in Brussels and during his time as a preacher: "Often I draw far into the night, to keep some souvenir and to strengthen the thoughts raised involuntarily by the aspect of things here."³⁶

For his parents' sake, van Gogh tried to cloak his artistic aspirations in the more sensible garb of a bourgeois professional, like a printer or technical draughtsman. He told his mother that he wanted to draw costumes and machines. In his letters to Theo, he was more candid:

On the other hand, you would also be mistaken if you thought that I would do well to follow your advice literally to become an engraver of bill headings and visiting cards, [...] But, you say, I do not expect

The Weaver,
Nuenen, February 1884.
Oil on canvas, 36.6 x 45 cm.
Private collection.
(Opposite)

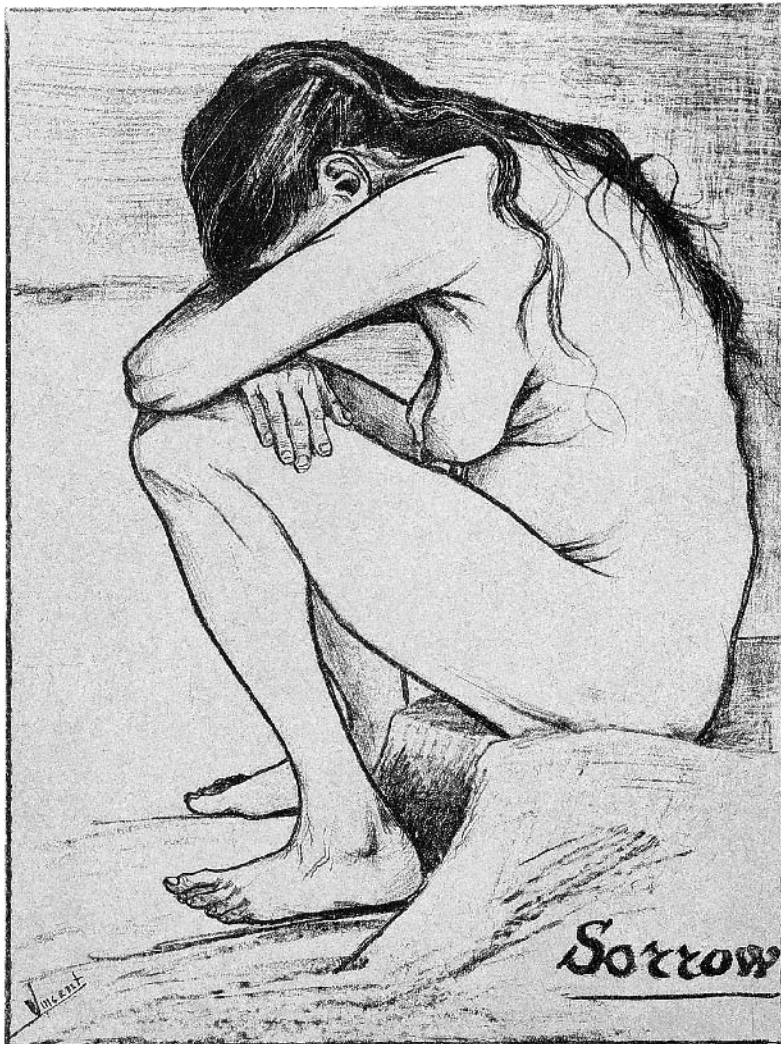


The Cottage,
Nuenen, 1885.
Oil on canvas, 65.5 x 79 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.









you take that advice literally; I was just afraid you were too fond of spending your days in idleness, and I thought you had to put an end to it. May I observe that this is a rather strange sort of 'idleness'. It is somewhat difficult for me to defend myself, but I should be very sorry if, sooner or later, you could not see it differently.³⁷

Van Gogh compared his unproductive period with a bird's change of feathers:

As the moulting time [...] is for birds, so adversity or misfortune is the difficult time for us human beings. One can stay in it – in that time of moulting – one can also emerge renewed; but anyhow it must not be done in public and it is not at all amusing, therefore the only thing to do is to hide oneself. Well, so be it.³⁸

The 'renewed' van Gogh made two important decisions: first, he resolved to determine the course of his life entirely on his own and not to seek his family's advice; second, he set out to put his passions to good use:

Woman ("Sien") Seated near the Stove,
The Hague, March-April 1882.

Pencil, pen and brush in black ink
(faded to brown in parts) and white
opaque watercolour on laid paper
(two sheets), 50 x 61 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(Opposite)

Sorrow,
The Hague, November 1882.
Lithograph, 38.9 x 29.2 cm.
Private collection.



When I was in other surroundings, in the surroundings of pictures and works of art, you know how violent a passion I had for them, reaching the highest pitch of enthusiasm. And I am not sorry about it, for even now, far from that land, I am often homesick for the land of pictures.³⁹

Homesick for the world of art, van Gogh moved to Brussels in October 1880. He began to study with reproductions and models: "There are laws of proportions, of light and shadow, of perspective, which one must know in order to be able to draw well; without that knowledge, it always remains a fruitless struggle, and one never creates anything."⁴⁰ Though his father disapproved of his decision, he supported his son financially. Theo, who by that time had begun working in Goupil's branch in Paris, also sent him money.

In the spring of 1881, to reduce his expenses, van Gogh moved to the vicarage in Etten, where his father had been working for some time. The young painter did not suffer from material wants, but his family neither understood nor supported his ideas:

Peasant Woman in a White Bonnet,
Nuenen,
December 1884-January 1885.
Lead pencil and charcoal,
33.6 x 20.9 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Girl in a Wood,
The Hague, August 1882.
Oil on paper mounted on canvas,
39 x 59 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo.

Beach at Scheveningen,
The Hague, August 1882.
Oil on canvas, 34.5 x 51 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(pp. 38-39)







Father and Mother are very good to me in that they do everything to feed me well, etc. Of course I appreciate it very much, but it cannot be denied that food and drink and sleep are not enough for a man, that he longs for something nobler and higher – aye, he positively cannot do without it.⁴¹

At this time, “something nobler and higher” meant, first of all, not the artistic work, but his love for his cousin Kee. Although she had resisted his advances, he continued trying to win her heart. His family was ashamed by his persistence, and openly criticized his passion. After a particularly heated argument during the Christmas holidays in 1881, the pastor ordered his wayward son to leave.

Two years later Vincent returned to the family nest for the last time. With this final break, he abandoned the family name, and began signing his canvases simply ‘Vincent.’ The event that precipitated the rupture was van Gogh’s decision to take up residence in The Hague with the prostitute Christina Hoornik, also called Sien. In May 1882 he wrote to Theo:

Last winter I met a pregnant woman, deserted by a man whose child she carried. A pregnant woman who had to walk the streets in winter, had to earn her bread, you understand how. I took this woman for a model, and I have worked with her all the winter. I could not pay her the full wages of a model, but that did not prevent my paying her rent, and thank God, so far I have been able to protect her and her child from hunger and cold by sharing my own bread with her.⁴²

The compassion he felt for the pregnant woman was coupled with his longing to have a nest: “I have a feeling of being at home when I am with her, as though she gives me my own hearth, a feeling that our lives are interwoven.”⁴³

The family reacted with reproaches, exhortations, and threats. Once again, the familiar pattern recurs: van Gogh’s parents could not understand the behaviour of their son, but they cared about his well-being. In the winter of 1883 they sent him a package of clothes which included a woman’s coat. For some time van Gogh had been dependent on people who did not accept him, a paradox which prompted him to think at length about the relationship between art and money. He wrote to Theo: “I will succeed in earning money to keep myself, not in luxury, but as one who eats his bread in the sweat of his brow.”⁴⁴ In the years to come, van Gogh would defend the artist as a productive, and therefore respectable, member of society. He began sending Theo some of his pictures in exchange for the money he sent; in this way Theo became his employer rather than his patron.

In The Hague, van Gogh focused on figurative drawing. Sien was his most important model: “I find in her exactly what I want: her life has been rough, and sorrow and adversity have put their marks upon her – now I can do something with her.”⁴⁵ Van Gogh’s conception of women was quite far removed from the classical ideal of beauty. On one occasion, he expressed his opinion in these terms:

Woman with a Broom,
Nuenen, March-April 1885.
Oil on canvas, 41 x 27 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(Opposite)



The Farm,
The Hague, September 1883.
Oil on canvas on wood, 28.5 x 39.5 cm.
Private collection.



*The Old Cemetery Tower in Nuenen in
the Snow Storm, Nuenen, January 1885.*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 41.5 cm.
Collection of Stavros S. Niarchos, London.



The Parsonage Garden at Nuenen in the Snow, Nuenen, 1885.

Oil on canvas, 53 x 78 cm.

The Armand Hammer Museum of Art, Los Angeles.

Woman Seated,

The Hague, early May 1882.

Pencil, pen and brush in ink (diluted), wash, traces of squaring, on laid paper (two sheets), 58 x 43 cm.

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

(Opposite)

Uncle Cor asked me today if I didn't like *Phryne* by Gérôme. I told him that I would rather see a homely woman by Israëls or Millet, or an old woman by Edouard Frère: for what's the use of a beautiful body such as Phryne's? Animals have it too, perhaps even more than men; but the soul, as it lives in the people painted by Israëls or Millet or Frère, that is what animals never have. Is not life given to us to become richer in spirit, even though the outward appearance may suffer?⁴⁶

For some time van Gogh served as an apprentice to the painter Anton Mauve. There, he started to paint with oil colours. His major motifs involved people: "I am decidedly not a landscape painter; when I make landscapes, there will always be something of the figure in them."⁴⁷ The comparison between the drawings *Sorrow*, a crouched nude, and *Les Racines*, the roots of a tree, tells us something of what he has in mind:

I tried to put the same sentiment into the landscape as into the figure: the convulsive, passionate clinging to the earth, and yet being half torn up by a storm. I wanted to express something of the struggle for life in that pale, slender woman's figure, as well as in the black, gnarled and knotty roots.⁴⁸







When Mauve discovered that van Gogh was living together with Sien, he cancelled the contact. Tersteeg, van Gogh's former master, sought to pressure him by asking Theo to stop the financial support. The painter was largely isolated in The Hague, and his relations with Sien became increasingly strained as money grew tight. During a visit, Theo convinced Vincent to abandon the relationship.

At the end of 1883, van Gogh joined his parents, who had moved to Etten, near Eindhoven. The return of the prodigal son was not a success:

I am sick at heart about the fact that, coming back after two years' absence, the welcome home was kind and cordial in every respect, but basically there has been no change whatever, not the slightest, in what I must call the most extreme blindness and ignorance as to the insight into our mutual position.⁴⁹

Because his family was unable to understand him – to know him – van Gogh severed the connection.

They have the same dread of taking me in the house as they would about taking a big rough dog. He would run into the room with wet paws – and he is so rough. He will be in everybody's way. And he barks so loud. In short, he is a foul beast. [...] And I, admitting that I am a kind of dog, leave them alone.⁵⁰

Woman Shelling Peas,
Nuenen, summer 1885.
Charcoal, 42 x 26 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(Opposite)

Peasant Burning Weeds,
Drente, October 1883.
Oil on wood, 30.5 x 39.5 cm.
Private collection.

Van Gogh has often been criticized because of his appearance and his manners. He confesses that, in some periods of his life, he had neglected his clothes in order to ensure his solitude. He left the vicarage and rented rooms in the home of a Catholic sexton. When he visited his father's house for a meal, he sat away from the family table: "I consciously choose the dog's path through life; I will remain the dog, I shall be poor, I shall be a painter, I want to remain human – going into nature."⁵¹

In the summer of 1884, van Gogh met Margot Begemann, a neighbour's daughter. The 43-year-old woman fell in love with the 31-year-old, who, as he stressed to Theo, had feelings of friendship for her and respected her "on a certain point that would have dishonoured her socially."⁵² He noticed "certain symptoms" in her behaviour, and so wrote to his brother that:

I was afraid that she would get brain fever, and that I was sorry to state that, in my eyes, the Begemann family acted extremely imprudently in speaking to her the way they did. This had no effect, at least no other than that they told me to wait two years, which I decidedly refused to do, saying that if there was a question of marriage, it had to be soon or not at all.⁵³

At the beginning of September, Margot attempted suicide. Van Gogh rescued her by making her vomit the poison she had taken. He reported this incident "which hardly anybody here knows, or suspects, or may ever know,"⁵⁴ to Theo. Defamation and the family's pressure were, in van Gogh's view, the reasons behind the suicide attempt: "But for heaven's sake, what is the meaning of that standing and of that religion which the respectable people maintain? – oh, they are perfectly absurd, making society a kind of lunatic asylum, a perfectly topsy-turvy world – oh, that mysticism."⁵⁵ Four years later, van Gogh was to suffer his own crisis, a despair which would drive him to attempt suicide. Unlike Margot, however, he would not be rescued.

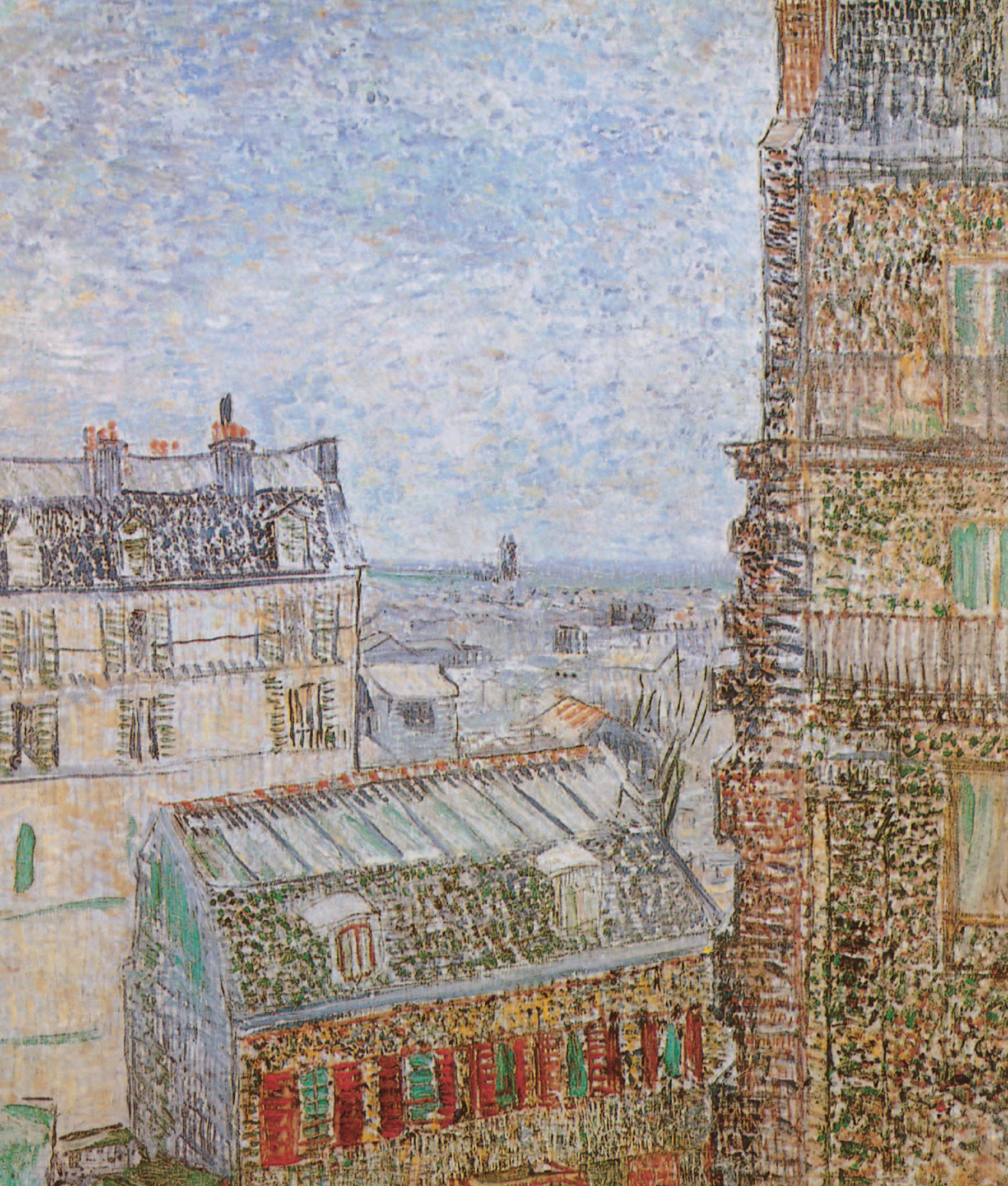
Van Gogh's artistic work in Nuenen is dominated by one central motif: the working man. The painter went into the fields and drew women digging out potatoes. He also sketched the weavers. In April 1885, he worked on the oil painting *The Potato Eaters*, which today is considered to be his first masterpiece. He described the picture to Theo:

I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor, and how honestly they earned their food. I wanted to give the impression of a way of life quite different from that of us civilized people. Therefore I am not at all anxious for everyone to like it or to admire it at once.⁵⁶

In his letters, van Gogh stressed again and again his appreciation for the life of peasants and workers. However, as in the Borinage, he longed for the land of pictures. In November 1885, he moved to Antwerp to join the Academy of Art. But he stayed there for only a short time. Four months later he left for Paris; he never returned to Holland. He declared later that he hadn't become an adventurer by choice "but by fate, and feeling nowhere so much myself a stranger as in my family and country."⁵⁷

The State Lottery,
The Hague, September 1882.
Watercolour, 38 x 57 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(Opposite)





Paris 1886-1888

Van Gogh had been living in the French capital for nearly half a year when he wrote to Horace M. Levens, an English painter he had met in Antwerp: "And mind my dear fellow, Paris is Paris. There is but one Paris and however hard living may be here, and if it became worse and harder even – the French air clears up the brain and does you good – a world of good."⁵⁸

He had arrived unexpectedly in March 1886. He immediately sent a note to his brother at the gallery: "My dear Theo, Do not be cross with me for having come all at once like this: I have thought about it so much, and I believe that in this way we shall save time. Shall be at the Louvre from midday on or sooner if you like."⁵⁹

Van Gogh stayed in the capital of the nineteenth century for two years. Because he was living with his most significant correspondent, this chapter of his life is poorly documented. The cohabitation of the two brothers was not without its conflicts. "There was a time, where I thought much of Vincent and where he was my best friend, but this is over now," complains Theo to his sister Willemien.

From his point of view it seems to be even worse, because he doesn't miss an occasion to let me know that he despises and detests me. For that reason, my home has become intolerable. No one comes to see me anymore because of his reproaches, and also because the house is so dirty that it is not very inviting.⁶⁰

The brothers eventually overcame this crisis and drew closer than ever before. After Vincent's departure, Theo again wrote to his sister: "It is unbelievable, how much he knows and what a bright view he has upon the world [...] Through him I got in contact with many painters who worship him a lot [...] Anyway, he has got such a big heart that he is always longing to do something for other people."⁶¹

Vincent opened his brother's eyes not only to new painters and paintings, but also to the world of music:

Though I don't know much about it, I like to listen to music, but here one can seldom hear something good without going to concerts. But before Vincent left, I sometimes went with him to a Wagner concert, and we both liked it a lot. It is disconcerting for me, that he is gone; at the end he was so much to me.⁶²

*View from Vincent's Window
(Lepic Street), Paris, spring 1887.
Oil on cardboard, 46 x 38 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(Opposite)*





The Moulin de la Galette,
Paris, autumn 1886.
Oil on canvas, 38.5 x 46 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

Van Gogh continued to study the French literature that had excited him for such a long time: "The work of the French naturalists, Zola, Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, de Goncourt, Richépin, Daudet, Huysmans, is magnificent, and one can hardly be said to belong to one's time if one has paid no attention to it."⁶³

To van Gogh, Paris offered a time for reflection and a time for painting. It was there that he first saw the Impressionist canvases of which Theo had written so often. He found work in the studio of Fernand Cormon, whose liberal way of teaching and disdain for the beaten track of the salons attracted many young painters. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Emile Bernard also worked in Cormon's studio, and both befriended van Gogh. Another student, François Gauzi, recalled:

When van Gogh entered the Cormon atelier, he wanted to be called only by his first name, and for a long time we didn't know his real last name.

He was an excellent companion who had to be left in peace [...] When discussing 'art', if one disagreed with him and pushed him to the limit, he would flare up in a disturbing way [...] He worked with a disorderly fury, throwing colours on the canvas with feverish speed. He gathered up the colour as though with a shovel, and the gobs of paint, covering the length of the paintbrush, stuck to his fingers. When the model rested, he didn't stop painting. The violence of his study surprised the atelier; the classically-oriented remained bewildered by it.⁶⁴

Even more than the studio, the colour store of Julien Tanguy fascinated the young painter. Over his wife's protests, the proprietor occasionally let his customers pay for their supplies with paintings. Tanguy's store thus became something of a gallery where the painters met to see the work of their colleagues. It was here that van Gogh came to know Paul Gauguin, whose paintings he greatly admired.

The Scottish painter Archibald Standish Hartrick offers this impression of the conversations in Père Tanguy's store:

Portrait of Père Tanguy,
Paris, winter 1887-1888.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 51 cm.
Collection of Stavros S. Niarchos, London.
(Opposite)

The Seine with the Pont de la Grande Jatte, Paris, summer 1887.
Oil on canvas, 32 x 40.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 56)

Shed with Sunflowers,
Paris, summer 1887.
Pen, pencil and watercolour,
30.5 x 23.9 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 57)

[Van Gogh] was particularly pleased with a theory that the eye carried a portion of the last sensation it had enjoyed into the next, so that something of both must be included in every picture made. The difficulty was to decide what were the proper sensations so coloured to combine together. An obvious instance of this sort of idea will be found in the fact that the entering of a lamplit room out of the night increases the orange effect of the light, and in the contrary case, the blue. Hence to depict it properly, according to the theory, it was necessary in the former case to include some blue into the picture and in the latter some orange. Van Gogh would roll his eyes and hiss through his teeth with gusto, as he brought out the words 'blue', 'orange' – complementary colours of course.⁶⁵

The effects of colour also prompted van Gogh's interest in the Japanese woodcuts he had first encountered in Antwerp. He had a sizable collection of these prints in Paris, and organised an









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exhibition of them in the café Tambourin that aroused considerable interest among his contemporaries. A show of his own works ended, however, with trouble: the landlady of the Tambourin refused to return the paintings because van Gogh had not paid his bills in the café. The self-portrait was the main subject of van Gogh's work from 1886 to 1888. In one canvas, he represents himself as a painter with brush and palette.

In the Paris that he once called a "spreading of ideas,"⁶⁶ he found his way. In the summer of 1887, he wrote to his sister Willemien:

In every man who is healthy and natural there is a germinating force as in a grain of wheat. And so natural life is germination. What the germinating force is in the grain of wheat, love is in us [...] My own adventures are restricted chiefly to making swift progress toward growing into a little old man, you know, with wrinkles, and a tough beard and a number of false teeth, and so on. But what does it matter? I have a dirty and hard profession – painting – and if I were not what I am, I should not paint; but being what I am, I often work with pleasure, and in the hazy distance I see the possibility of making pictures in which there will be some youth and freshness, even though my own youth is one of the things I have lost [...] It is my intention as soon as possible to go temporarily to the South, where there is even more colour, even more sun. But the thing I hope to achieve is to paint a good portrait. But never mind.⁶⁷

Japonaiserie: Flowering Plum Tree (after Hiroshige), Paris, 1887.
Oil on canvas, 55 x 46 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(Opposite)

The Courtesan (after Eisen),
Paris, 1887.
Oil on canvas, 105.5 x 60.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Nude Woman Reclining, Seen from the Back, Paris, first half of 1887.
Oil on canvas, 38 x 61 cm.
Private collection.



***Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh
Paris, c. 1 March 1886***

My dear Theo,

Don't be angry with me for arriving out of the blue. I've given it so much thought and I'm sure we'll gain time this way. Shall be at the Louvre from midday onwards, or earlier if you like.

Please let me know what time you can get to the Salle Carrée. As far as expenses are concerned, I repeat that it won't make much difference. I still have some money left, of course, and I want to talk to you before spending any of it. We'll sort everything out, you'll see.

So come as soon as you can. I shake your hand,

Ever yours, Vincent

[Vincent had arrived unexpectedly in Paris from Antwerp, scribbled this note in French with a piece of black crayon at the station and sent it to Theo by a porter. Theo had wanted him to wait till June, when he could rent a larger apartment. He stayed with Theo in the Rue de Laval, and moved with him in June to the Rue Lepic, in Montmartre.]

Still Life with a Plaster Statuette, Paris,
late 1887.
Oil on canvas.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(Opposite)

The Moulin de la Galette,
Paris, autumn 1886.
Oil on canvas, 55 x 38.5 cm.
Collection of Charles W. Engelhard.
(p. 64)

A Pair of Shoes, Paris, early 1887.
Oil on canvas, 34 x 41.5 cm.
Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore.
(p. 65)









Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Mr. Levens Paris, Aug-Oct. 1886

[Letter written in English by Vincent van Gogh to the English painter Horace M. Levens, whom he had met in Antwerp. The text is reproduced without alterations.]

Paris, Aug-Oct. 1887

My dear Mr. Levens,

Since I am here in Paris I have very often thought of yourself and work. You will remember that I liked your colour, your ideas on art and literature and I add, most of all your personality. I have already before now thought that I ought to let you know what I was doing, where I was. But what refrained me was that I find living in Paris is much dearer than in Antwerp and not knowing what your circumstances are I dare not say, come over to Paris from Antwerp without warning you that it costs one dearer, and that if poor, one has to suffer many things - as you may imagine. But on the other hand there is more chance of selling. There is also a good chance of exchanging pictures with other artists. In one word, with much energy, with a sincere personal feeling of colour in nature I would say an artist can get on here notwithstanding the many obstructions. And I intend remaining here still longer. There is much to be seen here - for instance Delacroix, to name only one master. In Antwerp I did not even know what the impressionists were, now I have seen them and though not being one of the club yet I have much admired certain impressionists' pictures - Degas nude figure - Claude Monet landscape.

And now for what regards what I myself have been doing, I have lacked money for paying models else I had entirely given myself to figure painting. But I have made a series of colour studies in painting, simply flowers, red poppies, blue corn flowers and myosotys, white and rose roses, yellow chrysanthemums-seeking oppositions of blue with orange, red and green, yellow and violet seeking les tons rompus et neutres to harmonise brutal extremes. Trying to render intense colour and not a grey harmony. Now alter these gymnastics I lately did two heads which I dare say are better in light and colour than those I did before.

So as we said at the time: in colour seeking life the true drawing is modelling with colour.

I did a dozen landscapes too, frankly green frankly blue.

*Agostina Segatori Sitting in the Cafe
Tambourin, Paris, 1887.*

*Oil on canvas, 55.5 x 46.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(Opposite)*

*Cineraria in a Flowerpot,
Paris, July-August 1886.
Oil on canvas, 54.5 x 46 cm.
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen,
Rotterdam.
(p. 68)*

*Sunflowers, Roses and Other Flowers in
a Bowl, Paris, August-September 1886.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 61 cm.
Kunsthalle, Mannheim.
(p. 69)*









And so I am struggling for life and progress in art.

Now I would very much like to know what you are doing and whether you ever think of going to Paris.

If ever you did come here, write to me before and I will, if you like, share my lodgings and studio with you so long as I have any. In spring - say February or even sooner I may be going to the South of France, the land of the blue tones and gay colours.

And look here, if I knew you had longings for the same we might combine.

I felt sure at the time that you are a thorough colourist and since I saw the impressionists I assure you that neither your colour nor mine as it is developing itself, is exactly the same as their theories. But so much dare I say we have a chance and a good one finding friends. I hope your health is all-right. I was rather low down in health when in Antwerp but got better here.

Write to me in any case. Remember me to Allen, Briet, Rink, Durant but I have not often thought of them as I did think of you - almost daily.

Shaking hands cordially. Yours truly Vincent

My present address is

Mr. Vincent van Gogh

54 Rue Lepic, Paris.

With regard my chances of sale look here, they are certainly not much but still I do have a beginning.

At the present moment I have found four dealers who have exhibited studies of mine. And I have exchanged studies with many artists.

Street Scene in Montmartre: Le Moulin à Poivre, Paris, February-March 1887.
 Oil on canvas, 35 x 64.5 cm.
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
 (pp. 70-71)

The Moulin de la Galette,
 Paris, 1886-1888.
 Oil on canvas, 47 x 39 cm.
 Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.
 (Opposite)





*Fishing in Spring, the Pont de Clichy
(Asnières), Paris, spring 1887.*

Oil on canvas, 49 x 58 cm.

The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

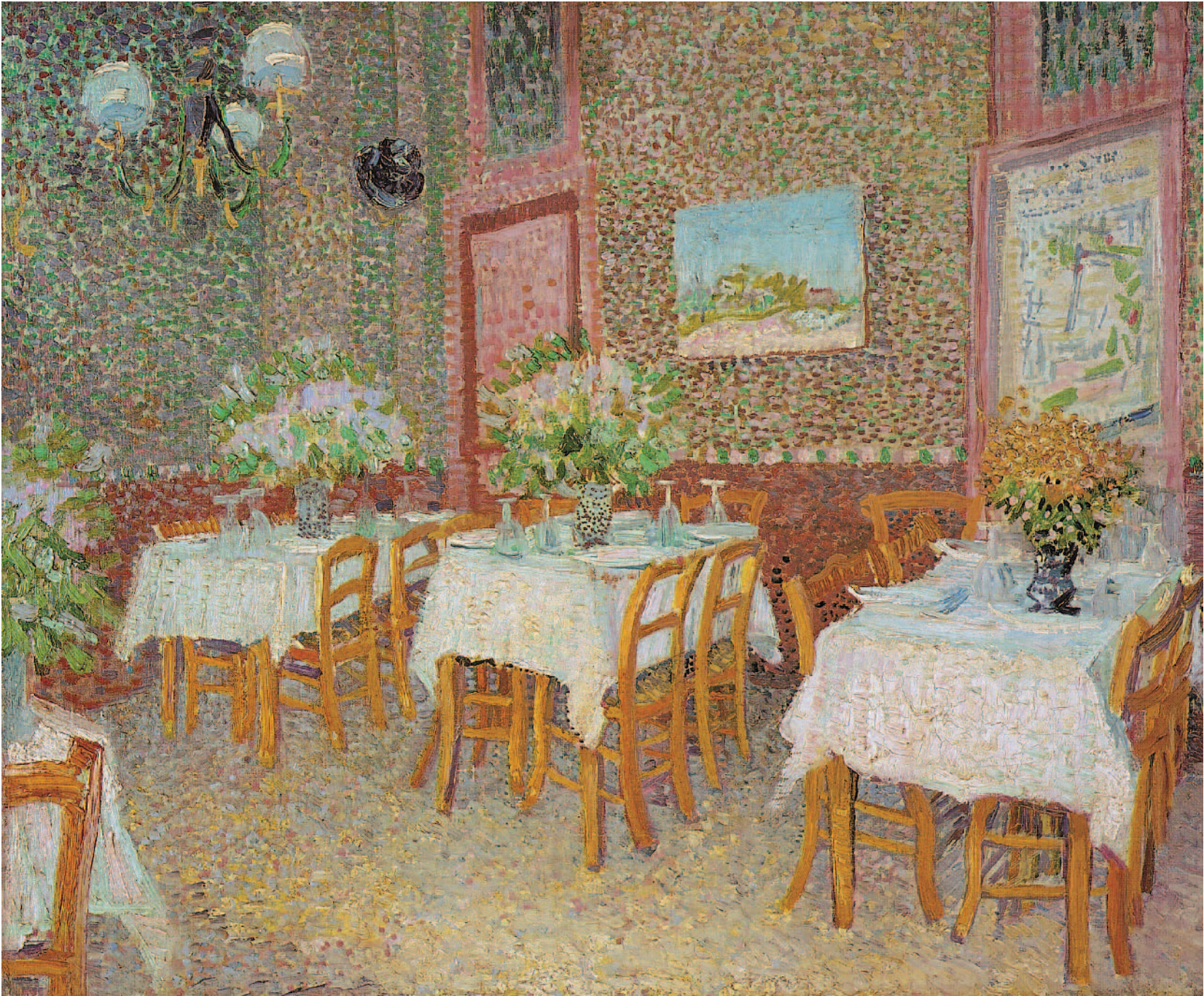


*Vegetable Gardens and the Moulin de
Blute-Fin on Montmartre,
Paris, February-March 1887.
Oil on canvas, 44.8 x 81 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.*





The Pit, the Mills at Montmartre,
Paris, autumn 1888.
Oil on canvas, 56 x 62.5 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.



Now the prices are 50 francs. Certainly not much - but - as far as I can see one must sell cheap to rise and even at costing price. And mind my dear fellow, Paris is Paris. There is but one Paris and however hard living may be here, and if it became worse and harder even - the french air clears up the brain and does good - a world of good. I have been in Cormons studio for three or four months but I did not find that so useful as I had expected it to be. It may be my fault however, anyhow I left there too as I left Antwerp and since I worked alone, and fancy that since I feel my own self more.

Trade is slow here. The great dealers sell Millet, Delacroix, Corot, Daubigny, Dupré, a few other masters at exorbitant prices. They do little or nothing for young artists. The second class dealers on the contrary sell those at very low prices. If I asked more I would do nothing, I fancy. However I have faith in colour. Even with regards the price the public will pay for it in the long run. But for the present things are awfully hard. Therefore let anyone who risks to go over here consider there is no laying on roses at all.

What is to be gained is progress and what the deuce that is, it is to be found here. I dare say as certain anyone who has a solid position elsewhere let him stay where he is. But for adventurers as myself, I think they lose nothing in risking more. Especially as in my case I am not an adventurer by choice but by fate, and feeling nowhere so much myself a stranger as in my family and country. - Kindly remember me to your landlady Mrs Roosmalen and say her that if she will exhibit something of my work I will send her a small picture of mine.

[According to John Rewald of New York, this letter was first published in the Sunday Times, London, February 17, 1929 (ed. F.V. Lucas). Levens painted mainly "farmyards." The letter was written in 1886 (not 1887).]

Interior of a Restaurant,
Paris, summer 1887.
Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 56.5 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(Opposite)

Still Life with Books (Parisian Novels),
Paris, autumn 1887.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 93 cm.
Holmes à Court Gallery, East Perth.
(p. 80)

Vase with Gladioli,
Paris, late summer 1886.
Oil on canvas, 48.5 x 40 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 81)







Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh Paris, Summer 1887

My dear friend,

Enclosed is a letter which arrived yesterday, but which the concierge didn't give me straight away. I've been to the Tambourin, since if I hadn't gone, they would have thought I was afraid. And I told la Segatori that I wouldn't pass judgement on her in this matter, but that it was for her to judge herself. That I had torn up the receipt for the pictures - but that she had to return everything. That if she had not had a hand in what had happened to me, she would have seen me the next day. That as she didn't come to see me, my feeling was that she knew they were trying to pick a quarrel with me, but that she had tried to warn me by saying, "Go away," which I hadn't understood, and furthermore, perhaps didn't want to understand.

To which she replied that the pictures, & all the rest, were at my disposal. She maintained that it was I who had tried to pick a quarrel - which doesn't surprise me - knowing that if she sided with me they would take it out on her. I also saw the waiter when I went in, but he made himself scarce. I didn't want to take the pictures immediately, but I said that when you returned we would discuss the matter because these pictures belong to you as much as to me, and in the meantime I advised her to think about what had happened again. She didn't look well and was white as a sheet, which isn't a good sign. She didn't know that the waiter had gone up to your place. If that's true, I would be more inclined to believe she had tried to warn me they were trying to pick a quarrel with me than that she had plotted the whole thing herself. She cannot do as she likes. I'm awaiting your return now before taking any action. I've done two pictures since you left. Have only got two louis left and I'm afraid I don't know how I'm going to manage from now until your return.

Don't forget that when I started working at Asnières I had plenty of canvases and Tanguy was very good to me. In fact he still is, but his old witch of a wife realized what was going on and complained. So I gave Tanguy's wife a piece of my mind and told her that it was her fault if I didn't buy anything more from them. Old man Tanguy is sensible enough to keep quiet, and will do whatever I want anyway. But with all this, work isn't easy. I saw Lautrec today; he's sold a picture, through Portier I think. A watercolour of Mme. Mesdag's has arrived which I find very beautiful.

Now I hope you'll enjoy your trip over there; remember me to my mother, to Cor & to Wil. And if you could manage, by sending me something again, to ensure that I don't have too hard a time from now until you get back, then I shall try to do some more pictures for you - as I'm really very happy as far as my work goes. What worried me a little about this business was that it looked a little cowardly not going there, to the Tambourin. And my peace of mind has been restored by my going there.

I shake your hand,

Vincent

*Portrait of Père Tanguy,
Paris, 1887.
Oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.
(Opposite)*

*Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Emile Bernard
Paris, Fall 1887*

My dear Bernard,

I feel impelled to apologize to you for having left you so abruptly the other day. So I do so herewith without delay. I recommend to you to read Tolstoi's Russian Legends, and I shall also let you have the article on Eug. Delacroix I spoke of.

All the same, I myself went to see Guillaumin, but in the evening, and I thought that perhaps you did not know his address, which is 13 Quai d'Anjou. I believe that Guillaumin as a human being has sounder ideas than the others, and if all were like him they would produce more good things, and would have less time and inclination to fight each other so furiously.

I persist in believing, not because I have given you a piece of my mind, but because it will become your own conviction too - I persist in believing that you will discover that in the studios one not only does not learn much about painting, but not even much good about the art of living; and that one finds oneself forced to learn how to live in the same way one must learn to paint, without having recourse to the old tricks and eye-deceiving devices of intriguers.

I do not think your self-portrait will be either your last or your best, although on the whole it is terribly you.

*Listen now, what I tried to explain to you the other day amounts roughly to this. In order to avoid generalizations, allow me to take an example borrowed from reality. If you have quarreled with a painter, and consequently say, "If Signac exhibits in the place where I exhibit, I shall withdraw my pictures," and if you slander him, then it seems to me that you are not acting as well as you might. For it is better to look at things for a long time before judging so categorically, and to think things over; for in case of a quarrel, reflection shows us as many wrongs on our own part as on the other's - and that the latter has as much *raison d'être* as we would claim for our own.*

So if you have already thought that Signac and others who use pointillism quite often do very fine things for all that, instead of slandering them you must respect them and speak sympathetically of them, especially if there has been a quarrel. Otherwise one becomes a sectarian, narrow-minded self, and the equal of those who utterly despise all others and believe themselves to be the only just ones.

This even extends as far as the academicians; take, for example, a picture by Fantin-Latour, especially his work as a whole. Well, here is one who never revolted, but does this prevent him from having that something, whatever it may be, of calm and fairness that makes him one of the most independent characters alive?

Furthermore I wanted to say a few words about the military service which you will have to perform. From now on you must absolutely attend to that - directly in order to find out in the first place what steps can be taken in such a case to safeguard your right to work, to be able to choose your garrison, etc., but indirectly in order to take care of your health. You must not go there in too anemic or enervated a condition, if you set a value on coming out of it stronger.

I do not consider it a great misfortune for you to be obliged to be a soldier, but rather as a very serious trial from which you will emerge - if you emerge at all - a very great artist.

Until then do your utmost to fortify yourself, for you will need plenty of vigour. If you work a lot during that year, I think you might end up by having a certain stock of pictures, some of which we shall try to sell for you, as we know you will need ready money to pay for models.

I shall be glad to do all I can to make a success of what we began in the cafe, but I think that the primary condition on which success depends is to set aside all petty jealousies, for only union is strength. Surely the common interest is worth the sacrifice of that selfishness of every man for himself.

With a hearty handshake,

Vincent

*Self-portrait, Paris, spring 1886.
Oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(Opposite)*





Arles 1888-1889

On February 19th, 1888, van Gogh left Paris for Arles. Two days later he wrote to Theo: "It seems to me almost impossible to work in Paris unless one has some place of retreat where one can recuperate and get one's tranquillity and poise back."⁶⁸ The region of Arles reminded him not only of the Dutch landscape, but also of the Japan shown in the woodcuts. He rented a room in the Carrel Inn and set to work immediately. In the morning, he went out into the fields and gardens, where he stayed until late afternoon. He spent his evenings in the Café de la Gare, where he wrote letters and read newspapers or novels like Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème*. It was there that he befriended the Zouave second lieutenant Paul-Eugène Milliet, the postman Joseph Roulin, and the couple Ginoux, who owned the café. In a letter to Theo, he explained that "I would rather fool myself than feel alone."⁶⁹ Van Gogh held his new friends in high esteem – later, in the time of crisis, they would become his most faithful and empathic companions – but he missed being near people with whom he could discuss art and painting.

In May of the same year, he rented two rooms in an empty house on the Place Lamartine. Since the rooms were unfurnished, he slept in the Café de la Gare, having abandoned the Carrel Inn after a quarrel with the landlords. The task of decorating the house – which he called both the Yellow House and The Artists' House – delighted him to no end. In his mind, it was to form the nucleus of an artists' colony, a studio of the South. "You know that I have always thought it idiotic the way painters live alone," he wrote to Theo. "You always lose by being isolated."⁷⁰

Dependent on his family for financial support, van Gogh began to reflect on the position of the artist in society:

It is hard, terribly hard, to keep on working when one does not sell, and when one literally has to pay for one's colour out of what would not be too much for eating, drinking and lodgings, however strictly calculated [...] All the same they are building state museums, and the like, for hundreds of thousands of guilders, but meanwhile the artists very often starve.⁷¹

For van Gogh, museums were cemeteries. He was similarly contemptuous of the art trade:

Given ten years as necessary to learn the profession and somebody who has struggled through six years and paid for them and then has to stop, just think how miserable that is, and how many there are like that!

Terrace of a Café at Night (Place du Forum), Arles, September 1888.
Oil on canvas, 81 x 65.5 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(Opposite)

Portrait of Postman Joseph Roulin, Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 81.3 x 65.4 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
(p. 88)

The Zouave, Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 89)





And those high prices one hears about, paid for work of painters who are dead and who were never paid so much while they were alive, it is a kind of tulip trade, under which the living painters suffer rather than gain any benefit. And it will also disappear like the tulip trade.⁷²

Van Gogh's alternative to this unhappy state of affairs was a community of artists: the painters should work together, support each other and give their works to one faithful dealer (Theo) who would pay a monthly sum to the artists, regardless of whether the works sold or not.

Van Gogh tried to persuade Gauguin to join the studio of the South. For over half a year, from March to October 1888, he courted his admired colleague with letters. He asked Theo to increase his monthly allowance to 250 francs, so that Gauguin could live with him in Arles. In return, Theo would receive one painting from Gauguin. Gauguin, who was living in Brittany, stalled in his replies: sometimes he claimed to be too ill to travel and on other occasions to be short of funds.

The months of waiting for Gauguin were the most productive time in van Gogh's life. He wanted to show his friend as many new pictures as possible. At the same time, he wanted to decorate the Yellow House:

I wanted to arrange the house from the start not for myself only, but so as to be able to put someone else up too [...] For a visitor there will be the prettier room upstairs, which I shall try to make as much as possible like the boudoir of a really artistic woman. Then there will be my own bedroom, which I want to be extremely simple, but with large, solid furniture, the bed, chairs and table all in white deal. Downstairs will be the studio, and another room, a studio too, but at the same time a kitchen [...] The room you will have then, or Gauguin if he comes, will have white walls with a decoration of great yellow sunflowers [...] I want to make it a real artists' house – not precious, on the contrary nothing precious, but everything from the chair to the pictures having character [...] I cannot tell you how much pleasure it gives me to find a big serious job like this.⁷³

In the middle of August, he started the cycle of the sunflowers for the guest room:

I am hard at it, painting with the same enthusiasm of a Marseillais eating bouillabaisse, which won't surprise you when you know that what I'm at is the painting of some big sunflowers. I have three canvases going – 1st, three huge flowers in a green vase, with a light background [...]; 2nd, three flowers, one gone to seed, having lost its petals, and one a bud against a royal-blue background [...]; 3rd, twelve flowers and buds in a yellow vase [...] The last one is therefore light on light, and I hope it will be the best [...] If I carry out this idea there will be a dozen panels. So the whole thing will be a symphony in blue and yellow.⁷⁴

Sunflowers,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 92.1 x 73 cm.
The National Gallery, London.
(Opposite)

Van Gogh's Chair,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 91.8 x 73 cm.
The National Gallery, London.
(p. 92)

Gauguin's Chair,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 90.5 x 72.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 93)









Boats on the Beach of Saintes-Maries,
Arles, June 1888.
Pencil, pen and India ink, watercolour
on paper, 39 x 54 cm.
The State Hermitage Museum,
St. Petersburg.







Of the projected twelve sunflower pictures, he completed only two, because the 'models' disappeared too quickly. He therefore turned to a new subject: the garden of the poet. Three variations on this theme, together with the two sunflower paintings, became the decoration for the guest room, which was waiting for Gauguin's arrival. The nest had been built, but it remained empty. Van Gogh tried to remain optimistic:

If I am alone – I can't help it, but honestly I have less need of company than of furiously hard work, [...] It's the only time I feel I am alive, when I am drudging away at my work. If I had company, I should feel it less of a necessity; or rather I'd work at more complicated things. But alone, I only count on the exaltation that comes to me in certain moments, and then I let myself run to extravagances.⁷⁵

At the same time, he resolved to control his exaltation:

Don't think that I would maintain a feverish condition artificially, but understand that I am in the midst of a complicated calculation which results in a quick succession of canvases quickly executed but calculated long beforehand. So now, when anyone says that such and such is done too quickly, you can reply that they have looked at it too quickly. Apart from that I am now busy going over all my canvases a bit before sending them to you.⁷⁶

On October 23rd, Paul Gauguin finally arrived in Arles. "He is very interesting as a man," Vincent writes to Theo, "and I have every confidence that we shall do loads of things with him. He will probably produce a great deal here, and I hope perhaps I shall too."⁷⁷ The first thing Gauguin produced was order. Fifteen years later he wrote in his memoirs of the time in Arles:

Self-portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin,
1888.

Oil on canvas, 61 x 50 cm.

Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Art
Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
(Opposite)

The Mill of Alphonse Daudet at Fonteville,
July 1888, Arles.

Watercolour and ink, 30 x 50 cm.
Private collection.

First of all, I was shocked to find disorder everywhere and in every respect. His box of colours barely sufficed to contain all those squeezed tubes, which were never closed up, and despite all this disorder, all this mess, everything glowed on the canvas – and in his words as well.⁷⁸

In the middle of November, Gauguin reported to his dealer and financial backer Theo: “The good Vincent and *le grièche* Gauguin continue to make a happy couple and eat at home the little meals they prepare themselves.”⁷⁹ Before, Vincent had eaten in restaurants, quickly exhausting the sums Theo sent him: between 150 and 250 francs each month. By way of comparison, the postman Roulin, who was married and had three children, earned only 135 francs. Plainly, van Gogh’s chronic lack of money was a result of his somewhat impromptu way of living. He took rooms in hotels and inns while travelling around – and didn’t like it at all. He was not extravagant: he always looked for the cheapest accommodation, and forbade himself to eat large meals. But his acts of self-denial often bordered on the ritualistic: even when invited as a guest, he would refuse meals out of a belief that, like a monk, he should eat no more than was necessary for him to survive. Even during his studies in Amsterdam he had exhibited a tendency towards self-abnegation. He confessed to his teacher Mendes da Costa that he was beating himself with a stick as punishment for not having worked enough.

A stomach disorder and dental problems were the consequence of his unbalanced diet, which consisted mostly of bread and cheese. It is doubtful, however, that these health problems were the exclusive result of poor nutrition; they might also have been symptoms of syphilis, a disease from which Theo also suffered. His course of treatment – balanced nutrition, repose, abstinence from sex – was often discussed between the brothers, and Vincent came to believe that living in the same way would cure his ills as well.

Another factor that contributed to van Gogh’s financial difficulties is that he would spend large sums on colours and canvases or prints as soon as the money arrived. Here too, Gauguin was able to counterbalance the impulsiveness of his host: instead of ordering prepared canvases from Paris he sought out cheap burlap in Arles and fashioned frames by hand. Van Gogh was impressed by his friend’s technical and practical skills. But he refused when Gauguin tried “to disentangle from that disordered brain a logical reasoning behind his critical options.”⁸⁰

Paul Gauguin saw himself in the position of a sage, and relegated van Gogh to the role of his student:

Woman with an Umbrella on the Langlois Bridge at Arles,
Arles, May 1888.
Oil on canvas, 49.5 x 64.5 cm.
Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne.
(Opposite)

La Mousmé,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 73.3 x 60.3 cm.
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
(p. 100)

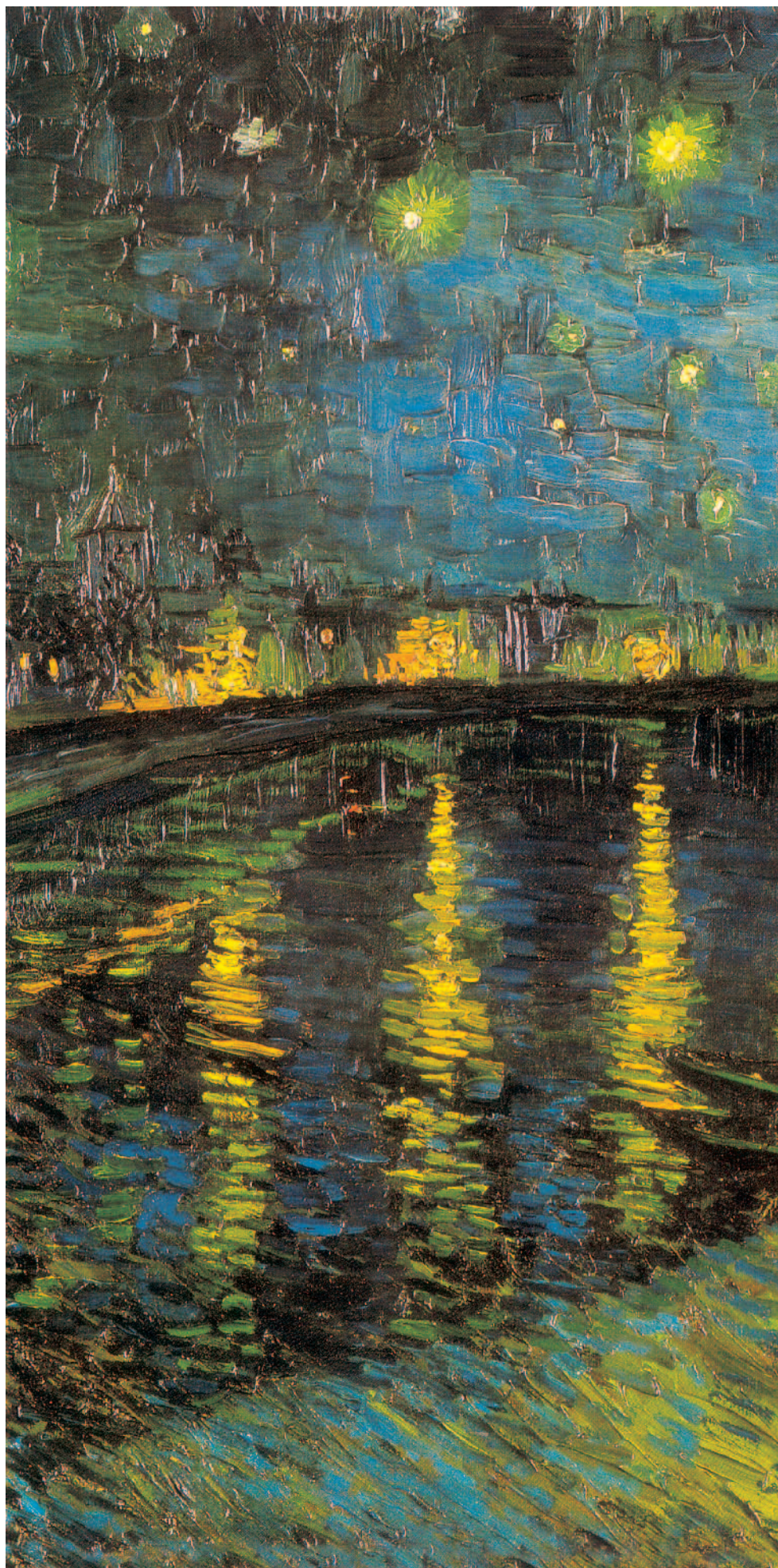
Portrait of Madame Augustine Roulin and Baby Marcelle,
Arles, 1888-1889.
Oil on canvas, 92.4 x 73.5 cm.
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.
(p.101)

Vincent, at the moment when I arrived in Arles, was fully immersed in the Neo-Impressionist school, and he was floundering considerably, which caused him to suffer [...] With all these yellows on violets, all this work in complementary colours – disordered work on his part – he only arrived at subdued, incomplete, and monotonous harmonies; the sound of the clarion was missing. I undertook the task of enlightening him, which was easy for me, for I found a rich and fertile soil. Like all natures that are original and marked with the stamp of personality, Vincent had no fear of his neighbour and was not stubborn. From that day on, my van Gogh made astonishing progress.⁸¹









Starry Night over the Rhone,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.





Regarding the pictures van Gogh painted before and after Gauguin undertook him however, there is little evidence of this progress. In March 1888 van Gogh painted the *The Bridge at Langlois*, in July *The Moussmé* and the *Portrait of Joseph Roulin*, in August the *Sunflowers*, in September *The Poet's Garden*, *The Starry Night*, *The Yellow House*, the *Self-portrait for my Friend Paul Gauguin* and *The Café by Night*, and in October *Vincent's Room at Arles*. The very paintings that Gauguin dismissed as 'subdued, incomplete and monotonous' are today regarded as his greatest masterpieces.

With Gauguin at his side, van Gogh painted less and without the force he had discovered earlier that year. Discussions with his more confident colleague might have shaken his nerve. But as the year drew to a close, poor weather conditions had also made it impossible to work outside. Unlike Gauguin, van Gogh needed reality as a model. He was not able to separate his thoughts from his subjects. He strove for a synthesis of reflection and the immediate feeling he had about the things and people he painted. In his letters, he explains the meaning of certain motifs: The sunflower, which he called 'his flower', signifies gratitude. The 'sowing man', a subject he had borrowed from Millet, stands for the longing for the infinite. Van Gogh's aim was:

to express the love of two lovers by a wedding of two complementary colours, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibrations of kindred tones. To express the thought of a brow by the radiance of a light tone against a somber background. To express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance. Certainly there is no delusive realism in that, but isn't it something that actually exists?⁸²

The love and hope he had introduced into his canvases while waiting for Gauguin were ultimately frustrated. Gauguin didn't share his views on art. That was painful enough, but van Gogh was even more hurt by the way his friend disparaged him. He had already had a similar experience with Anton van Rappard, whom he had met in Brussels. Both artists exchanged letters during the years 1881 and 1885. When Rappard criticized his *Potato Eaters*, van Gogh was not wounded by the remarks themselves – he admitted that Rappard was right in some details – but by their tone: "Now you are speaking to me and behaving to me exactly as a certain abominably arrogant Rappard studying at a certain academy did at one time."⁸³ In December 1888, Gauguin wrote to Emile Bernard:

I'm in Arles, completely out of my element because I find everything, the landscape and the people, so petty and shabby. In general, Vincent and I rarely agree on anything, especially on painting. He admires Daumier, Daubigny, Ziem, and the great Rousseau, none of whom I can stand. And, on the other hand, he detests Ingres, Raphaël, Degas, all of whom I admire [...] He loves my paintings, but when I'm doing them, he always finds that I've done this or that wrong. He is a romantic and I am more inclined to a primitive state. Regarding colour, he sees the possibilities of impasto as in Monticelli, whereas I hate the mess of execution, etc...⁸⁴

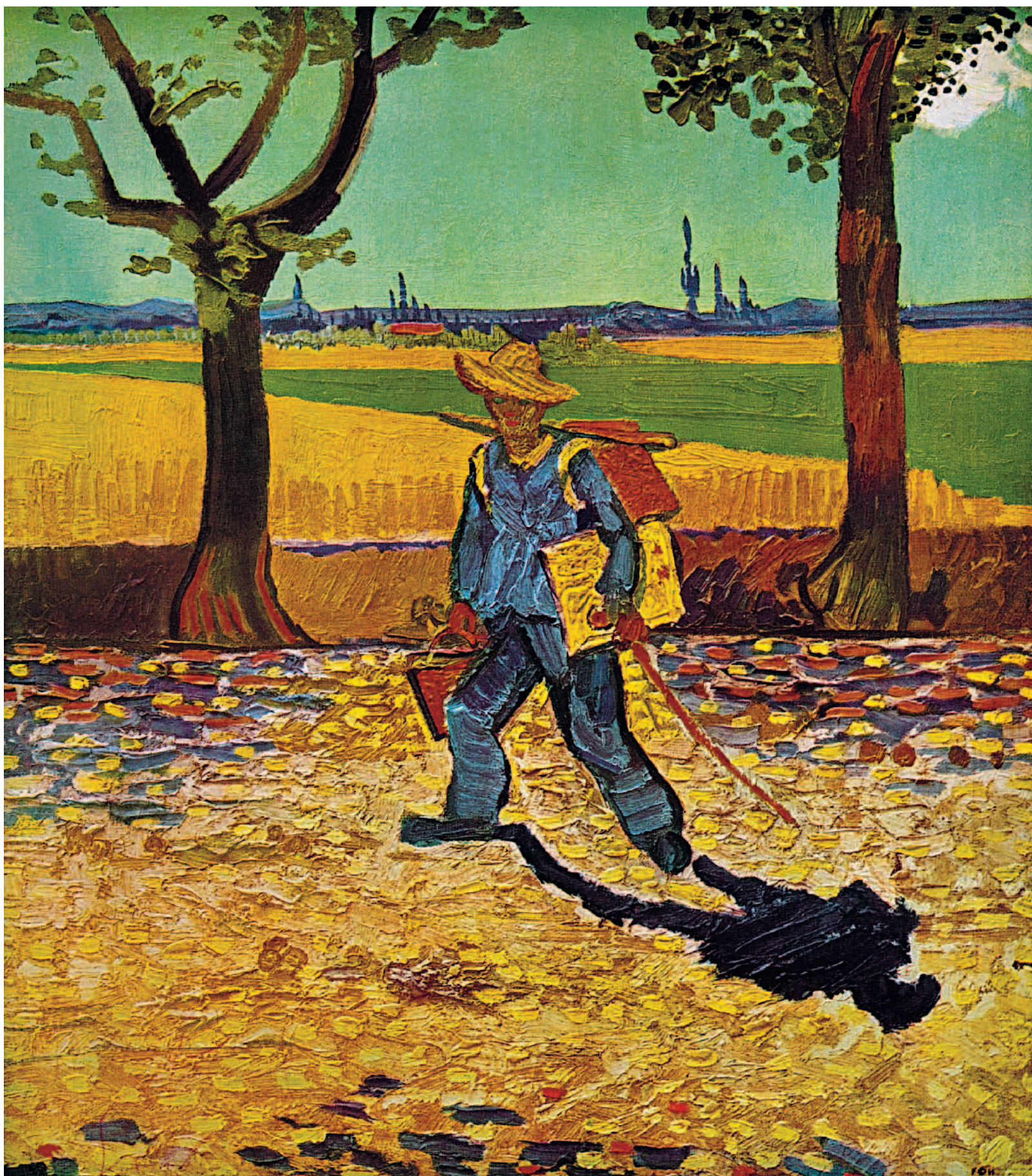
At about the same time, Gauguin announced to Theo that he wanted to return to Paris: "Vincent and I absolutely cannot live side-by-side any longer without friction because of the incompatibility

Sunflowers,
Arles, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 92.4 x 72.1 cm.
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.
(Opposite)

Street in Saintes-Maries,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 38 x 46.1 cm.
Private collection.
(p. 106)

The Artist on the Road to Tarascon,
Arles, July 1888.
Oil on canvas, 48 x 44 cm.
Destroyed during the Second World War.
(p. 107)





of our temperaments and because he and I both need tranquillity for our work.”⁸⁵ Nobody knows, finally, what happened in the last days before Christmas. In his biography of van Gogh, Matthias Arnold points out that many letters of this period are missing. He doubts that these documents – which might contain information about van Gogh’s first crisis and, later, about his suicide – could have been lost while all the other letters were collected by Theo with such care. Whatever the circumstances of their disappearance, however, the bulk of the available information about the events of December 23rd, 1888, comes from a less than objective witness, Paul Gauguin:

During the latter part of my stay, Vincent became excessively brusque and noisy, then silent. Several nights I surprised Vincent who, having risen, was standing over my bed. To what can I attribute my awakening just at that moment? Invariably it sufficed for me to say to him very gravely: ‘What’s the matter, Vincent?’ for him to go back to bed without a word and to fall into a deep sleep.

I came upon the idea of doing his portrait while he painted the still life that he so loved – some sunflowers. And, the portrait finished, he said to me: ‘That’s me all right, but me gone mad.’ The same evening we went to the café: he took a light absinthe. Suddenly he threw the glass and its contents at my head. I avoided the blow and, taking him bodily in my arms, left the café and crossed the Place Victor Hugo; some minutes later, Vincent found himself in bed, where he fell asleep in a few seconds, not to awaken again until morning. When he awoke, he said to me very calmly: ‘My dear Gauguin, I have a very vague memory of having “offended you last evening.”’ – I answered: ‘I gladly forgive you with all my heart, but yesterday’s scene could happen again, and if I were struck I might lose control of myself and strangle you. So permit me to write to your brother and announce my return.’ My God, what a day!

When evening had arrived and I had quickly eaten my dinner, I felt the need to go out alone and take in the air, scented with flowering laurels. I had already almost crossed the Place Victor Hugo, when I heard behind me a familiar short footstep, rapid and irregular. I turned just at the moment when Vincent rushed towards me, an open razor in his hand. My look at that moment must have been powerful indeed, for he stopped, and lowering his head, took off running in the direction of the house. Was I lax in that moment, and oughtn’t I to have disarmed him and sought to calm him down? Often I have questioned my conscience, but I do not reproach myself at all. Let him who will cast the stone at me.

Only a short stretch, and I was in a good hotel in Arles, where, after asking the time, I took a room and went to bed. Very agitated I could not fall asleep until about three in the morning, and I awoke rather late, about seven-thirty. Upon arriving at the square, I saw a large crowd assembled. Near our house, there were some gendarmes and a little gentleman in a bowler hat, who was the police commissioner. Here is what had happened. Van Gogh returned to the house and, immediately, cut off his ear close to the head. He must have taken some time in

View of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer,
Arles, June 1888.
Oil on canvas, 64 x 53 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(Opposite)

Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear,
Arles, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 60.5 x 50 cm.
The Courtauld Gallery, London.
(p. 110)

The Langlois Bridge,
Arles, April 1888.
Watercolour on paper, 30 x 30 cm.
Private collection.
(p. 111)









Seascape with Sailboats,
Arles, June 1888.
Oil on canvas, 44 x 53 cm.
The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts,
Moscow.

stopping the haemorrhage, for the next day there were many wet towels scattered about on the floor tiles of two rooms downstairs. When he was in good enough condition to go out, his head covered up by a Basque beret pulled all the way down, he went straight to a house where, for want of a fellow-countrywoman, one can find a chance acquaintance, and gave the 'sentry' his ear, carefully washed and enclosed in an envelope. 'Here,' he said, 'a remembrance of me.' Then he fled and returned home, where he went to bed and slept. He took the trouble, however, to close the shutters and to set a lighted lamp on a table near the window. Ten minutes later, the whole street, given over to the *filles de joie*, was in commotion and chattering about the event.

I had not the slightest inkling of all this when I appeared on the threshold of our house and the gentleman with the bowler hat said to me point-blank, in a more than severe tone: 'What have you done, sir, to your comrade?' – 'I don't know.' – 'Oh, yes, ...you know very well, ...he is dead.' I would not wish anyone such a moment, and it took me a few long minutes to be able to think clearly and to repress the beating of my heart.

Anger, indignation, and grief as well, and the shame of all those gazes that were tearing my entire being to pieces suffocated me, and I stuttered when I said, 'Alright, sir, let us go upstairs, and we can explain ourselves up there.' In the bed, Vincent lay completely enveloped in the



sheets, curled up like a gun hammer; he appeared lifeless. Gently, very gently, I touched the body, whose warmth surely announced life. For me it was as if I had regained all my powers of thought and energy. Almost in a whisper, I said to the commissioner of police: 'Be so kind, sir, as to awaken this man with great care and, if he asks for me, tell him that I have left for Paris. The sight of me could be fatal to him.'⁸⁶

Compared with the reports of other witnesses, such as that of the policeman Alphonse Robert, Gauguin's story is incorrect on some minor points. Van Gogh did not cut off his whole ear, but only a piece above the lobe. He gave this 'present' to the prostitute Rachel, and not to the 'sentry.'

Gauguin's account offers little insight into the motives behind his host's act of self-mutilation. Perhaps van Gogh feared that his friend would make good his threat to leave him. Gauguin's departure would have been doubly traumatizing, for it also would have meant the end of the artists' house. Another reason for his distress might have been Theo's engagement with Johanna Bonger. Arnold tells us that van Gogh was informed of his brother's plans to marry on December 23rd. This change would surely have had an impact on his life. Perhaps Theo, faced with the expense of setting up his new household, would no longer be able to offer the support – financial or intellectual – on which his brother had come to depend. Gauguin informed Theo about Vincent's crisis, and the younger van Gogh arrived in Arles on December 25th but stayed for only a very short time. In all likelihood, he returned to Paris the same day, accompanied by Gauguin.

Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 81.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh Arles, 28 June 1888

My dear Theo,

I suppose it was to convince me that, being myself one of the most absent-minded of mortals, I have no right whatever to reproach these Southerners with their carelessness. I was idiot enough once more to address my letter 54 Rue de Laval, instead of 54 Rue Lepic, so the post-office clerks, who sent me back the letter opened, have had the pleasure of edifying themselves by the contemplation of Bernard's brothel. I hasten to send on the letter as it is.

This morning I received part of the order for paints from Tanguy.

His cobalt is too bad for us to order any more of it from him. As his chromes are rather good, we can go on ordering those. But instead of carmine he sent some dark madder, which isn't too important, but not to have any more carmine at all would mean a very serious shortage in his poor old show.

*It is not his fault, but in the future I will put "Tanguy" beside the names of the paints that one can buy from him. Yesterday and today I worked on *The Sower*, which I have completely worked over. The sky is yellow and green, the ground violet and orange. There is certainly a picture of this kind to be painted of this splendid subject, and I hope it will be done someday, either by me or by someone else.*

This is the point. The "Christ in the Boat" by Eugène Delacroix and Millet's "The Sower" are absolutely different in execution. The "Christ in the Boat" - I am speaking of the sketch in blue and green with touches of violet, red and a little citron-yellow for the nimbus, the halo - speaks a symbolic language through colour alone.

Millet's "Sower" is a colourless grey, like Israël's pictures.

Now, could you paint the Sower in colour, with a simultaneous contrast of, for instance, yellow and violet (like the Apollo ceiling of Delacroix's which is just that, yellow and violet), yes or no? Why, yes. Well, do it then. Yes, that is what old Martin said, "The masterpiece is up to you." But try it, and you tumble into a regular metaphysical philosophy of colour à la Monticelli, a mess that is damnably difficult to get out of with honour.

And it makes you as absent-minded as a sleepwalker. And yet if only one could do something good.

Well, let's be of good heart, and not despair. I hope to send you this attempt along with some others soon. I have a view of the Rhône - the iron bridge at Trinquetaille - in which the sky and the river are the colour of absinthe; the quays, a shade of lilac; the figures leaning on their elbows on the parapet, blackish; the iron bridge, an intense blue, with a note of vivid orange in the blue background, and a note of intense malachite green. Another very crude effort, and yet I am trying to get at something utterly heartbroken and therefore utterly heartbreaking.

Nothing from Gauguin. I certainly hope to get your letter tomorrow. Forgive my carelessness. A handshake.

Ever yours, Vincent

Many thanks for the paints. Goodbye for now.

The Roubine du Roi Canal with Washer Women, Arles, June 1888.
Oil on canvas, 74 x 60 cm.
Private collection.
(Opposite)

The Sower, Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 32 x 40 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 116)

The Sower (after Millet), Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 80.8 x 66 cm.
Collection of Stavros S. Niarchos, London.
(p. 117)





***Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh
Arles, c. 21 August 1888***

My dear Theo,

I write in great haste to tell you that I have had a note from Gauguin, saying that he has not written much, but that he is quite ready to come South as soon as the opportunity arises.

They are enjoying themselves very much painting, arguing and fighting with the worthy Englishmen; he speaks well of Bernard's work, and B. speaks well of Gauguin's.

I am hard at it, painting with the enthusiasm of a Marseillais eating bouillabaisse, which won't surprise you when you know that what I'm at is the painting of some big sunflowers.

I have three canvases going - 1st, three huge flowers in a green vase, with a light background, a size 15 canvas; 2nd, three flowers, one gone to seed, having lost its petals, and one a bud against a royal-blue background, size 25 canvas; 3rd, twelve flowers and buds in a yellow vase (size 30 canvas). The last one is therefore light on light, and I hope it will be the best. Probably I shall not stop at that. Now that I hope to live with Gauguin in a studio of our own, I want to make decorations for the studio. Nothing but big flowers. Next door to your shop, in the restaurant, you know there is a lovely decoration of flowers; I always remember the big sunflowers in the window there.

If I carry out this idea there will be a dozen panels. So the whole thing will be a symphony in blue and yellow. I am working at it every morning from sunrise on, for the flowers fade so soon, and the thing is to do the whole in one rush.

You were quite right to tell Tasset that he must give us some tubes of colour for the 15 francs carriage not prepaid on the two packages.

When I have finished these sunflowers, I may need yellow and blue perhaps. If so I will send a small order accordingly. I very much like the ordinary canvas of Tasset's which was 50 centimes more expensive than Bourgeois's; it is very well prepared.

I am very glad that G. is well.

I am beginning to like the South more and more.

I am working on another study of dusty thistles, with an innumerable swarm of white and yellow butterflies. [Painting lost]

I have again missed some models which I had hoped to have these last few days. Koning has written saying that he is going to live in The Hague, and that he means to send you some studies.

I have heaps of ideas for new canvases. I saw again today the same coal boat with the workmen unloading it that I told you about before, at the same place as the boats loaded with sand which I sent you a drawing of. It would be a splendid subject. Only I am beginning more and more to try a simple technique which is perhaps not impressionistic. I would like to paint in such a way that everybody, at least if they have eyes, would see it. I am writing in a hurry, but I wanted to enclose a few words to our sister.

A handshake, I must get back to work.

Ever yours, Vincent

Gauguin said that Bernard has made an album of my sketches and has shown it to him.

*Portrait of Doctor Rey,
Arles, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 64 x 53 cm.
Moscow, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts.
(Opposite)*





The Yellow House,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 72 x 91.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.





Arles 1889

 n January 7th, fourteen days after his self-mutilation, van Gogh left the hospital. Joseph Roulin and his wife began to look after him. He wrote to Theo: "I am going to set to work again tomorrow. I shall begin by doing one or two still lifes so as to get back into the habit of painting."⁸⁷ In the first letters after his return into the Yellow House, van Gogh makes no mention of his madness:

I hope I have just had simply an artist's fit, and then a lot of fever after very considerable loss of blood, as an artery was severed; but my appetite came back at once, my digestion is all right and my blood recovers from day to day, and in the same way serenity returns to my brain day by day. So please quite deliberately forget your unhappy journey and my illness.⁸⁸

Writing and painting, van Gogh hoped to recover and to forget. He painted a portrait of his physician, Dr. Rey. Still, he clung to his belief in the future of the artists' house. He wrote to Gauguin, who answered immediately. The first page of this letter is missing; in the second part, Gauguin advises his friend how to restore a painting: "The 'vintage' is totally flaked, because the White peeled off. I have glued everything with a method recommended. I tell you about it, because I think that it is easy to do and will help you to retouch your pictures."⁸⁹ As if nothing had happened, Gauguin resumed his habitual role as the teacher.

The letter van Gogh sent one week later to Theo can be read like an indirect answer to Gauguin:

Look here, I won't say more about the absurdity of this measure. Suppose that I was as wild as anything, then why wasn't our illustrious partner more collected? [...] How can Gauguin pretend that he was afraid of upsetting me by his presence when he can hardly deny that he knew I kept asking for him continually, [...] One good quality he has is the marvelous way he can apportion expenses from day to day. While I am often absent-minded, preoccupied with aiming at the goal, he has far more money sense for each separate day than I have. But his weakness is that by a sudden freak or animal impulse he upsets everything he has arranged. Now do you stay at your post once you have taken it, or do you desert it? I do not judge anyone in this, hoping not to be

Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe,
Arles, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 51 x 45 cm.
Private collection.
(Opposite)

Portrait of Joseph Roulin,
Arles, February-March 1889.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(p. 124)

La Berceuse (Portrait of Augustine Roulin),
Arles, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 91 x 71.5 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(p. 125)





condemned myself in cases when my strength might fail me, but if Gauguin has so much real virtue, and such capacity, how is he going to employ himself?⁹⁰

In spite of his deep disappointment over Gauguin's flight from Arles, van Gogh wrote to him to propose that they again try to establish an artists' community, this time in Brittany. In his reply, Gauguin evaded the suggestion. Van Gogh sought to maintain a positive outlook, but the hopefulness he felt when he was waiting for Gauguin in Arles continued to elude him. His world was in turmoil; nothing was clear.

During this period, van Gogh worked on a painting he had already begun in December: a portrait of Augustine Roulin, the wife of the postman, that he calls *La Berceuse*. He describes the picture to Theo:

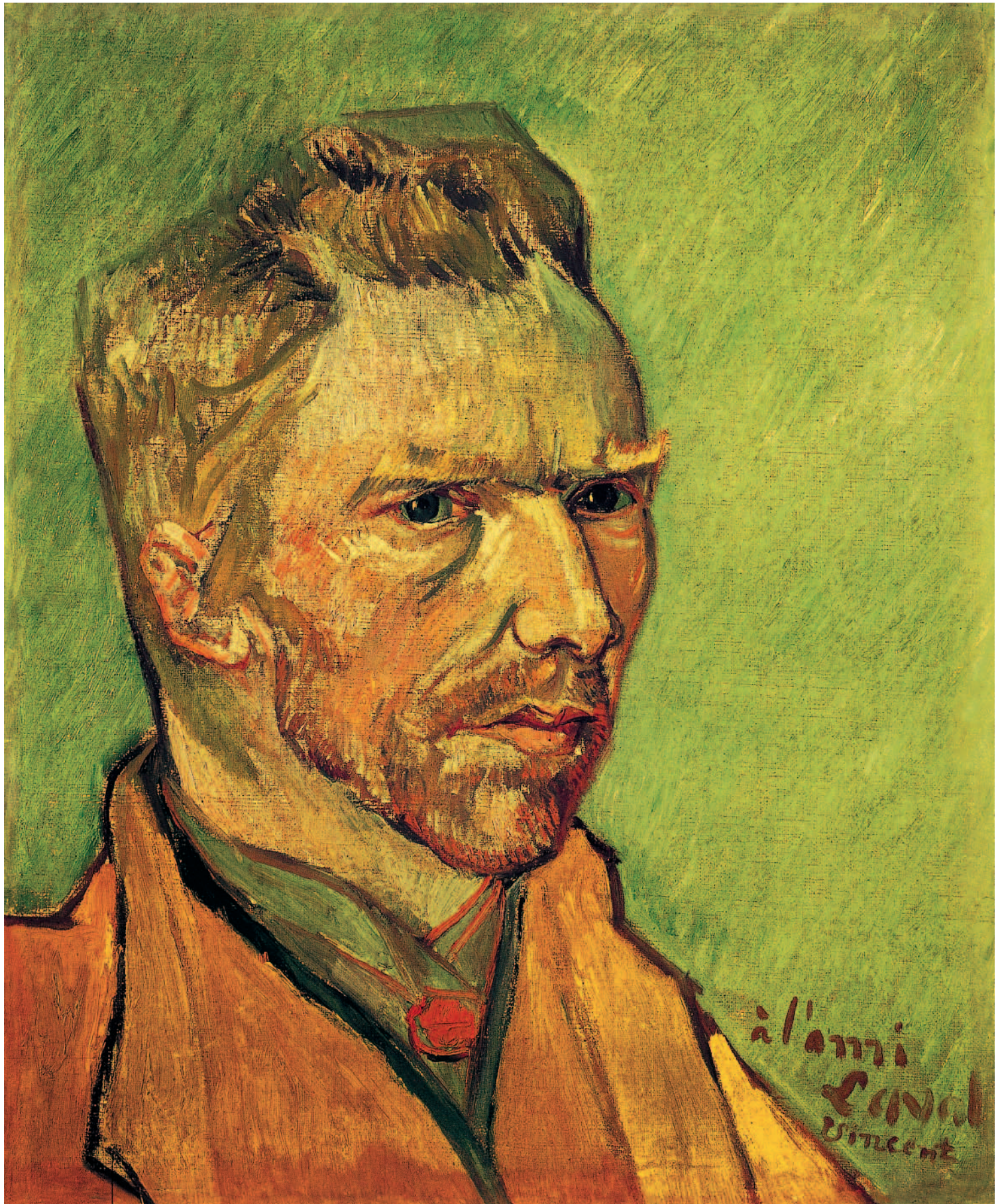
I think I have already told you that [...] I have a canvas of *La Berceuse* the very one I was working on when my illness interrupted me [...] I have just said to Gauguin about this picture that when he and I were talking about the fishermen of Iceland and of their mournful isolation [...] the idea came to me to paint a picture in such a way that sailors, who are at once children and martyrs, seeing it in the cabin of their Icelandic fishing boat, would feel the old sense of being rocked come over them and remember their own lullabies.⁹¹

The picture painted to comfort others became a consolation for himself. He wrote to Gauguin: "My dear friend, to achieve in painting what the music of Berlioz and Wagner has already done [...] an art that offers consolation for the broken-hearted!"⁹²

At the end of January, Joseph Roulin had to move to Marseille. On February 3rd, van Gogh informed his brother: "I am feeling very well, and I shall do everything the doctor says, but [...] When I came out of the hospital with kind old Roulin, who had come to get me, I thought that there had been nothing wrong with me, but afterward I felt that I had been ill."⁹³ For the first time van Gogh spoke about the possibility that he could again have an attack and he promised his doctor in Arles, Dr. Rey, "that at the slightest grave symptom I would come back and put myself under the treatment of the mental specialists in Aix, or under his."⁹⁴ A few days later, van Gogh was back in the hospital, but not of his own free will. On February 7th, Reverend Salles, the Protestant clergyman, informed Theo:

Your brother [...] had again shown symptoms of mental derangement. For three days, he believes he sees everywhere people who poison and people who are poisoned. The charwoman [...] in view of his abnormal state, took it for her duty to report the affair; the neighbours informed the superintendent. He gave the order to watch your brother and admit him into the hospital [...] What shall be done now?⁹⁵

Self-portrait,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm.
Private collection.
(Opposite)





In the following weeks, Salles would pose this question several times, but Theo's instructions remained vague. Van Gogh returned to the Yellow House, but only for a short while: "the neighbours, who had grown afraid of him, petitioned the mayor, complaining that it was dangerous to leave him at liberty."⁹⁶

On March 19th, van Gogh described the events:

I write to you in full possession of my faculties and not as a madman, but as the brother you know. This is the truth. A certain number of people here (there were more than eighty signatures) addressed a petition to the Mayor [...], describing me as a man not fit to be at liberty, or something like that [...] Anyhow, here I am, shut up in a cell

Dance Hall at Arles,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 85 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

all the livelong day, under lock and key and with keepers, without my guilt being or even open to proof.⁹⁷

Van Gogh saw himself as wrongly convicted, not ill. On several previous occasions he had learned that deviation from social conventions is often punished with exclusion. After van Gogh's failure as a preacher, his father had threatened to admit him to the mental hospital in Gheel.⁹⁸ Tersteel, the manager of Goupil's gallery in The Hague, considered him to be of "unsound mind and temperament"⁹⁹ when he learned that the painter was living with a prostitute. During one visit he gave van Gogh a homily: "He was hasty in everything; he was sure of just one thing: I was a fool and everything I did was wrong."¹⁰⁰

In his letters, van Gogh uses madness and illness quite often as a metaphor for the state of society:

Then the doctors will tell us that not only Moses, Mahomet, Christ, Luther, Bunyan and others were mad, but Frans Hals, Rembrandt, Delacroix, too, and also all the dear narrow-minded old women like our mother. Ah – that's a serious matter – one might ask these doctors: Where then are the sane people? Are they the brothel bouncers who are always right? Probably. Then what to choose? Fortunately there is no choice.¹⁰¹

Since he had no choice, van Gogh took the place assigned to him by the citizens of Arles:

Am I to suffer imprisonment or the madhouse? Why not? Didn't Rochefort and Hugo, Quinet and others give an eternal example by submitting to exile, and the first even to a convict prison? But all I want to say is that this is a thing above the mere question of illness and health. [...] And that is what the first and last cause of my aberration was. Do you know those words of a Dutch poet – 'Ik ben aan d'aard gehecht met meer dan aardse banden' [I am attached to the earth by more than earthly ties]. That is what I have experienced in the midst of much suffering – above all – in my so-called mental illness.¹⁰²

Van Gogh understood from the beginning the social side of his 'madness.' In time, he learned to accept that he was ill and that he needed help. But he didn't want to be punished: "If – say – I should become definitely insane – I certainly say that this is impossible – in any case I must be treated differently, and given fresh air, and my work, etc."¹⁰³

The mental hospital in Saint-Rémy, suggested by Pastor Salles, seemed to offer this treatment. Van Gogh also had other reasons to consent to going there: he had nowhere else to go. The owner of the Yellow House had cut off their contract; Gauguin refused to join him in Brittany; and his place in Theo's flat was now occupied by the bride. He was afraid that he would again have to live in hotels: "I must have my own fixed niche."¹⁰⁴ The mental hospital became a shelter, a substitute for a home, a nest.



The Red Vineyard,
Arles, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 75 x 93 cm.
The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts,
Moscow.



***Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh
Arles, 30 April 1889***

My dear Theo,

On the occasion of the first of May [Theo's birthday] I wish you a tolerably good year, and above all good health.

How I should like to pass on to you some of my physical strength. I have the feeling I've too much of it at the moment. Which does not prevent my head from still not being all that it should be.

How right Delacroix was, who lived on bread and wine alone, and who succeeded in finding a way of life in keeping with his vocation. But the inevitable question of money is ever-present - Delacroix had private means. Corot too. And Millet - Millet was a peasant and the son of a peasant.

You may perhaps be interested in reading this article I cut out of a Marseilles paper because one catches a glimpse of Monticelli in it, and I find the description of the painting representing a corner of the churchyard very interesting. But alas, it's yet another deplorable story.

How sad it is to think that a painter who succeeds, even if only in part, pulls along half a dozen artists who are worse failures than himself.

However, remember Pangloss, remember Bouvard et Pécuchet - I do - and even that becomes clear then. But perhaps those people don't know Pangloss, or else, fatally marked by real despair and great suffering, they have forgotten all they knew about him.

And anyway, we are falling back again in the name of optimism on a religion that strikes me as the rear end of some sort of Buddhism. No harm in that, on the contrary, if that's what one wants.

I don't like the article on Monet in the Figaro very much - how much better that other article in the 19me Siècle was! One could see the pictures in that, and this one is full of nothing but depressing banalities.

Today I am stuck in the middle of packing a case of pictures and studies. I've stuck some newspapers on to one which is flaking - it's one of the best, and I think that when you've had a look at it you'll understand more clearly what my studio, now come to grief, could have been. This study, just like some of the others, was spoiled by the damp while I was ill.

The flood water came up to within a stone's throw of the house, and more important, since the house wasn't heated during my absence, by the time I got back water and saltpeter were oozing from the walls.

That was a blow to me, since not only the studio had come to grief, but even the studies that would have been reminders of it. It is all so final, and my urge to establish something very simple but lasting was so strong. I was fighting a losing battle, or rather it was weakness of character on my part, for I am left with feelings of deep remorse about it, difficult to describe. I think that was the reason I cried out so much during the attacks - I wanted to defend myself and couldn't do it. For it was not to me, it was precisely to painters such as the poor wretch about whom the enclosed article speaks that the studio could have been of use.

In fact, we had several predecessors. Bruyas at Montpellier gave a whole fortune to that, a whole life, and without the slightest apparent result.

Yes - a chilly room in the municipal gallery where you can see a troubled face and many fine pictures, where you certainly feel moved, but, alas, moved as in a graveyard.

Yet it would be difficult to walk through a graveyard that demonstrated more clearly the existence of that Espérance which Puvis de Chavannes has painted.

Pictures fade like flowers - even some of Delacroix's have suffered in this way, the magnificent Daniel, Les Odalisques (quite different from those in the Louvre, it was in a single range of purplish-blue), but how they impressed me, those pictures fading there, little understood, that's for sure, by most of the visitors who look at Courbet and Cabanel and Victor Giraud, etc.

*View of Arles,
Arles, April 1889.
Oil on canvas, 72 x 92 cm.
Neue Pinakothek, Munich.
(Opposite)*





What are we, we other painters?

Oh, well, I'm sure Richepin is quite right, for instance when he brutally bursts in and consigns them straight back to the madhouse with his profanities.

However, I assure you that I know of no hospital where they would be willing to take me in for nothing, even supposing that I myself shouldered the painting expenses and left the whole of my work to the hospital.

And that is, I don't say a great, but still a small injustice. Even so, I should feel resigned if one took me in. If I were without your friendship, they would drive me remorselessly to suicide, and coward that I am, I should end by committing it. At this point, I hope, we are permitted to protest against society and to defend ourselves.

We can be fairly sure that the Marseilles artist who committed suicide in no way did it under the influence of absinthe, for the simple reason that no one is likely to have offered him any and he could not have had anything to buy it with. Besides, he would not have drunk it purely for pleasure, but because, being ill already, he kept himself going with it.

M. Salles has been to Saint-Rémy - they are not willing to give me permission to paint outside the institution, nor take me for less than 100 francs.

So this is pretty bad news.

If I could get out of this mess by joining the Foreign Legion for 5 years, I think I should prefer that.

For on the one hand, being locked up and not working, I should find it hard to get better, and on the other hand, they would make us pay 100 francs a month during the whole long life of a madman.

It's a bad business, and what are we to make of it? But would they be willing to have me as a soldier?

I feel very tired after the conversation with M. Salles, and I don't quite know what to do. I myself advised Bernard to do his service there, so it's hardly surprising that I'm considering going to Arabia as a soldier myself.

I say that so you will not blame me too much if I do go. Everything else is so vague and so strange. And you know how doubtful it is that one will ever get back what it costs to paint. For the rest, it seems I am physically well.

Supposing I am only allowed to work under supervision! And in the institution - my God, is it worth paying money for that? In that case I could certainly work just as well, even better, in the barracks.

Anyway, I'm thinking about it. You do so as well. Let us remember that all is for the best in the best of all worlds - it's not impossible.

A really good handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

Here is what I think is worth putting on stretchers from the consignment.

The Night Café - The Alyscamps (lane of tombs)

The Green Vineyard - ditto

The Red Vineyard - Garden with large conifer bush and oleanders [Painting lost]

The Bedroom

The Furrows - ditto with cedar & geraniums ditto [Unknown painting] - Sunflowers

Portrait of Boch - Flowers, scabious, etc. [Unknown painting]

Portrait of Laval - ditto, asters, marigolds, etc. [Unknown painting]

Portrait of Gauguin

Portrait of Bernard

The packing case contains some studies by Gauguin which belong to him, and his two fencing masks and some fencing gloves.

If there is room in the packing case, I'll add some stretchers.

Peach Trees in Blossom,
Arles, April 1889.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm.
The Courtauld Gallery, London.
(Opposite)

Pollard Willow,
Arles, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 55 x 65 cm.
Collection of Stavros S. Niarchos, London.
(p. 136)

L'Arlésienne: Madame Joseph-Michel
Ginoux, 1888-1889.
Oil on canvas, 91.4 x 73.7 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York.
(p. 137)





*Letter from Theo van Gogh to Vincent van Gogh
Arles, 2 May 1889*

Paris, 2 May 1889

My dear Vincent,

Many thanks for your letter, which shows us that at least your physical strength leaves nothing to be desired, seeing that you say you have too much of it; however, this is something you should not rely on; feeling one's strength does not mean having much of it; but if it is really true, all the better. Now there is one thing in your letter which I entirely disapprove of, and I am going to tell you what it is, and after that you may do what you like. I mean your plans to join the Foreign Legion.

It is meant as an act of despair, isn't it? For I don't think you have developed a taste for that profession spontaneously. The fact is that you can do no painting at the moment; that you are in a state of convalescence, and this fact has given you the idea that you will never be able to paint again, and so you tell yourself that three months of being taken care of without being able to work cost money and don't bring any in. But you forget that, suppose they let you work when you are a soldier, you will be kept like a boy in a boarding school, and that, if you are already afraid of the supervision of an establishment like the one at St. Rémy, you will have a great deal more to fear from the practices of military life. Viewed as a whole, this idea is born of an exaggerated dread and is causing me expense and worry, and you consequently bother your head unnecessarily. Last year was not a bad one for me as far as money is concerned, so you may count on what I sent you before without any scruple and without fear of causing me trouble. If it is not repulsive to you to go to St. Rémy, say for only a month, you will be examined by medical specialists, and you will probably be able to profit by their advice.

On the other hand, the director of the establishment at St. Rémy tells me in a letter he wrote me that he will not pledge himself to anything with reference to allowing you to go out before he has examined you, but I suppose that after he has seen you, there will be no doubt about his leaving you free to go out in order to work.

As for me, I attribute a large part of your disease to the fact that your material existence has been too neglected. In an establishment like the one at St. Rémy there will be approximately the same regularity in the mealtimes and so on, and I think this regularity will do you no harm - on the contrary. Now if you should prefer, we might try to get information about the establishment at Aix or Marseilles in order to see whether they make other conditions there. What you ought to know is that from one point of view you are not to be pitied, though it may not seem so.

How many are there who would be glad of having done the work you have accomplished; what more do you ask; wasn't it your cherished wish to create something, and if it was granted you to make what you have made, then why do you despair that a time will come when you will do good work again? However bad society may be at present, there are still ways of living in it; witness Puvis de Chavannes, Degas, and others. I feel sure that if you have the will, you'll be able to take up your work again very soon. For all that, don't think that I am without fellow feeling for your disillusionment when, for example, you went back to your studio and found it all moldy because of the moisture.

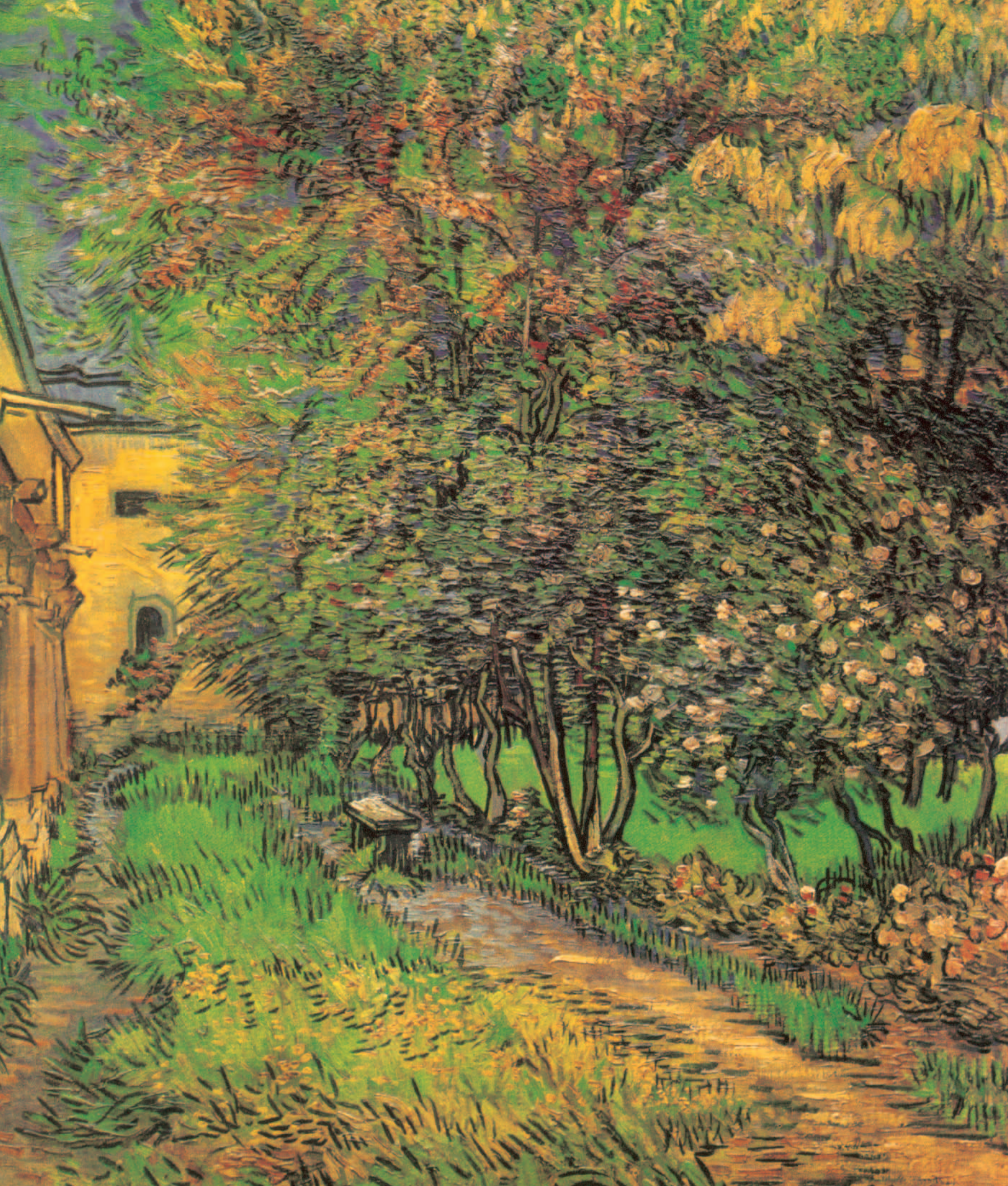
Yet be of good heart; your disasters will surely come to an end.

The kindest regards from my wife, who is in good health. She is getting quite accustomed to the house. A hearty handshake.

Theo

*The Ward in the Hospital in Arles,
Arles, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 72 x 91 cm.
Oskar Reinhart Collection
"Am Römerholz", Winterthur.
(Opposite)*





Saint-Rémy 1889-1890

 On May 8th, 1889, Pastor Salles took van Gogh to the mental hospital in Saint-Rémy, thirty kilometers from Arles. One week later, van Gogh wrote to Theo:

I wanted to tell you that I think I have done well to come here; first of all, by seeing the reality of the life of the various madmen and lunatics in this menagerie, I am losing the vague dread, the fear of the thing. And little by little I can come to look upon madness as a disease like any other. Then the change of surroundings does me good, I think. As far as I can make out, the doctor here is inclined to consider that I have had some sort of epileptic attack.¹⁰⁵

The vague dread, or 'nameless fear' – an expression used by van Gogh – disappeared as soon as the illness had a name: "I really think that once you know what it is, once you are conscious of your condition and of being subject to attacks, then you can do something yourself to prevent your being taken unawares by the suffering or the terror."¹⁰⁶

Van Gogh himself led Dr. Rey to believe that there was a history of epileptic attacks in his family. The doctor in Saint-Rémy accepted this diagnosis of his new patient without question. More recently, however, scholars have found no indication that any of van Gogh's relatives were, in fact, epileptic.

That the diagnosis was false finally did not matter very much: the treatment at Saint-Rémy was the same for all patients. They were bathed regularly; otherwise they were left on their own:

As these poor souls do absolutely nothing (not a book, nothing to distract them but a game of bowls and a game of checkers) they have no other daily distraction than to stuff themselves with chickpeas, beans, lentils, and other groceries and merchandise from the colonies in fixed quantities and at regular hours.¹⁰⁷

At the beginning, van Gogh was impressed by the community of the sick, which seemed to him, in some parts, more human than the community of the healthy:

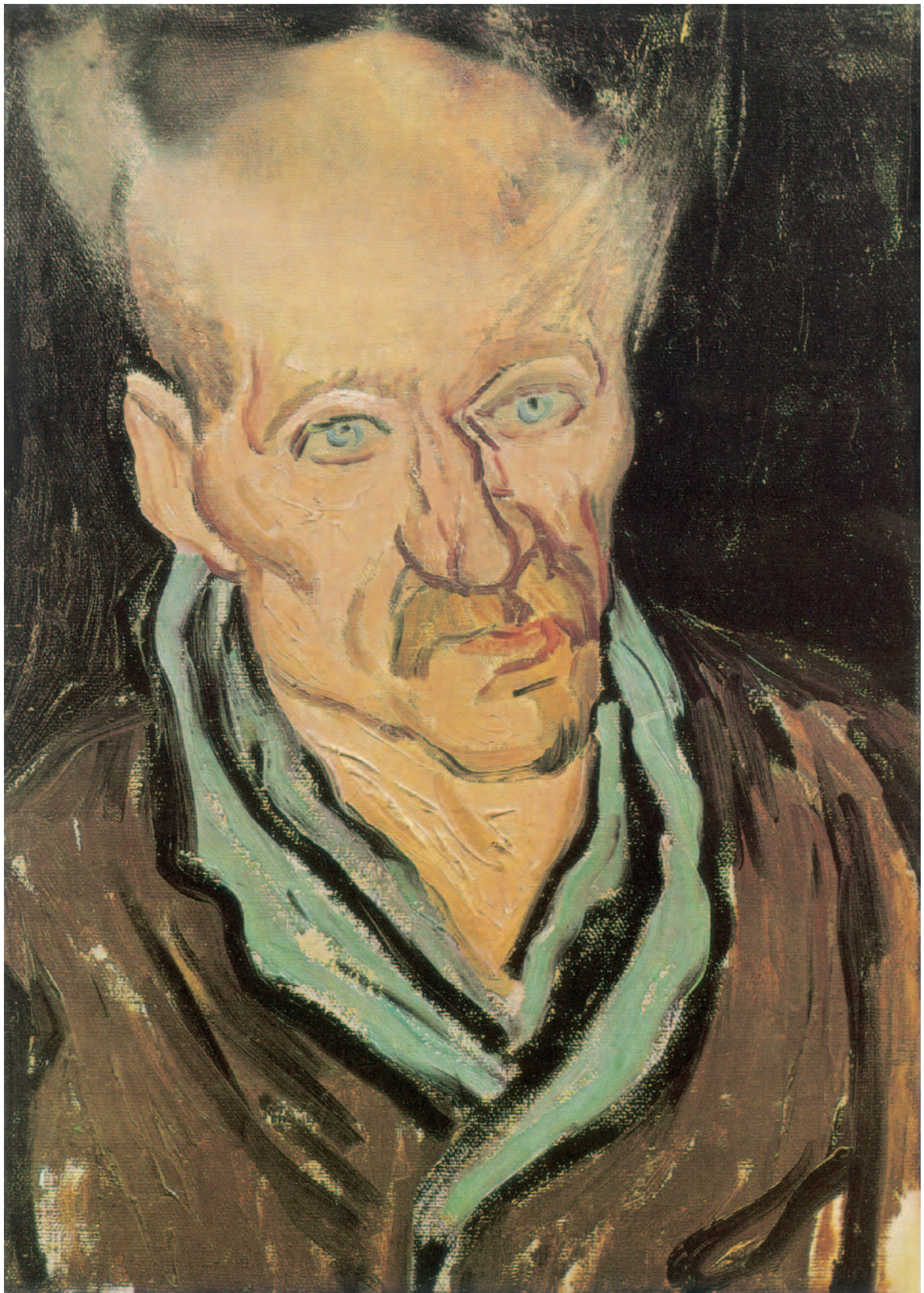
For though there are some who howl or rave continually, there is much real friendship here among them; they say we must put up with others so that others will put up with us, and other very sound arguments,

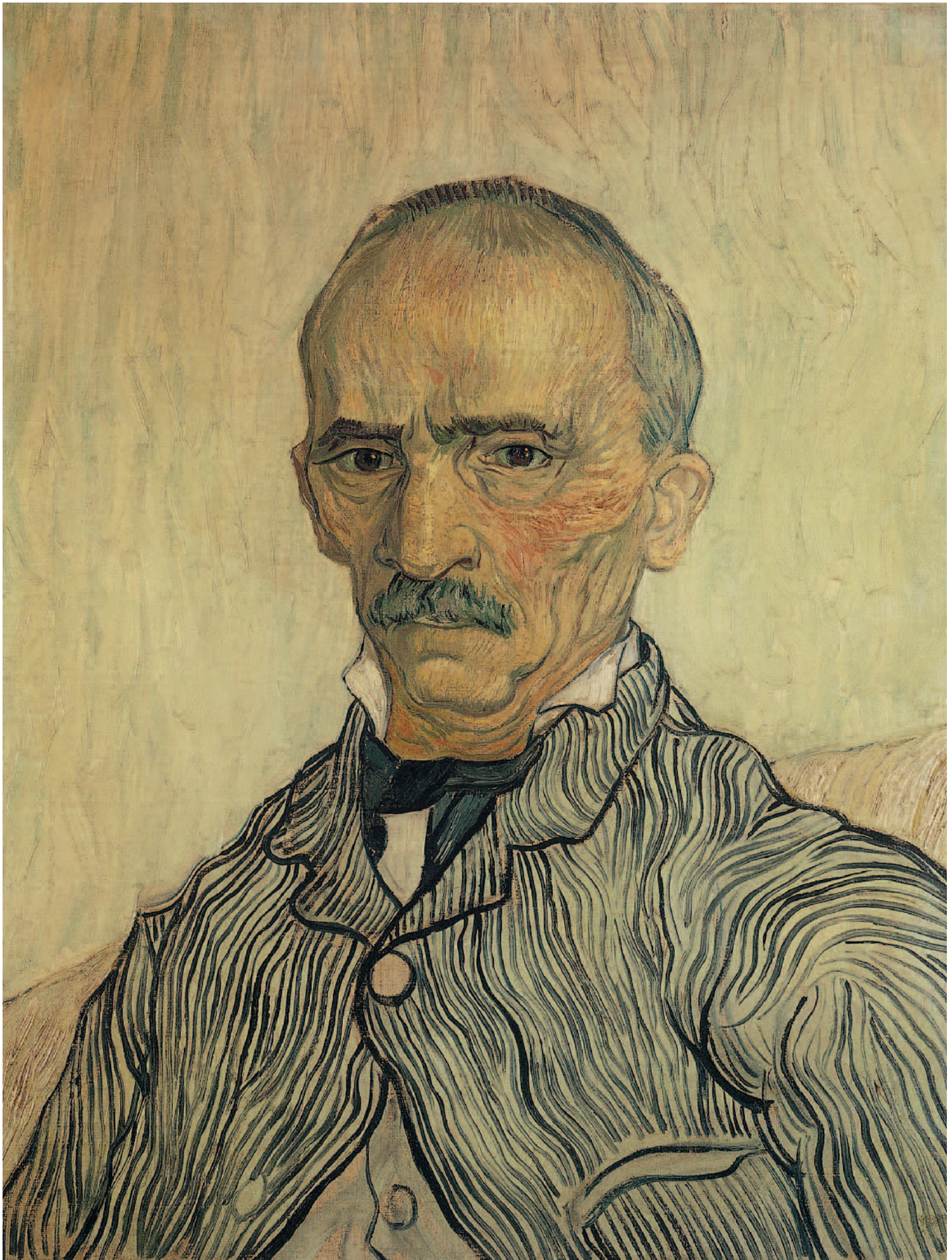
The Garden of the Asylum at Saint-Rémy, Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 95 x 75.5 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(Opposite)



Rest from Work (after Millet),
Saint-Rémy, c. 1889-1890.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 91 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
(pp. 142-143)







which they really put into practice. And among ourselves we understand each other very well. For instance I can sometimes chat with one of them who can only answer in incoherent sounds, because he is not afraid of me.¹⁰⁸

For the first time, van Gogh felt that he was a part of the hospital community, but in contrast with the other patients, he did not succumb to lethargy. Since he felt a duty to work, he started painting as soon as he arrived. He asked Theo to send him canvases and colours, along with a statement indicating how much he would have to produce in order to 'pay' for his stay. For the art dealer, this must have been a naïve delusion; Theo hadn't sold one of his brother's pictures. Nevertheless, he bought all of the necessary materials and sent them to Saint-Rémy.

During his stay in the hospital, van Gogh painted landscapes in which he recreated the world of his childhood anew. At the same time, he continued to study the effects of colours:

Only I have no news to tell you, for the days are all the same, I have no ideas, except to think that a field of wheat or a cypress is well worth the trouble of looking at close up, and so on. I have a wheat field, very yellow and very light, perhaps the lightest canvas I have done. The cypresses are always occupying my thoughts, I should like to make something of them like the canvases of the sunflowers, because it astonishes me that they have not yet been done as I see them. It is as beautiful of line and proportion as an Egyptian obelisk. And the green has a quality of such distinction. It is a splash of black in a sunny landscape, but it is one of the most interesting black notes, and the most difficult to hit off exactly what I can imagine. But then you must see them against the blue, in the blue rather. To paint nature here, as everywhere, you must be in it for a long time.¹⁰⁹

Portrait of a Patient in Saint-Paul Hospital, Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 32.5 x 23.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 144)

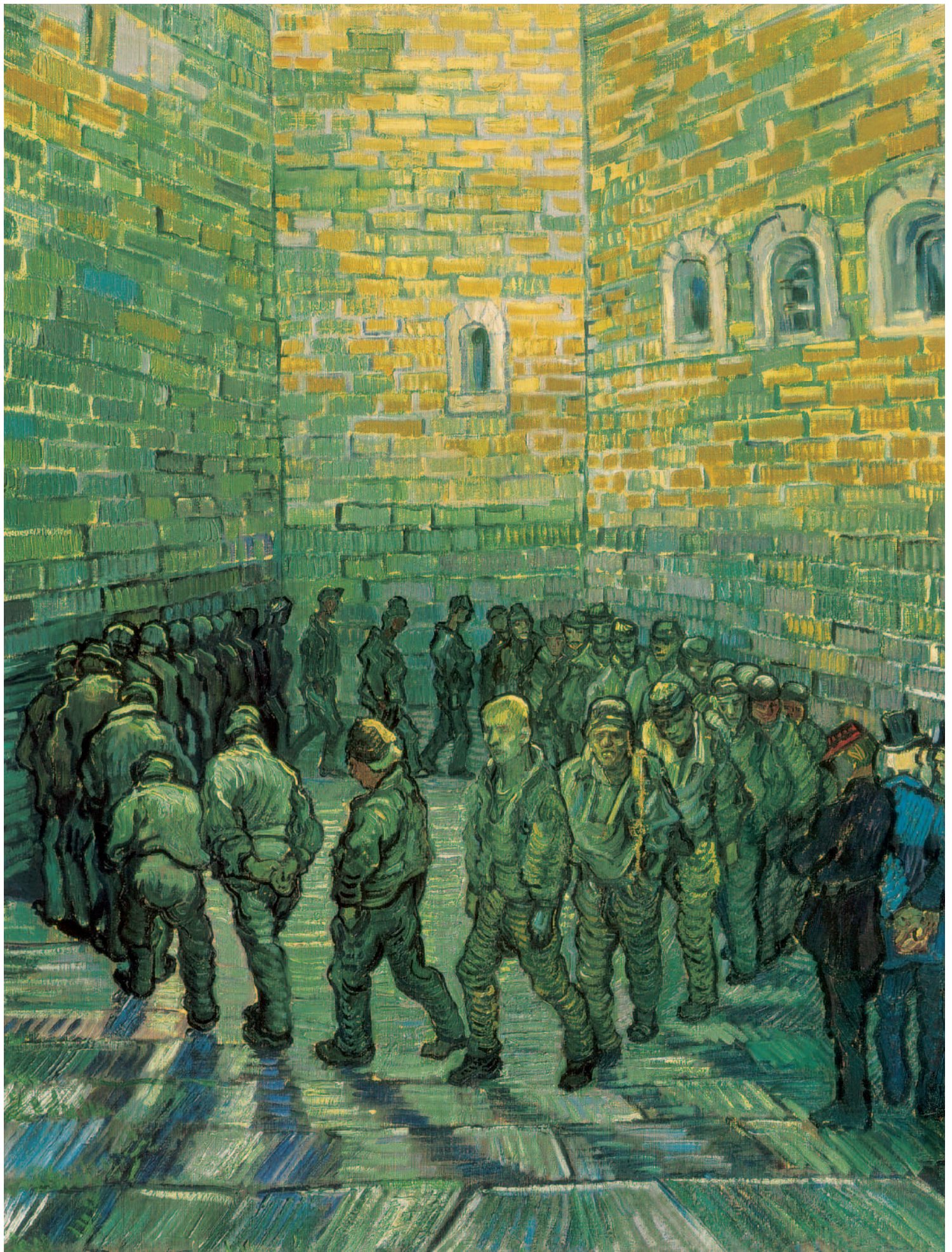
Portrait of Trabuc, an Attendant at Saint-Paul Hospital, Saint-Rémy, September 1889.
Oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cm.
Kunstmuseum Solothurn, Dübi-Müller Foundation, Solothurn.
(p. 145)

The Exercise Yard (after Gustave Doré), Saint-Rémy, 1890.
Oil on canvas, 80 x 64 cm.
The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.
(Opposite)

During the first months, the orderly life at the hospital seemed to have a positive effect on the painter. In his letters, he stressed that he only wished to work, and that he was not missing his friends. But then, one day in July, he was working in an open field when he suffered another attack, and for many days afterwards his "mind [was] absolutely wandering."¹¹⁰

During this state of confusion he might have tried to commit suicide by drinking paint or turpentine. After the crisis had subsided, Dr. Peyron informed Theo that his brother's brain was clear again and that all thoughts of suicide had disappeared.

Van Gogh again returned to his work, but his view of the hospital life had changed. The other patients, who had previously appeared to form an ideal community, now frightened him. Worse, the nuns who worked in Saint-Rémy terrified him. He realized that his attacks tended "to take an absurd religious turn," and he was annoyed to see these good women who believe in the Virgin









of Lourdes, and make up things like that, and thinking that I am a prisoner under an administration, which very willingly fosters these sickly religious aberrations, whereas the right thing would be to cure them.¹¹¹

Comparing the last attack with the first crisis in Arles, van Gogh decided that his illness seemed “to be caused more by some outside influence than by something within myself. I may be mistaken, but however it may be, I think you will feel it quite right that I have rather a horror of all religious exaggeration.”¹¹² After the attack, van Gogh would no longer leave the hospital to paint outdoors. It therefore became difficult for him to find subjects for his work. As an alternative he took himself as a model or copied one of the prints Theo had sent him from Paris. He ‘repainted’ the *Pietà* by Delacroix and *Prisoners’ Round* by Gustave Doré.

A few weeks before he had asked himself: “What is the good of getting better?”¹¹³. Now he had only one aim: “to recover like a man who meant to commit suicide and, finding the water too cold, tries to regain the bank.”¹¹⁴ Suddenly, he felt “a terrible desire [...] to see my friends and the northern countryside again.”¹¹⁵ Van Gogh remained in the South for eight more months, chiefly because Theo didn’t give him a clear sign to come to Paris. Theo’s wife Johanna was pregnant, and van Gogh had to wait until the child was born and until his brother had found a doctor for him. When Dr. Paul Gachet, a well-known art lover who lived in Auvers-sur-Oise near Paris, agreed to treat the painter, van Gogh left Saint-Rémy. On May 16th, 1890, Dr. Peyron closed the record with a final note: ‘cured.’

The Good Samaritan
(after Delacroix),
Saint-Rémy, early May 1890.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(p. 148)

The Raising of Lazarus
(after Rembrandt),
Saint-Rémy, May 1890.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 65 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 149)

The Diggers,
Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 65.1 x 50.2 cm.
The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit.
(Opposite)

Wheat Field with a Reaper,
 Saint-Rémy, June 1889.
 Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm.
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Irises,
 Saint-Rémy, May 1890.
 Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 92.1 cm.
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
 New York.
 (p. 154)

The Promenade, Evening,
 Saint-Rémy, May 12-15, 1890.
 Oil on canvas, 49.5 x 45.5 cm.
 Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis
 Chateaubriand, São Paulo.
 (p. 155)











Irises,
Saint-Rémy, May 1889.
Oil on canvas, 71 x 93 cm.
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Letter from Theo van Gogh to Vincent van Gogh Saint-Rémy, 21 May 1889

Paris, 22 May 1889

My dear Vincent,

Many thanks for your letter; Jo too is very pleased with the one you wrote her. We hear with pleasure that your trip to St. Rémy was accomplished without a hitch, and that your stay there will not last very long, for it can hardly be pleasant to be near so many lunatics. What I should like is to be able to find people somewhere who would be able to take care of you, and would leave you entirely at liberty otherwise. Surely something like this might be found. If you don't have such a dread of going back to Paris or its environs, I myself would try to find a boarding house of this kind.

Please tell us in your next letter what you think of the establishment where you are now staying. How are you treated, do you get enough food, and what is the behaviour of the people you have to do with? Do you see anything of the countryside? Above all, don't harass yourself, either physically or mentally, because for the moment it is better to do everything in your power to regain your strength. Working will come of itself after that.

Some days ago I got your consignment, which is very important; there are superb things in it. Everything arrived in good condition and without any damage. The cradle, the portrait of Roulin, the little sower with the tree, the baby, the starry night, the sunflowers and the chair with the pipe and tobacco pouch are the ones I prefer so far.

The first two are very curious. Certainly there is none of the beauty which is taught officially in them, but they have something so striking and so near to truth. Who can tell whether we are more in the right than the simple people who buy pictures with glaring colours? Or rather, isn't it a fact that the charm they see in them is also an inspired sensation, as much as that of the pretentious fellows who look at pictures in museums? Now there is in your canvases a vigour which one certainly does not find in the chromos; in the course of time they will become very beautiful by reason of the settling of the layers of paint and they will undoubtedly be appreciated someday. When we see that the Pissarros, the Gauguins, the Renoirs, the Guillaumins do not sell, one ought to be almost glad of not having the public's favour, seeing that those who have it now will not have it forever, and it is quite possible that times will change very shortly. If you could see how feeble the Salon and the Universal Exhibition are with regard to the pictures, I think you would be of the opinion that they will not last much longer. The Dutch school cuts a very good figure beside them.

There are two watercolours by J.H. Weissenbruch of which I am particularly fond, also pieces by Willem and Jacob Maris and Bosboom, Israëls and Breitner. One of the Weissenbruchs is a mill on the bank of a canal, a blue sky with a little cloud hiding the sun. The other is a canal at night with boats in the moonlight. He is a thundering good artist, that one, but Tersteeg says he isn't saleable.

Not long ago I saw Gauguin, who is now working at sculpting. Within a short time he will go to Pont-Aven, where De Haan is staying already. It seems that before long there will be an exhibition of the Independents; I should like very much to know what you think of it, and which canvases you think are most suitable to be shown. I hear tell that everyone can exhibit four canvases, as there is not enough room to admit more.

I shall write again soon, and you write me too if you are feeling well.

A cordial handshake,

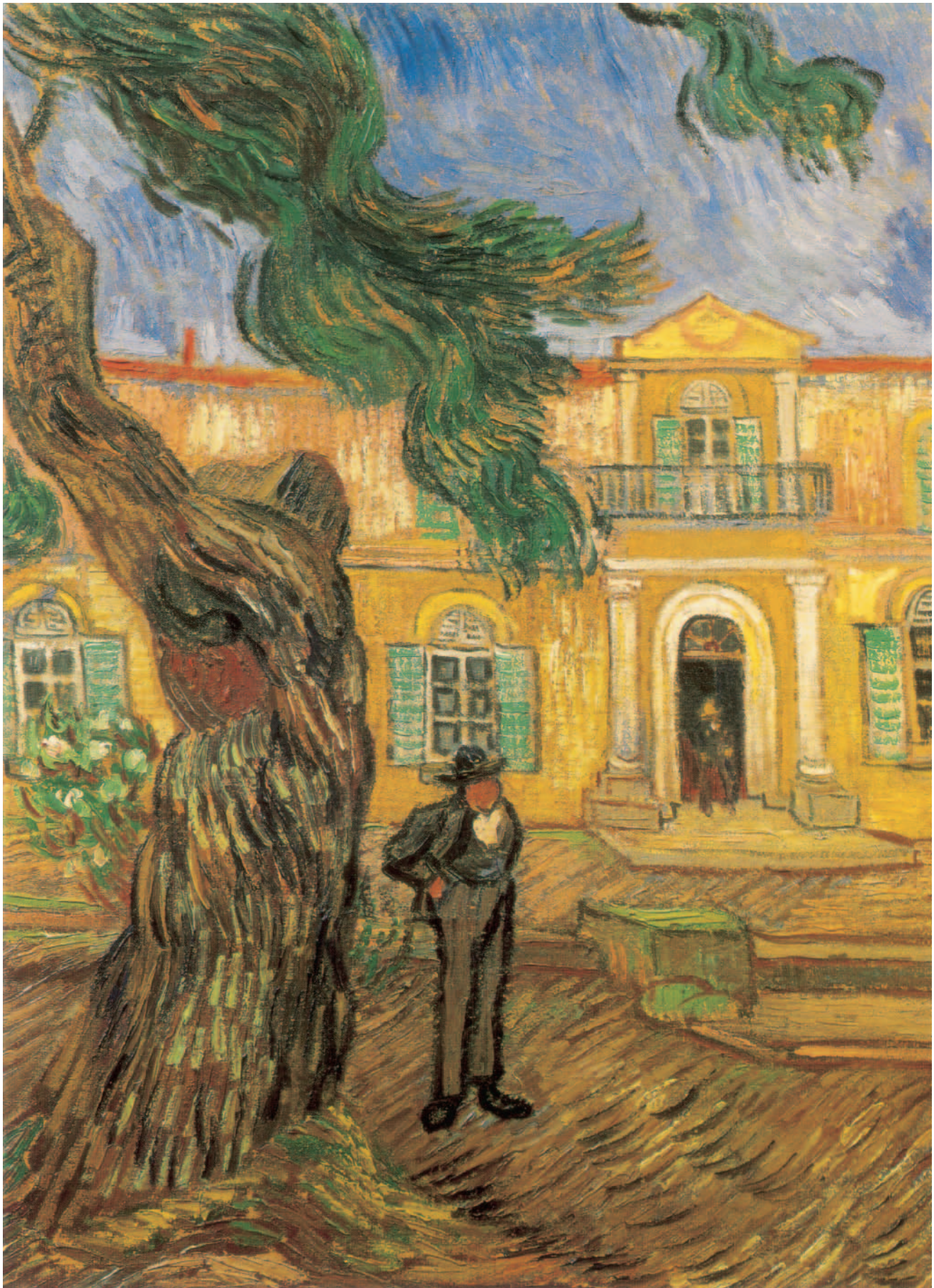
Yours, Theo

*Self-portrait,
Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 51 x 45 cm.
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo.
(Opposite)*

*Pine Trees with Figure in the Garden of
Saint-Paul Hospital, Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 63.4 x 49 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
(p. 160)*

*Trees in the Garden of Saint-Paul
Hospital, Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm.
Private collection.
(p. 161)*







***Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh
Saint-Rémy, 7 or 8 September 1889***

My dear Theo,

I think what you say in your letter is quite right, that Rousseau and artists such as Bodmer are in any case men, and that one would want the world to be peopled with men like them - indeed, yes, that's how I feel as well.

And that J. H. Weissenbruch knows and does the muddy towpaths, the stunted willows, the foreshortenings & the skilful & strange perspectives of the canals, as Daumier does the lawyers, I think that's perfect. Tersteeg has done well to buy some of his work. The reason people like that don't sell is, I think, because there are too many dealers trying to sell other things with which they deceive & mislead the public.

Do you know that even today, when I chance upon the story of some energetic industrialist, or even more of some publisher, I still feel the same indignation, the same rage as I used to when I was with G. & Co.

Life passes in this way, time does not return, but I am working furiously for the very reason that I know that opportunities for work do not recur.

Especially in my case, where a more violent attack could destroy my ability to paint for good.

During the attacks I feel cowardly in the face of the pain and suffering - more cowardly than is justified - and perhaps it is this moral cowardice itself, which previously I had no desire to cure, that now makes me eat for two, work hard, and limit my relations with the other patients for fear of falling ill again - in short, I am trying to recover, like someone who has meant to commit suicide, but then makes for the bank because he finds the water too cold.

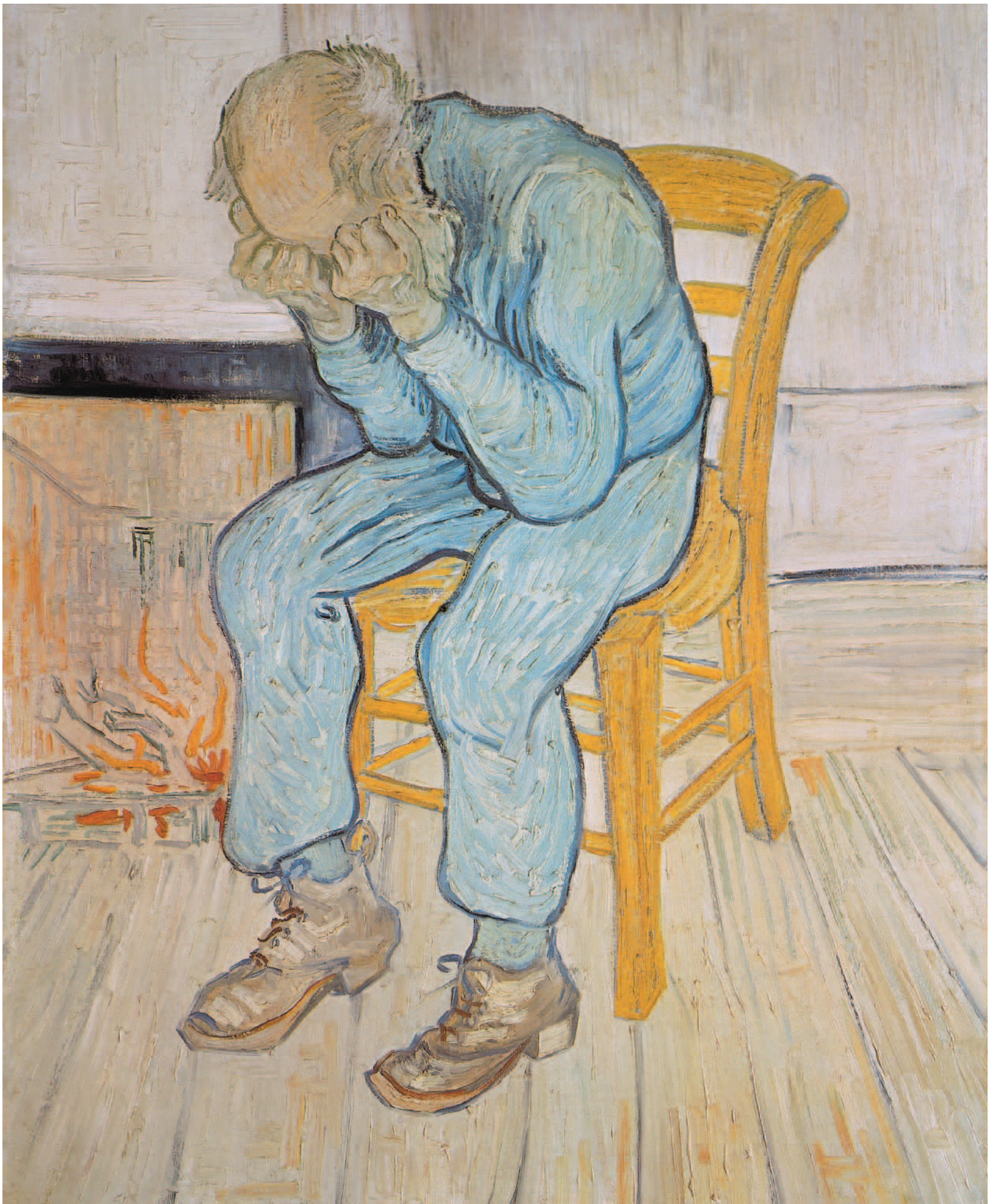
My dear brother, you know that I came to the south and threw myself into work for a thousand reasons - looking for a different light, believing that observing nature under a brighter sky might give one a more accurate idea of the way the Japanese feel and draw. Wanting, finally, to see this stronger sun, because one has the feeling that unless one knows it one would not be able to understand the pictures of Delacroix, as far as execution and technique are concerned, and because one feels that the colours of the prism are veiled in the mists of the north.

All this remains more or less true. Then if one adds that heartfelt leaning towards the south Daudet described in Tartarin, and the fact that from time to time I have also found friends and things to love here, then you will understand that however horrible I find my illness, I have the feeling that I have formed ties here that are a little too strong - ties which could later make me long to come back and work here again. Despite all this it could be that I shall be returning to the north fairly soon.

Yes, for I shall not conceal from you that in the same way that I am at present eating ravenously, so I have a terrible craving to see my friends again and the countryside of the north.

Work is going very well, I am discovering things I have sought in vain for years, and, aware of that, I am constantly reminded of that saying of Delacroix's you know, that he discovered painting when he had neither breath nor teeth left. Oh well, with my mental illness, I think of so many other artists suffering mentally, and tell myself that it doesn't stop one from carrying on one's trade as painter as if nothing had gone wrong.

*Sorrowing Old Man ("At Eternity's Gate"),
Saint-Rémy, May 1890.
Oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(Opposite)*





When I see that here the attacks tend to take an absurdly religious turn, I might almost believe that this actually necessitates a return to the north. Don't say too much about it to the doctor when you see him - but I don't know whether it comes from living so many months both at the hospital in Arles and here in these old cloisters. In fact, I really shouldn't live in such surroundings, the street would be better. I am not indifferent, and even as I suffer, religious thoughts sometimes give me great consolation. I had a piece of bad luck this last time during my illness - that lithograph of Delacroix's, La Pietà along with some other sheets, fell into some oil and paint and was ruined.

I was very sad about it - so I have been busy painting it and you will see it one day on a size five or six canvas. I have made a copy of it which I think has some feeling. Besides, having seen Daniel and Les Odalisques and the portrait of Bruyas and La Mulâtresse in Montpellier not long ago, I am still under the impression they made on me.

That is what uplifts me, and also reading a fine book such as one by Beecher Stowe or by Dickens. But what disturbs me is the constant sight of these good women, who both believe in the Virgin of Lourdes and make up that sort of thing, and realizing that one is a prisoner of an administration that is only too willing to cultivate these unhealthy religious aberrations when it should be concerned with curing them. So I say again, better to go, if not into penal servitude, at least into the army.

I reproach myself with my cowardice, I ought to have defended my studio better, even if it meant coming to blows with the gendarmes and the neighbours. Others would have used a revolver in my place, and had one killed gawking idiots like that, as an artist one would certainly have been acquitted. It would have been better had I done that, but I was cowardly and drunk - ill too, but I wasn't brave.

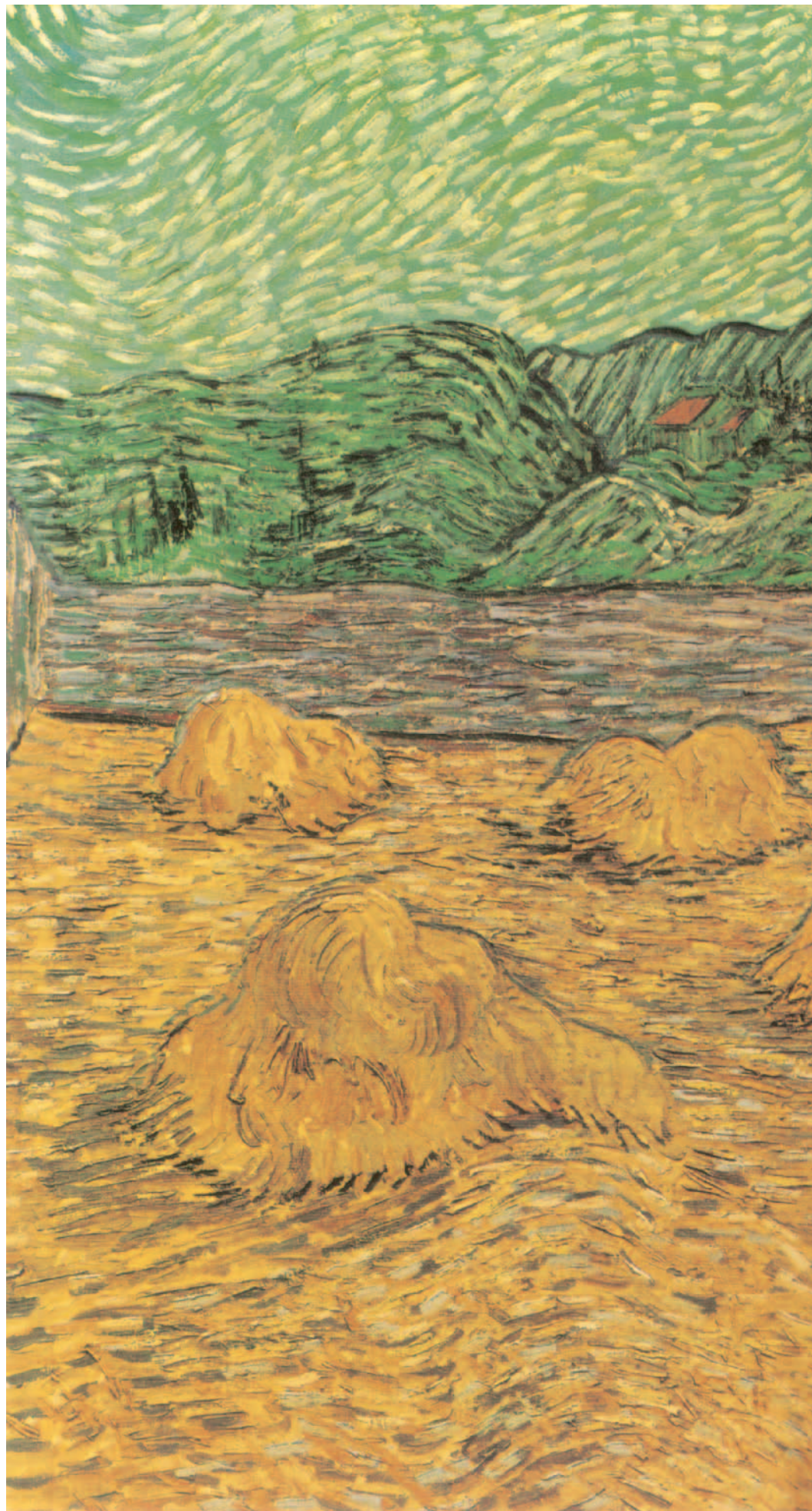
I'm also very frightened in the face of the suffering brought on by these attacks, and so I don't know if my zeal is anything other than what I said, it is like that of someone who means to commit suicide, but then struggles for the shore because he finds the water too cold.

But listen, to be in board and lodgings as Braat was when I saw him that time - happily long ago - no, and no again. It would be different if old Pissarro or Vignon, for instance, would care to take me in. Well, I'm a painter myself - it could be arranged, and it would be better if the money went to feed painters than to the excellent nuns.

Yesterday I asked M. Peyron point blank, since you are going to Paris, what would you say if I suggested that you be kind enough to take me with you? His reply was evasive - that it was too sudden, that he would have to write to you beforehand.

But he is very kind and very indulgent towards me, and while he doesn't have the final say here, far from it, I have him to thank for many liberties.

*Pietà (after Delacroix),
Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 60.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(Opposite)*



*Landscape with Wheat Sheaves and
Rising Moon,*
Saint-Rémy, mid-June 1889.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 91.5 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.



After all, one shouldn't only make pictures, one should see people too, and every now and then, by associating with others, recuperate a little and stock up on new ideas.

I've abandoned any hope that it won't come back - on the contrary, we must face the fact that I will have an attack from time to time. But at those times I could go into an asylum or even into the town prison where they usually have an isolation cell.

Don't be anxious, in any case - the work is going well, and look, I don't need to tell you that I've still got a lot of things to do, wheat fields and such.

I've done the portrait of the attendant [Lost painting] and have got a copy of it for you. It makes a fairly curious contrast with the portrait I've done of myself, in which the look is vague and veiled, whereas he has a military air and small, lively, black eyes.

I have given it to him, and I'll do his wife as well, if she wants to pose. She is a woman whose looks have faded, a poor soul, resigned to her fate, nothing out of the ordinary and so insignificant that I simply long to paint that dusty blade of grass. I talked to her sometimes when I was doing some olive trees behind their little house, and she told me then that she didn't believe I was ill - in fact, you would now say the same if you saw me working, my mind clear and my fingers so sure that I drew that La Pietà by Delacroix without taking a single measurement, though there are those four hands and arms in the foreground - gestures and postures that are not exactly easy or simple.

Please send me the canvas soon, if at all possible, and I think I'm also going to need 10 more tubes of zinc white.

All the same, I'm sure that if one is brave then recovery comes from within, through the complete acceptance of suffering and death, and through the surrender of one's will and love of self.

But that's no good to me, I like to paint, to see people and things and everything that makes our life - artificial, if you like. Yes, real life would be something else, but I don't think I belong to that category of souls who are ready to live, and also ready to suffer, at any moment.

What an odd thing the touch, the stroke of the brush, is.

In the open air, exposed to the wind, to the sun, to people's curiosity, one works as best one can, one fills one's canvas regardless. Yet that is how one captures the true and the essential - the most difficult part. But when, after some time, one resumes the study and alters the brushstrokes in keeping with the objects - the result is without doubt more harmonious and pleasant to look at, and one can add whatever serenity and happiness one feels.

Ah, I shall never be able to convey my impressions of some of the figures I have seen here. Certainly, this is the new road, this road to the south, but men from the north find it difficult to follow. And I can already see myself one day in the future enjoying some small success, and missing the solitude and the anguish as I watched the reaper in the field below through the iron bars of my cell. It's an ill wind...

Self-portrait,
Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 54.2 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
(Opposite)





To succeed, to enjoy lasting good fortune, one must have a different temperament from mine. I shall never do what I could have done and ought to have wanted and pursued.

But, having these dizzy spells so often, I can never be more than fourth or fifth rate. Although I am well aware of the worth and originality and superiority of Delacroix or Millet, for example, I can still say, yes, I too am something, I too can achieve something. But I must take these artists as my starting point, and then produce the little I am capable of in the same way.

So old Pissarro has been dealt two cruel blows all at once.¹ As soon as I read about it, I thought of asking you if there would be any way of going and staying with him. If you paid him the same as here, he would find it worth his while, for I don't need much - except for work. So ask him straight out, and if he doesn't like the idea, I could easily go and stay with Vignon.

I am a little afraid of Pont-Aven, there are so many people there. But what you say about Gauguin interests me very much. And I still tell myself that Gauguin and I will perhaps work together again. I know that G. can do even better things than he has done, but how to reassure him! I still hope to do his portrait.

Have you seen that portrait he did of me painting sunflowers? My face has certainly brightened up since then, but it was really me, extremely tired and charged with electricity as I was then.

Yet to see the country, one must live with the ordinary folk and in the cottages, the inns, etc. And I said that to Boch, who complained he had seen nothing that had tempted him or made an impression on him.

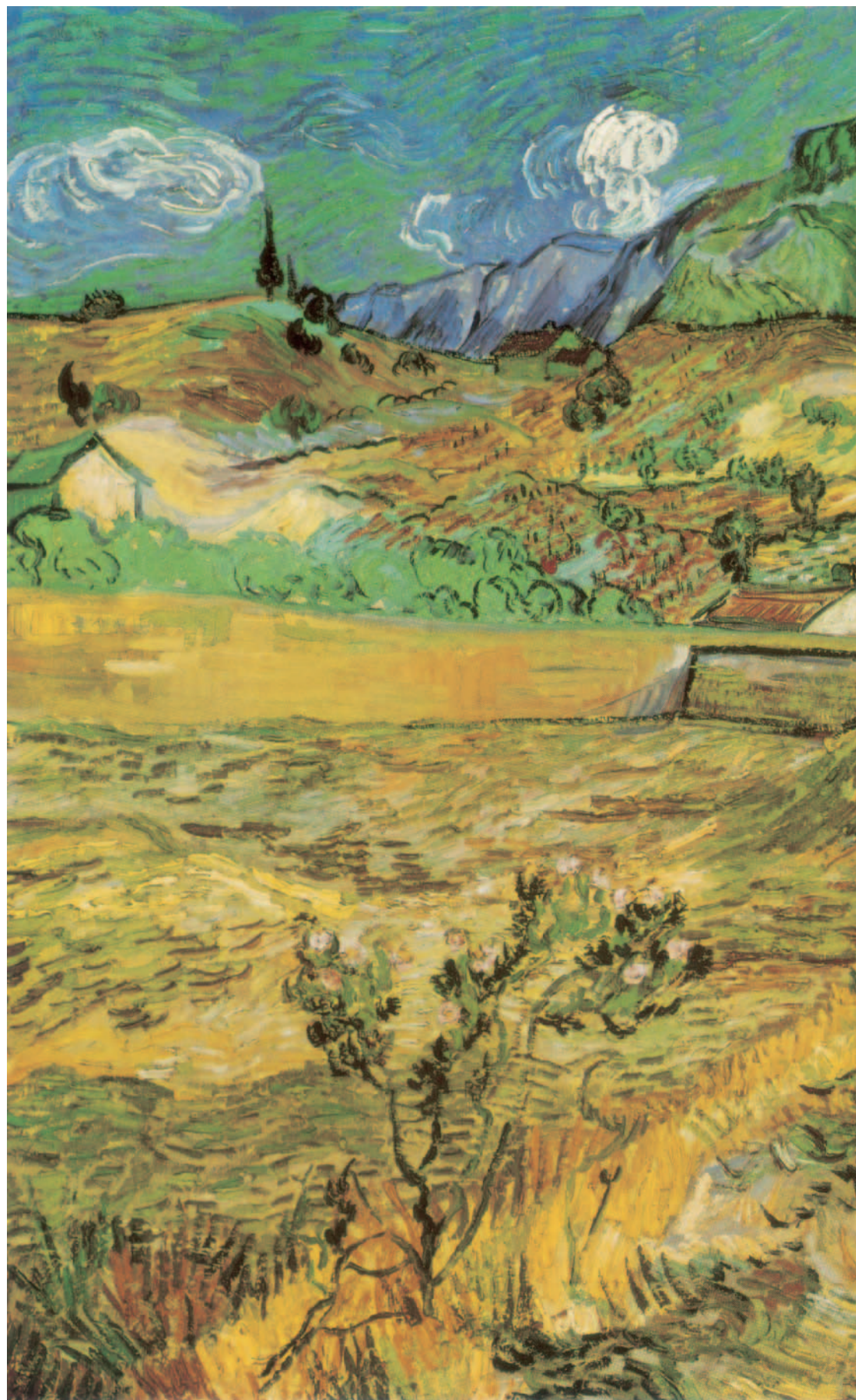
I walked around with him for two days, and I showed him how to do thirty pictures as different from the north as Morocco would be. I'd be curious to know what he's doing at the moment.

And then, do you know why Eugène Delacroix's pictures - the religious and historical pictures, La Barque du Christ, La Pietà, Les Croisés, - have this allure? Because Delacroix, when he did a Gethsemane, had been beforehand to see what an olive grove was like on the spot, and the same for the sea whipped up by a strong mistral, and because he must have said to himself, these people we know from history, doges of Venice, crusaders, apostles, holy women, were of the same type as, and lived in a similar way to, their present-day descendants.

And I must tell you, and you can see it in La Berceuse, however unsuccessful and feeble that attempt may be, if I had had the strength to continue, then I should have done portraits of saints and holy women from life which would have seemed to belong to another age, and they would have been drawn from the bourgeoisie of today and yet would have had something in common with the very earliest Christians.

The emotions that are aroused are, however, too strong, so I'll leave it at that - but later, later, I don't promise not to return to the charge. What a great man Fromentin was - he will always be the guide for any who wish to see the east. He, the first to establish a link between Rembrandt and the south, between Potter and what he himself saw.

*Hospital at Saint-Rémy,
Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 90.2 x 73.3 cm.
Armand Hammer Museum of Art,
Los Angeles.
(Opposite)*





Landscape at Saint-Rémy
(*The Ploughed Field*), Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 73.5 x 92 cm.
Indianapolis, Indianapolis Museum of Art.

You are right a thousand times over - I mustn't think about all that - to calm down I must do things - even if they're only studies of cabbages and lettuces, and after calming down, then - whatever I am capable of.

When I see them again, I'll do some copies of those studies of the Diligence of Tarascon, the Vineyard, the Harvest, and above all of the Red Tavern, that Night Café which is the most characteristic of all as far as colour is concerned. But the white figure in the middle must be done all over again for the colour, and better composed. Still, I'd go so far as to say that this is the real south, and a calculated combination of greens and reds.

My strength has been all too quickly exhausted, but in the distance I can see the possibility of others doing an infinite number of fine things. And again and again there is truth in the idea that to make the journey easier for others it would have been a good thing to set up a studio somewhere in this area.

To make the journey in one go from the north to Spain, for example, is not a good thing, you will not see what you should see - you must get your eyes accustomed gradually to the different light.

I really don't need to see the Titians and Velasquezes in the galleries, I've seen so many types in the flesh that have given me a better picture of the south now than before my journey.

My God, my God, those good people among artists who say that Delacroix is not of the true east. Now look, is the true east what Parisians like Gérôme make of it? Because you paint a bit of sunny wall from nature, well and truly according to our northern way of seeing things, does that prove that you have seen the people of the east? That was what Delacroix was searching for, and it in no way prevented him from painting walls in La Noce Juive and Les Odalisques.

Isn't that true? - and then Degas says that it costs too much to drink in the taverns and paint pictures at the same time. I don't deny it, but would he rather I went into the cloisters or the churches? It is there that I myself get frightened. That's why I make a bid to escape with this letter.

With many handshakes for you and Jo,

Ever yours, Vincent

I still have to congratulate you on the occasion of Mother's birthday. I wrote to them yesterday, but the letter has not yet gone because I have not had the presence of mind to finish it. It is queer that already, two or three times before, I had had the idea of going to Pissarro's; this time, after your telling me of his recent misfortunes, I do not hesitate to ask you this. Yes, we must finish with this place, I cannot do the two things at once, work and take no end of pains to live with these queer patients here - it is upsetting.

In vain I tried to force myself to go downstairs. And yet it is nearly two months since I have been out in the open air.

The Shepherdess (after Millet),
Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 53 x 41.5 cm.
Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv.
(Opposite)





In the long run I shall lose the faculty for work here, and that is where I begin to call a halt, and I shall send them then - if you agree - about their business. And then to go on paying for it, no, then one or other of the artists who is hard up will agree to keep house with me. It is fortunate that you can write saying you are well, and Jo too, and that her sister is with you.

I very much wish that, when your child comes, I might be back - not with you, certainly not, that is impossible, but in the neighbourhood of Paris with another painter. I could mention a third alternative, my going to the Jouvès, who have a lot of children and quite a household.

You understand that I have tried to compare the second attack with the first, and I only tell you this, it seemed to me to stem from some influence or other from outside, rather than from within myself. I may be mistaken, but however it may be, I think you will feel it quite right that I have rather a horror of all religious exaggeration.

The good M. Peyron will tell you heaps of things, probabilities and possibilities, and involuntary acts. Very good, but if he is more precise than that I shall believe none of it. And we shall see then what he will be precise about, if he is precise. The treatment of patients in this hospital is certainly easy, one could follow it even while travelling, for they do absolutely nothing; they leave them to vegetate in idleness and feed them with stale and slightly spoiled food. And I will tell you now that from the first day I refused to take this food, and until my attack I ate only bread and a little soup, and as long as I remain here I shall continue this way. It is true that after this attack M. Peyron gave me some wine and meat, which I accepted willingly the first days, but I wouldn't want to be an exception to the rule for long, and it is right to respect the regular rules of the establishment. I must also say that M. Peyron does not give me much hope for the future, and this I think right, he makes me realise properly that everything is doubtful, that one can be sure of nothing beforehand. I myself expect it to return, but it is just that work takes up my mind so thoroughly, that I think that with the physique I have, things may continue for a long time in this way.

The idleness in which these poor unfortunates vegetate is a pest, but there, it is a general evil in the towns and countryside under this stronger sunshine, and having learnt a different way of life, certainly it is my duty to resist it. I finish this letter by thanking you again for yours and begging you to write to me again soon, and with many handshakes in thought.

[Pissarro's mother had recently died and he had also had an eye operation.]

L'Arlésienne (portrait of Madame Ginoux), Saint-Rémy, early February-February 20, 1890.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
(Opposite)

Mulberry Tree,
Saint-Rémy, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm.
Norton Simon Museum of Art, Pasadena.
(p. 178)

Still Life with Irises,
Saint-Rémy, May 1890.
Oil on canvas, 92 x 73.5 cm.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
(p. 179)







The Starry Night,
Saint-Rémy, June 1889.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.





Conclusion

Nature and work were, again, the twin supports in van Gogh's life. But there were no people around him. Dr. Gachet proved to be of little help. Van Gogh: "I think we must not count on Dr. Gachet at all. First of all, he is sicker than I am, I think, or shall we say just as much, so that's that. Now when one blind man leads another blind man, don't they both fall into the ditch?"¹¹⁶ The sixty-two-year-old specialist in heart conditions and nervous diseases was a great art lover. He was in contact with many painters, and his collections, which were later given to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, included paintings by Cézanne, Pissarro – and van Gogh. The doctor was more interested in van Gogh as a painter than as a patient.

Van Gogh lived in the Ravoux Inn. Adeline, the daughter of the owner, at this time thirteen years old, later remembered her parents' guest:

Van Gogh spent his days in a more or less uniform way: He ate breakfast, then around nine o'clock he left for the countryside with his easel and his paintbox, with his pipe in his mouth (which he never put down); he went to paint. He returned punctually at noon for lunch. In the afternoon he often worked on a painting-in-progress [...] After dinner he played with my little sister, drew his Sandman for her, and then went immediately up to his room.¹¹⁷

The Church at Auvers-sur-Oise,
Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890.
Oil on canvas, 93 x 74.5 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
(Opposite)

Daubigny's Garden,
Auvers-sur-Oise, June-July 1890.
Oil on canvas, 53.2 x 103.5 cm.
Hiroshima Museum of Art, Hiroshima.
(pp. 184-185)





***Letter from Vincent van Gogh to His Mother
Auvers-sur-Oise, c. 10–14 July 1890***

[Written at the top of this letter in his mother's handwriting was "Very last letter from Auvers."]

Dear Mother and sister,

Many thanks for your excellent letters, which gave me a great deal of pleasure. For the present I am feeling much calmer than last year, and really the restlessness in my head has greatly quieted down. In fact, I have always believed that seeing the surroundings of the old days would have this effect.

I often think of you both, and should very much like to see you once again.

It is good that Wil went to work in the hospital, and that she says that the operations were not as bad as she expected, because she appreciates the means of lessening the pain and also the efforts of the many physicians to do what has to be done, simply and intelligently and kindly - well, that is what I call looking at things sensibly - and trustingly.

But for one's health, as you say, it is very necessary to work in the garden and to see the flowers growing.

I myself am quite absorbed in that immense plain with wheat fields up as far as the hills, boundless as the ocean, delicate yellow, delicate soft green, the delicate purple of a tilled and weeded piece of ground, with the regular speckle of the green of flowering potato plants, everything under a sky of delicate tones of blue, white, pink and violet. I am in a mood of almost too much calm, just the mood needed for painting this.

I sincerely hope that you will spend very happy days with Theo and Jo, and you will see, as I did, how well they take care of the little child, who is looking well.

Anna's children must be quite big now.

Goodbye for today, I have to go out to work.

In thought embraced by,

Your loving Vincent

Child with an Orange,
Auvers-sur-Oise, late June 1890.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 51 cm.
Private collection.
(Opposite)

Rain - Auvers,
Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890.
Oil on canvas, 50.3 x 100.2 cm.
National Museum Wales, Cardiff.
(pp. 188-189)







Notes

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- ¹³ Memoir..., p. XX.
- ¹⁴ Huberta du Quense-van Gogh: Vincent van Gogh (1910), in: Van Gogh. A retrospective, p. 32.
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- ²⁴ L 9a, in: The complete letters..., I: 8.
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- ²⁹ L 94, in: The complete letters..., I: 105.
- ³⁰ L 85, in: The complete letters..., I: 93.
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- ³² The complete letters..., III: 596 f.
- ³³ The complete letters..., I: 169.
- ³⁴ The complete letters..., I: 224.
- ³⁵ see: Arnold: Vincent..., p. 257.
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- ⁴³ L 212, in: The complete letters..., I: 396.
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- ⁴⁸ L 195, in: The complete letters..., I: 360.
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- ⁸⁰ Gauguin: *Avant...*, p. 124.
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Biography

- 1853 Vincent van Gogh is born on the thirtieth of March in Groot Zunder, in the south of Holland, not far from the Belgian border as son of the vicar Theodotus van Gogh and Anna van Gogh-Carbentus. He is the oldest of the family's six children. He is named after his brother who had been stillborn exactly one year previously.
- 1857 His brother Theodorus is born on the first of May. Van Gogh was particularly close throughout his life with Theodorus, and the two maintained a long correspondence.
- 1869 He is hired by his uncle to work for the famous art dealership Goupil and Cie. in the Hague. There he becomes acquainted with twentieth century English art, with the works of the Barbizon school, as well as with seventeenth century Flemish painting (particularly with Rembrandt).
- 1872 This year marks the beginning of the correspondence with his brother Theo, which lasted throughout their lives.
- 1873 He joins the London branch of Goupil. In London he suffers his first disappointing encounter with love in the face of Ursula, his landlady's daughter, who rejects him.
- 1874 In October, he is sent to the Goupil gallery centre in Paris, where he lives isolated and devotes himself to the study of the Bible.
- 1876 He is dismissed for negligence from the Goupil's centre and returns to England, where he works initially as a teacher and then later as a vicar's assistant.
- 1877 Van Gogh returns to Amsterdam in order to prepare himself for entering the Theology Faculty.
- 1878 Van Gogh abandons his studies at the faculty and consequently fails to become a vicar.
- 1879 By order of the Evangelical Church of Brussels, van Gogh finally gains permission to work as a temporary preacher for six months at Borinage. But his contract is not renewed because of his almost fanatical zeal with which he pursues his life among the miners. He falls into a depression and severs all ties with his family for nine months.
- 1880 After many failures, van Gogh begins his artistic career. He goes to Brussels, studies anatomy and perspective and works in the studio of the Dutch painter Anton van Rappard.

The Hague period 1881-1883

- 1881 He returns to his parents' home in Etten and improves his drawing. He falls in love with his cousin Kee Voss-Stricker, who rejects him violently, and he falls once more into a depression. At the end of this year he goes to The Hague and starts working in the studio of Anton Mauve. Mauve soon dismisses him because of his unstable behaviour. Even though he lives off the pension sent to him monthly by his brother Theo, van Gogh takes Clasina Maria Hornik, also known as Sien, under his wing. She was a pregnant prostitute abandoned with her other five-year-old child.

- 1882 A short period of optimism and continuous work is followed by yet another depression, when he, pressured by his family, decides to leave Sien. Still, during his Hague period, van Gogh created almost two-hundred designs (sixty of which are in pencil and thirty in watercolour), mostly Dutch landscapes and portraits of Sien.

The Nuenen period 1883-1885

- 1883 After a time of solitude and depression, he decides to return to his parents who are now living in Nuenen and sets up his studio in the laundry.
- 1884 Margot Beggeman and Vincent van Gogh meet and decide to marry. Their parents' opposition to this marriage drives Margot to attempt suicide. Van Gogh saves her at the last minute but is profoundly shocked.
- 1885 His father dies abruptly from a heart attack. His work begins being appreciated in Paris. In November he leaves Nuenen for Antwerp. This period is one of the most prolific ones, and he paints one of his masterpieces, "The Potato Eaters", showing the humility, hard work and poverty of the farmers. He discovers the art of Rubens, his palette becomes lighter and he starts applying flat colour after being inspired by Japanese prints.

The Paris period 1886-1888

He moves with his brother Theo to Paris. The artist frequents the art gallery of Julien Tanguy (often called "Brother Tanguy"). But from 1887 Vincent's brother is increasingly worried by his irritability. Under the influence of the impressionists (notably Monet, Sisley and Renoir), he extends his palette yet again with lighter colors. He also becomes friends with the painter Pissarro.

The Arles period 1888-1890

- 1888 Van Gogh moves to Arles. He is inspired by the blazing sun and the brilliance of the Province colours. He will produce more than two hundred paintings in two years. From May 1888 he stays in the 'Yellow House'. Gauguin joins him in October but their differences lead to disputes in matters of art and their relationship deteriorates. In December, after a violent dispute with Gauguin, van Gogh cuts off part of his ear lobe, wraps it in newspaper and sends it to a prostitute called Rachel for "safekeeping". Gauguin leaves horrified. And Van Gogh is hospitalized several days later.
- 1889 Suffering from fits of madness, van Gogh voluntarily enters the asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, where he will stay for a year. Even though it is interrupted with bouts of depression, this period is very crucial for the art of van Gogh from an artistic point of view. He creates some of his masterpieces, several notable landscape paintings, in these years.
- 1890 Van Gogh contributes to the *Salon of Independent Artists* in Paris with ten of his works. He moves to Auvers-sur-Oise and is treated by the physician Paul Gachet who is also an amateur painter. He feels he is a burden to his brother and his behavior becomes once more troublesome. On July the 27th Vincent van Gogh shoots himself in the chest, and dies on the morning of the 29th with his brother Theodorus at his side.

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Van Gogh's life and work are so intertwined that it is difficult to distinguish the two. While observing his paintings, we see a panorama of his life story – a narrative that is now considered a legend. Van Gogh represents the embodiment of a suffering, misunderstood martyr of modern art and is an emblem of the unconventional artist.