

IMPRESSIONIST PAINTING FOR BEGINNERS

VINCENT VAN GOGH

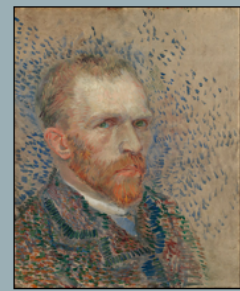
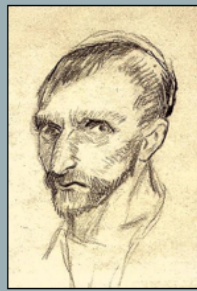
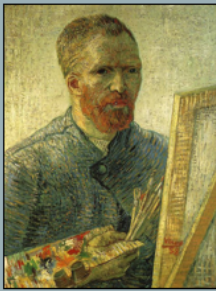
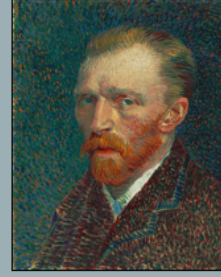
Leigh Cohn

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Categorized as a “Post Impressionist,” Vincent Van Gogh’s story is well-known. He was a tortured artist who never saw success during his lifetime. Now, he’s widely-regarded as one of—if not THE—greatest painters in history.

I will present an overview of his unfortunately short life—he died at 37—with a few interesting details and my own personal perspective.

VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853-90)



Born in 1853 in the province of North Brabant in The Netherlands, Van Gogh's unhappy childhood was a precursor to a life marred by mental illness and his suspected suicide at age 37. Starting off with one foot in the grave, he received the same name as a stillborn brother who died the previous year.

Van Gogh painted 43 self-portraits. In the one with his bandaged ear, it appears that his right ear is injured, but it's actually the left. Likewise, in the one where he's painting, he appears to be left-handed, but for both pictures, he was looking in the mirror when he painted them.

The Netherlands



Kröller-Muller Museum (2023)
91 paintings, 180 drawings



Nuenen
(2017)



Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (2017)
200 paintings, 400 drawings, 700 letters



My son, daughter-in-law, and grandson also live in North Brabant, and I've had the opportunity to visit The Netherlands three times since 2017. Of course, besides my family, on those trips I've always focused on Van Gogh.

All together, in only 20 years of productivity, Van Gogh left about 900 paintings, 1,100 drawings, and 750 letters, mostly written to his brother Theo.



Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen 1884



Bridge at Arles (Pont de Langlois) 1888

I've seen sights that he saw and painted...



Tulip Fields near The Hague 1886



Leigh Cohn, *Flowers & Windmill*, 2017

...and I've painted similar compositions. I've also attempted to use some of his techniques, which I've written about in my blog and website.



Leigh Cohn, *Tilburg Sunset Triptych*, 2023

My grandson was born about twenty minutes away from Vincent's birthplace, and on my first visit to see the baby, I was, of course, elated. This scene is near my son's house, and I stood there glowing like the sun, and also thinking about Van Gogh's parents, and how they must have looked at something similar when he was a baby.

The triptych is about 5-feet-wide.



Vincent's father was a minister and his mother was a strict, religious woman with six children. Homeschooled and encouraged by his mother to draw, Vincent was a serious, yet difficult child who got sent away to a boarding school at eleven. He begged to return home, but instead, two years later went to middle school at [Willhem II College](#) in Tilburg. I've walked by the campus!

Not surprisingly, he was miserable there, too, though it's notable that he took an art class there from a landscape painter whose work is in the Louvre. Nonetheless, Vincent was abruptly sent home just shy of his 15th birthday in 1868. His parents couldn't take him for long, and within months, Vincent's namesake, Uncle "Cent" arranged for him to get a position with an art dealer in The Hague.

These early works were done a dozen years later...



Pollard Willow 1883
Pen and Watercolor



Sketch in letter
1882



Young Scheveningen Woman Seated:
Facing Left 1881

From the age of 16 to 28, he moved to London and Paris for his art dealer job but was eventually fired. He fell in love with women who rejected him, decided to become a pastor but failed the exams, and he worked as a missionary in Belgium. However, he was dismissed for “undermining the dignity of the priesthood” by giving his comfortable lodgings to a homeless person.

After more moves and different jobs, he returned to The Hague in 1881 to study art. His second cousin, Anton Mauve was a successful painter and agreed to teach him; and, that worked out generally okay for about a year—until Mauve found out that Van Gogh was living with a prostitute. Vincent remained with her and her two children (neither rumored to be his), and of course, his religious parents were furious. Van Gogh became more depressed, and eventually left her; and in 1883, he returned to live with his parents in Nuenen.



Cows in the Meadow 1883

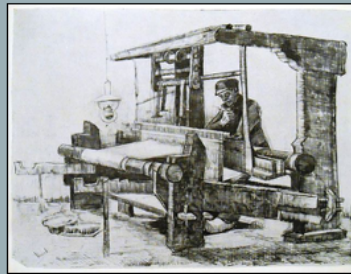


Leigh Cohn, *Van Gogh Study on White* 2023

In Nuenen, he dedicated his life to being a painter. He mainly painted outdoors and quickly. He sketched frequently, often turning sketches into paintings. The countryside in Brabant looks very much the same now as it did then.



The Parsonage Garden at Nuenen 1884



During his two or three years there, he sketched local workers—sometimes modelled after Millet drawings—and his palette consisted of somber earth tones.

While in Nuenen, Vincent fell in love with a neighbor's daughter who was quite older, and they wanted to marry, but both families disapproved. When she attempted suicide, he rushed her to a nearby hospital, and the affair ended. Nonetheless, Van Gogh continued trying to be an artist.

A note about color...

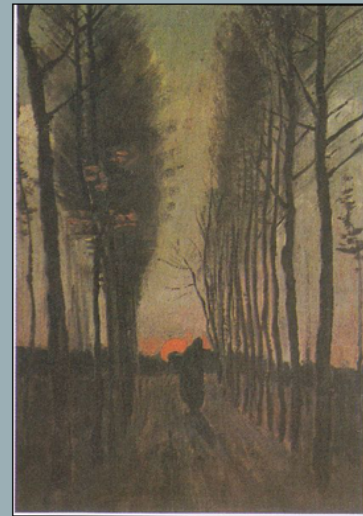


iPhone photo from 20-feet away

iPhone photo from 2-feet away



Lane of Poplars, Nuenen 1884

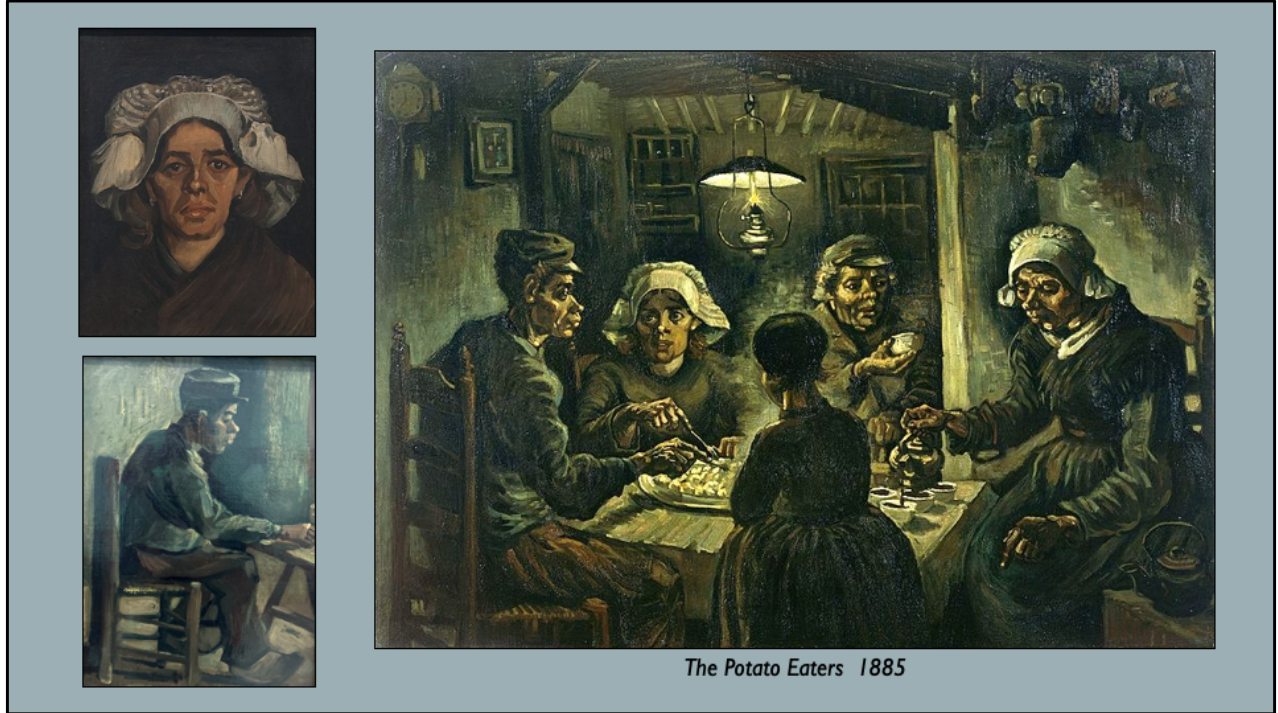


Wikimedia Image

A note about color and reproduction... This is a painting I saw at the Kröller-Müller Museum. Notice the differences in color depending on my distance from the painting, and also how different they are in the online image.

Color shifting is also true for printed pictures, electronic screens, and our own eyes. I could show you the same painting in various books, and the colors look entirely different.

Additionally, color is effected by the lighting—for example a sunny day versus nighttime—and, not everyone's brains process colors exactly the same.



In 1885, Van Gogh decided to paint a masterpiece suitable for the Paris Salon and worked on a series of studies for his biggest undertaking so far, *The Potato Eaters*.

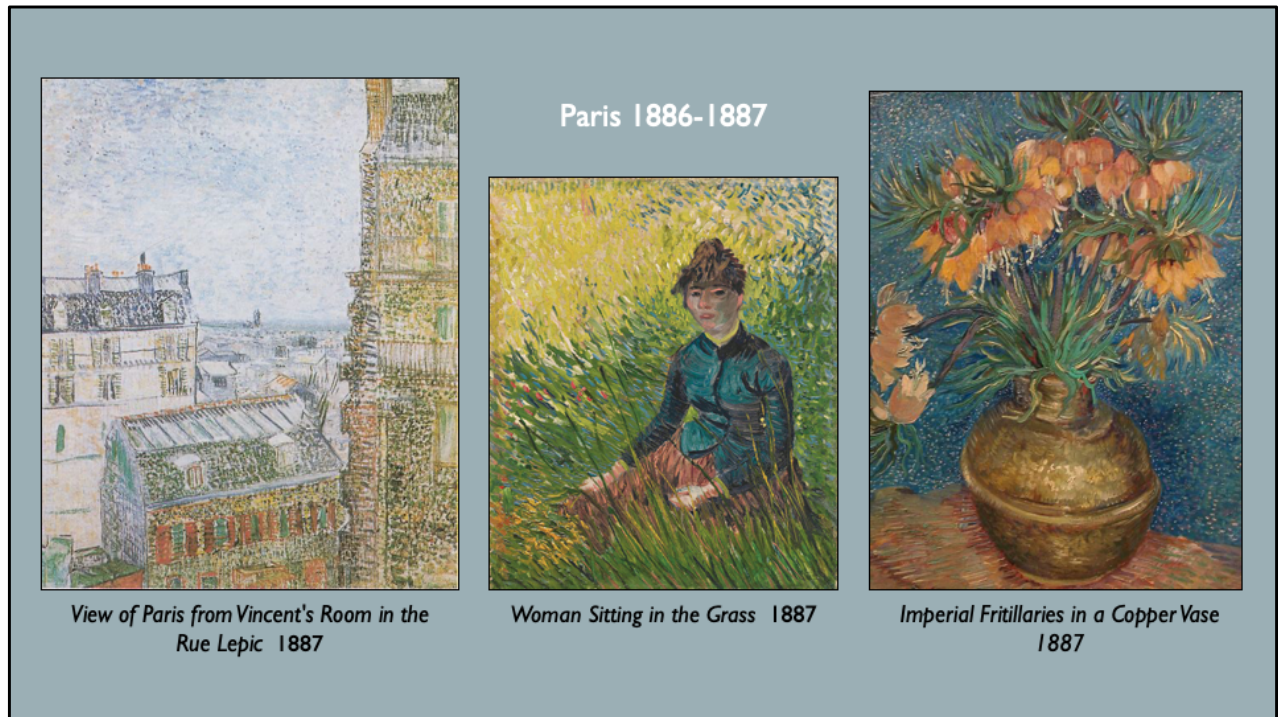
The dark and gloomy painting obviously wasn't appropriate for the Salon, which disappointed him. But his brother Theo, who was an art dealer in Paris, got the painting into a gallery in The Hague.

You know that Impressionism was the rage by this time—the final exhibition was the next year—but Van Gogh didn't know anything about these painters! Theo recognized the shortcomings of Vincent's palette and suggested that he come to Paris to see how the Impressionists were using color.



shortly after his arrival, he was involved in another “sex scandal” and moved again., In 1886, he settled into Theo’s apartment in Montmartre, a section of Paris that attracted artists then and still does now.

In Paris, he was in the loving presence of his older brother, he saw Impressionist art for the first time, and everything changed. It was like that moment in the movie of the “Wizard of Oz” when Dorothy awakens from a black & white Kansas to the colorful land of Oz.



In Paris, Vincent got to know other painters, including Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec and Signac, and attended the last two Impressionist Exhibitions, where he would have seen works by Pissarro, Degas, and the others.

You can see how he was influenced by Pointillism; the short, quick brushstrokes of the Impressionists; and the use of complimentary color. His paintings become brighter and more alive.

In Paris, he sold his first painting—for a measly 5 francs. So, the myth that Van Gogh never sold a painting during his lifetime is definitely not true. However, he may have only sold two, though he bartered them for food and lodging.



Fishing in Spring, the Pont de Clichy 1887



Wheat Field with Poppies and Lark 1887

The one on the left is reminiscent of Manet and Renoir, while the one on the right could almost be mistaken for Monet.

Although they never met, Van Gogh tremendously admired Monet's work; and, in 1888, Theo actually purchased ten Monet paintings to sell in competition with Durand-Ruel. Later, in 1889, ten of Vincent's paintings were displayed at the Salon des Indépendants, which Monet visited, pronouncing that the Van Gogh's were "the best of all in the exhibition."

ARLES (1888-89)



As you might expect, Theo found Vincent difficult to live with. They had assorted arguments, moves together and apart, and eventually, in February, 1888, Vincent moved to Arles, in the south of France, for his health. Over the next year, he completed more than 200 paintings and really developed his own style.

Many of his most recognizable pieces are from 1888-89 when he was in Arles.



Starry Night over the Rhone 1888

Van Gogh loved painting the night sky because of the effect of the twinkling stars on the Ultramarine Blue background and strong contrast from the yellow.



*Terrace of the Café on the Place du Forum in
Arles in the Evening 1888*



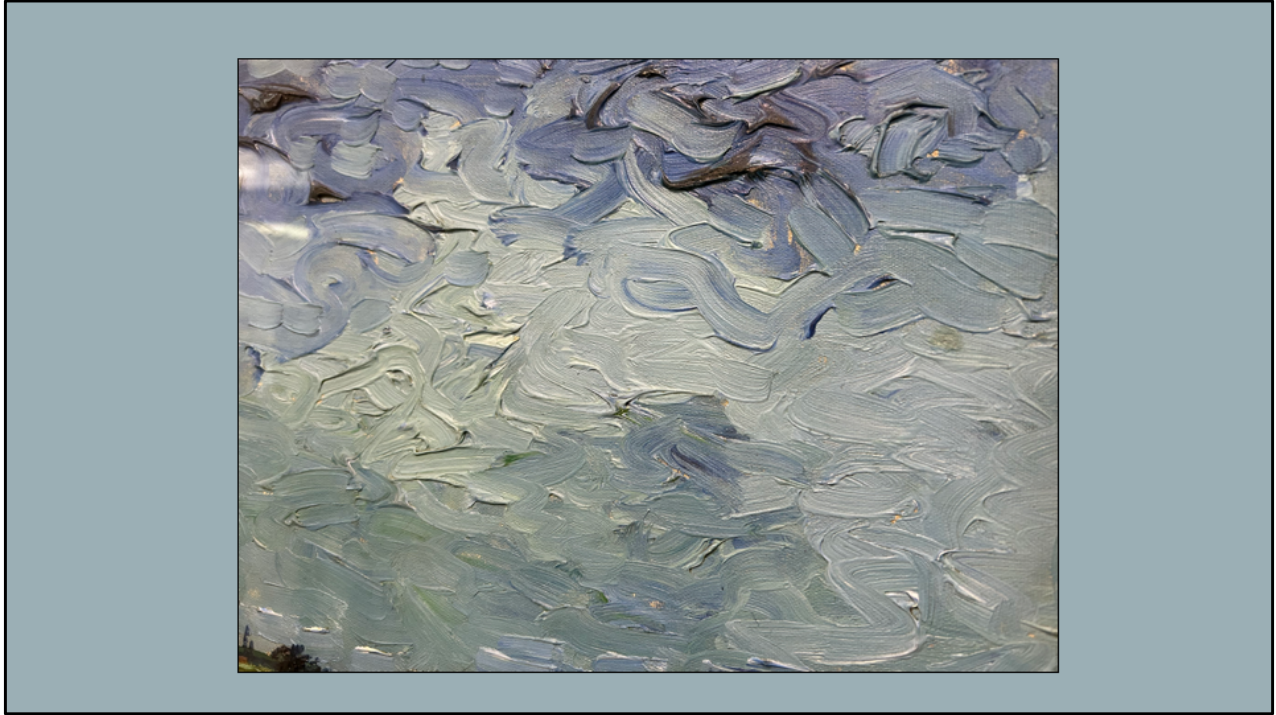
I was able to get up and personal with “Terrace of the Café” when I went to the Kröller-Muller Museum. When you get inches away from a Van Gogh, you can see every nuance of the applied paint—it’s thickness, the blending of colors, the splotches.

I love looking as close as possible to see how the painter worked. Here are a few examples closeups that I photographed there.



I have an artist friend who I went with to a Van Gogh exhibit one time in L.A. He commented that Van Gogh knew exactly where every brushstroke would go and could rapidly complete a painting without needing to work on it again later.

I don't entirely believe that to be true, but it would certainly explain how he could be so prolific. His thick brushstrokes allowed him to put wet paint on top of wet paint without it getting muddy, so here it seems likely that this was done in one sitting.



That seems to be case most of the time.





However, here he is clearly painting over a mauve undercoat, and the dark lines in the bottom were almost definitely added after the green and blue areas were dry.



Portrait of Madame Roulin 1888

Hidden gem...



On another canvas, I made a fascinating discovery. A week or two before going to the Kröller-Muller, I read a [New York Times article](#) (Solomon) about sand and pebbles being found in Van Gogh paintings. The biggest particle was a quarter inch in diameter. The conservator theorized that the canvases must have fallen on the ground, but in “The Lullaby: Madame Augustine Roulin” something caught my eye. The gemstone in Madame Roulin’s ring appeared to me to be a painted pebble. I could tell that it was raised significantly different than his usual impasto applications.

This is one of five nearly identical versions of this portrait. One of them he sent to Paul Gauguin as an act of reconciliation after their famously tempestuous relationship ended...



Which brings me to what happened between them. I'll try to present an accurate description of the events, because there are a lot of myths floating around.

Theo always supported Vincent's art financially, emotionally, and as an art dealer. He believed in his brother's ability and wanted him to succeed. In 1888, Theo was representing some of Paul Gauguin's work and had heard about his experiences at the Pont-Aven art colony. Theo sold 300 francs worth of Gauguin's ceramics and agreed to pay him a modest monthly allowance to go to Arles and work with Vincent to create a similar artist community.

Vincent was excited about the collaboration and decorated his room with cheerful sunflower paintings in anticipation of Gauguin's arrival.

Arles 1888



Gauguin's portrait of Van Gogh



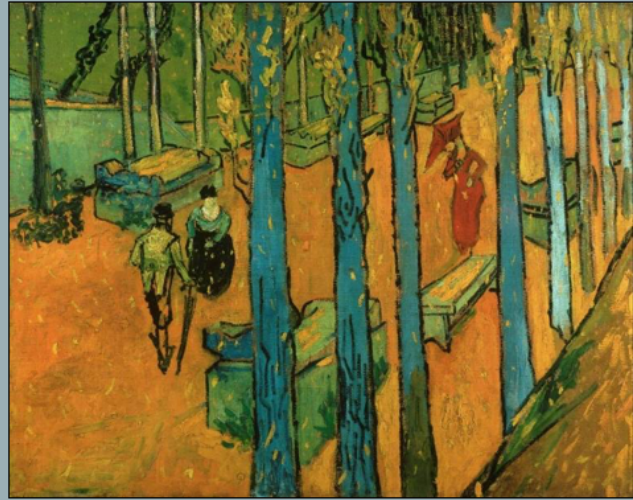
Van Gogh's portrait of Gauguin

Gauguin valued Van Gogh's artwork, but he had a chip on his shoulder. A former boxer and fencer, he was naturally pugnacious—and quite full of himself. He arrogantly acted as if he were a master teacher and Vincent a student who was beneath him. Remember, Gauguin was only five years older and had been a stockbroker up until six years earlier.

At the beginning of their collaboration, they painted portraits of each other. Again there are differing reports. Over the two months they were together, Van Gogh completed 36 canvases but some people have written this portrait is the only painting that Gauguin finished. That's false, and it's likely that Gauguin did 21 pictures in Arles, including several that are online and in books.

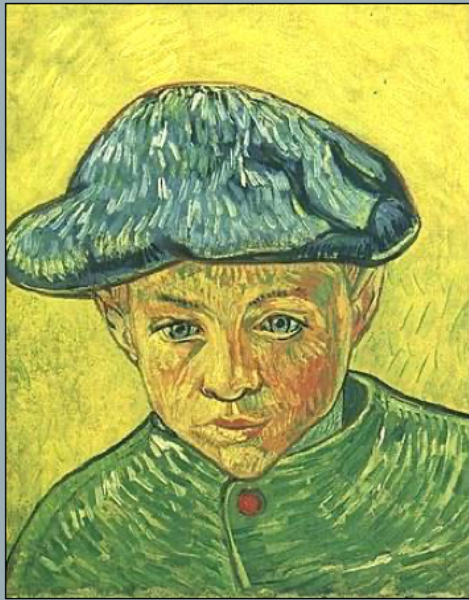


Paul Gauguin, Lane at Alyscamps, Arles 1888

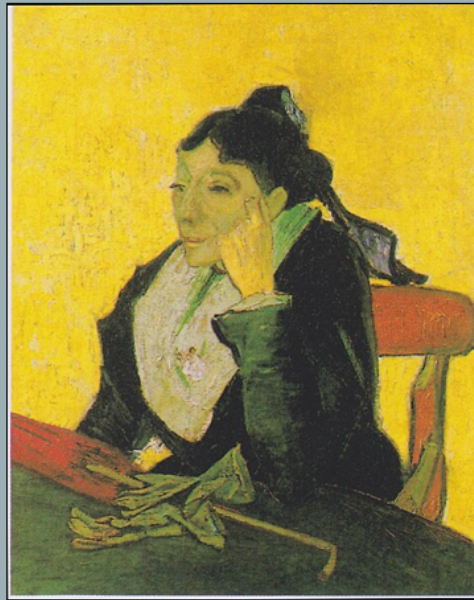


Les Alyscamps, Falling Autumn Leaves 1888

Gauguin wanted Van Gogh to paint more from his imagination and change up his color palette, and Vincent attempted to take Gauguin's advice. You can see Gauguin's influence here.



Portrait of Camille Ginoux 1888



Portrait of Madame Ginoux 1888

Predictably, the relationship deteriorated; and, Van Gogh rejected the dominant oranges that Gauguin was pushing and returned to his yellows and greens.

Two Empty Chairs: November 1888



The two artists' personalities and values were in complete conflict, as were their painting styles. Both were intelligent, articulate men; but, one was an arrogant bully and the other a self-doubting visionary. In Pont-Aven, Gauguin collaborated with other artists to establish a kind of art that was independent from nature, a different way of seeing the world. He worked in a more controlled and cerebral way. Whereas, for Van Gogh art and life were one. He lost himself in his creations and they reflected his inner state of emotion. He painted what he saw and felt.

Vincent's letters about the two empty chairs he'd painted have a melancholy subtext. He describes the one on the right as "a study of his (Gauguin's) armchair of **somber** reddish-brown wood, the seat of greenish straw, and in the **absent one's** place a lighted torch and modern novels."



The Yellow House 1888

Their personal and artistic vision was incompatible, and Gauguin wrote to a friend, “It is all so petty and wretched, the region and the people alike. Vincent and I rarely agree on much, least of all where painting is concerned.”

After two months of quarrelling, it all came to a boil. Gauguin had been threatening to give up on building an artists’ community and Van Gogh had become distraught and unpredictable. On the night of December 23rd in 1888, Van Gogh burst into Gauguin’s room, fearful that the other had abandoned him. Upset, Gauguin walked out into the street, and Vincent followed. Fifteen years later, Gauguin said that Van Gogh threatened him with a straight razor, though that is uncorroborated; and, other versions say that when Gauguin turned around, Vincent ran back to the little yellow house with his rented rooms.



Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe 1889

Disturbed by their encounter, Gauguin stayed the night at a guesthouse. Van Gogh was also historically upset. He mutilated his left ear. How much is a point of contention. A policeman on the scene said Van Gogh cut off the entire ear, but others, including Theo and his wife, saw him after the bandages were removed and maintained that he had “only” sliced off the earlobe.

Regardless, Vincent placed it in a handkerchief—though some accounts say it was wrapped in paper and in a package—and he gave it to a 17-year-old country woman named Gaby, who worked in a brothel. Different versions have her as a cleaning woman or a prostitute. Afterward, Van Gogh went home and passed out. Alerted by Gaby, a policeman found him the next morning unconscious and covered in blood. He was taken to the town hospital, and diagnosed with “acute mania with generalized delirium.”

Fearing that Van Gogh would kill himself if Gauguin visited the hospital, he quickly gathered his belongings and left town. They never spoke or saw each other again. However, they did write letters back and forth and seemed to reach a conciliation. Part of Van Gogh still wanted to please Gauguin, and his use of orange in this self-portrait reflects those sentiments.



Still Life with a Drawing Board, Pipe, Onions and Sealing Wax 1889



Crab on Its Back 1889



Still Life with Smoked Herrings on Yellow Paper 1889

These were painted back at the yellow house in January 1889, during his convalescence. In the year that Van Gogh lived in Arles, he completed 187 paintings. That's an enormous amount. Some people consider me prodigious, but I've never painted more than 34 canvases in a year, and that was intense! By comparison, he painted 6X as many, at the rate of one every other day.

Under immense, self-directed pressure, he pushed himself to keep going by consuming large quantities of coffee, nicotine, and alcohol. This all added to the fuel of his mental illness. Gauguin was simply the straw that broke the camel's back.

Incidentally, by 1973 (50 years ago), psychologists and art historians had written at least 93 publications attempting to define Van Gogh's diagnosis—schizophrenia and epilepsy were most common suggestions. Nowadays, he'd probably be diagnosed with bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder, as well.



Ward in the Hospital in Arles 1889



The Courtyard of the Hospital at Arles 1889

By February, Vincent had reached a state of psychosis with bouts of paranoia, hallucinations, and delusions. He was again hospitalized, but placed in solitary confinement, labeled as a “lunatic” and “public menace.” From thus comes the stereotype of the tortured artist as a “Mad Genius.”

Van Gogh understood his condition, recognized his exhaustion, and went back and forth between the hospital and the house. He had periods of sanity and was highly productive. He wrote to Theo, “I am not actually mentally ill. You will see that the pictures I painted in the period between my two attacks are calm and no worse than others I have done.”

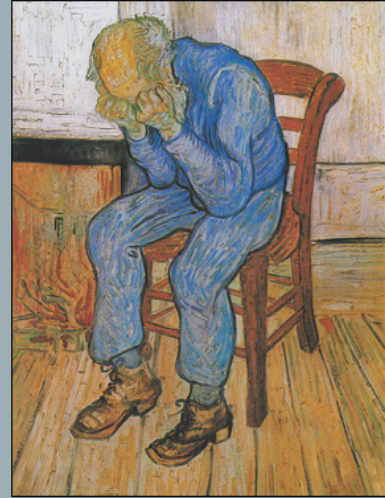
SAINT-RÉMY (1889-90)



Vestibule of the Asylum and Saint-Rémy
1889



The Reaper (after Millet) 1889



Sorrowing Old Man ("At Eternity's Gate") 1890

In May 1889, accompanied by a caregiver, Vincent voluntarily entered an asylum in Saint-Remy, less than an hour away from Arles. Housed in a former monastery, he was given two rooms with barred windows, one of which he used as a studio. He expected that this monk-like isolation would suit him, and at first it did. He painted scenes around the asylum and used Millet etchings as inspiration.



Landscape from Saint-Rémy 1889



Wheat Field with Cypresses 1889

When he was allowed outside, he painted the surroundings.

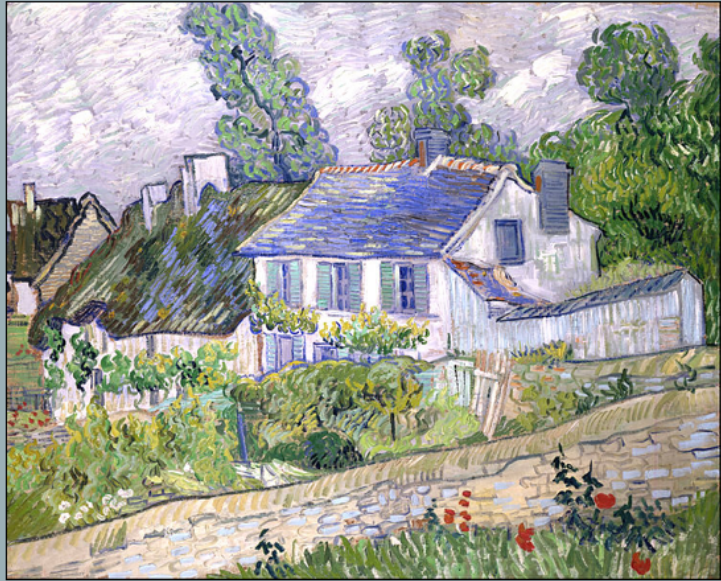


Iris 1889

Auvers-sur-Oise 1890



Portrait of Dr. Paul Gachet 1890



Houses at Auvers 1890

In May of 1890, Van Gogh left the clinic and moved to Auvers-sur-Oise, a suburb of Paris, to be closer to Dr. Paul Gachet, his doctor and an amateur painter, as well as Theo.



The Starry Night 1889

During the final months of his life, Van Gogh alternated between periods of productivity and incapacity. He knew that his time was limited and wrote, "...I am getting to grips with my work, precisely because I know that there will not be another opportunity to paint. Least of all in my case, since a more serious attack may do permanent damage to my ability to work."

Despite the incredible beauty that we see in the 137 paintings from this period, he only signed 7 of them, because he was so dissatisfied with the results.



Wheatfield with Crows 1890

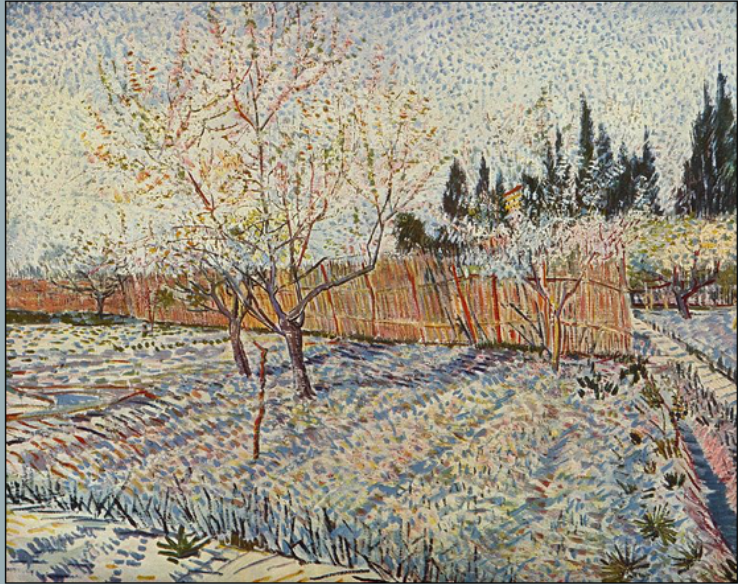
On July 27, 1890, it is generally accepted that Vincent shot himself in the chest, though there have been rumors to the contrary. He stumbled back to his room and Dr. Gachet was notified. No one knows where he got the revolver or whether he shot himself in a field or barn. It was evening, and he wasn't with paint and easel completing this canvas, as the movie "Lust for Life" depicted.

By the next morning, Theo arrived and found him lying in his bed, puffing his pipe. Vincent's final words were, "I wish it were all over now." Theo sadly wrote their mother, "He has found the peace he never found on earth...He was such a brother to me."

EPILOGUE



Portrait of Theo van Gogh 1887



Orchard with Cypresses 1888

Six months later, his brother Theo died. The cause of death was listed as *dementia paralytica* caused by "heredity, chronic disease, overwork, and sadness." The brothers are buried side-by-side in Auvers.

Theo's estate, which included all of Vincent's paintings—as well as many works by other artists—was left to his widow, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger. She tirelessly promoted the artwork and is widely credited as being responsible for his posthumous fame.

It's worth noting that his most expensive painting, "Orchard with Cypresses" sold at auction in 2022 for \$117.2 million.



Almond Blossom 1890

Theo and Johanna had one son, Vincent Willem Van Gogh, who was born in January of 1890. Upon his birth, Van Gogh painted “Almond Blossom” to decorate the baby’s nursery. When the boy grew up, he set up a foundation to keep the collection intact. Subsequently the Vincent Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam opened in 1973, five years before Vincent Willhem passed away at 88, older than his father and uncle put together.



Leigh Cohn, *Cherry Blossom* 2023

Finally, to bring it full circle, I painted this "Cherry Blossoms" to celebrate my grandson's birth earlier this year.