

# Vincent van Gogh in Saint-Rémy

In May 1889, following several psychotic episodes in Arles, Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) voluntarily admitted himself to the asylum at the monastery of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. He stayed there for just over a year. Despite several further episodes of severe depression and madness, van Gogh was incredibly prolific during this period, producing about 150 paintings, among them *Starry Night*.

## Madness in Arles

Vincent van Gogh left Paris and settled in Arles in February, 1888. Profoundly affected by the quality of the light and vividness of the colors, he changed his style of painting, banishing the shadows of his earlier work. He had become fascinated by the Japanese woodblock prints that he had bought in Paris, and was intrigued by the new techniques of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) and Emile Bernard (1868-1941) in Pont Aven, who were beginning to using flat colors within clearly defined outlines (a technique later called “cloisonnism” from the procedure of melting enamels onto a surface within compartments defined by small metal strips). Most importantly he began to heighten his colors – to paint what he felt as much as what he saw. He combined these new approaches – flat colors, clear outlines, heightened hues – with the thick impasto and broad brushstrokes of earlier Dutch painting to develop his own unique style.

In October 1888, Gauguin came to stay with van Gogh in Arles. They shared the small Yellow House on the Place Lamartine in Arles that van Gogh had rented and decorated with the financial support of his younger brother Theo (1857-1891), an art-dealer in Paris. Vincent wanted to establish a “Studio of the South” where painters could create art appropriate to the

modern age. Both Gauguin and van Gogh had very definite ideas about the future of art and they did not always agree. In particular, van Gogh wanted to paint directly from nature whereas Gauguin wanted to paint from memory and imagination (a process he called "abstraction"). They argued.

On December 23, 1888, Gauguin threatened to leave. Van Gogh became psychotic. In his madness he cut off his left ear with a razor, and presented this bloody object to a young prostitute. The following was the next day's newspaper report (Bailey, 2016, p 157)

Hier soir, un individu se présentant à la porte de la maison de tolérance no. 1, sonnait et remettait à la femme, qui vint lui ouvrir, une oreille pliée dans un morceau de papier, lui disant «Tenez, cela vous servira.» Il s'en alla ensuite. Je vous laisse à penser l'étonnement et l'effroi dut avoir cette femme en trouvant une oreille dans ce papier. La police faisant peu après sa ronde, eut connaissance du fait ... et a été sur les traces de cet étrange personnage. Ce matin, M. le commissaire central et son secrétaire se sont transportés au domicile d'un peintre hollandaise nommé Vincent, place Lamartine, et ont appris par la bonne qu'elle avait trouvé ce matin un rasoir ensanglanté sur la table et a trouvé ensuite l'artiste peintre couché dans son lit avec une oreille coupée et dans un état assez grave. M. le commissaire central l'a fait transporté à l'hôpital.

[Yesterday evening, an individual presented himself at brothel no. 1, rang the bell and handed to the woman, who came to open the door, an ear folded into a piece of paper, saying "Here, this will be useful to you." He then left. I leave you to imagine the astonishment and fear this woman must have felt when she found an ear within the paper. The police patrol coming by the brothel soon afterwards were made aware of what had happened ... and were soon on the trail of this strange character. This morning, the Chief of Police

and his secretary went to the home of a Dutch painter named Vincent on Place Lamartine, and learned from the maid that she had just found a bloody razor on the table. They then discovered the painter lying in bed with an amputated ear and in serious condition from loss of blood. The Chief of Police had him taken to hospital.]

Van Gogh was treated in the hospital at Arles. Theo van Gogh came down from Paris to check on his brother. Gauguin took the train back to Paris and the two artists never saw each other again. The following illustration shows van Gogh's self-portrait (F527) from January 1889. This and later paintings are identified by their Faille number (Faille & Hammermacher, 1970; Feilchenfeldt, 2013) The portrait was painted using a mirror thus making it appear as if his right ear was amputated rather than his left. In the background is one of van Gogh's Japanese prints: *Geishas in a Landscape* by Sato Torakiyu (1870s)



Over the next few months van Gogh suffered from two other

bouts of severe madness for which he was hospitalized. His neighbors petitioned the police that *le foux roux* (the red-headed madman) not be allowed to return to the Yellow House. Finally, he agreed to be admitted to the asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Theo arranged to pay for his treatment there, and a kindly Protestant minister accompanied him to his new home.

No one knows what caused van Gogh's psychotic episodes. A recent symposium (Bakker et al., 2016) discussed many possible causes but came to no conclusion. Some of the problems in making a diagnosis so long after the patient died are discussed by ter Berg et al. (2012) and Voskuil (2020). The doctors who treated him in Arles and in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence thought that he suffered from a type of epilepsy that manifested itself in mental changes rather than physical convulsions. This disorder presently goes by the name of "temporal lobe epilepsy" (Blumer, 2002). Patients with temporal lobe epilepsy experience attacks of confusion and automatic behavior. Between these attacks, the patient may be depressed.

To my mind, van Gogh's periods of madness were more likely due to "bipolar disorder" (Carota et al., 2005), previously known as "manic-depressive illness." Many other creative artists have suffered from this disorder (Jamison, 1993; Johnson et al., 2012; Ludwig, 1995). Such a diagnosis would explain von Gogh's episodes of overwhelming depression. His remarkable productivity when not depressed could be attributed to periods of hypomania.

## **The Asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole**

Saint-Rémy-de Provence is located about 20 km south of Avignon in the region called Bouches-du-Rhône ("mouths" of the Rhône – where the river empties into the Mediterranean Sea).



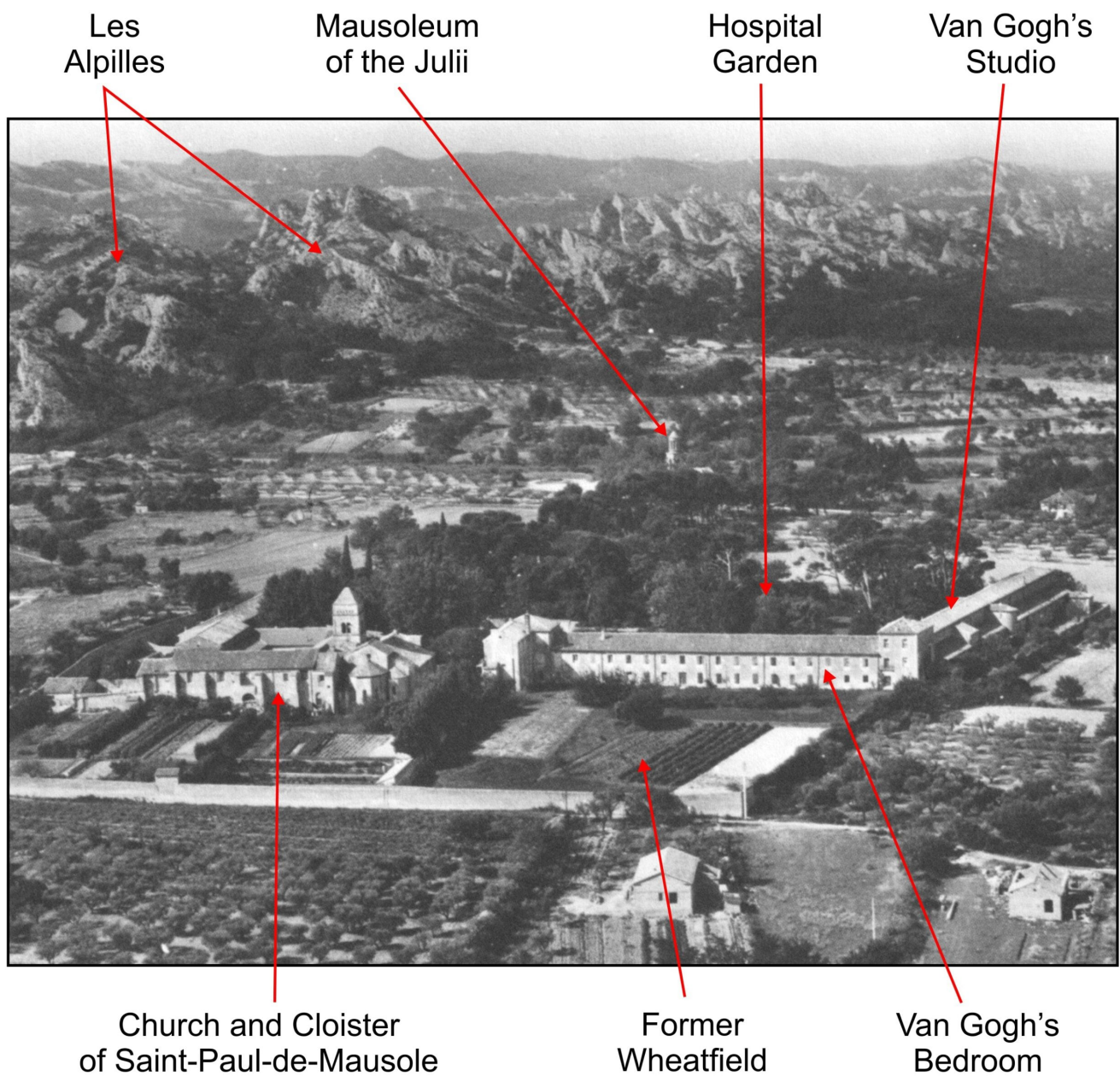
South of Saint-Rémy are a striking set of low limestone mountains called *Les Alpilles*, wherein the medieval Princes of Les Baux (from Provençal, *bauç*, a rocky spur), allegedly descended from the magus Balthasar, built their castle. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the mineral bauxite (a source of aluminum) was discovered and mined there.

The region near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence has been inhabited for millennia. Greeks and then Romans lived in a town called Glanum, located about one kilometer south of modern Saint Rémy. The most striking remnants of Roman times are *Les Antiques*: a triumphal arch and a mausoleum for the Julii family, both dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.



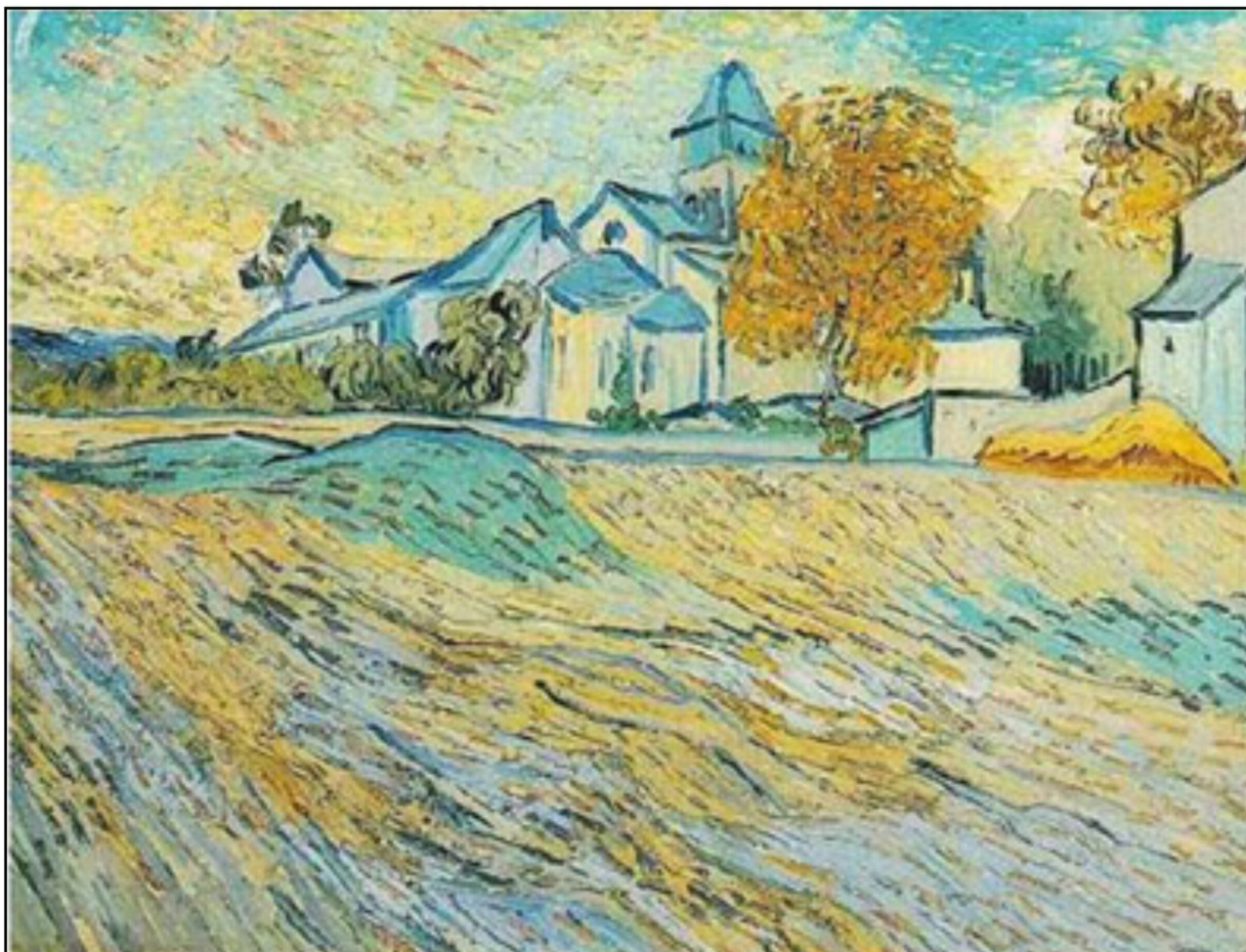
The modern town of Saint-Rémy was named after Saint Remigius who converted the Franks to Christianity in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century CE. In the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, a Benedictine monastery was built near the site of Glanum (Duret, 2021), taking its name from the most prominent of the Roman ruins: Saint-Paul-de-Mausole. The Romanesque monastery is renowned for its square bell tower and the peacefulness of its cloister. In 1605, the monastery was ceded to the Strict Order of St. Francis of Assisi. Over the years, these monks began to construct the adjacent hospital buildings and to care for the mentally disturbed. After the French Revolution (1789-99), the monastery was secularized. The asylum was taken over by private interests, but continued to care for mentally disturbed patients, albeit using nuns rather than monks. At the time of van Gogh's hospitalization, the asylum was directed by Théophile Peyron, a retired naval doctor. Treatment was based on kindness and therapeutic baths.

Since there were very few patients, van Gogh was allowed both a second-story bedroom with a barred window facing east over the wheatfield, and a ground-floor painting-studio that looked out onto the enclosed hospital garden. The following illustration is an aerial view of the monastery taken from the east sometime in the 1940s (adapted from Bailey, 2018, 2019). The town of Saint-Rémy is outside the photo to the right (north) and Les Baux is to the left (south)



The following illustration shows a view of the monastery as seen from the northeast, as painted by van Gogh in October

1889 (F803). This painting for a while belonged to Elizabeth Taylor. Below that is a recent photograph of the monastery church and cloister as viewed from the southeast.





When van Gogh arrived at the asylum he would have entered through the main door of the hospital. The following illustration shows the view from the vestibule to the enclosed garden in a painting by van Gogh (F1530, October, 1889) and in a modern photograph (Bailey, 2019).



The following is an ink drawing of the fountain in the garden that is visible through the vestibule door (F1531, May 1889) made soon after van Gogh arrived.



## Irises

During his first weeks at the asylum, van Gogh was limited to the hospital grounds, but was allowed to paint in the hospital garden. He felt comfortable in the asylum and hoped that his stay there might cure his madness. He wrote a letter to his new sister-in-law Joanna van Gogh-Bonger on May 9, 1889

(Jansen et al., 2009, 772):

Although there are a few people here who are seriously ill, the fear, the horror that I had of madness before has already been greatly softened.

And although one continually hears shouts and terrible howls as though of the animals in a menagerie, despite this the people here know each other very well, and help each other when they suffer crises. They all come to see when I'm working in the garden, and I can assure you are more discreet and more polite to leave me in peace than, for example, the good citizens of Arles.

It's possible that I'll stay here for quite a long time, never have I been so tranquil as here and at the hospital in Arles to be able to paint a little at last. Very near here there are some little grey or blue mountains, with very, very green wheatfields at their foot, and pines.

One of the earliest paintings from his stay in the asylum was *Iris* (May 1889, F608)



The painting owes much to the Japanese art that van Gogh had become fascinated by in Paris. In an 1888 letter to Theo, he had praised the Japanese way of seeing the importance of simple things

If we study Japanese art, then we see a man, undoubtedly wise and a philosopher and intelligent, who spends his time – on what? – studying the distance from the earth to the moon? – no; studying Bismarck's politics? – no, he studies a single blade of grass.

But this blade of grass leads him to draw all the plants – then the seasons, the broad features of landscapes, finally animals, and then the human figure. He spends his life like that, and life is too short to do everything.

Just think of that; isn't it almost a new religion that

these Japanese teach us, who are so simple and live in nature as if they themselves were flowers? (Jansen et al., 2009, 686):

One particular painting which van Gogh probably saw in reproduction, is a screen with a field of irises displayed on a gold background by Ogata Korin (1658-1716):



Although the iconography is similar, the style of van Gogh's painting is distinctly his own:

Korin's paintings seem slick, precious, almost delicate, next to Vincent's fleshy, jostling flowers. Van Gogh reinforced objects with bold outlines, but his thick application of paint gave the surface a tangible, almost sculptural, rather than graphic, quality. (Helvey, 2009, p 122)

One of the fascinating aspects of van Gogh's *Irises* is the isolated white flower in the upper left. Helvey (2009) proposes that this is an *Iris albicans* as opposed to the other *Iris germanica* flowers, rather than a mutation (as might be the pale blue flower on the right). As such it would be much like van Gogh, a "stranger on the earth." This quotation (from *Psalms* 119: 18-19) is from a sermon that a younger van Gogh gave in his days as a preacher; it provides the title for

Lubin's 1972 biography of the painter.

Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.

I am a stranger in the earth: hide not thy commandments from me.

Van Gogh's *Irises* was sold at auction in 1987 for what was then a record price for a painting: 49 million dollars. However, the stock market crashed and the buyer defaulted. Rather than putting the painting up for auction again (and having it not reach the same price), Sotheby's arranged for the Getty Museum in Los Angeles to acquire it in a private purchase.

One year later, in May 1890, when the irises were again in bloom, just before leaving the asylum, van Gogh painted *Bouquet of Irises* (F680). The background pink of the original painting has faded over the years:



## The Wheatfield

Van Gogh's bedroom at the asylum looked out over a wheatfield. In the distance beyond the wall enclosing the field were the *Alpilles*. Van Gogh remarked on the view in a letter to Theo in late May, 1889:

Through the iron-barred window I can make out a square of wheat in an enclosure, a perspective in the manner of van Goyen, above which in the morning I see the sun rise in its glory. (Jansen et al., 2009, 776)

Jan van Goyen (1596-1656) was a Dutch painter of landscapes and seascapes. Van Gogh is referring to his characteristic "perspective" which used a low horizon and paid great

attention to the sky and clouds. Van Gogh was different: he seldom used a low horizon for his paintings, his bright colors were the opposite of the highly restricted palette of browns, greys, ochres and greens used by van Goyen, and his brushstrokes were bold rather than fine.

The following is one of his first paintings of the wheatfield (May 1889, F720). The wheat was growing well and beginning to turn from green to gold. Although some have proposed that the view was painted from his window, I suggest that he set up his easel at the edge of the field looking southeast. This would allow him to show the wildflowers at the edge of the field in the foreground:

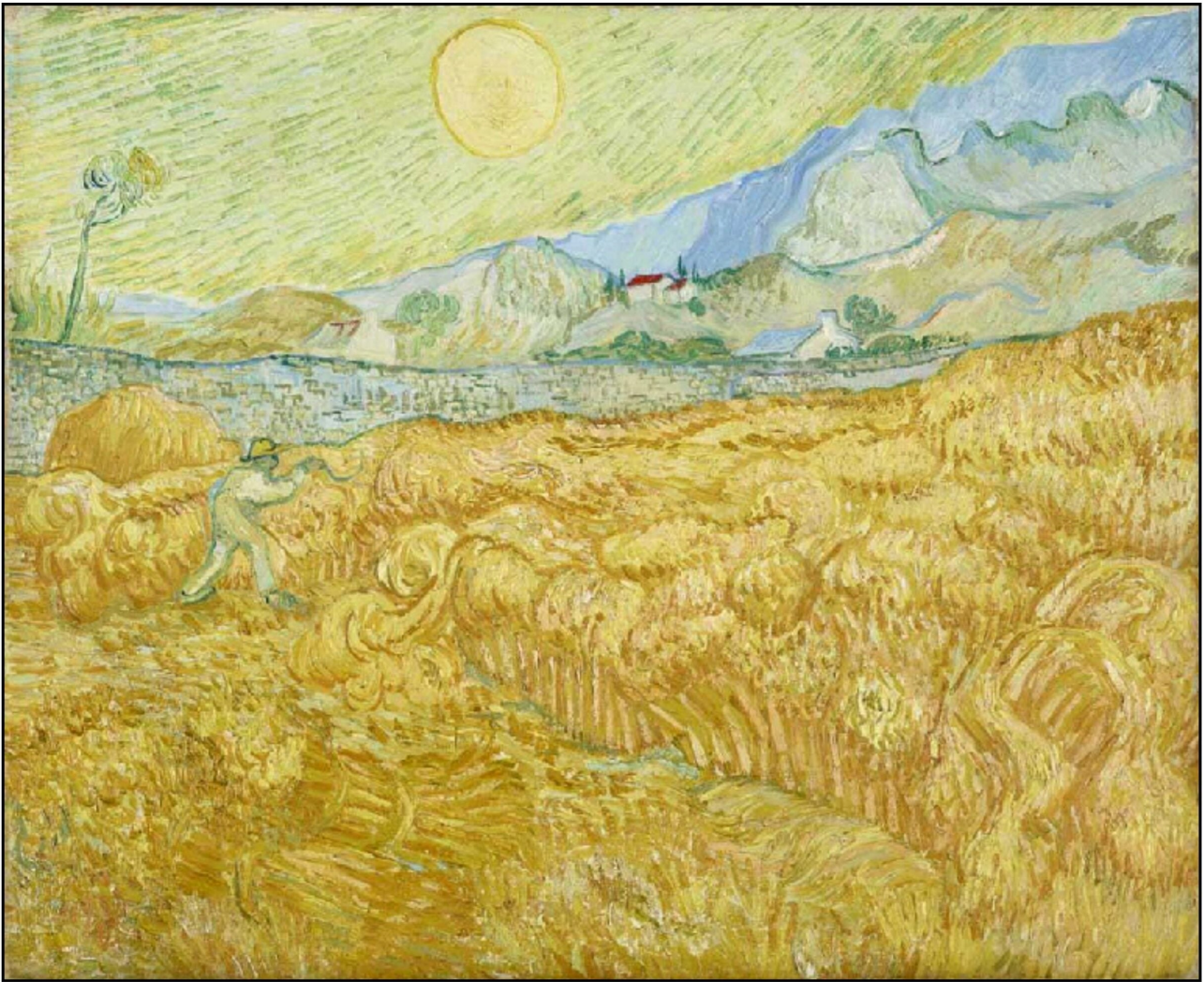


In mid July, 1889, van Gogh suffered a severe relapse and was unable to work for over a month. After returning to some

semblance of normality, he completed several versions of the harvest in the wheatfield. In a letter to Theo from early September (Jansen et al., 2009, 800) he described the scene

Work is going quite well – I'm struggling with a canvas begun a few days before my indisposition. A reaper, the study is all yellow, terribly thickly impasted, but the subject was beautiful and simple. I then saw in this reaper – a vague figure struggling like a devil in the full heat of the day to reach the end of his toil – I then saw the image of death in it, in this sense that humanity would be the wheat being reaped. So if you like it's the opposite of that Sower I tried before. But in this death nothing sad, it takes place in broad daylight with a sun that floods everything with a light of fine gold.

Van Gogh is comparing the painting to a study that he had made in Arles in 1888 of François Millet's 1850 painting of *The Sower*. He was to make other copies in early 1890 at the asylum.



In 1902, one version of these harvest paintings (September 1889, F619) was the first work of Van Gogh to be purchased and displayed in a museum: the Folkwang Museum, originally in Hagen and now in Essen, Germany (Lloyd et al., 2007, p 41).

After the harvest was over, van Gogh continued to paint the wheatfield. The following illustration shows a painting of the field during rain from November, 1889 (F650). Van Gogh was familiar with the convention in Japanese woodblock prints of using slanting lines to represent rain. In 1887 in Paris, he had made a copy of Hiroshige's 1857 *Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi Bridge and Atake* (Pickvance, 1986, p 139).



Rilke (1907, p 56) remarked about the painting

But now rain, rain: exhaustive and noisy like in the country, without any other sounds in between. The round edge of the wall in the monastery garden is full of mosses and has spots of an utterly luminous green, much as I have never seen.

In a letter to Emile Bernard (Jansen et al., 2007, 822) described another painting of the wheatfield (November 1889, F737) now newly planted with winter-wheat, illustrated below:

Another canvas depicts a sun rising over a field of new wheat. Receding lines of the furrows run high up on the canvas, towards a wall and a range of lilac hills. The field

is violet and green-yellow. The white sun is surrounded by a large yellow aureole. In it, in contrast to the other canvas, I have tried to express calm, a great peace.



The painting is wonderfully tranquil. This contrasts with van Gogh's inner feelings at the time. In this regard it is worthwhile to consider the "other painting" to which he contrasts it. This *View of the Monastery Garden* (November, 1889, F659) is one that he describes extensively in a letter to Emile Bernard:

A view of the garden of the asylum where I am, on the right a grey terrace, a section of house, some rosebushes that have lost their flowers; on the left, the earth of the garden – red ochre – earth burnt by the sun, covered in fallen pine twigs. This edge of the garden is planted with

large pines with red ochre trunks and branches, with green foliage saddened by a mixture of black. These tall trees stand out against an evening sky streaked with violet against a yellow background. High up, the yellow turns to pink, turns to green. A wall – red ochre again – blocks the view, and there's nothing above it but a violet and yellow ochre hill. Now, the first tree is an enormous trunk, but struck by lightning and sawn off. A side branch thrusts up very high, however, and falls down again in an avalanche of dark green twigs.

This dark giant – like a proud man brought low – contrasts, when seen as the character of a living being, with the pale smile of the last rose on the bush, which is fading in front of him. Under the trees, empty stone benches, dark box. The sky is reflected yellow in a puddle after the rain. A ray of sun – the last glimmer – exalts the dark ochre to orange – small dark figures prowl here and there between the trunks. You'll understand that this combination of red ochre, of green saddened with grey, of black lines that define the outlines, this gives rise a little to the feeling of anxiety from which some of my companions in misfortune often suffer, and which is called 'seeing red'. And what's more, the motif of the great tree struck by lightning, the sickly green and pink smile of the last flower of autumn, confirms this idea. (Jansen et al., 2007, 822)



## Cypresses

In June 1889 van Gogh was allowed to travel outside the limits of the asylum, usually in the company of one of the hospital's orderlies. He took his easel and paints into the surrounding countryside. Several drawings and paintings from that early summer period portray some of the striking cypress trees near the asylum. Van Gogh noted his new fascination with the cypress trees in a letter to Theo (Jansen et al., 2007, 783):

The cypresses still preoccupy me, I'd like to do something with them like the canvases of the sunflowers because it astonishes me that no one has yet done them as I see them.

It's beautiful as regards lines and proportions, like an

Egyptian obelisk.

And the green has such a distinguished quality.

It's the *dark* patch in a sun-drenched landscape, but it's one of the most interesting dark notes, the most difficult to hit off exactly that I can imagine.

Now they must be seen here against the blue, *in* the blue, rather.

The following painting (June, 1889, F717) made just before his relapse, portrays a large cypress, linking the gold of the wheatfield to the blues of the *Alpilles* and the stormy sky.



## **Starry Night**

The most famous of van Gogh's paintings from Saint-Rémy, *Starry Night*, was painted in mid-June, 1889 (F612), following a profound experience of the night stars, and just before his July madness. Unlike most of van Gogh's paintings, this was not done directly from nature, but rather from memory and imagination – using the technique that Gauguin had called abstraction, and that van Gogh had argued so strongly against in Arles. He did not paint this in the bedroom where he had experienced the stars, but in the ground-floor studio. Images from recent paintings that were drying in the studio – of the wheatfield with the *Alpilles* in the background and of the cypress trees near the asylum – are combined with his memory of the night sky. The town portrayed in the foreground is likely not Saint-Rémy – the church steeple is too prominent, the town is not clearly visible from the hospital, and van Gogh made no other similar paintings. Most critics have suggested that the painting portrays a memory: “a Dutch village inserted into a Southern landscape” (Pickvance, 1986, p 103)



The band of light blue and white above the horizon probably represents the approaching dawn. The moon at the right is surrounded by an intense yellow glow. The bright white star to the left of center is probably Venus, the morning star, also known as *Phosphorus* or light bringer (Boime, 1984). The sky and the milky way appear to move in tumultuous waves. The central swirling pattern in the sky may have a source in the famous Hokusai's 1831 woodblock print of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (Bailey 2018, p 81) Like Hokusai's wave, van Gogh's sky crests and tumbles toward the slopes of the *Alpilles*.

For van Gogh, the stars represented the gateways to eternity. The following is from a letter to Theo in July 1888 (Jansen et al., 2007, 638):

Painters – to speak only of them – being dead and buried, speak to a following generation or to several following generations through their works. Is that all, or is there more, even? In the life of the painter, death may perhaps not be the most difficult thing.

For myself, I declare I don't know anything about it. But the sight of the stars always makes me dream *in as simple a way* as the black spots on the map, representing towns and villages, make me dream.

Why, I say to myself, should the spots of light in the firmament be less accessible to us than the black spots on the map of France.

Just as we take the train to go to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to go to a star. What's certainly true in this argument is that while *alive*, we *cannot* go to a star, any more than once dead we'd be able to take the train. So it seems to me not impossible that cholera, the stone, consumption, cancer are celestial means of locomotion, just as steamboats, omnibuses and the railway are terrestrial ones.

To die peacefully of old age would be to go there on foot.

Erickson (1998) suggests that the three main compositional elements of the painting – the village scene, the cypress and the sky – represents different aspects of van Gogh's religious beliefs. The village likely means the conventional religion that he tried to follow in his youth. Erickson points out that

While every house glows with yellow light under the brilliance of the starry sky, the church remains completely dark (pp 170-171).

The flame-like cypress tree may represent mankind's aspirations beyond this mortal life. Cypressess have long been associated with death and van Gogh felt that death was the

gateway to eternity. Since the cypress is what ties the earth to the sky, perhaps he could experience the infinite through nature rather than religion. The starry sky itself represents the Infinite.

## **Beyond the Asylum**

In the autumn of 1889, after recuperating from his prolonged bout of madness, van Gogh began to travel again in the countryside around the asylum. The illustration below shows the stone quarry (October, 1889, F635). The quarry near Saint-Rémy had provided stone for the building of the Greco-Roman city of Glanum, but by Vincent's time had long fallen into disuse.



Van Gogh's quarry paintings are intriguing since from 1890 to 2000 Paul Cézanne created a series of paintings of the Bibemus quarry near Aix-en-Provence some 75 km southeast of Saint-Rémy, e.g. *La carrière de Bibémus* (1895). Both painters were intrigued by the different planar surfaces and by the subtle alterations in their color with the direction of the light. The main differences between the painters are that van Gogh's planes are more clearly outlined, and Cézanne's brushwork is much less defined.

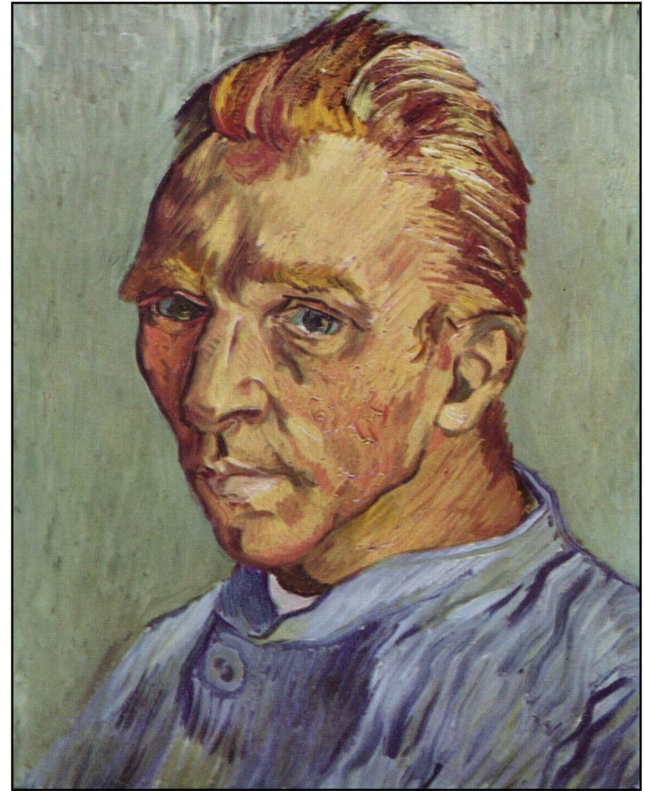
Another theme for the autumn of 1889 were the olive groves near the asylum. The following is one of many paintings of olive trees, with the southern sun and the *Alpilles* in the background (November, 1889, F710). The trees are dancing to the rhythms of the sunlight. By the time van Gogh was painting

the sun, it had itself moved from when he started to paint and the blue shadows on the ground that he had painted first are no longer properly aligned. This painting thus records the passage of time as well as of the existence of the olive groves. Another interesting feature of this particular painting is that all the colors appear heightened except for the light green color of the olive tree foliage which van Gogh has precisely delineated.



## Portraits

After recuperating from his summer madness, van Gogh painted three self-portraits in September 1889. Two of these are shown below (F626 and F525).



The portrait on the left shows the painter wearing a smock and holding a palette and brushes. This is a convention long used by painters and Van Gogh had likely seen a print of Rembrandt in a similar pose: the *Self-portrait with Two Circles* (1665) now at Kenwood House on Hampstead Heath in London. Rembrandt, however, gazes directly at the viewer whereas van Gogh looks off into the distance.

The orange-white colors of the head contrast strikingly with a dark blue and violet background that recalls the swirling sky of *Starry Night*. Orange and blue are classic complementary colors. From bright orange to dark blue also show a high contrast in brightness. The blue of the eyes ties everything together. Van Gogh described the portrait to Theo in a letter

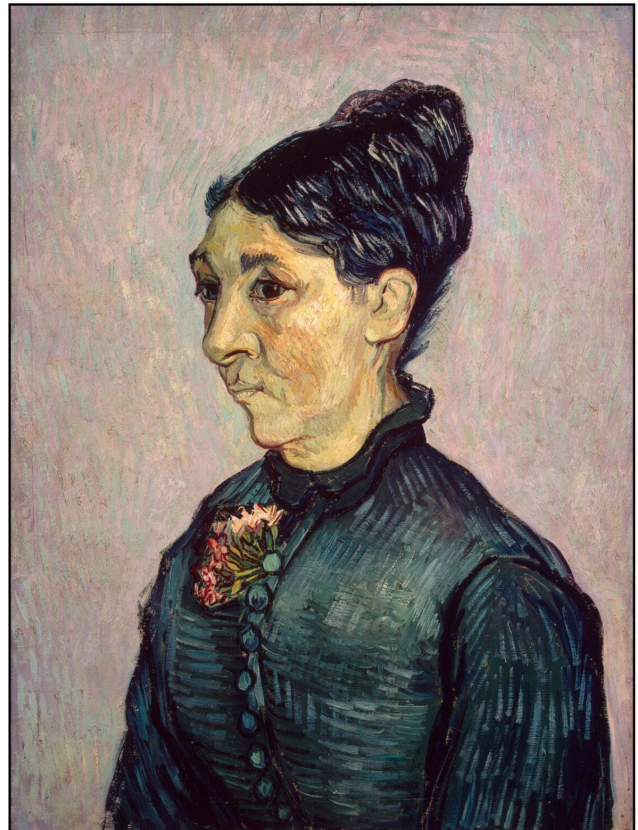
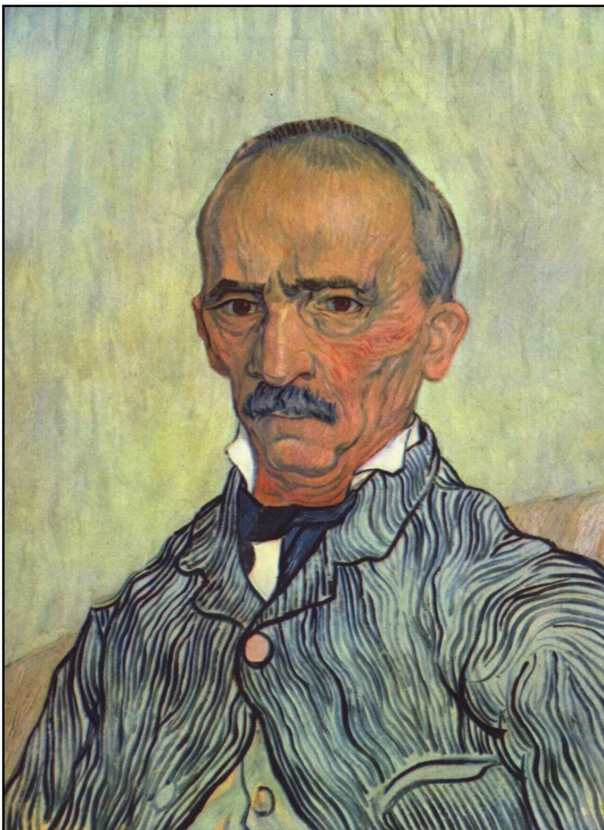
One I began the first day I got up, I was thin, pale as a devil. It's dark violet blue and the head whiteish with yellow hair, thus a colour effect. (Jansen et al., 2007, 800).

Another similar portrait, much less effective, was completed

at about the same time with a pale blue background. Finally van Gogh painted a small self-portrait after he had shaved his beard. He wondered to Theo whether he should send this to his mother to show how well he had recuperated from his madness. He seemed unaware of how profoundly sad he appears: with raised internal eyebrows and down-turning mouth corners. He looks apologetically at the viewer. According to Pickvance (1986) this is probably van Gogh's last self-portrait.

Van Gogh also produced striking portraits of the head orderly at the hospital Charles-Elzéard Trabuc and his wife, Jeanne Lafuye Trabuc (September 1889, F629 and F231). Rilke was able to see the first portrait in a dealer's storage room in Paris (1907, p 56):

An elderly man with a short-cropped, black-and-white mustache, sparse hair of the same color, cheeks indented beneath a broad skull; the whole thing in black and white, rose, wet dark blue, and an opaque bluish white – except for the large brown eyes.



Van Gogh remarked about the orderly in a letter to Theo

He was at the hospital in Marseilles through two periods of cholera, altogether he is a man who has seen an enormous amount of suffering and death, and there is a sort of contemplative calm in his face.

It makes a rather curious contrast with the portrait I have done of myself, in which the look is vague and veiled, whereas he has something military in his small quick black eyes.

His comments to Theo about the wife were unkind, although the painting, itself, is more sympathetic.

She is a faded woman, an unhappy, resigned creature of small account, so insignificant that I have a great longing to paint that dusty blade of grass. I have talked to her sometimes when doing some olive trees behind their little house, and she told me then that she did not believe I was ill (Jansen et al., 2007, letters 800 and 801)

## **Studies of Earlier Artists**

During the autumn of 1889 and early in 1890, van Gogh produced numerous studies of the works of Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) and Gustave Doré (1832-1883) (Naifeh, 2021). All of the copies were based on black-and-white reproductions, with van Gogh seeking to add extra levels of meaning to the images by means of color. One of his most successful copies was based on a *Pièta* by Eugène Delacroix. The original painting from about 1850 was small and dark, but lithographic reproductions, mirror-reversed by the printing process, were very popular. The following illustration shows the original image, the lithograph, and van Gogh's copy (September, 1889, F630)



Van Gogh uses his favorite colors, blue and yellow. The blue may point to eternity and the yellow, like the sunrise that it promises, may represent hope. The colors are as unnatural as the posture of the dead Messiah. Van Gogh gave Christ beard as orange as his own. He was looking toward his own death and resurrection.

### **At Eternity's Gate**

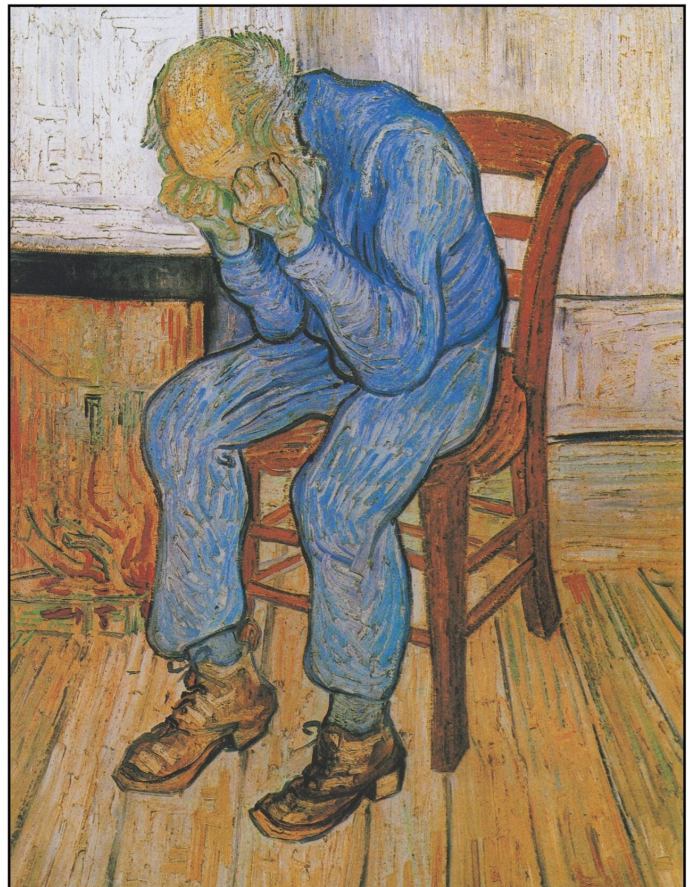
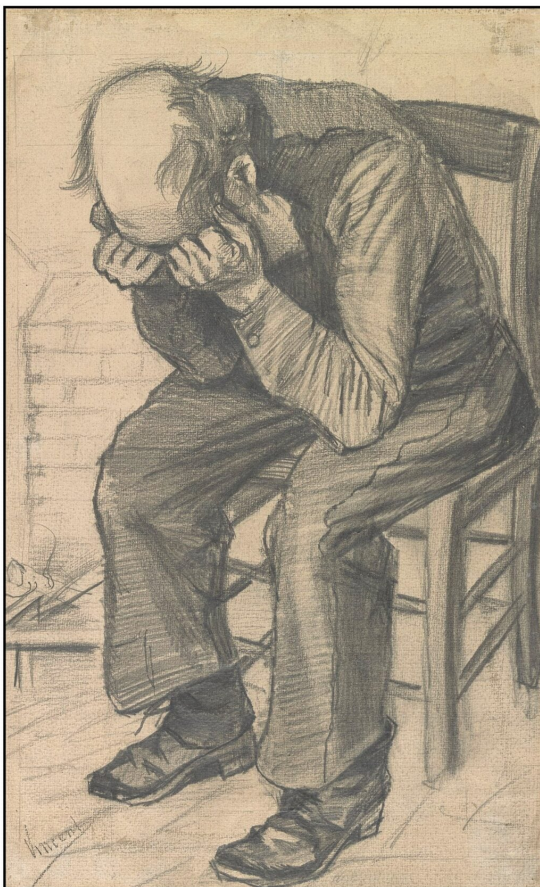
In December, 1889 and in the early months of 1890, van Gogh suffered three more relapses into madness. During each of there periods he was unable to paint for several weeks. His hopes of getting better in the asylum began to wane.

After the last attack, in April 1890, van Gogh painted a color-study of one his own early lithographs, based on a drawing he had made in 1882 of an elderly pensioner in an almshouse in the Hague. He told Theo about that drawing:

It seems to me that a painter has a duty to try to put an idea into his work. I was trying to say this in this print—but I can't say it as beautifully, as strikingly as reality, of which this is only a dim reflection seen in a dark mirror—that it seems to me that one of the strongest

pieces of evidence for the existence of 'something on high' in which Millet believed, namely in the existence of a God and an eternity, is the unutterably moving quality that there can be in the expression of an old man like that, without his being aware of it perhaps, as he sits so quietly in the corner of his hearth. At the same time something precious, something noble, that can't be meant for the worms. ... This is far from all theology—simply the fact that the poorest woodcutter, heath farmer or miner can have moments of emotion and mood that give him a sense of an eternal home that he is close to. (Jansen et al. 2007, 288).

The original drawing (F997) and the color study (F701) are shown below. The painting became known as *At Eternity's Gate*.



In May of 1890, van Gogh left the asylum in Saint-Rémy. Theo arranged for him to stay in Auvers-sur-Oise. About 25 km northwest of Paris. There he was able to paint productively

once again. However, he remained depressed and finally committed suicide by shooting himself with a revolver in July 1890. Other versions of how he died have been proposed (Naifeh and Smith, 2011; Schnabel, 2019), but suicide seems most likely. His brother Theo died 6 months later in January, 1891, most likely from the effects of tertiary syphilis. Theo's wife Joanna van Gogh-Bonger (1862-1925) took care of van Gogh's paintings and letters, and nurtured the posthumous fame of her brother-in-law (Luijten, 2019). A 2023 list of the 100 paintings attaining the highest prices ever at auction has 9 paintings by van Gogh, a number only exceeded by Picasso's 14.

## **The Afterlife of the Paintings**

Although van Gogh was only able to sell one painting during his lifetime, in the years following his death his work slowly began to exert an immense effect on other artists. Throughout his life, van Gogh attempted to portray the full meaning of the world he experienced. His paintings were directly based on what he saw, but he tried to add his intense emotional response to the visual by heightening the colors and by using powerful brushstrokes. After his death, other artists began to use these techniques

Van Gogh's work thus became the direct precursor of the Expressionist Movement in modern art (Lloyd et al., 2007). Expressionist paintings characteristically portray the emotional response to what the artist sees. Such art is subjective rather than objective, spiritual rather than worldly, creative rather than derivative.

Furness (1973, p. 4) remarked

Many critics point to the use of the word 'expressionist' to designate the particular intensity of the work of those painters who strove to go beyond impressionism, beyond the passive registration of impressions towards a more violent,

hectic, energetic creativity such as is found above all in van Gogh. The dissolution of conventional form, the abstract use of colour, the primacy of powerful emotion – above all the turning away from mimesis herald a new consciousness and a new approach in painting, which literature was to follow.

Two of the early groups that followed the expressionist ideals of van Gogh were *Die Brücke* (the bridge) which was founded in Dresden in 1905 and included Erich Heckel, Ludwig Kirchner, Emil Nolde, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and *Der Blaue Reiter* (the blue rider) which originated in Munich 1911, and counted Wassily Kandinsky, August Macke, Franz Marc, and Gabriele Münter among its members.

Van Gogh also had a significant effect on 20<sup>th</sup>-Century philosophy (Nichols, 2018). The existentialists looked to expressionism as a way to transcend the confining limits of reality. For Karl Jaspers (1883-1969)

existence is always incomplete and contradictory and thus points toward something that can complete and unify its paradoxes, that is, the transcendent (Longtin Hansen, 2018).

Art can act as a means to understand the transcendent:

Art acts as a cipher by revealing the deeper reality: it seems to imitate things that occur in the world, but it makes them transparent. (Jaspers, 1932, p 172)

Existentialism insists that we have the freedom to create ourselves in a world without rules; artists like van Gogh create for us a way to experience that world.

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