ARTIST PROFILE

LOVING VINCENT

VINCENT VAN GOGH has long been a mainstay of popular culture and international exhibitions, and now he is the subject of a new book and Hollywood film, proving the fascination with the fabled painter has not abated.

by Jason Edward Kaufman
Since he died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound in 1890, the world has venerated Vincent van Gogh. Few artists have been as obsessively studied and perhaps none is more adored by the general public. He sold just one painting during his lifetime, and now his name recognition rivals Pablo Picasso’s, and the iconic works that he painted in the South of France—The Starry Night, Sunflowers, The Night Café, and Van Gogh’s Bedroom in Arles—are among the most familiar and beloved images ever made, nearly as well-known as the Mona Lisa or the Statue of Liberty. 

Rarely does a month go by without headlines announcing a new exhibition or Hollywood film about the Dutchman. Pictures sell for tens of millions of dollars, reams of publications advance fresh theories about his self-mutilation and suicide, scientific studies reveal new insights about his materials and technique, and admirers flock to his exhibitions and make pilgrimages to the places he lived. The brand has spawned merchandise ranging from posters, mugs, totes, and phone cases to van Gogh–themed beer and vodka, Arles-bedroom alarm clocks, sunflower sunglasses, and starry-sky skirts. Reviewing a van Gogh show in the 1980s, Time Magazine critic Robert Hughes quipped that the gift shop offered everything but a severed-ear ashtray. 

Van Gogh painted more than three dozen self-portraits, a self-examination rivaling that of Rembrandt. The 1889 picture, created after he injured himself, seems to show a restored left ear, but depicts his right ear seen in reverse in the mirror.

**From left:** Self-portrait with Straw Hat, 1887, oil on cardboard, 40.9 cm x 32.8 cm, located at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Self-Portrait as a Painter (Self-portrait before Easel), 1887–1888, oil on canvas, 61.1 x 50 cm, located at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Self-Portrait, 1887, oil on canvas, 44.1 x 35.1 cm, located at Musée d’Orsay, Paris; Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin, 1888, oil on canvas, 61 x 50 cm, located at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA; Self-Portrait, 1889, oil on canvas, 65 x 54.5 cm, located at Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

The fairy tale nocturne combines motifs that van Gogh pondered through the window bars in his cell at the asylum of Saint-Paul de Mausole near Saint-Rémy.

_Above: The Starry Night, Saint Rémy, June 1889, oil on canvas, 73.7 x 92.1 cm, located at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Opposite: The bedroom of van Gogh at Arles, 1889, oil on canvas, 57.5 x 74 cm, located at Musée d’Orsay, Paris._
DISTRESS AND DISAPPOINTMENT

Van Gogh never achieved significant recognition in his lifetime. The standard version of his biography casts him as the poor, struggling artist who endured mental anguish and self-doubt to produce wondrous artworks, only to die young and penniless, unaware that he would posthumously ascend to art world superstardom. Sadly, the nuanced version of van Gogh’s life is far more agonizing than a romantic tale of overlooked genius. His ear cutting—the most renowned catastrophe in art history—confirms that the man was genuinely ill, though far more agonizing than a romantic tale of overlooked genius. In his final 70 days in Auvers-sur-Argence, where he painted hundreds of letters (many of them illustrated). Astonishingly, this prolific pace of his creativity led the way, becoming the first paintings to achieve eight-figure prices at auction. When Van Gogh sold his portrait of Dr. Gachet (1890) for $16 million, her father, art dealer Francis Taylor, bought it for her in 1963 for £92,000 (around $250,000), and it changed hands again in 2018 for $39.7 million. Earlier works sell in the low seven figures, but the late works continue to fetch enormous sums. Laboro in a Field (1889), a 20-inch-by-25-inch sunrise scene of a man ploughing outside van Gogh’s asylum window, sold for $81 million in 2017—nearly surpassing the record.

MANIC CREATIVITY AND FERVENT DEMAND

Van Gogh completed nearly 900 paintings, 1,100 drawings and watercolors, 5 sketchbooks, and hundreds of letters (many of them illustrated). That many of his masterpieces were executed in a matter of hours has not diminished their value. When the art market bloomed in the 1980s, van Goghs led the way, becoming the first paintings to achieve eight-figure prices at auction. When Van Gogh sold his portrait of Dr. Gachet (1890) for $16 million, her father, art dealer Francis Taylor, bought it for her in 1963 for £92,000 (around $250,000), and it changed hands again in 2018 for $39.7 million. Earlier works sell in the low seven figures, but the late works continue to fetch enormous sums. Laboro in a Field (1889), a 20-inch-by-25-inch sunrise scene of a man ploughing outside van Gogh’s asylum window, sold for $81 million in 2017—nearly surpassing the record. When Van Gogh sold his portrait of Dr. Gachet (1890) for $16 million, her father, art dealer Francis Taylor, bought it for her in 1963 for £92,000 (around $250,000), and it changed hands again in 2018 for $39.7 million. Earlier works sell in the low seven figures, but the late works continue to fetch enormous sums. Laboro in a Field (1889), a 20-inch-by-25-inch sunrise scene of a man ploughing outside van Gogh’s asylum window, sold for $81 million in 2017—nearly surpassing the record.
CONFLICT

The cornerstone of his fame, van Gogh's paintings speak for themselves. Their simple subjects—a bright sunflower, a night sky—have mass appeal. His work played a crucial role in early modern art, profoundly influencing Picasso, Henri Matisse, Kandinsky, and the German expressionists. His use of expressive brushwork and a vibrant palette to convey emotions influenced generations of artists. If van Gogh's life unfolded like a movie script, the fuel for his work really heated up in the South of France. He spent his last three years in the South, amid olive groves, mountains, and sunsets in painting. Twisting cypresses, wheat fields, lavender, and orange came forth on the canvases. Ten weeks later he took a walk, shot himself in the abdomen, and made his way back to the inn. The bullet, having deflected off a rib, lodged near his heart. The breakdowns continued with increased regularity, as did the number of relapses and bizarre behavior. Relapses and bizarre behavior continued. The doctor reported that van Gogh got into bed with another patient and refused to leave. When he was well enough to return to the Yellow House, neighbors drew up a petition to have the "insane red-headed man" incarcerated. By May 1889, he consented to care by a Munich doctor and remained there a year, undergoing "treatment" that consisted of weekly baths. The breakdowns continued with increased regularity, as did the number of paintings he produced. Bailey writes that Starry Night is based on motifs van Gogh pondered through the window bars of his cell. Despite periods of relative stability, his condition worsened and he lost hope of recovery. Several times he attempted suicide by eating paint, turpentine, or paraflin. One time, he threw himself into a stream. His doctor reported that van Gogh believed people were trying to poison him. His fear of abandonment proved accurate. In a year of intermittent, he received only a single visit. It was the Arles pastor who had accompanied him there in the first place. In May 1890 he left the hospital and relocated to Auvers, where he could be closer to his brother in Paris and receive the care of the homoeopathic doctor and amateur painter Paul Gachet. He settled in a rented room and resumed painting. Twisting cypresses, wheat fields, olive groves, mountains, and sunsets in turbulent swaths of ochre, drab green, lavender, and orange came forth on the canvases. Ten weeks later he took a walk, shot himself in the abdomen, and made his way back to the inn. The bullet, having deflected off a rib, lodged near his heart. Without access to a surgeon to remove the bullet, he died 30 hours later. (Almost 70 years later, a farmer ploughed up a rusted 7 mm revolver that some believe was the bullet.)

THE EAR

Two days before the Christmas of 1888, an evening of rancor sent van Gogh into a paroxysm. The artist sliced off nearly his entire left ear, wrapped it in paper, and presented it to a prostitute with instructions to "guard this object carefully." Some believe the ear was intended for Gauguin, who later told an acquaintance that van Gogh threatened him with the razor. Art historian Martin Bailey speculates more plausibly that van Gogh's anxiety was triggered by recent news that his brother was engaged to be married, which could interfere with his financial and emotional support. In Bailey's new book, Starry Night: Van Gogh at the Ashes of Loneliness (White Lion Publishing, 2018), he conjectures persuasively that attacking the ear may have been an effort to find relief from the auditory hallucinations that plagued the artist. In the hospital, all van Gogh told his doctor was that "it was a personal matter."

Van Gogh made paintings of the hospital where he was treated after cutting his ear and the asylum where he spent a year as a patient. In the asylum picture, the man by the tree is his doctor and the figures in the doorway is likely the artist himself. From left: Hospital of Saint Paul at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence (detail), 1889, oil on canvas, 63.4 x 49 cm, located at Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Wind in the Hospital in Arles, 1889, oil on canvas, 72 x 91 cm, located at Oskar Reinhart Collection, Winterthur, Switzerland.

Close-ups show the energy of van Gogh’s expressive brushwork. From top: Wheatfield with Cypresses (detail), 1889, oil on canvas, 72 x 90.9 cm; and Cypresses, 1889, oil on canvas, 93.4 x 74 cm, both located at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
In their exhaustive biography Van Gogh: The Life (Random House, 2011), co-authors Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith posit an alternative. There are conflicting accounts of the episode. The artist’s painting gear was never located. There were rumors in town that teenagers shot the artist, probably by accident. One suspect known to have taunted the eccentric painter was John Peter Van Rapp, a local schoolboy who had taunted the artist with a revolver there. Asked by the police if he had committed suicide, he said, “Yes, I believe so … Do not accuse myself with a revolver there.”

Revisionist accounts have not gained much traction—after all, more than once van Gogh had sought an end to his despair. On his death bed he reportedly told a fellow lodger, “Go and get me a doctor. I wounded myself in the fields. I shot myself by accident. One suspect known to have taunted the eccentric artist liked to dress up as William “Buffalo Bill” Cody and carry a pistol.”

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With more than 200 paintings and 400 drawings, the Van Gogh Museum has the largest and most comprehensive collection and display of van Gogh’s art. When Vincent’s brother Theo died from syphilis six months after his brother, his widow van Gogh-Bonger took control of the estate and later bequeathed unsold works to her son Vincent—van Gogh’s nephew and namesake—who established a foundation that led to the government opening the museum in 1973. The presentation explores every period of van Gogh’s life and work, and includes works by related artists. Touchscreens provide additional information about technique and materials, including reconstructions of how pictures would have looked before their pigments faded. More than 2 million visitors a year make it the most visited museum in the Netherlands.

A pioneering collector of van Gogh, Helene Kröller-Müller used her husband’s fortune in the early 1900s to amass almost 90 paintings and 180 drawings, as well as works by other noted artists. She founded one of Holland’s first museums devoted to modern art, The Kröller-Müller Museum, set in a sprawling park featuring modern and contemporary sculptures.

The house where van Gogh was born in 1853 is today the Vincent van Gogh Huis, a museum with digital presentations about his early years. The protestant church where his father preached survives nearby.

Van Gogh moved back to live with his parents when he was 30 and stayed two years. The pastor’s house where he lived with his family survives, and the Vincent centre museum in the old town hall offers audiovisual materials about his first years as an artist.

Van Gogh made 16 paintings of the olive groves surrounding the asylum of Saint-Paul. On the canvas in the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, conservators discovered a grasshopper embedded in the paint. Olive Orchard (detail), 1889, oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm, located at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO.

The Yellow House where van Gogh lived from 1888 to 1889 was damaged by Allied bombs in the Second World War and later demolished. A number of sites that he painted—the Alpyscamps, Montmajour Abbey—survive, as does the hospital that today houses a cultural center: Foundation Vincent van Gogh Arles mounts exhibits that often include loaned van Gogh works in the context of contemporary art. foundation-vincentvangogh-arles.org

The medieval monastery that housed the asylum of Saint-Paul de Mausole, where van Gogh spent a year from 1889 to 1890, still operates as a psychiatric clinic and maintains a small museum about van Gogh. A reconstructed cell with a bed, table, chair, and barred window evokes his spartan life there. Most of the facility has been modernized, but exterior façades and features of the garden remain as they were in van Gogh’s time. saintremy-de-provence.com

Auberge Ravoux is the only known van Gogh residence that remains intact. Following superstition about suicide, the small attic room in which he died (that he rented for 3.50 francs a night including board) was never again rented. The attic garret is empty, but a room down the hall has an audiovisual presentation about van Gogh and Auvers. A French historic landmark, the Auberge has attracted 1.3 million visitors since it opened to the public in 1993. A Belgian entrepreneur bought it in 1987 and established a private foundation that restored the building and opened a restaurant in the room where van Gogh ate. The town hall and church that van Gogh painted survive, with the headstones of Vincent and Theo van Gogh in the village cemetery. The house of Dr. Paul Gachet is now a museum, and many sites that van Gogh and other artists painted are marked by illustrated signboards. maisondevangogh.fr/

—J.K.
VINCENT ON FILM

No artist has ever received more cinematic attention than van Gogh.

His box-office appeal began with the 1956 classic Lust for Life, based on the 1934 best-selling novel by Irving Stone. Vincente Minnelli’s film starred Kirk Douglas as the artist, and Anthony Quinn won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Paul Gauguin. In 1990 van Gogh returned to the silver screen in two films: Robert Altman’s biopic Vincent & Theo, starring Tim Roth, focuses on the artist’s relationship with his supportive brother; and Akira Kurosawa’s Dreams includes a segment in which an art student in a gallery of van Gogh’s imagines a voyage to Provence where he meets the artist (played by Martin Scorsese) and wanders through 3-D renderings of celebrated landscape paintings. Andrew Hutton’s 2010 television drama Van Gogh: Painted with Words features the young Benedict Cumberbatch and a script drawn from the artist’s letters.

The latest addition to the van Gogh filmography, Loving Vincent, goes a step further, rendering every frame as if painted by van Gogh. Polish animator Dorota Kobiela and co-director Hugh Welchman enlisted more than 100 artists to make 65,000 oil paintings à la van Gogh, then edited them together at 12 per second to create a painterly montage that merges with a number of actual van Gogh pictures. Some critics complained about the fabricated narrative about an Arles postman trying to deliver the artist’s last letter, but the technical feat garnered a 2018 Oscar nomination for best animated feature.

Now the artist Julian Schnabel, who directed biopics of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas, is making a film about van Gogh’s final years. Shot on location in France, At Eternity’s Gate stars Willem Dafoe. New York–based photographer Lily Gavin was invited to make on-set images that were exhibited at Les Rencontres de la Photographie in Arles this past summer. And, of course, there are countless documentaries about the artist, including an Exhibition on Screen collaboration with the Van Gogh Museum available on DVD and streaming.

—J.K.