

LUXURY

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Garden at Arles, 1888,
oil on canvas, 73 x 92
cm, located at Haags
Gemeentemuseum, The
Hague, the Netherlands

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



HIP / Art Resource, NY



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, 65.1 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.

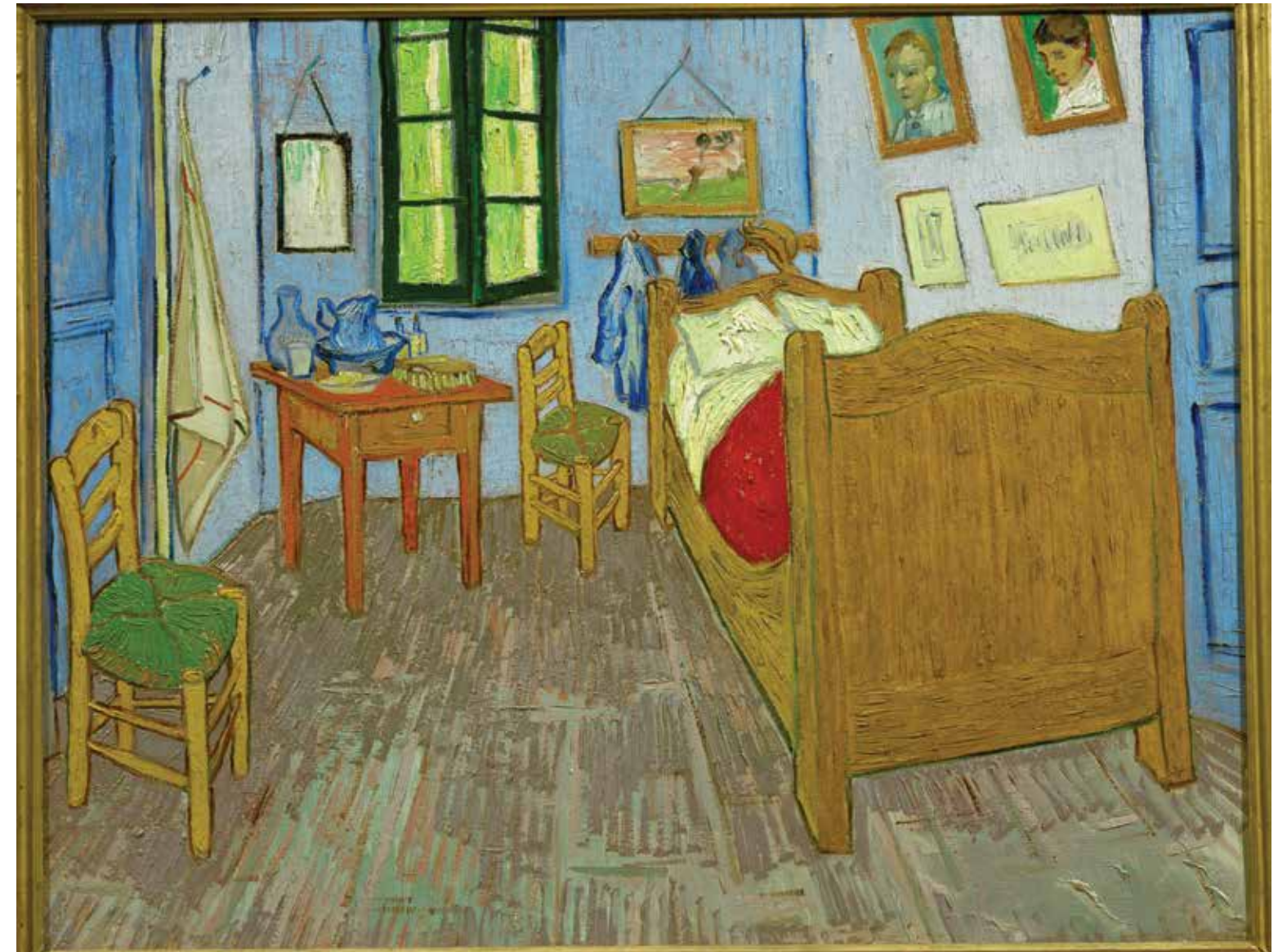
Since he died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound in 1890, the world has venerated Vincent van Gogh. Few artists have been as obsessively studied and perhaps none is more adored by the general public. He sold just one painting during his lifetime, and now his name recognition rivals Pablo Picasso's, 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. ▸



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.



HIP / Art Resource, NY; Art Resource, NY; © Harvard Art Museum / Art Resource, NY; Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY



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 from what is not entirely known. The consensus among his physicians was that he inherited epilepsy. Diagnoses today add on a form of bipolar disorder and, possibly, borderline personality disorder. As his condition worsened toward the end of his life, he had seizures during which he experienced simultaneous auditory and visual hallucinations. Breakdowns of confusion and depression incapacitated him for periods, lasting weeks and sometimes months. An excessive drinker

and smoker who ate poorly and frequented brothels, his psychotic episodes, digestive ailments, and venereal disease went largely untreated. Even during periods of lucidity and focus, he lived tormented by constant fear of relapse.

Poor health and an agitated temperament led to loneliness and deprivation. He never married, had few intimate friends, and never settled down, relocating at least 37 times in 37 years. He tried art dealing, teaching, and preaching before taking up art at the age of 27, subsisting solely on support from his younger brother Theo. Theo, an art dealer in Paris, encouraged him but could not interest clients in the work.

In his final years, van Gogh participated in several group shows, but he sold only one painting and was the subject of a single significant article. He died believing that his art would prove of “very secondary” importance. Yet, for a brief, incandescent span, van Gogh was possibly the most productive painter in history.

Album / Art Resource, NY; Scala / Art Resource, NY



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). Astonishingly, this prolific career took place within a single decade, from 1880 to 1890, and nearly all of the best-known works erupted in the last five years. The frenzied pace of his creativity is legendary.

In the 15 months he spent in Arles, in the South of France, he produced 200 paintings—about one every 48 hours. After a year in an asylum near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, where he painted another 150 canvases, he picked up the pace. In his final 70 days in Auvers-sur-

Oise, a village northwest of Paris, he completed roughly a canvas a day.

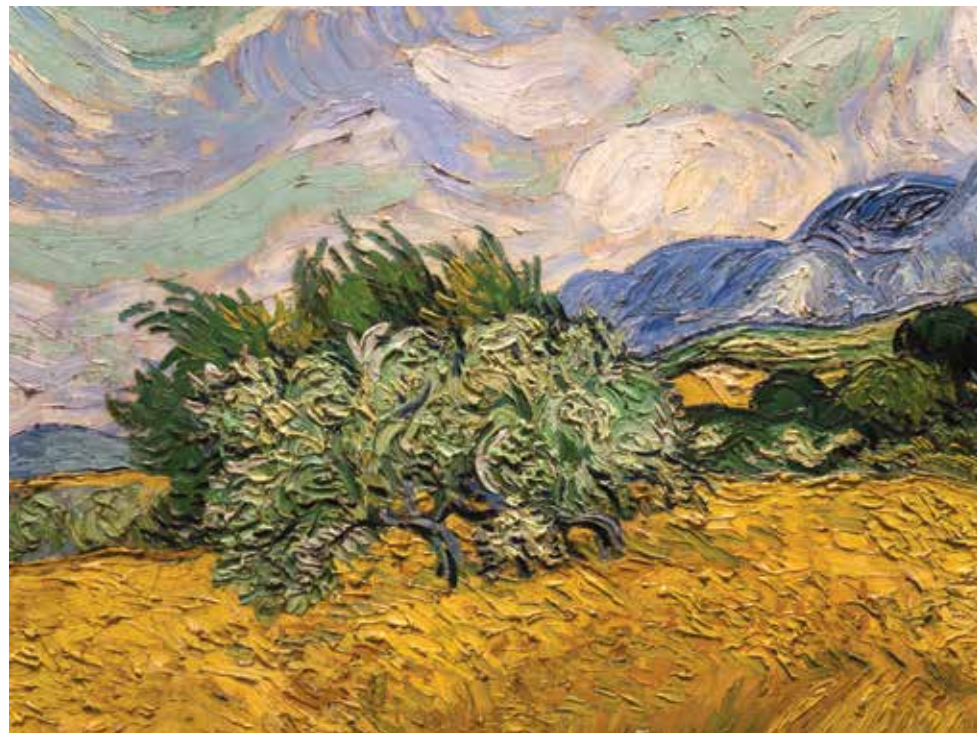
That many of his masterpieces were executed in a matter of hours has not diminished their value. When the art market boomed in the 1980s, van Goghs led the way, becoming the first paintings to achieve eight-figure prices at auction. When *Vase with 15 Sunflowers* (1888) sold for \$39.7 million in 1987, the auction record had been \$8.1 million for an Italian Renaissance painting by Mantegna. Two years later the still life *Irises* (1889) topped \$50 million, and The Museum of Modern Art was so intent on the Arles portrait *Postman Joseph Roulin* (1888) that it gave the private seller \$58 million

From left: Irises, 1889, oil on canvas, 71 x 93 cm, located at J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Portrait of Dr. Gachet, 1890, oil on canvas, 68 x 57 cm, located at Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Sunflowers, 1889, oil on canvas 95 x 73 cm, located at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.



along with works from its collection by Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Wassily Kandinsky, and Picasso. In 1990 a *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (1890) sold for \$82.5 million to a Japanese collector, becoming the most expensive work of art ever sold publicly. (The record held until a Picasso topped \$100 million in 2004.)

Since then, at least seven paintings from van Gogh's mature period (the final two years of his life) have sold for between \$47 million and \$72 million. Private collectors, most of whom maintain anonymity, recognize the investment value of van Gogh. In 2012, the estate of Elizabeth Taylor sold *View of the Asylum and Chapel of Saint-Rémy* (1889) 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. *Laborer 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. ▸



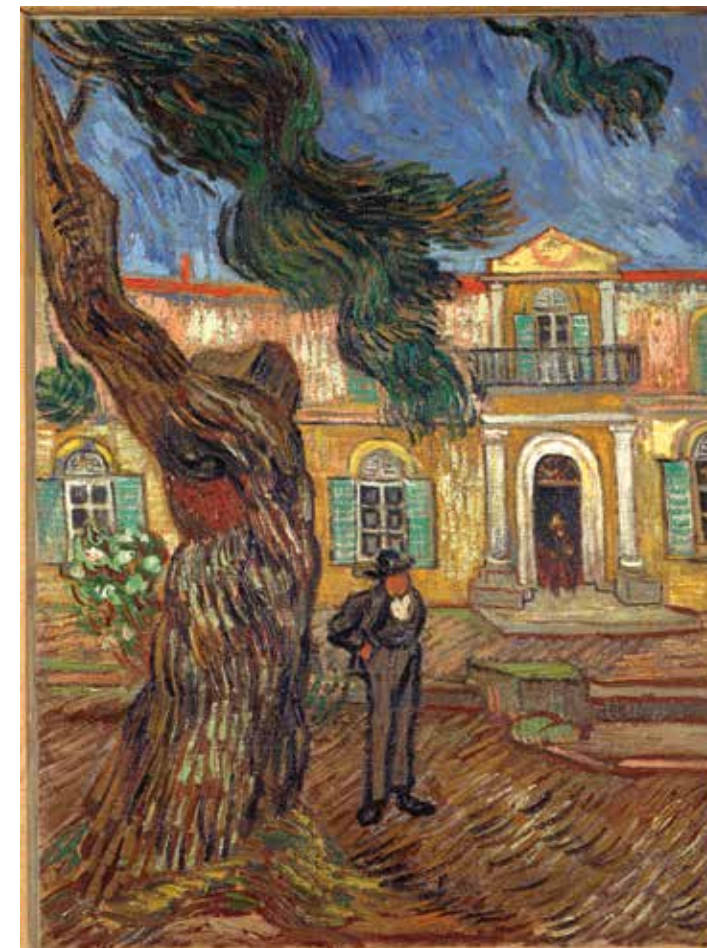
Close-ups show the energy of van Gogh's expressive brushwork. *From top: Wheatfield with Cypresses (detail), 1889, oil on canvas, 72.1 x 90.9 cm; and Cypresses, 1889, oil on canvas, 93.4 x 74 cm, both located at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

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 riding an emotional roller coaster that plunged from buoyant hope to wrenching crisis, fatally crashing in the end. And all of this led up to his miraculous resurrection.

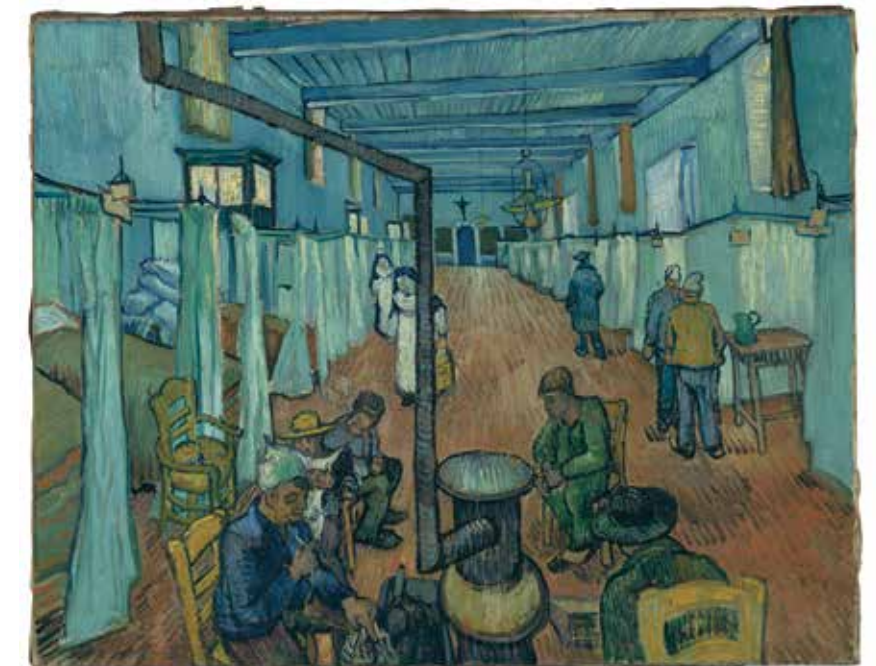
In February 1888, van Gogh fled a difficult winter in Paris and took a train 500 miles to Arles. In the town of 23,000 on the Rhône River surrounded by fields, sunshine, and mountains, he chose a quiet, affordable place to regain his health, concentrate on work, and establish an artist community. He emulated the Pont-Aven group in Brittany, founded by Paul Gauguin, a slightly older artist van Gogh saw as an ideal partner.

So Theo paid the penniless Gauguin to join his brother and, in preparation, van Gogh rented part of a modest yellow house to be his Studio of the South. There were two tiny bedrooms upstairs, a kitchen and studio below, and a bathroom in a hotel next door. He decorated with large pictures of bright sunflowers, local residents, and Provençal scenery. When Gauguin arrived in October, the men set about painting side by side, sharing meals and expenses, and visiting the nearby brothels. They also competed and their intense personalities clashed. Gauguin, a symbolist, painted from his imagination. Van Gogh insisted on painting from reality. Arguments about art escalated, exacerbated by the cramped cohabitation. Gauguin talked of founding his own studio in the tropics and, fearing abandonment, van Gogh descended into a paranoid nightmare.



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 figure 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; Ward in the Hospital in Arles, 1889, oil on canvas, 72 x 91 cm, located at Oskar Reinhart Collection, Winterthur, Switzerland.



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 Asylum* (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."

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 psychiatric clinic in nearby Saint-Rémy 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.

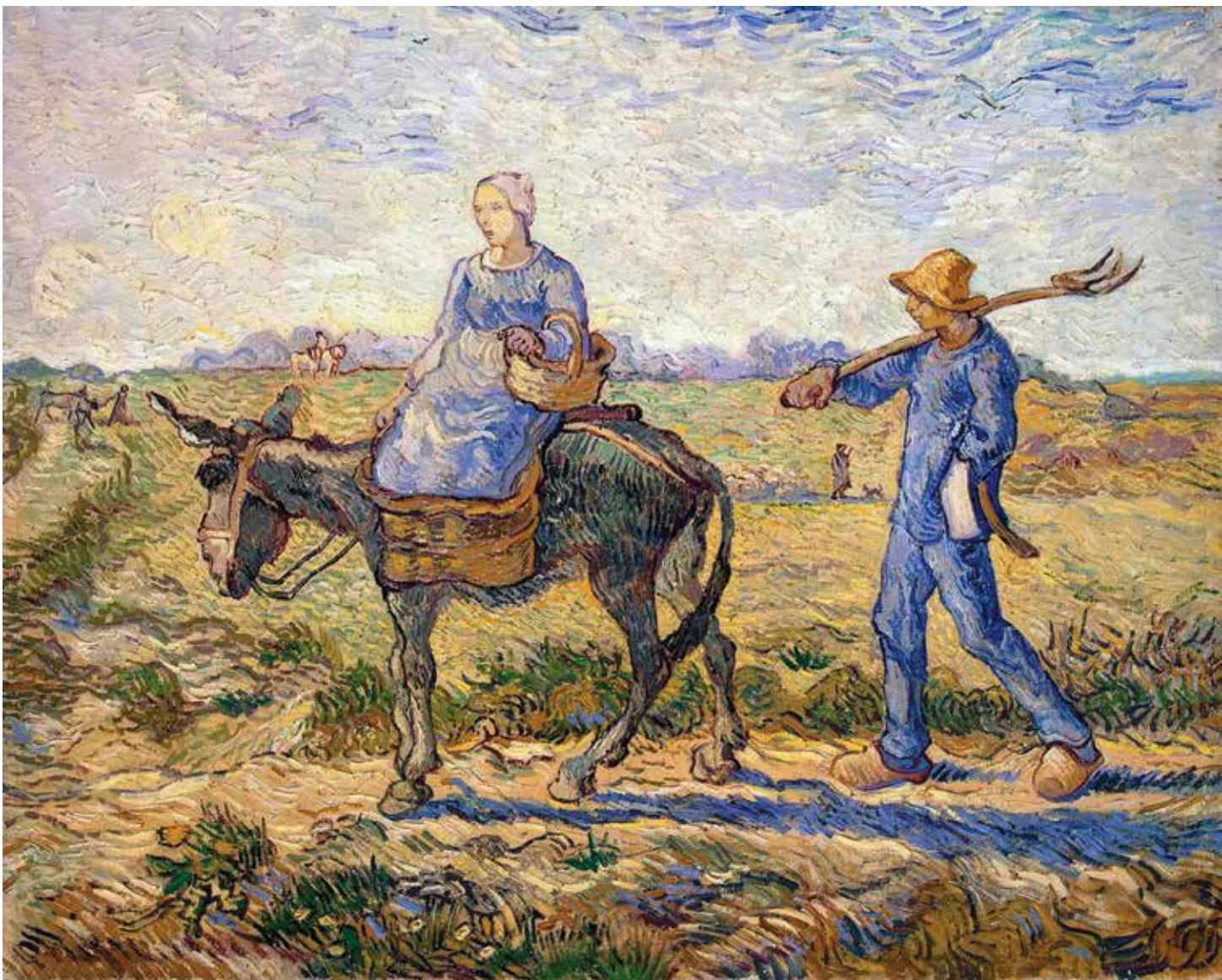
Despite periods of relative stability, his condition worsened and he lost hope of recovery. Several times he attempted suicide by eating paint, turpentine, or paraffin. One time, he threw himself into a stream. His doctor reported that van Gogh believed people were trying to

poison him. His fear of abandonment proved accurate: In a year of internment, 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 homeopathic 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 the artist borrowed from his landlord.) ▶

Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Jason Edward Kaufman

Scala / Art Resource, NY; Oskar Reinhart Collection @Am Römerholzli, Winterthur



Counterclockwise from top: *Peasant Couple Going to Work, Morning (after Millet)*, 1890, oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm, located at Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia; *Woman Cleaning a Cauldron*, 1883-1885, charcoal on paper, 60.96 x 46.35 cm, located at Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; catalog of the exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* held at Grafton Galleries, London (November 8, 1910–January 15, 1911), located at Tate Gallery, London; *Wheat Stacks in Provence*, 1888, oil on canvas, 73 x 92.5 cm, located at the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, the Netherlands.

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 artist liked to dress up as William "Buffalo Bill" Cody and carry a pistol.

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 with a revolver there." Asked by the police if he had committed suicide, he said, "Yes, I believe so ... Do not accuse anyone. It is I who wanted to kill myself."

AFTERLIFE

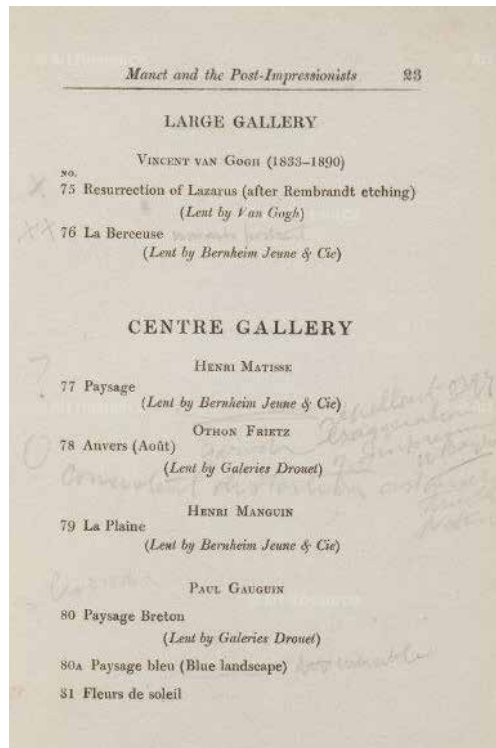
A cache of hundreds of newly painted canvases were left to van Gogh's brother Theo. Having an art dealer brother might have been the logical secret to van Gogh's posthumous success, except that Theo died just six months after Vincent. So the paintings went to Theo's wife, Johanna van Gogh Bonger. She had a baby named Vincent to support and a lot of artwork that had only started to mean something to the people who had seen it. Fortunately van Gogh-Bonger understood what she had. Deliberate and shrewd, she set out to make a name of Vincent van Gogh. She moved back to Amsterdam, where she grew up, and sought out her family's connections in the art world. Theo had told her not to sell the work painting by painting but instead to maintain it as a rare, precious, and important collection. So she did. Her collection ultimately became the Van Gogh Museum and one explanation for the exorbitant prices achieved by her brother-in-law's work is rarity. The opening of the museum in 1973 took many works permanently off the market.

Van Gogh-Bonger also edited and published in 1914 Vincent's letters to her late husband and wrote the van Gogh family history. She stayed in touch with Vincent's friends, among them Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Edgar Degas, and important collectors, critics, and dealers,

who owned and understood his paintings.

The year following van Gogh's death, his retrospectives toured Brussels and Paris. Van Gogh was grouped with other modernists like Gauguin and his paintings traveled to Scandinavia and Germany. By 1908 German art dealer Paul Cassirer and Van Gogh-Bonger successfully created and controlled a market for van Gogh's work. Van Gogh-Bonger strategically loaned out her canvases, which continued to be shown in the right exhibitions.

British art historian Roger Fry described van Gogh as a saint, and he was among the first to link van Gogh's works with those of Paul Cézanne, Matisse, and Georges Seurat, who also used quick strokes of color, played with perception, and expressed their feelings through their paintings. Fry invented the term "post-impressionism" and curated an infamous London exhibition in 1910 titled *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, introducing van Gogh and contemporaries to England. At the time the show and the then outrageous work were mocked, but ultimately confirmed the influence of the deceased artists on the modern movements of cubism, art nouveau, and German expressionism. Van Gogh's holiness among modern artists was solidified and the rest is history. ▸



UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Van Gogh's paintings endure as top attractions at hundreds of institutions, most notably in the Netherlands at the **Van Gogh Museum** in Amsterdam and **Kröller-Müller Museum** in Otterlo and internationally at the **Metropolitan Museum** and the **Museum of Modern Art** in New York and the **Musée d'Orsay** in Paris. Major temporary shows open next year in England and Germany, focusing on the artist's relationship to those respective countries.

• *Van Gogh and Britain* (Tate Britain, London; through August 11, 2019) centers on several years that the artist spent in England in his early 20s as an apprentice to his uncle at the London branch of Goupil Gallery. He also worked as a substitute teacher at boarding schools in rural Kent and West London. The exhibition displays some 40 works by van Gogh that serve as a lens to examine how he responded to British culture and his impact on British modern art. tate.org

• *Van Gogh and Germany* (Städel Museum, Frankfurt; October 23, 2019–February 16, 2020) considers the artist's influence on German expressionism and the German avant-garde. staedelmuseum.de

—J.K.

PILGRIMAGE SITES

AMSTERDAM

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. *vangoghmuseum.nl*

OTTERLO

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. *kröllermüller.nl*

ZUNDERT

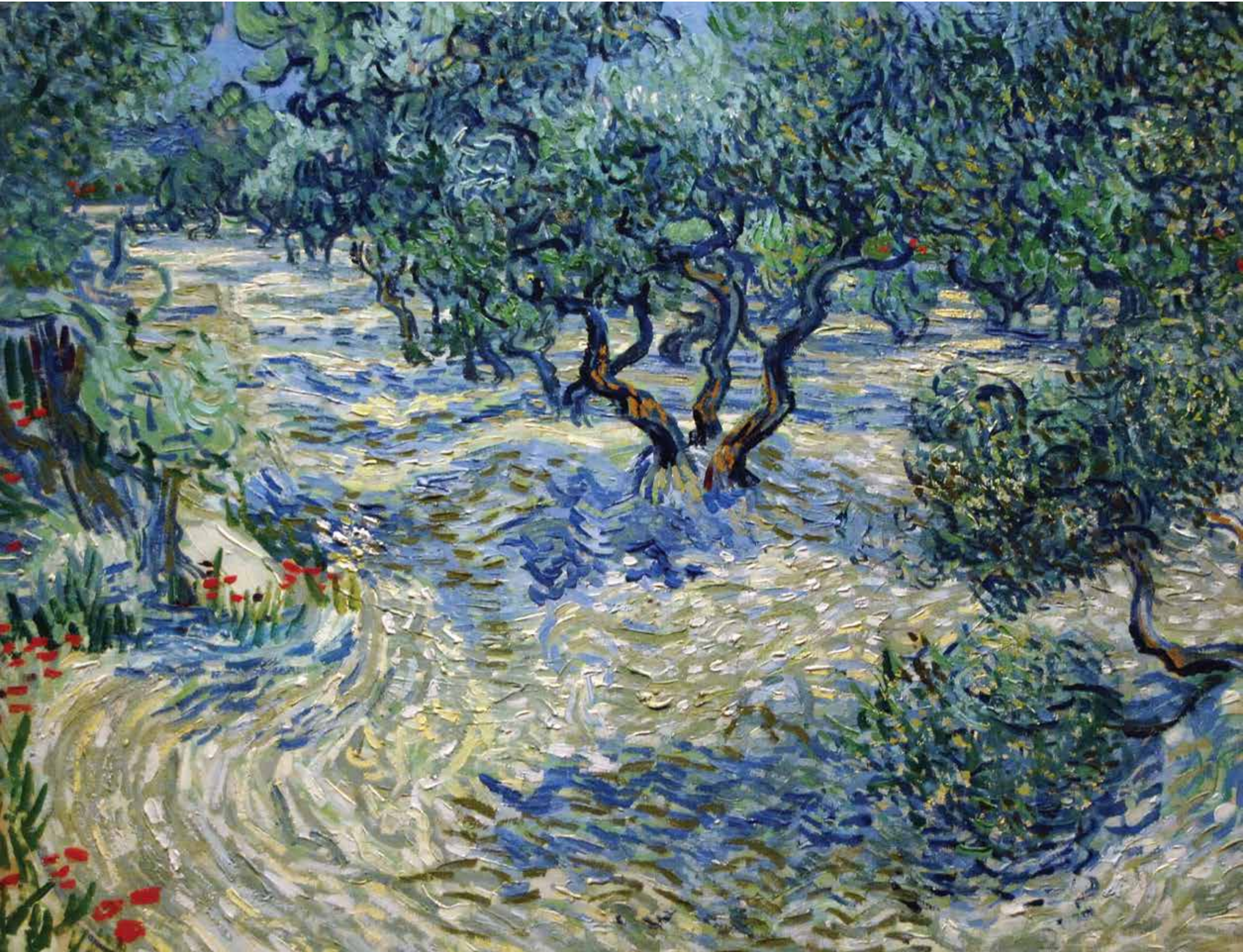
The house where van Gogh was born in 1853 is today the **Vincent van Gogh Huis**, a museum with digital presentations about his early years. The protestant church where his father preached survives nearby. *vangoghhuys.com*

NUENEN

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 **Vincentre** museum in the old town hall offers audiovisual materials about his first years as an artist. *vangoghvillagenuenen.nl*

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.



Album / Art Resource, NY

FRANCE

ARLES

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 Alyscamps, 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. *fondation-vincentvangogh-arles.org*

SAINT-RÉMY

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*

AUVERS-SUR-OISE

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 skylit 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

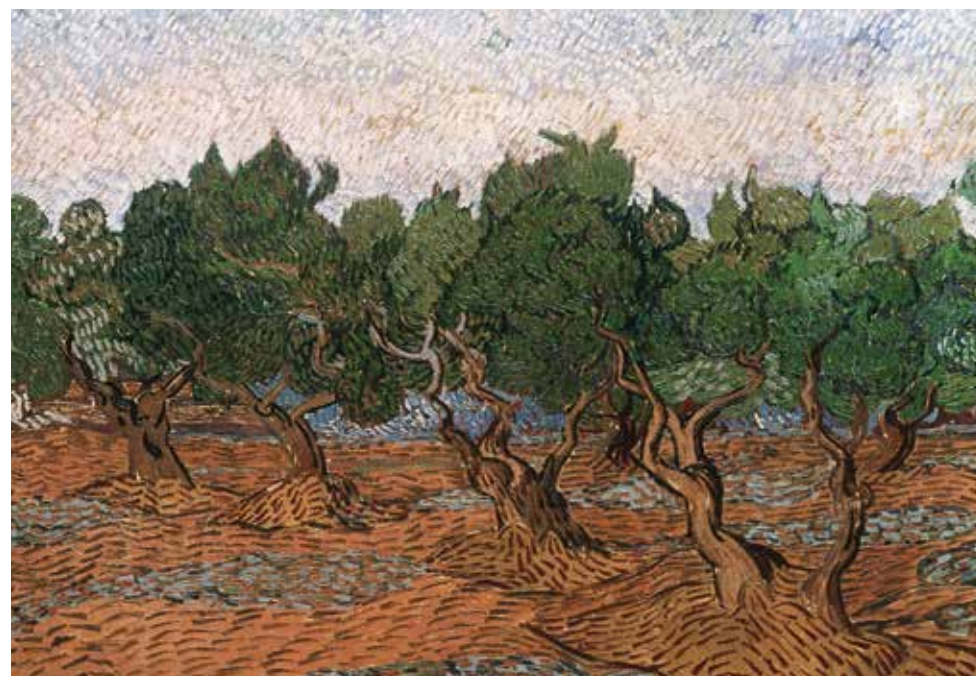
No artist has ever received more cinematic attention than van Gogh.

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.



Album / Art Resource, NY; Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

Clockwise from top left: *The Night Café*, 1888, oil on canvas, 72.4 x 92.1 cm, located at Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT; *Shoes*, 1886, oil on canvas, 38.1 x 45.3 cm, located at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; *Thatched Cottages at Cordeville, Auvers-sur-Oise*, 1890, oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm, located at Musée d'Orsay, Paris; *Olive Grove*, 1889, oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm, located at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

