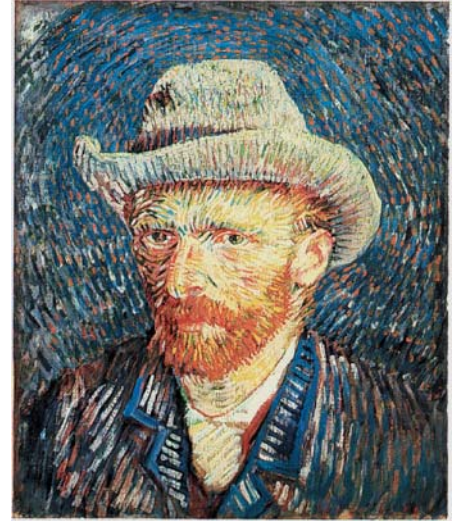


VINCENT VAN GOGH LULLABY IN COLOR



"Sorrowful yet always rejoicing," Vincent van Gogh, who grew up walking the Dutch countryside, traveled through life seeking the eternal "Light that rises in the darkness"- like these swans readying for flight south of Amsterdam. From the pain and beauty of his journey, he created masterworks of passion, including penetrating self-portraits, such as this one at age 34. Van Gogh likened painting to performing music. "Whether I really sang a lullaby in colors," he wrote, "I leave to the critics."

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By JOEL L. SWERDLOW, ASSISTANT EDITOR

Photographs by LYNN JOHNSON

THE LETTERS FROM VINCENT VAN GOGH to his brother Theo are yellowed. Some are torn at the corners or have holes from aging. Acid from ink eats through the cheap paper.

I have come to this bombproof vault in the cellar of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam to begin my search for Vincent. Who was this man who said he "sang a lullaby in colors:" and why does he have such a hold on us? His paintings sell for the most money; his exhibitions attract the highest number of visitors; reproductions of his work-on socks, sheets, party napkins, coffee cups-permeate homes and offices; the song "Vincent" has sold more than ten million copies since 1971; movies mythologize his life. No other artist, at any time in any culture, has been more popular.

THE 650 LETTERS from Vincent to Theo fill three volumes. Their first surprise is immediate: I knew that Theo financed Vincent's painting and had assumed Theo was the big brother. But Vincent was older. The letters begin in 1872, when Vincent was 19 and Theo was 15.

Vincent was working in The Hague. His uncle had got him a job with Europe's top art dealership. The family had decided that Theo too would become an art dealer. Vincent wrote Theo a letter of congratulations. ***I am so glad that we shall both be in the same profession.*** (From *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*. By permission of Little, Brown and Company in conjunction with the New York Graphic Society. All rights reserved.) Big brother Vincent began to offer advice. ***Keep your love of nature, for that is the true way to learn to understand art more and more.***

Before I began reading, I had a clear image of van Gogh: Untutored genius. Bohemian. Poor. Forsaken in love. Lonely. Sold only one painting. Crazy. Committed suicide. But the voice in Vincent's letters is insightful and literate. ***How beautiful Shakespeare is! Who is mysterious like him? His language and style can indeed be compared to an artist's brush, quivering with fever and emotion. But one must learn to read, just as one must learn to see and learn to live.***

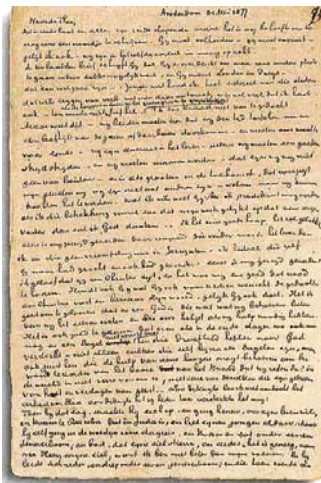
Despite obvious intelligence, Vincent kept failing. After the art dealership fired him because he argued too much, he taught Bible in England, worked as a clerk in Dordrecht, a small town in southern Holland, and then moved to Amsterdam to study for the ministry. He wrote to Theo that the solution to his troubles lay in God. ***There is a God Who knows what we want better than we do ourselves, and Who helps us whenever we are in need.***

In Amsterdam the 24-year-old Vincent was so depressed he thought he might die. Walking through the city made him happy, Vincent reported to Theo in letters, but the depression continued. ***My head is sometimes heavy, and often it burns and my thoughts are confused.***

I meet Peter Hanneman, director of the Psychiatric Crisis Center in Amsterdam, who specializes in treating troubled young adults, and describe Vincent's symptoms: Argumentative. Obsessive. Often anxious. My stomach has become terribly weak. Eats mostly bread and coffee. Trouble sleeping. Denies himself pleasure. Heavy smoker.



Lopped again and again, branches of an ash sprout thick from knobby limbs near Dordrecht, where at 24 van Gogh considered himself a failure. Like the tree's branches, his careers as an art dealer, lay preacher, and bookstore clerk had been pruned away. Still, convinced of God's calling, he moved to Amsterdam to study Latin and Greek in preparation for the ministry. In May 1877 he wrote (left) to his brother Theo: "My conscience tells me there is something greater in the future."



well," he explains. He describes gas explosions, suffocations, accidents, the daily descent. His neighbor in the next bed, a retired baker, listens. "They were slaves," he says, interrupting. Vincent's exact words.

BORINAGE After abandoning religious studies, van Gogh moved to this bleak area on the French border to work as an evangelist among the poor, giving away most of his clothes and spending his nights nursing miners burned in underground explosions. His neighbors called him mad or a saint. His church superiors dismissed him for lack of eloquence. At 26, jobless, he decided to become an artist, copying drawings and prints. In one of his early works (above), women bend under sacks of coal as they pass a shrine containing a crucifix. Van Gogh believed the miners' labor and lowly status brought them close to Christ, who bore the sins of a world that despised him. Van Gogh saw his work as an artist in a similar light. "I consciously choose the dog's path through life," he wrote to Theo. "I shall be poor: I shall be a painter: I want to remain human"



THE BEGGARS OF THE BURDEN, EARLY 1881

"Most helpful for such a person would be to help him find the part of himself he does not ordinarily use," Dr. Hanneman says. "It would take time. But there is a genius in everybody. If he finds it, his so-called problems can disappear or seem less important."

I explain to Hanneman that as a child and young adult Vincent had loved to draw. His work showed talent. Yet no one encouraged him to become an artist. His father, a small-town minister, thought he should be a sales-clerk. Theo, who knew Vincent best, thought he should be a bookkeeper or a carpenter's apprentice. "What if someone had directed I Vincent toward art?" I ask. "What if he had I been spared the ten years of confusion and failure? Could that have helped?"

"Self-discoveries must emerge at their own pace," Hanneman says. "Van Gogh had to discover himself when he was ready."

Van Gogh abandoned his ministry studies. He then went as an evangelist to the Borinage, a coal-mining region that spans the Belgian-French border--where he nursed injured miners and gave away the money Theo had started sending him. In the Borinage, as throughout his life, reading helped shape how he viewed the world. Vincent compared the miners to the slaves in Uncle Tom's Cabin. **There is still so much slavery in the world.**

The last mine in the Borinage closed in the 1960s. To find miners, I stop at a hospital. One 76-year-old has a strong handshake. He began to work underground at age 14. "One lung is broken, and the other does not work

While in the Borinage, van Gogh discovered himself just as Dr. Hanneman described. In March 1880, just before his 27th birthday, he walked from the French border city of Valenciennes to Courrieres-about 30 miles. His goal: to visit the studio of Jules Breton, one of Europe's leading painters. He had little to show Breton, only pen and charcoal drawings.

Van Gogh stood outside Breton's studio, too scared to enter. He wandered into the town's church, admired a copy of Titian's painting "Burial of Christ," and walked the 50 miles back to his home in Cuesmes, Belgium. **Three days and three nights in the beginning of March, in wind and rain, without a roof over my head.** During this journey van Gogh realized he was a painter. He never explained to anyone why or how this happened. **From that moment everything has seemed transformed for me.**

I retrace his journey, imagining him wet and penniless, getting bread by trading drawings--none of which has ever surfaced. The countryside is much as he saw it. But most of the church and many of the houses in Courrieres are made of new bricks. "Allied soldiers were in the church during World War II," an elderly woman explains as she guides me through the church. "They refused to surrender, so the Germans burned down the church and the town. Several hundred people died." Some walls of the church still have bullet holes.

Perhaps sensing my disappointment, my guide says, "My aunt had six sunflowers that van Gogh did here. She lost them during World War II."

Van Gogh did not paint sunflowers until seven years after Courrieres, so her story could not be true. But I appreciate her desire to be part of van Gogh and do not correct her.

VINCENT KEPT MOVING-Holland, Brussels, Antwerp. As I follow him, his letters read like a play with two major characters. One is offstage because Vincent rarely saved Theo's letters.

Many nights I stay awake, unable to stop reading. The letters open a window on the soul, sometimes so intense, so personal, I look away from the page. **My Youth is gone-not my love of life or my energy, but I mean the time when one feels so lighthearted and carefree.** Vincent is becoming my friend. Knowing how his letters will end, I read slowly. When I fall asleep, I force myself awake and continue reading.

Wherever Vincent lived, he studied art. In Antwerp one teacher called his work "putrefied dogs." But Vincent developed according to classical academic training: drawing, charcoal, anatomy, wood engravings, perspective, composition, tone, and color. He could produce realistic sketches, but he failed classes because he refused to follow instructions.

More of my preconceptions about van Gogh begin to fall away. Bohemian cafe life? No. He had a strict regime. Up at 4 a.m. to work. Poor? Yes, but by choice. He received 150 francs from Theo every month, more than double what a laborer made. Most went for paint, tobacco, and models. Sold only one painting? Before producing great works, he sold drawings and traded his work for supplies. Lonely? True. **There may be a great fire in our soul, yet no one ever comes to warm himself at it, and the passers-by see only a wisp of smoke.**

His behavior was self-destructive. He would admire a woman from a distance, then announce his love, scaring her away. During 1882 and 1883 he lived with a prostitute and her two children, demanding that Theo support them. This contributed to a near break in the brothers' relationship. For about two weeks Theo stopped answering Vincent's letters.



THE HAGUE Echo of the woman van Gogh hoped to marry, a prostitute poses in Amsterdam's red-light district. Having moved to The Hague for the company of artists, van Gogh found companionship of a different sort-with an unwed mother named Sien (drawing at right), who sometimes walked the streets. "I have a feeling of being at home when I am with her, as though she gives me my own hearth," he wrote of their life together in his apartment. But with money tight and both families hostile, he left the city,



THEO MOVED from Holland to Paris in 1880, eventually becoming a branch manager for a leading gallery. He lived in Paris the rest of his life. I skim ahead, looking for references to him. Shy. Black eyeglasses. Fastidious dresser. Saves Vincent's letters in a desk drawer. health: sciatic pain, persistent cough, seizures, weeks of inability to think clearly. Vincent was worried. ***I am very sorry to hear that you don't feel well either.***

Theo never threatened to stop sending money and, in effect, bought all work that Vincent did not trade or give away. When Theo complained that business was bad, Vincent told him to borrow money and send it. Vincent was also skilled at manipulating Theo's emotions. ***I am sorry that I didn't fall ill and die in the Borinage that time, instead of taking up painting, for I am only a burden to you.***

Vincent paid models before buying food and often had nothing to eat until Theo's next letter. Living on bread and coffee for days as Vincent did leaves me light-headed and preoccupied with food. To earn a meal, why didn't Vincent work as a laborer? He was broad shouldered and strong. The letters make his answer clear: Painting was more important than food.

Vincent's financial dependency was complete. ***My underwear is also beginning to fall apart.*** Nonetheless, he remained the big brother, eager to instruct Theo. ***The best way to know God is to love many things. Love a friend, a wife. ...But one must love with a lofty and serious intimate sympathy.***

Although he wanted to show the dignity of daily survival, Vincent's subject matter remained downbeat. He sought unattractive models and unpleasant scenes. ***I see drawings and pictures in the poorest huts, in the dirtiest corner.*** His work so far, to me, is unappealing. Why be reminded about life's ugliness? Yet Vincent believed that people would want to look at his drawings. ***No result of my work could please me better than that ordinary working people would hang such prints in their room or workshop.***

IN SEPTEMBER 1883, when Vincent was 30 years old and had been an artist for three years, he discovered color. ***I have felt a certain power of color awakening in me.*** This awakening came roughly at the point at which most new artists turn to color. Van Gogh's actions, however, were extreme. Color soon dominated all his perceptions. Vincent began piano lessons, telling the teacher that musical notes range from dark blue to yellow. He thought Vincent was crazy and refused to continue the lessons.

Van Gogh's courtship of color, his one successful love affair, was not the mad dabbling portrayed in *Lust for Life*, the 1934 best-seller made into a 1956 Academy Award-winning movie. He developed a rigorous system, based on the "laws of simultaneous contrast and complementary colors" described by Michel-Eugene Chevreul, a 19th-century French chemist. ***The laws of the colors are unutterably beautiful.*** At times, he stepped back and stared at a canvas for two hours before selecting his next stroke. ***If one combines two of the primary colors, for instance yellow and red, in order to produce a secondary color—orange—this secondary color will attain maximum brilliancy when it is put close to the third primary color not used in the mixture.***



THE POTATO EATERS, MAY 1885



HEAD OF A PEASANT WOMAN WITH CAP, 1885

Vincent's mastery of color grew in late 1883 and 1884. On a warm summer day I follow Vincent's footsteps from Nieuw-Amsterdam to Zweeloo, in the part of the Netherlands that has changed least since his time. Cars stop to offer me a ride. They cannot understand why I want to walk. Only by going slowly, as Vincent suggests, can you see. I look inside a white potato blossom and find soft shades of purple and yellow.

NUENEN Their skin "the color of a very dusty potato," peasants gather for an evening meal in van Gogh's first major painting, set in a hut near his parents' house in rural Nuenen. "I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish," he wrote. "It speaks of manual labor, and how they have honestly earned their food." To prepare, van Gogh spent the winter drawing peasant hands and heads, such as the one at right, in a series modeled after black-and-white magazine illustrations depicting the toil and misery of ordinary people. On the final canvas he exaggerated the coarseness of the peasants' features and the darkness of the hut, applying paint like worked earth. "If a peasant picture smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam—all right, that's not unhealthy."

Van Gogh did not notice-or care to paint-such colors. Instead, he focused on his traditional subject: ordinary people. In early 1885, encouraged by Theo's willingness to try selling his paintings, he completed "The Potato Eaters." It is his first work of genius because of his successful color experimentation. I examine the canvas in Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum, and it reveals a jungle of color. Blacks and browns are not what they appear. Like every color in the painting, they are made by combinations of primary colors-red, yellow, and blue. Reds and greens fight. Even the shadows have colors, all of which carry energy, convey emotion, and capture what is beyond the visible.

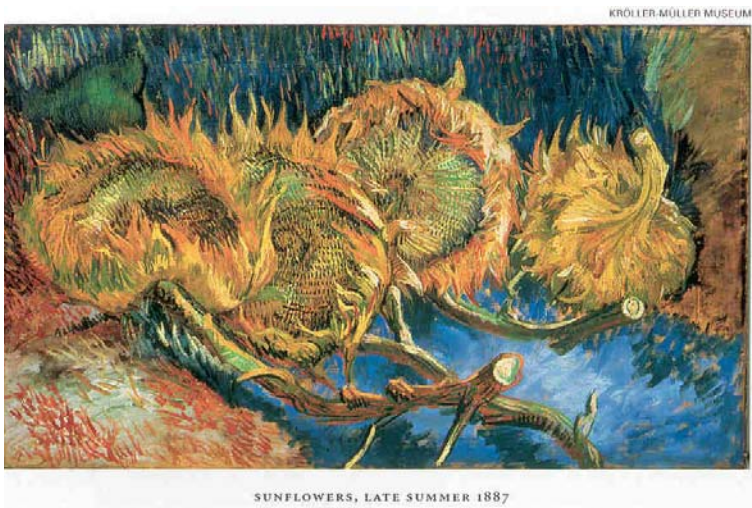
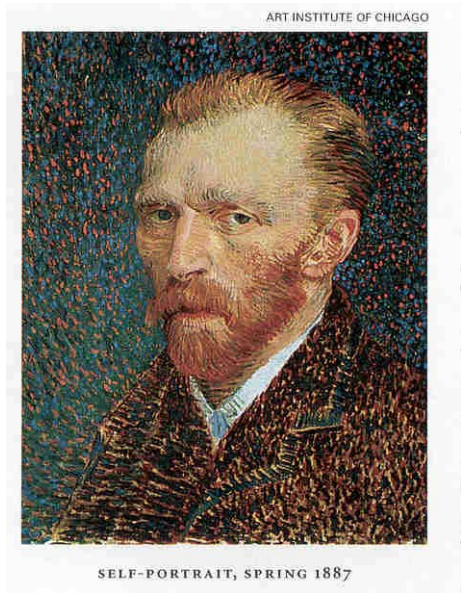
How Vincent's vision emerged remains a mystery. His letters provide intimate access to the creative process--more than is possible with any other artist--yet leave us at a dead end when we seek the source of genius. In van Gogh's case it was a combination of inherited skill, willingness to challenge accepted truths, and an intuitive grasp of color relationships. Obsessiveness was also essential. Unencumbered by job or family, he devoted every moment to developing his skills.

Sensing what color made possible, Vincent began to ask Theo about Impressionism. He knew that a movement existed but remained unaware of Impressionism's bright colors, happy scenes, dabs of paint, and impression of spontaneity--even though the first major Impressionist exhibition had been in Paris ten years earlier. ***Here in Holland it is rather difficult to find out what Impressionism really means.*** Vincent had been studying Japanese woodcut prints, the same type the Impressionists studied, yet knew little about developments in nearby Paris.

Theo, who apparently found Vincent's intensity difficult, tried to persuade him not to come to Paris. But in March 1886, after 18 months of asking about Impressionism, Vincent sent a note to Theo's office. It announced his arrival in Paris. ***Do not be cross with me for having come all at once like this.*** Vincent moves in with Theo, and the letters stop.

Few Impressionists had sold, yet Parisian artists continued to devise new techniques, such as Georges Seurat's pointillism--small dots or strokes of color that blend when seen from a distance. Vincent met these artists at studios and cafes, and many quickly recognized him as a genius. Only six years after that walk in the rain to Courrieres, Vincent was at the heart of the avant-garde.

Vincent confined himself to a compact area within Montmartre, a hilltop section of northern Paris known for nightlife. I visit the apartment he shared with Theo; the area where he first felt drawn to--and painted--sunflowers; and the cafes where he argued art.



PARIS Under the Impressionists' influence van Gogh abandoned a dark palette, rendering stilllifes (above) in "intense color and not a gray harmony." He showed his work for the first time in the Cafe du Tambourin (left). Joining the avant-garde, he hung his canvases with theirs in working-class restaurants like the one below. A friend wrote that the exhibition was "more modern than anything that was made in Paris at that moment."

In his pocket Vincent carried red and blue chalk, drawing on walls when describing his latest theories. To better understand color combinations, he studied balls of colored yarn, which he kept in a lacquer box. Purple and yellow. Pink and blue. Yellow and yellow. Orange and red. Instead of grays and browns, his work began to emphasize blue and red, then yellow and orange--which he added to some works completed in the Netherlands.

Within months of arriving in Paris, van Gogh began to see like the van Gogh we know today. He was a failed preacher, using color to whisper his sermon: Go slow. Stop thinking. Look around. You'll see something beautiful if you open yourself.

I want to go to van Gogh's "Restaurant de la Sirene at Asnieres:" No place, his painting suggests, could make you happier. The actual restaurant disappeared long ago. Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, author of *Van Gogh a Paris*, joins me to eat in a cafe that seems ordinary until I begin to listen to van Gogh. Blue table cloth. Thick floorboards. Ivy growing on stone wall. Plants in curved vases. Green. Yellow. Red. Orange. Sun shimmers on a red-tile roof.

We choose this quiet cafe because terrorists have been placing bombs in popular places. A newspaper headline reports massacre and rape in Bosnia. "How can van Gogh be important when such things are happening?" I say. Welsh-Ovcharov's response--"Such things make van Gogh even more necessary"--helps answer a fundamental question: Given Vincent's suffering and his acute awareness of suffering in others, why do his Paris paintings make me happy? His work offers consolation, escape.

Few who lived in van Gogh's time saw value in his work. They laughed when Theo showed them Vincent's paintings.

Are today's dealers selling works by geniuses, who--like van Gogh--must wait for death before being recognized? Wandering around Parisian galleries, I find new artwork using video and computers boring. If they are saying something, I cannot hear--just as people could not hear van Gogh.

How do sensitivities change? I stand in the Luxembourg Gardens where van Gogh stood as he painted. I look at the garden, then at a reproduction of his work in a book, and back at the garden. I see combinations of colors I had not noticed before. Trees, flowers, and people relate with a grace I had not seen. "I need classes to help me read his paintings," I say to Welsh-Ovcharov. "He's teaching me to better appreciate the actual garden."

"You don't need a teacher," she responds. "Van Gogh is accessible. Apart of his art can be understood by everyone." Skeptical, I go to the Musee d'Orsay to look at van Goghs. A man stands in front of "Starry Night Over the Rhone." His eyes have tears. I ask why. "Beauty and truth are always sad," he replies.

The man shows me how starlight fails to hit only one spot on the shore: where a couple strolls. They are in darkness. I ask if he learned this from a class or a book. "No!" he says. "It's something I just saw."

"STARRY NIGHT OVER THE RHONE" was painted in Aries, an agricultural town in southern France, where Vincent moved on February 20, 1888--after two years in Paris. He rented a room in one of the first places he passed and began to work. Nearby were apricot, almond, cherry, peach, and olive trees. Eleven miles in the distance are les Alpilles, the Little Alps.

I take Vincent's favorite route, nearly three miles to Montmajour, a hilltop abbey. The massive stone walls, curved ceilings, and echoing hallways are a scene from medieval mythology. Vincent came here to paint flowering fields visible in all directions and sometimes stole figs from nearby fields. It is hot. A cicada chorus sings, just as it did for Vincent.

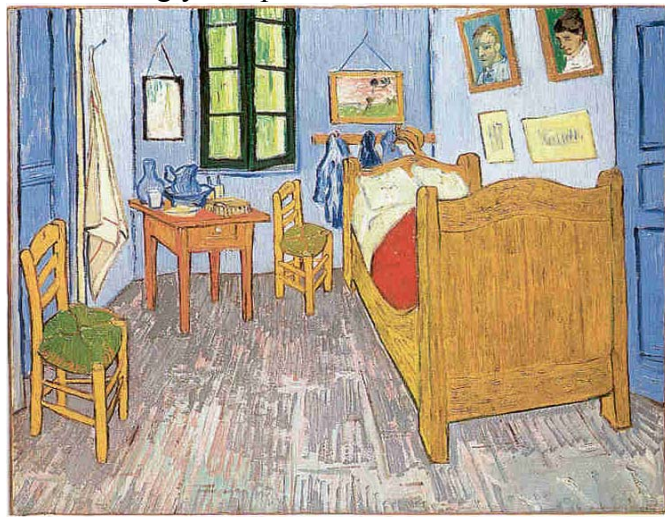
At the top of a hill is a windmill, one of the few remaining from van Gogh's time. On its walls and ceiling is a drawing. "It charts 32 winds that blow over these hills," the windmill keeper explains. The winds are so strong, so reliable, so familiar, each has its own name. "Wind comes down the Rhone River Valley," he says. "At Aries the Rhone splits into the Grand Rhone and the Petit Rhone, and the wind spreads." He gestures toward the sky. "Why do you think the sky here is so clear?" he asks. "Wind blows away the clouds. That is why we have such good light."

I am glad that Vincent starts to write again. His almost daily letters to Theo reveal a heightened color-consciousness. *I saw a stable with four coffee-colored cows....the stable bluish-white...and a great green curtain in the doorway....I saw another very quiet and lovely thing the other day, a girl with coffee-tinted skin...ash-blond hair, gray eyes, a print bodice of pale pink...against the emerald leaves of some fig trees.*

Colors rushed from his fingertips. "Wheat Fields with Sheaves" shows wheat with at least six shades of yellow. I look at an actual wheat field, thinking van Gogh exaggerated. Then I close my eyes, remind myself that to see requires a willingness to see, and look again. The wheat really does have six yellows.

Van Gogh's style had always been to study other artists, absorbing what seemed useful and rejecting what he did not like. Within months of arriving in Arles, he began to reject Impressionist color combinations. *All the colors that the Impressionists have brought into fashion are unstable.* For color inspiration he turned to established painters such as Eugene Delacroix, Adolphe Monticelli, and Felix Ziem. For inspiration on painting outdoors he turned to Jules Breton--whose studio he had been afraid to enter in Courrieres. Vincent was drawn back into a respect for Chevreul's laws of color. Artistic innovation, van Gogh thus reminds us, is not linear: The way forward sometimes comes from looking back.

Using color more freely, van Gogh's love affair with nature intensified. I am ravished, ravished with what I see. ...I have a lover's insight or a lover's blindness. What had required hours now came quickly. The human eye may be able to distinguish as many as ten million different colors and tones; an infinite number of combinations is possible. Perhaps someone armed with powerful computers will one day decipher van Gogh's color concoctions. They are instantly accessible yet maddeningly complex.



VAN GOGH'S BEDROOM IN ARLES, SEPTEMBER 1889

ARLES Lit by a vigorous sun, a sheet casts a long shadow on a building in Arles (left), an ancient town in the south of France where van Gogh journeyed to seek luminous colors like the ones in Japanese prints. Walking the streets and fields, van Gogh captured "the land of the blue tones and gay colors" in a series of paintings considered among his best. Here van Gogh created "a new art," writes critic Meyer Schapiro, by replacing traditional light and shadow with bounded areas of pure color--in hues drawn as much from the artist's mind as from nature. After working at a pace that left him "half dead," van Gogh withdrew to render his bedroom (shown above in a copy he made) in tones suggesting sleep. "Looking at the picture ought to rest the brain, or rather the imagination," he wrote. Alone in Arles van Gogh hoped to found an artists' community, but two months with painter Paul Gauguin ended in quarrels and the first attack of mental illness, when van Gogh cut off part of his ear and gave it to a prostitute.

VINCENT OFTEN could not eat or sleep. *To attain the high yellow note that I attained last summer, I really had to be pretty well keyed up.* After working all night on a self-portrait, he was unhappy with it and traded it for five Japanese prints. The Arles shop owner sold it to a cleric, and its history disappears--until 1946, when Reeves Lewenthal, a young American art dealer, got a flat tire on the outskirts of Paris. Lewenthal entered a bistro to call a mechanic. The bistro was dark and grimy with paintings on its walls. Lewenthal recognized one as a van Gogh.

Some art historians still believe this painting--"Study by Candlelight"--is genuine, but by the 1970s most regarded it as a fake. The persistence of such stories helps explain Vincent's popularity. Find a van Gogh and get rich quick. A new one turns up about every decade. So do forgeries. Annet Tellegen, one of the world's leading experts on van Gogh, says that about one in fifteen currently accepted van Goghs--including some of

the most famous--are forgeries. Because owners have invested so much money and prestige, they have little interest in learning the truth.

A COMBINATION of fake and real greets me as I enter the Place du Forum, just north of the open square that was a center of Arlesian life under Roman rule--from the first century B.C. through the fifth A.D. There it is! The subject of his "Cafe Terrace at Night." Restored in 1980, its tables have silk sunflowers. It is called the Cafe van Gogh. Next door is Snack Bar Le Tambourin, the name of Vincent's favorite cafe in Paris. A cup of coffee costs two dollars.

My hotel room overlooks the terrace cafe. Sounds drift in as I continue Vincent's letters. I am angry at Theo, whose records show that he sold one of Vincent's self-portraits to a buyer in London. Theo never told Vincent, and no one knows how much the buyer paid.

At 1:30 a.m. I go looking for what Vincent portrayed in "The Night Cafe," completed several blocks away near the railroad station. In contrast to the happy glow of "Cafe Terrace at Night," it uses the conflict between colors to capture lonely people awake in the middle of the night. ***I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green.***

The only open cafe I find is a McDonald's with plastic sunflowers and a tile replica of van Gogh's "The Night Cafe." After I return to my room, Theo suddenly walks onstage. Vincent--for unknown reasons--saved 36 of his letters, beginning in Arles. They convey a deep sensitivity I had not expected: "The sympathy an artist feels for certain lines and for certain colors will cause his soul to be reflected in them." "It is such a pleasure for me to look at your pictures. They make the rooms so gay, and there is such an intensity of truth." "You have repaid me many times over, by your work as well as by your friendship, which is of greater value than all the money I shall ever possess."

Theo's words could not touch Vincent's loneliness. ***Often whole days pass without my speaking to anyone.*** "We regarded him as crazy," Jeanne Calment tells me. "He lit candles in the brim of his hat as he painted outside at night. People called him *fada*, touched by fairies."

Calment, born in 1875, and the world's oldest person whose birth is documented, smiles and thrusts out her breasts. This, she says, is how she flirted with Vincent when she was 14. He had come into her cousin's store. "I was very pretty, but he wanted only to discuss painting:" she says--still annoyed.

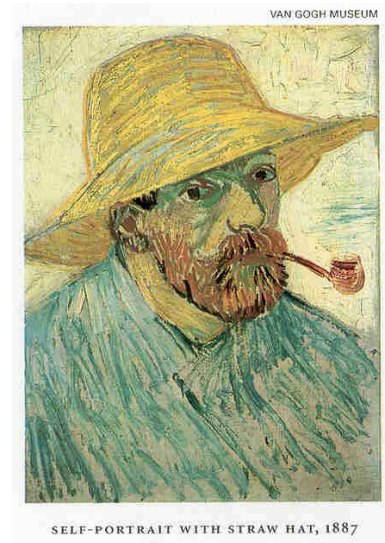
How I'd like to settle down and have a home! Vincent never lost faith in romantic love, but for companionship he turned to prostitutes--plentiful because Arles was a garrison town for French troops.

Three months after arriving in Arles he rented what he called the Yellow House, which he hoped to transform into an artists' commune. I look for the house but learn that Allied bombers flattened it while trying to destroy a bridge over the Rh6ne shortly after D-day.

Where the house stood is now a street. Vincent huddled here in the rain, preparing for the arrival of Paul Gauguin, whom he had met in Paris. I am vain enough to want to make a certain impression on Gauguin with my work. Gauguin had sold a few paintings and by the early 1900s would be famous for his midlife escape to Tahiti and paintings that use color and distorted perspective to express emotion. Both Theo and Vincent recognized Gauguin's genius. He was to receive the same 150-franc monthly payment from Theo--who, thanks to Vincent's influence, had become the principal dealer for Paris's avant-garde.

Gauguin arrived in late October 1888. Never has more artistic talent been assembled than when the two worked together. Friction was immediate. Gauguin believed artists must paint from memory; van Gogh needed to see what he was painting. ***Our arguments are terribly electric.*** On December 23 Vincent may have threatened Gauguin with a razor--the source is Gauguin, who sometimes lied--and then cut off his own earlobe.

The question most frequently asked about van Gogh is, Why? Maybe he was emulating the ear cutting at bullfights in Arles. Maybe he had Meniere's disease, excess fluid on nerve endings in the inner ear that causes annoying sounds. ***I hope I have just had simply an artist's fit.*** A coincidence difficult to ignore is that Vincent's



ear cutting came shortly after Theo became engaged. Vincent had compared one of Theo's previous girlfriends to Lady Macbeth.

Theo rushed to Aries. When he arrived, he put his head on the pillow next to Vincent's--yet he left the same day to rejoin his 26-year-old fiancée, Johanna Bongers, called Jo.

Vincent never explained what happened with Gauguin or why he cut his ear. ***To suffer without complaining is the one lesson that has to be learned in this life.*** Maybe nothing could have stopped his self-destruction. "If he might have found somebody to whom he could have disclosed his heart," Theo wrote to Jo, "it would perhaps never have gone thus far."

THE NEXT STAGE in Vincent's decline came about a month later--attacks during which he would hear strange sounds -and think people were trying to poison him. ***The unbearable hallucinations have ceased, and are now getting reduced to a simple nightmare.*** He asked to be committed to Saint-Paul-de-Mausole, a mental hospital at St.-Remy, some 15 miles from Arles.

Since his death van Gogh has been diagnosed more than any other artist in history. Diagnoses include epilepsy, manic-depression, and schizophrenia. Drinking large amounts of absinthe, which contained toxic wormwood, could also have poisoned him. Van Gogh thought that his problem had physical roots, a belief supported by recent studies that reveal that physical abnormalities of the brain contribute to mental illness. ***I am beginning to consider madness as a disease like any other.***

Is such mental illness related to creativity? Many writers and composers, including Lord Byron, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Schumann, have had severe mental illnesses. As with van Gogh, illness both impeded and fueled their creativity.

When attacks came--they lasted for three and a half of his twelve months in the asylum--Vincent could not work. But amid the howling of other patients, he completed more than a hundred masterpieces. Working on my pictures is almost a necessity for my recovery. Some see craziness in these paintings, pointing for example to the swirls in "The Starry Night." "The Starry Night," however, is the result of rational thought. Its construction resembles the Japanese prints Vincent studied. At 4 a.m., June 19, 1889, around the time Vincent executed the painting, Venus and the constellation Aries were where he placed them. He had also read magazine accounts of comets.



THE ASYLUM'S DOCTORS thought Vincent might have epilepsy and treated him with baths. The bathtubs are now planters outside the hospital. During attacks they locked Vincent up. I look up at his window--it no longer has bars--through which he painted "The Starry Night."

Then I stop. The former monastery is still a mental hospital, yet people, drawn by the van Gogh story, picnic all around it.

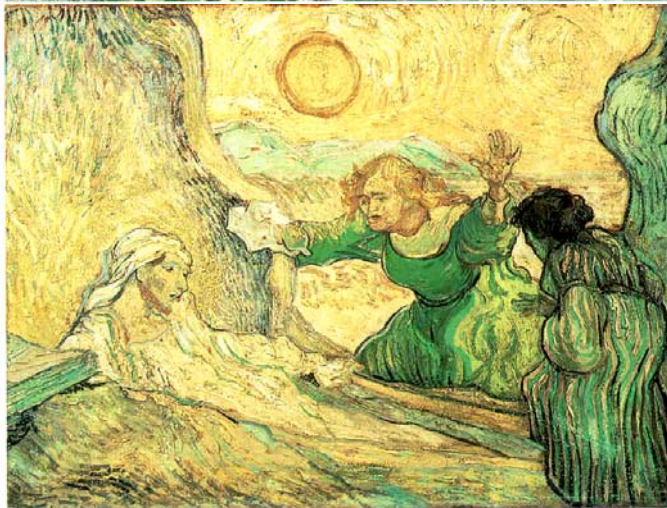
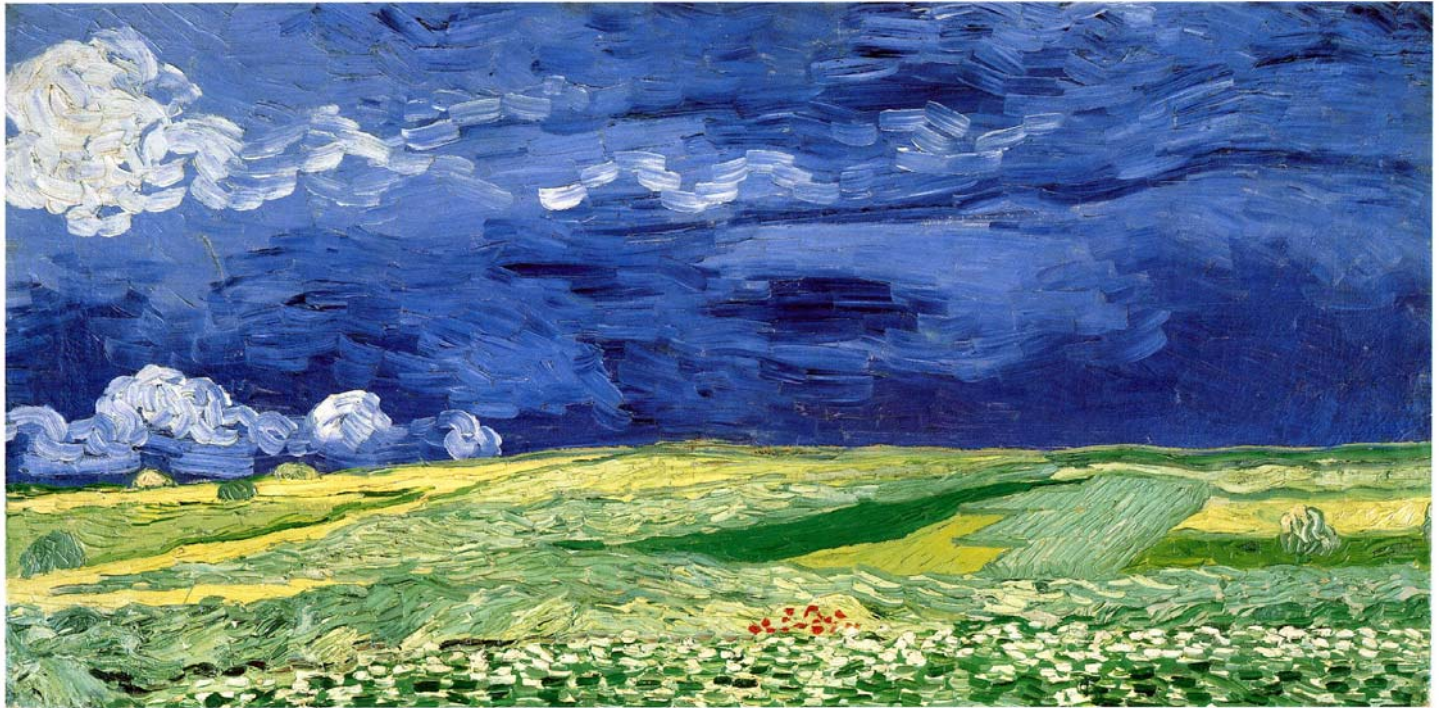
I can no longer avoid something that has bothered me since Paris. There, I saw people make a pilgrimage to van Gogh's paintings as though he were a religious figure or a rock star. Some had tears in their eyes. Others posed for photographs in front of his work.

Looking at the St.-Remy picnickers, I want to stop focusing on van Gogh's private life, to skip my next stop: Auvers--where Japanese tourists leave family ashes on Vincent's grave. Everyone, including me, should stop treating the places he lived as sacred shrines and let his paintings speak for themselves. Little is known about what was going on in Shakespeare's life when he wrote Hamlet or Macbeth, but that does not get in the way of our understanding his plays.

It is too late to cancel my lunch with Philippe Latourelle, director of St.-Remy's art center. He shares my concern. "Pretty soon they'll be taking pictures at every tree or rock where van Gogh stood," he says.

But to my surprise, I switch sides. While describing my feelings at the window through which he painted "The Starry Night," I argue against my own conclusion that we should not focus on Vincent's private life. Knowing that he painted "The Starry Night" while in an asylum--about a year before he committed suicide--changes how you see it.

The picnickers also answer my question about van Gogh's popularity. The van Gogh story gives them something they need. Misunderstood. Resisting materialism. Needing love. Alone. Unappreciated. We have all been van Gogh. We find pieces of ourselves in him. In Amsterdam I had asked a student from Mexico why the Van Gogh Museum excited him. "He kept working hard, he never gave up," the young man replied. "I want to earn money to get through college. I won't give up either."



THE RAISING OF LAZARUS (AFTER A DETAIL OF AN ETCHING BY REMBRANDT), MAY 1890

AUVERS-SUR-OISE Like Lazarus waking from the dead, van Gogh rose from two months of mental confusion to paint this version of a Rembrandt etching (left) and journey from a year's confinement in the asylum to Auvers, an artists' colony north of Paris: "The whole horrible attack has disappeared like a thunderstorm and I am working...with calm and a steady enthusiasm." In 70 days he produced some 70 paintings. But increasingly he worried that he was a financial burden on his brother Theo's family. Uneasy after a visit, he returned to the country to paint wheat fields (Wheatfield Under Thunderstorms, July, 1890, above). They expressed, he wrote, "the health and restorative forces" of nature. but also "sadness and

Such attitudes help explain the high prices paid for van Goghs. His "Portrait of Dr. Gachet" sold for \$82.5 million in 1990, breaking the world record of \$53.9 million held by his "Irises." People are buying great art. They are also buying a piece of the story.

I leave the lunch in St.-Remy laughing at myself. Now that I recognize the value of Vincent and Theo's story, I want to enlarge it—to embrace Theo's wife, Jo.

Theo had met her in 1885, but Jo had discouraged him. She had rekindled the relationship in 1888, just before Vincent left Paris. Vincent may have wanted to give Theo's romance room to grow.

Another attack came on July 8, a few days after Vincent heard that Jo was pregnant. Vincent's health problems often seem associated with anything that bound Theo closer to Jo.

Three-and-a-half months after the baby--named Vincent--was born, Vincent left St.-Remy. ***I shall probably arrive in Paris about five o'clock in the morning.***

Vincent stayed only three days. In 16 years of correspondence--not counting the Paris years--he and Theo had rarely spent time together.

VINCENT RENTED A ROOM in Auvers-sur-Oise, a small town on the Oise River just north of Paris, and began painting immediately. ***Auvers is very beautiful. ...There is a great deal of color here.***

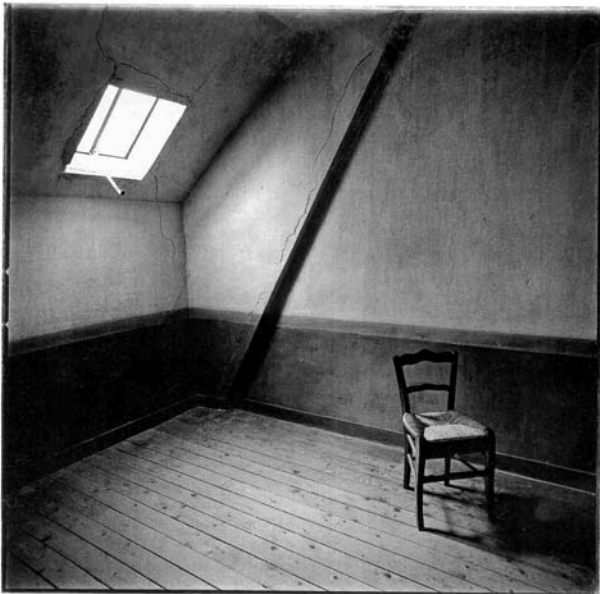
It is still beautiful. Dominated by its church. Stone houses. Narrow streets. Tile roofs. Wheat fields. Hills. Van Gogh produced roughly one masterpiece a day for the 70 days he lived here--today they could be worth more than a billion dollars. At Ravoux's, the inn where he lived, I eat at the table d'hote, where he sat. After dinner he often drew the sandman for the innkeeper's two-year-old daughter.

Such camaraderie did not curtail Vincent's unhappiness. ***I see no happy future at all.*** Maybe loneliness can kill. Maybe Vincent thought he was losing Theo to illness or to Jo. The letters offer one strange clue. Vincent and Theo had signed their letters, "Yours sincerely" or "With a handshake." In the year before Vincent's suicide, Theo sometimes added "From the brother who loves you."

I read the letters more slowly, knowing I am at the end. The three reunited in Paris and discussed money. ***We are all rather distressed and a little overwrought.*** Evidence of family tension is visible in Vincent's work: The more than 2,000 pieces include not one sketch of Jo or the baby.

Vincent borrowed or stole a gun. On the afternoon of July 27, 1890, he went out to the country and shot himself in the upper abdomen. He then walked to his room, where he lay alone, bleeding--exactly what he had done after cutting his ear. The innkeeper's family became anxious when Vincent missed dinner. They saw him come in limping, and the inn-keeper went up to see if he was unwell. A doctor was summoned, but he could do nothing.

Theo arrived the next morning. They were alone for more than 12 hours. No one knows what was said. Vincent died on July 29, 1890. He was 37 and had been a painter for ten years. In his pocket was an unmailed letter. ***There are many things I should like to write you about, but I feel it is useless.***



AUVERS-SUR-OISE An empty chair stands in the attic bedroom where van Gogh died of a self-inflicted bullet wound in July 1890. "It is useless," he wrote in his last letter (above), which carried a sketch of a final painting. But already the art world recognized his genius. "Men like him do not die entirely," wrote G. Albert Aurier, one of the first to praise him. His work "will make his name live again and for eternity."

On the afternoon of July 27, I take his final walk. The flowers and fresh air seem out of place. At 1 a.m. I am alone in Vincent's attic room. He was awake here all night. Calm. Smoking. Whimpering. The room is hot, airless and cell-like. A hook in the ceiling held the lantern. The small window looks out on the building next door. Dominique-Charles Janssens, a Belgian businessman who restored the inn in 1993, has left the room empty. Janssens was correct when he told me, "There is nothing to see, everything to feel." I lie where Vincent's bed was, look up, and see nail holes where he hung his paintings--the last things he saw, his last companions.

Vincent's body lay on the table d'hote. White linen. Sunflowers. Yellow dahlias. Vincent's paintings. Theo wept so much he could not speak.

Theo died six months later. To say he died of grief adds to the myth, but for years he had suffered from seizures, bronchitis, and syphilis.

Widowed at 28 with little money and a baby, Jo moved to her native Holland and opened a boarding house. Ignoring advice to throwaway Vincent's paintings, she arranged his first posthumous shows and published his letters.

Her grave in Amsterdam is covered with ivy. She planted this same ivy over the graves of Vincent and Theo in Auvers, where the vines have grown together.

Rain hits as I leave the Auvers cemetery. I seek refuge in the nearby church. A woman is singing. Her voice echoes in the empty church. I float with the music, knowing I need not say good-bye to Vincent. ***Looking at the stars always makes me dream.... Why, I ask myself, shouldn't the shining dots of the sky be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France? Just as we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star.***

LYNN JOHNSON used special-format black-and-white " photography for this story because she wanted, through light and composition, to evoke the feeling of van Gogh's time. "How fearful it made me," she says, "to be on a page with the work of van Gogh."