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## Four Places on the Van Gogh Trail: A Pilgrimage through The Hague, Nuenen, Antwerp & Paris

Josephine Lee Smith  
*Bard College*

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Four Places on the Van Gogh Trail:  
A Pilgrimage through  
The Hague, Nuenen, Antwerp & Paris

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of the Arts  
of Bard College

by  
Josephine Smith

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# INTRODUCTION



The Van Gogh route spans four countries and two hundred and twenty five locations.<sup>1</sup> It follows in the footsteps of the painter Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) starting from the village of his birth in the Netherlands to his final resting place just outside of Paris.<sup>2</sup> Van Gogh never stayed long in one place and lived in various cities and villages throughout his thirty seven years. The changing of his environments stimulated the steady production of his work while his style and palette were constantly being transformed.

My research on Van Gogh started around seven years ago and it has been in the last five years that I've had the opportunity to travel along the Van Gogh Route. From 2019 to 2021 I spent time exploring the artist's life in France from Paris to Provence. It was then as a student abroad in the Netherlands for my junior year of college that I was fortunate to visit every city where the artist lived in both the Netherlands and Belgium. My experiences have led me to write my senior project on how the different environments that Van Gogh lived in influenced and transformed his art over time.

In this paper I will be writing about four different less known places that Van Gogh lived and worked in by following his artistic development through a period of six years from 1882 to 1888. The places I've chosen set the basic foundations for the artist for his style was constantly in a state of change. The paper shows the development of not just his painting but also his drawing. My purpose is to give a glimpse into how Van Gogh saw the world and how he showed his vision of the world through his paintings and how location was always an important theme. It's important to give an arc of his short life to understand how he came to the first place that will be written about.

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<sup>1</sup> Van Gogh Route: Accessed February 3rd, 2024. [Home - Van Gogh Route](#)

<sup>2</sup> Van Gogh is buried in the village of Auvers sur Oise

Vincent van Gogh was born in the Dutch village of Groot Zundert on March 30th, 1853. His parents were the pastor Theodorus van Gogh (1822-1885) and his wife Anna Carbentus (1819-1907). He grew up in a household with five younger siblings. In 1869, at the age of sixteen Vincent started working for the art firm Goupil & Co. in The Hague. In 1873 he was transferred to the London branch. In all he worked at Goupils until 1876 when he was let go because of shoddy work habits having lost interest in the art dealing trade. After that he took a job as an assistant teacher outside of London before moving back to the Netherlands once again in 1877.

He worked for a few months in a bookshop in Dordrecht but soon left there for Amsterdam. There he enrolled to become a pastor like his father but a year of studying Greek and Latin didn't satisfy him. Rather, he decided his calling was to be a preacher for the poor. For this reason he moved to Belgium to become a lay preacher and spent time in the desolate mining region of the Borinage in the southern part of the country. He became overzealous, exhibiting some odd behaviors, and his six month apprenticeship was not renewed by the Evangelization Committee. The artist was left at a crossroads, and having enlisted the support of his brother Theo (1857-1891) he chose to become an artist.

The beginnings of Van Gogh's career started in the village of Etten where he was living back with his parents in 1881. Themes such as the working class became evident in this body of work and he would have a fascination with peasants and working people until the end of his life. That same year he made the decision to move to the Hague which is the first lengthy period of time where the progression of his work can be seen. He would stay there two years before moving to the rural northern Dutch region of Drenthe. Van Gogh at this point was now a painter, although his classic style would not be evident for another three years when he arrived in the

South of France. In 1884 he lived in the Dutch town of Nuenen where he created his first famous work, "*The Potato Eaters*" (1885).<sup>3</sup> In 1885, he left the Netherlands for good and went to study in Antwerp, Belgium. This only lasted for a few months, as he fell into hard times and in February of 1886 he moved to Paris to live with his brother Theo. The artist's two years in Paris marked the shift from dark, somber colors to light colors that mirrored the styles of impressionism and pointillism. Here he befriended artists such as Henri de Toulouse Lautrec (1864-1901) and Émile Bernard (1868-1941).

In 1888, the noise and crowds of the city became overwhelming to Van Gogh so he left for Arles in the south of France. This marked the beginning of his most well known period, where he created some of his most famous paintings such as "*Sunflowers*" (1888) and "*The Bedroom*" (1888).<sup>4</sup> After fifteen months in May 1889, Van Gogh went to stay in the Saint-Paul de Mausole Asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. There he would stay for a year before spending the last two months of his life in the village of Auvers sur Oise. He died on July 29th, 1890 after sustaining a bullet wound to his abdomen.

His time in The Hague, Nuenen, Antwerp and Paris represents four different artistic periods of Van Gogh's life. The work he completed in these locales is less known but still remains important in determining how the artist was influenced by and saw the world. The last three years of his life are for many the most fascinating period of Van Gogh's life to study for he painted his starry nights and cypresses, but the artist would have not reached such a zenith if he had never been exposed earlier to the experiences of living in such towns as The Hague or Antwerp.

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<sup>3</sup> Fig. 1

<sup>4</sup> Fig. 2 & 3

At the time of Van Gogh's arrival to The Hague he was still an amateur who didn't paint, but he had been fervently drawing much of what he saw around him. The city offered many subjects, including people of the working class and a variety of landscapes such as fish drying barns and shop fronts. His own skill at drawing the figure improved with his daily excursions to find models. He was attracted to particular parts of the city including an area called the Geest and the working class seaside village of Scheveningen. His grip on the genre of landscape was strengthened early in his stay as he trained with his cousin Anton Mauve (1838-1888) who was a founding member of the Hague School. With his mentor, Van Gogh was able to perfect techniques and styles which formed the basis for his future work. Towards the end of these two years he derived immense satisfaction from depicting factories, mills and storefronts which were all in close proximity to his studio on the Schenkweg. The people he encountered and fashioned were a reflection of these surroundings.

Van Gogh lived in Nuenen for about two years, from late 1883 to Autumn of 1885. The works he made here embody the working class. He painted and drew their small thatched cottages and dreary atmospheres with a pervasive melancholy. "*The Potato Eaters*" was his standout work during this time, but this period cannot be defined by just this one painting. Along with the peasant class Vincent had a deep interest in weavers and dilapidated buildings of worship, old churches that reflected his own troubled state of mind and emotion.

The Belgian City of Antwerp offered Van Gogh a lively cosmopolitan atmosphere. His arrival there in the last few months of 1885 gave the artist a fresh view of city life since his early days of working in London and his brief exposure to Paris. The works produced during this time were a mix of his lessons from the Academy and his usual keen observations made while walking around the city. Van Gogh mainly went to Antwerp to be a student at the Academie of

Fine Arts. His drawings of models at the institution reflected the types of people he found down by the Wharves rather than figures with classical anatomy. His other main subject matter similar to The Hague was landscape for it was free of cost. His drawings were cityscapes with focus put on well known buildings that still exist today such as Het Steen and the main square of the old city.

Van Gogh lived in Paris from 1886-1888. This two year period is his most transformative but also the least documented.<sup>5</sup> The crucial change: Van Gogh's palette went from somber to light colors. This was due to his exposure to Parisian culture which at the time was at the epicenter of the art world. In the bohemian area of Montmartre and energized by Theo's connections as an art dealer, Van Gogh was fully immersed in the fin de siècle. Van Gogh's subject matter expanded from the rural hills just near his apartment to the outskirts of Asnières. He was enraptured by simple restaurant windows, boaters on the Seine, and nightclubs like the Moulin de la Galette, all which he rendered in a colorful modern style.

More than a hundred years after Van Gogh's death, The Hague, Nuenen, Antwerp and Paris all are places included on the Van Gogh Trail. Each has their fair share of buildings and monuments dedicated to the artist that are visited by thousands. Out of the four places, The Hague has most changed with there being very few of the buildings from Vincent's time still standing, but people can still go to the shores of Scheveningen and tour museums that the artist went to. Nuenen is the most well preserved location on the Van Gogh trail, where visitors are offered special tours of Van Gogh's studio found in the back of the parsonage where his family lived. Places such as his fathers' church still exist. The quaint landscape is still lush and not much has changed since the artist's stay in the mid 1880s. In Antwerp, the lodgings of Van Gogh can

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<sup>5</sup> In Paris Van Gogh was living with his brother Theo in their apartment. Many of the artist's letters were to his brother so there is very little correspondence unless Theo went on a business trip.

still be seen and the city's art academy still operates for art students. In Paris, Van Gogh and Theo's apartment at 54 Rue Lepic is still there, though privately occupied. Montmartre is no longer dotted with farmland, but a modernized part of the capital. All these locations offer a wealth of information relating to Van Gogh's lived experience that helps tell the story of his life.



Fig. 1: "*The Potato Eaters*" (1885) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 2: "*Sunflowers*" (1888) Vincent van Gogh

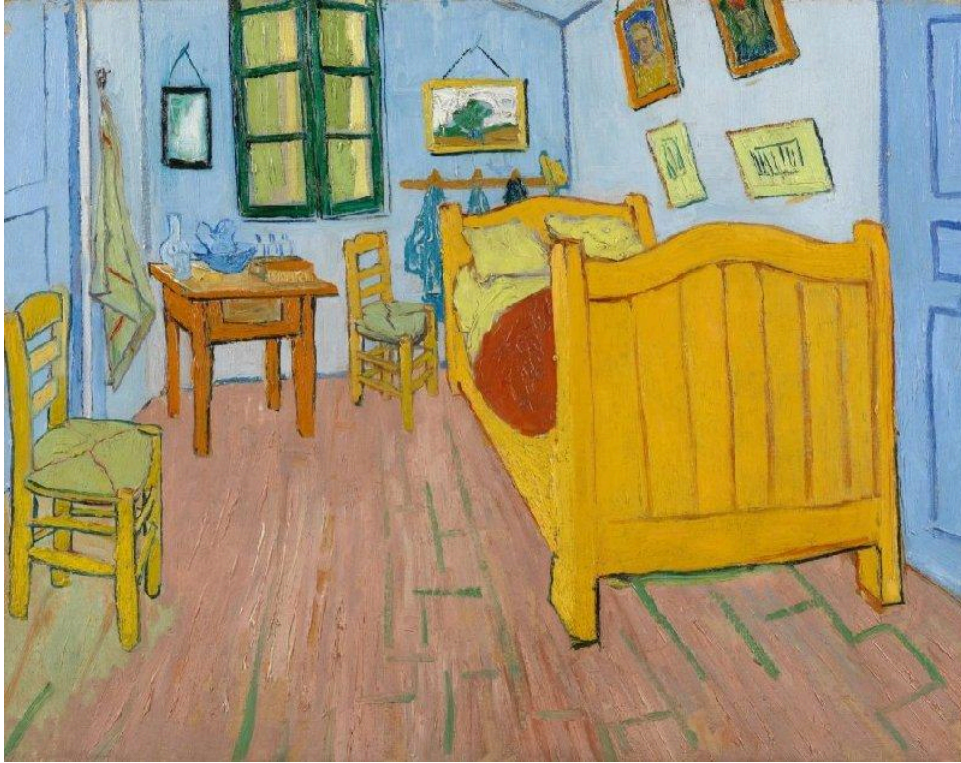
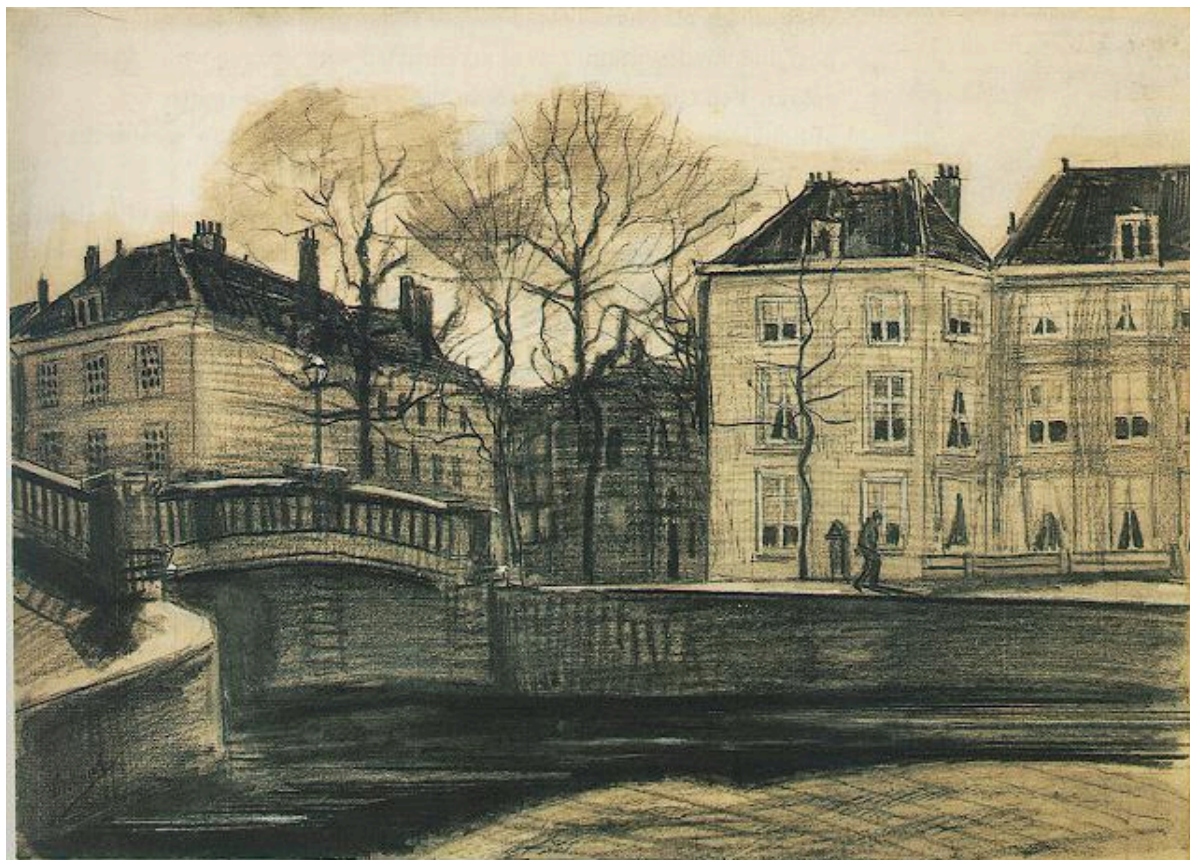


Fig. 3: *"The Bedroom"* (1888) Vincent van Gogh



## CHAPTER 1: THE HAGUE



*“Bridge and Houses on the Corner of Herengracht-Prinsessegracht”* (1882) Vincent van Gogh

The Hague lies less than an hour away from the bustling capital of Amsterdam. It does not boast colorful architecture nor is it the first destination for visitors to the Netherlands. Instead it exerts its own dignified charm, accompanied by its regal past. It is the city where the Dutch parliament has resided for centuries and where today the royal family lives. More than a century ago Vincent van Gogh lived there from 1881-1883. He was a mere unknown draftsman at the time who hadn't yet touched the medium of oil painting. The city was not an unfamiliar place to him as he had lived there ten years before while working as an art dealer; his own mother had been born and raised there. It had also been home to his uncle Vincent van Gogh (1820-1888) who was an art dealer himself. The artist's return to the Hague was the result of a fight with his father on Christmas that had left him homeless.

The Hague in Van Gogh's day had a population of about 100,000 people.<sup>6</sup> It was quiet but held a sizable complement of foreigners, as the writer Henry James observed in 1876: "I should be at a loss to say how much I find it to my taste, small enough for convenience and compact sociability, yet large enough to exhibit certain metropolitan airs and graces."<sup>7</sup> The city had a rich center with elegant squares and pleasant winding streets as commented by Karl Baedeker in his *"Travelers Handbook of 1881 for Belgium and Holland."*

Today, the Hague unfortunately is sadly lacking in Van Gogh landmarks. During my own travels there I didn't see any buildings left that Van Gogh had visited. What remains is the seaside at Scheveningen and public museums such as the Mauritshuis and the Panorama Mesdag. The Schenkweg where Van Gogh set up his studio no longer exists. It was completely rebuilt after the

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<sup>6</sup> Baedeker Karl. 1881. *Belgium and Holland : Handboek for Travellers* 6. Ed. rev. and augmented ed. Leipsic: Baedeker.

<sup>7</sup> Pollock, Griselda. "Stark Encounters: Modern Life and Urban Work in Van Gogh's Drawings of the Hague 1881-3." *Art History* 6, no. 3 (September 1983): 330–58.  
doi:10.1111/j.1467-8365.1983.tb00819.x.

area was destroyed during World War II and was renamed the Hendrick Hamelstraat.<sup>8</sup>

Scheveningen is still a popular resort town with an easy trip by tram from the Hague central station. Unlike in Van Gogh's day, today the beach has been modernized to cater to holiday goers with the installment of a ferris wheel and boardwalk. When I visited Scheveningen, it still boasted dreary weather, but in the spring the beach was filled with the aroma of Kibbeling, battered and fried chunks of fish, and rows of beach chairs were aligned in the sand.<sup>9</sup> There are no remains of the "*Bakery at Noordstraat*" and the whole area of the Geest has been renamed and redone.<sup>10</sup>

"*Rooftops*" (1882) is a watercolor done at Van Gogh's studio on the Schenkweg.<sup>11</sup> It depicts five red roofs seen from an almost aerial view. All along the rooftops are small chimneys which emit faint puffs of smoke. Down below in the foreground on the right is a carpenter's yard. A figure can be seen working as he stands amidst scattered wood. Only the faint detail of the wood panels can be seen. The sky is a grayish blue while the silhouette of a black bird can be seen flying. In the background is the lush summer landscape. It shows the outskirts of the town where the fields become flat. A path covered by a treeline fades into the distance, while hidden behind are factories where black smoke rises. The green complements the red, while the image has a blurry texture as if the watercolor was to run off the page. The vast landscape creates an atmosphere of solitude.

This drawing was done from the window of the artist's studio. Located in the eastern part of the city, Van Gogh had his lodgings on the Schenkweg. This was not an area that many visited, for it was lower class and desolate. It bordered the rural countryside and was located not

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<sup>8</sup> Van Gogh Route: Schenkweg, Accessed February 3rd, 2024. [Home - Van Gogh Route](#)

<sup>9</sup> Kibbling is a battered fried fish dish, common in the Netherlands

<sup>10</sup> Van Gogh Route: Schenkweg, Accessed February 3rd, 2024. [Home - Van Gogh Route](#)

<sup>11</sup> Fig. 4

far from the Rijnspoor train station.<sup>12</sup> Van Gogh lived in two different apartments at the Schenkweg, the first being from his arrival to July 1882, and in the second until his departure to Drenthe. The only difference between these two places was that the second studio was larger for the purpose of accommodating his lover Sien Hoornik and her family. The location was a reflection of the artist's interest in living among the working class. Van Gogh very rarely lived in a city center and almost never painted upper class citizens. His fascination was more with nature and the locations where the average person did not venture, as he once wrote, “In the poorest little house, in the filthiest corner, I see paintings or drawings. And my mind turns in that direction as if with an irresistible urge.”<sup>13</sup> This would remain evident throughout the rest of his career as he was attracted to shabby peasant cottages in Nuenen and the working class portside of Antwerp.

“*Beach with People Walking and Boats*” (1882) is a watercolor that depicts the shores of Scheveningen.<sup>14</sup> A couple can be seen strolling down the ocean shoreline. Their backs are turned towards the viewer as they link arms. The couple wears respectable clothing with the man sporting a top hat and the woman with a black hat and dress. In front of them is a group of people standing together, their bodies merging due to the light transparency of the watercolor. The women can be seen wearing white bonnets while a man stands on the outside of the group wearing a red vest and a black hat. Two more black silhouettes of people stand farther down the beach. On the right side of the watercolor are several boats moored to the shore, their ropes keeping them from drifting away. Two figures stand in the water, their ankles being swallowed by the tumultuous waves. The water looks choppy as if rocked by a ferocious windy storm from

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<sup>12</sup> Naifeh Steven and Gregory White Smith. 2011. *Vincent Van Gogh : The Life* First ed. New York: Random House.

<sup>13</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 249: Vincent to Theo The Hague, on or about Friday, 21 July 1882.

<sup>14</sup> Fig. 7

the north sea. White foam can be seen blending in with the grayishness of the water. The sky is dreary, in the color of dirty brown with a streak of blue popping out. Birds can be seen flying above. The watercolor is alive where the waves can almost be heard slapping against the boats as they rock back and forth. The tone is drab while the environment also evokes a sense of solitude.

Today there are around 150 watercolors of Van Gogh's that survive.<sup>15</sup> They are generally rarer than his drawings. Most of them were done during his early years as an artist but there are a few from his later years in the south of France although these were generally used as preliminary works for his oil paintings. Van Gogh did not think highly of the medium for he found it difficult and runny. He even used the word "diabolical" to show his displeasure for it.<sup>16</sup> He had been urged on in this medium by his cousin Anton Mauve who was a frequent watercolorist himself.

Anton Mauve was Van Gogh's leading inspiration during his stay in The Hague. The two artists were bonded through Mauve's marriage to Van Gogh's first cousin.<sup>17</sup> He made frequent trips to Mauve's studio in the early months of 1882 trying to receive guidance after a year and half of self study. They started off on good terms, as Van Gogh wrote in the beginning of 1882, "Mauve knows it all so well, and when he says something, he makes an effort and doesn't just say something for the sake of saying it, well, I also make an effort to listen and take pains to put it into practice." Mauve was not only a mentor but also helped Van Gogh financially.

Born in the town of Zaandam, Netherlands in 1838, Anton Mauve was the son of a Baptist.<sup>18</sup> At an early age he moved with his family to the city of Haarlem where he would

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<sup>15</sup> Brooks, David, "Watercolours", The Vincent van Gogh Gallery, October 23rd, 2023. [The Vincent van Gogh Gallery \(vggallery.com\)](https://www.vggallery.com)

<sup>16</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Letter 200: The Hague, on or about Saturday, 14 January 1882.

<sup>17</sup> Naifeh Steven and Gregory White Smith. 2011. *Vincent Van Gogh : The Life* First ed. New York: Random House.

<sup>18</sup> Thyssen-Bornemisza Museo Nacional (Madrid) Accessed: January 24th, 2024 [Mauve, Anton. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza \(museothyssen.org\)](https://www.museothyssen.org)

eventually study with the painters Pieter van Os (1808-1892) and Wouterus Verschuur (1812-1874).<sup>19</sup> There he was introduced to the genre of landscape which would dictate his later work. Mauve moved to the Hague in the early 1870s at the same time that the Hague school was being formed.<sup>20</sup> The Hague School was a group of Dutch Artists who in the latter half of the 19th century painted in and around the vicinity of The Hague. This particular group of artists bonded over their interest in depicting the rural Dutch landscape. Apart from Mauve, other members included Jozef Israëls (1824-1911), Jan Hendrik Weissenbruch (1824-1903) and Jacob Maris (1837-1899). Their style was known to be somber and dark which was ultimately influenced by the Dutch painters of the 17th century such as Rembrandt (1606-1669) and Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/9-1682).<sup>21</sup>

Van Gogh was a great admirer of the Hague School, especially during the early part of his career. Ten years earlier he expressed in a letter to Theo his interest by writing out a long list of artists he admired, a few of them being members of The Hague School.<sup>22</sup> It was not until Van Gogh moved to this city at the beginning of the 1880s that he made acquaintances with many of the members through his connection with Mauve. One of the artists Van Gogh mentioned constantly was Jozef Israëls. This Hague painter was known for his silent, dreary scenes of peasants which was a subject that Van Gogh took for his own for the rest of his career. Vincent saw Israëls' "*Peasant Family at the Table*," (1882), which likely inspired Van Gogh's "*Potato*

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> The Hague School was similar to the Barbizon School in France and the Macchiaioli group in Italy. The Macchiaioli were a colony of painters in Florence, Italy during the second half of the 19th century. Leeuw Ronald de John Sillevs and Charles Dumas. 1983. *The Hague School : Dutch Masters of the 19th Century*. Paris: Grand Palais ; London : published in association with Weidenfeld and Nicolson

<sup>22</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 017: Vincent to Theo Theo van Gogh. London, beginning of January 1874.

*Eaters*” where the images are similar in theme.<sup>23</sup> In Israel’s version a peasant family sits at a table. They eat in a dreary room that's scarce of anything but a cupboard and a red pitcher. The colors are unexciting while the moment seems to be frozen in time. Van Gogh’s version is dark, but exerts a feeling of liveliness. The figures have more character and emotion. When comparing the two Van Gogh’s version, while less realistic, is far more modern than Israëls’ painting which follows a more traditional approach of depiction.

Van Gogh’s relationship with Mauve had started to deteriorate by the spring of 1882. The artist was known to have a difficult personality and he never kept many long term friendships. Van Gogh was known to be direct, blunt and was not afraid to speak his mind. There were days when he would not speak to anyone and others where he was known to get into heated arguments especially with people who disagreed with him. Mauve eventually stopped talking to his cousin and feeling an immense dissatisfaction, Vincent complained to Theo: “The way Mauve talked also became just as narrow-minded, if I may put it like that, as previously broad-minded. First and foremost, I had to draw from plaster casts. I utterly detest drawing from plaster casts – yet I had a couple of hands and feet hanging in the studio, though not for drawing. Once he spoke to me about drawing from plaster casts in a tone that even the worst teacher at the academy wouldn’t have used, and I held my peace, but at home I got so angry about it that I threw the poor plaster mouldings into the coal-scuttle, broken.”<sup>24</sup> Despite their fractured relationship Mauve has been credited with giving Van Gogh his first set of oil paints and introducing him to perspective and methods for landscape painting. Most importantly he taught Van Gogh how to paint from real life which would always be the artist's mainstay until his last days amidst the

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<sup>23</sup> Fig. 5

<sup>24</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 202: Vincent to Theo The Hague, Sunday, 22 January 1882.

wheatfields of Auvers.<sup>25</sup> Van Gogh still carried a sympathy for Mauve even years later when living in the South of France. In 1888, he painted “*The Pink Peach Tree*” (*Souvenir de Mauve*) in honor of Mauve after he had unexpectedly died that summer.<sup>26</sup>

Van Gogh made several trips to the seaside resort of Scheveningen. Situated along the western coast just outside of The Hague, it had a population of around 12,000 people in 1881.<sup>27</sup> At the time of the artist's residency, the village was booming from tourism as the middle class frequented the area during the summer. The high season ran from mid July to early September and was popular due to its bathhouses and luxury pavilions.<sup>28</sup> Scheveningen attracted roughly 20,000 visitors in 1881.<sup>29</sup> The Hague offered two ways to get to the beach town, either by gondola or tram.<sup>30</sup> The second option was Van Gogh's preferred choice but due to his equipment and lack of money he chose to walk.<sup>31</sup> At one point the artist was even looking for places in Scheveningen to live but it was deemed too expensive.<sup>32</sup> Instead he chose to store his supplies at the painter Théophile de Bock's house, for it was quite a haul for Van Gogh to go back and forth, as his studio and Scheveningen were at opposite sides of the city.<sup>33</sup> There were two different parts of the village, the side for vacationers and the other which was the working fishing village. Van Gogh was of course more interested in the working class area and retained a dislike for the

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<sup>25</sup> Leeuw Ronald de John Sillevius and Charles Dumas. 1983. *The Hague School : Dutch Masters of the 19th Century*. Paris: Grand Palais ; London : published in association with Weidenfeld and Nicolson

<sup>26</sup> Fig. 6

<sup>27</sup> Baedeker Karl. 1881. *Belgium and Holland : Handboek for Travellers* 6. Ed. rev. and augmented ed. Leipsic: Baedeker.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#)

<sup>32</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 369: Vincent to Theo van Gogh, The Hague, Sunday, 29 and Monday, 30 July 1883.

<sup>33</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter: 361: To Theo van Gogh, The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 11 July 1883.



modernization of the other half as he once explained to Theo, “I don’t doubt that you’ll agree with me that in the last 10 years the dunes in the vicinity of the city and Scheveningen have lost much of what was real and, another thing, are taking on a more frivolous character, more so each year.”<sup>34</sup>

The fishing side of the village was quaint with dunes and fish drying barns which the artist enjoyed depicting. His works from Scheveningen consisted of portraits and landscapes that embodied the themes of a working class culture going about their day to day lives. “*Beach with People Walking and Boats*” captures perfectly all the elements of a typical seascape that Van Gogh depicted at this time. This being the raw atmosphere of gloomy Dutch weather with the imagery of Scheveningen women in local clothing combined with the element of movement. It also corresponded with the influences of local artists such as Mauve in the sense of how Van Gogh used color and tone. Scheveningen was also a favorite place for Mauve in which he made some of his finest works.

Van Gogh was further influenced by his cousin to paint the beach. Two canvases by Mauve were called, “*Morning Ride on the Beach*” (1876) and “*Fishing Boat on the Beach*” (1882).<sup>35</sup> The latter in particular captured more of Van Gogh’s interest in these themes, for it portrays a type of large boat called a “Pink” being pulled to shore by horses. Van Gogh’s figures in his own body of work resemble Mauve’s workers. The artist was able to see this work in person and commented, “Mauve himself is very busy with a large painting of a pink against the dunes being hauled by horses. I think it’s wonderful to be in The Hague, and I find no end of beautiful things and I must try and depict some of them.”<sup>36</sup> Van Gogh would do a series of

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<sup>34</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 166: Vincent to Theo van Gogh, The Hague, Thursday, 29 December 1881.

<sup>35</sup> Figs. 8&9

<sup>36</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 194: Vincent to Theo The Hague, Thursday, 29 December 1881

seascapes once more when he took a trip in 1888 to the fishing village of Saintes-Marie-de-la-Mer in the South of France.

“*The Bakery in Noordstraat*” (1882) is a drawing showing the exterior of a bakery in the district of the Geest created in March 1882.<sup>37</sup> Three figures stand in front of a bakery. One is an older woman who wears a shawl over her head and walks with a cane. Next to her is a man with a tool in his hand. The third figure, who stands more to the right, is clad in all black with his back turned to the viewer. The bakery window can be seen with the breads depicted in vague loaf shapes. The interior behind is shrouded in a blackness. Above is the store sign that reads “*Brood & Beschuit Bakkery*” which the artist wrote in Dutch. Above that are windows, their interiors hidden by white curtains. Behind two of the figures seems to be a doorway that has been scribbled fully in black. There is only the silhouette of a figure shown at the end, helping the viewer understand that it is a walkway. The sidewalk is roughly drawn in quick strokes that fly in different directions. A part of the road seems to be in the midst of demolition as there looks to be a pile of rubble.

The tone of the work is quiet and almost looks as if it was drawn in the morning. The drawing seems quickly done, as the amount of detail is scarce throughout the image. It is believed that Van Gogh used the same models from other sketches. Specifically, the woman with the cane seems to be the same person in the drawing “*Old Woman with a shawl and Walking Stick*” (1882).<sup>38</sup> This pasting of the same models into the cityscapes was not unusual for Van Gogh at the time. It can be seen in the drawing, “*Torn up Street with Diggers*” (1882) in which the same lady appears.<sup>39</sup> It’s also possible that Van Gogh drew his figures in the studio, as is

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<sup>37</sup> Fig. 10

<sup>38</sup> Fig. 11

<sup>39</sup> Fig. 12

surmised of the drawing “*The Entrance to the Pawn Bank*” (1882).<sup>40</sup> This use of the same figures is more evident in the artist’s early works. In the later part of his career he did depict certain figures repeatedly such as sowers.<sup>41</sup> Van Gogh’s anger towards his cousin stemmed from the harshness of Mauve’s words, but also from the fact that Vincent felt that he was alone in his sympathy for the lower classes.

The Geest was one of Van Gogh’s favorite areas for finding subject matter. The area was a working class neighborhood and housed the red light district of the city.<sup>42</sup> Van Gogh made several ventures into this district not only to the brothels, but also to soup kitchens and almshouses. These types of places always appealed to the artist and he frequented them in cities such as Antwerp and Arles. One of his reasons was that he could find people to pose for cheaper prices. It was here that Van Gogh found some of his favorite models, such as Sien Hoornik and Adrianus Zuyderland.

I have chosen drawings and watercolors to discuss Van Gogh’s work in The Hague as there are only a small number of paintings from this period. They are dark and the colors are muddled, which does not embody the best type of work that he did at this time. Van Gogh’s drawings, unlike his paintings, show a determined sense of progress through his experimentation with different drawing techniques, from shading to cross hatching. The variety of drawings is diverse, as he cared to depict the old and young while imbuing them all with movement and expression. It is not that Van Gogh disliked painting; in fact, he had an urge to paint as he

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<sup>40</sup> Fig. 13 & Heugten Sjaar van Michael Hoyle and Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh. 1996. *Vincent Van Gogh Drawings. Volume 1 the Early Years 1880-1883*. London Amsterdam Wappingers Falls NY: Lund Humphries ; Van Gogh Museum ; Distributed in the USA by Antique Collectors' Club

<sup>41</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 236: Vincent to Anthon van Rappard The Hague, Tuesday, 6 June 1882.

<sup>42</sup> Naifeh Steven and Gregory White Smith. 2011. *Vincent Van Gogh : The Life* First ed. New York: Random House.

explained, "...that painting is in my very marrow."<sup>43</sup> What held him back was that he was short of money with his only financial support coming from Theo. Supplies were expensive and so it wasn't always possible for him to paint, as he wrote in another letter, "But although I enjoy it tremendously, and probably won't paint as much as my ambition and pleasure demand for the time being, because of the heavy costs, I reckon I'll lose nothing by devoting much of my time to drawing, and do that just as eagerly."<sup>44</sup>

By the Autumn of 1883, Van Gogh had decided he wanted to leave The Hague. He had fallen out with many of his contemporaries and came to feel alienated from his lover Sien Hoornick and her family. His own parents and brother had rejected his proposed marriage to her and there was a risk that he would lose his only means of financial support if he went against Theo. The next phase of his career would take him to the rural northern Dutch region of Drenthe, a primitive land of peat farmers and extreme poverty. He was motivated by other artists who had painted there and deemed the lifestyle to be cheaper, but this would only last three months for he was isolated and destitute. Still, this period served as his transition from mainly drawing to doing oil painting. That December he would move to Nuenen which would begin the era of his mature works.

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<sup>43</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 260: Vincent to Theo van Gogh, The Hague, Sunday, 3 September 1882.

<sup>44</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 258: Vincent to Theo van Gogh, The Hague, Sunday, 20 August 1882.



Fig. 4: "*Rooftops*" (1882) Watercolor Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 5: "*Peasant Family at the Table*" (1882) Jozef Israëls



Fig. 6: "Pink Peach Trees" (*Souvenir de Mauve*) (1888) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 7: "Beach with People Walking and Boats" (1882) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 8: *“Morning Ride on the Beach”* (1876) Anton Mauve



Fig. 9: *“Fishing Boat on the Beach”* (1882) Anton Mauve

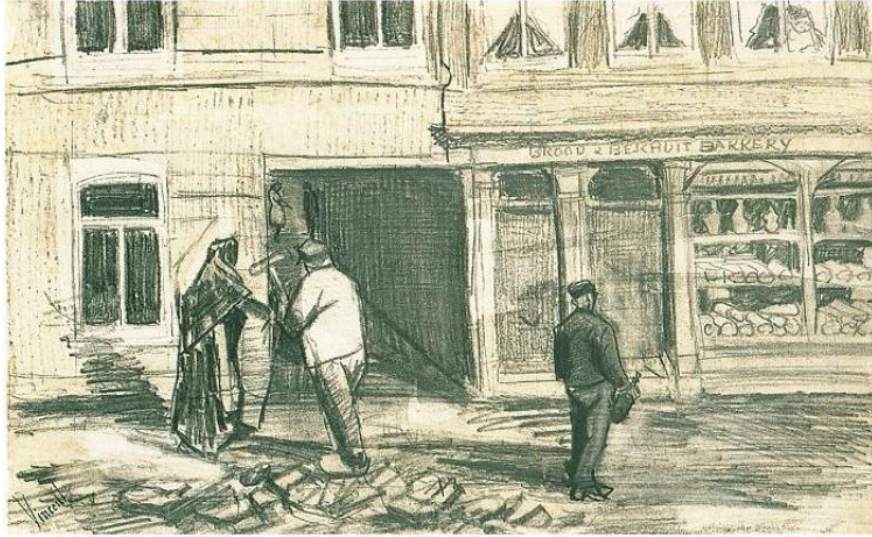


Fig. 10: *"The Bakery in Noordstraat"* (1882) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 11: *"Old Woman with a Shawl & Walking Stick"* (1882) Vincent van Gogh



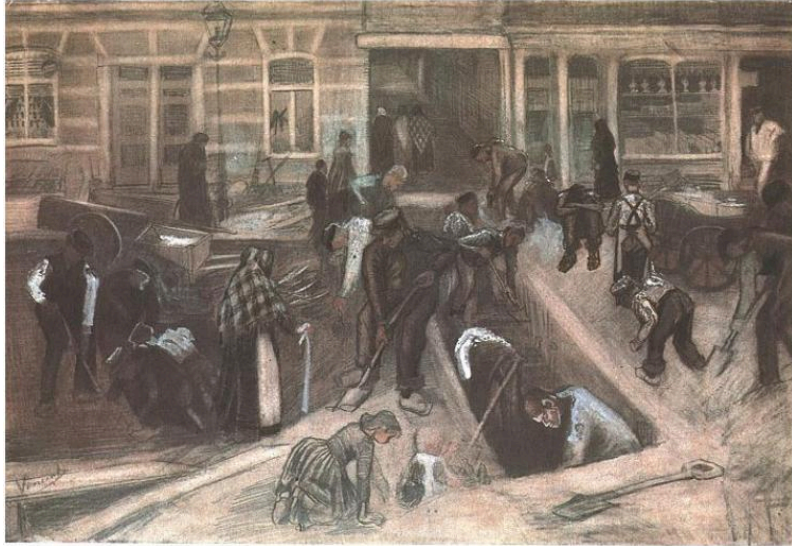


Fig. 12: *"Torn-Up Street with Diggers"* (1882) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 13: *"The Entrance to the Pawn Bank"* (1882) Vincent van Gogh

## CHAPTER 2: NUENEN



*"Peasant Woman Cooking by a Fireplace"* (1885) Vincent van Gogh

In the eastern part of North Brabant lies Nuenen. This is a small village of 20,000 that would be unknown if not for the fact of it once being the home of Van Gogh. Only 140 years ago did Van Gogh arrive there in the late months of 1883. He stood at the steps of his parental home emaciated and destitute after three months of living in Drenthe. He was not just a draftsman now but a painter and his oeuvre consisted of muddy landscapes and backbent laborers. He had now been an artist for three years and Nuenen would represent his first breakthrough into maturity.

Nuenen is the best preserved location in the Netherlands on the Van Gogh Route. A bus ride from the neighboring city of Eindhoven will drop you off in the heart of “Van Gogh Village.” The parsonage where the artist's family lived still exists. The current pastor and her family live there now just as the artist's father had. During my trip to Nuenen, I was fortunate enough to have a tour of the artist's studio located in the back of the family home. Through this I got a tour of the neighbors house and ended by walking in the parsonage yard. A few houses down is a preserved weavers cottage that can't easily be missed. The land where the old church tower was is in ruins now. Interestingly, the visitor can find the grave of Van Gogh's father Theodorus. During my few short hours, I managed to take a walk to the plot of land where the “*Potato Eaters*” was painted. The original cottage was destroyed in the mid 20th century, but nevertheless the land remains valuable. The church where the artist's father preached still stands, unchanged and it's easily recognizable when comparing it with the painting.

“*The Vicarage at Nuenen*” (1885) depicts the artist's parental home.<sup>45</sup> In the center of the painting stands a big brown house on an autumn day. The sky is a dreary blue as if it's about to rain. The interior of the house is shaded by curtains that maybe were white but are now a polluted beige. There are two figures near the entrance, both clad in black as if arriving home from a funeral. The road is not paved; it is an earth colored dirt road that continues past the edge

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<sup>45</sup> Fig. 14

of the canvas. There is another path that leads through a closed gate where the viewer's eye is blocked by branches. The image is subdued, as if there is an ominous presence of death. It is easy to imagine that the day is quiet, or lonesome with so much of the image bathed in different tones and shades of brown. There is only a small snippet of a white cloud that peeks out from behind the tree on the far left. The rustling of the trees can almost be heard. The leaves have small dashes of color.

The Van Gogh family arrived in Nuenen in 1882, after leaving the comforts of their surroundings in Etten.<sup>46</sup> The Reverend Theodorus had been offered a position as the new pastor and the family packed up and moved. The parsonage was a two story house centrally located at Berg 26.<sup>47</sup> It had been constructed in 1764 and was situated just down the street from the local church.<sup>48</sup> The exterior was of a brick facade while a hedge ran along the sidewalk, interrupted by a small gate that led to the front door. The parsonage had a spacious backyard and next to the house was a mangle room.<sup>49</sup> The yard also supported a small pond in which the artist depicted in a few drawings.

“*The Vicarage at Nuenen*,” is very much a reflection of the artist's state of mind. Van Gogh’s arrival to Nuenen was not taken warmly and despite his parents accommodating him, there was much anger and tension between them. The artist had compared himself to a “shaggy dog” who gets in everyone's way and has dirty paws.<sup>50</sup> The artist's familial bonds, with the

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<sup>46</sup> Naifeh Steven and Gregory White Smith. 2011. *Vincent Van Gogh : The Life* First ed. New York: Random House.

<sup>47</sup> Gogh Vincent van Louis van Tilborgh Marije Vellekoop and Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam. 1999. *Vincent Van Gogh : Paintings : Volume I : Dutch Period 1881-1885 Van Gogh Museum*. London Wappinger Falls NY: Lund Humphries ; Distributed in the USA by Antique Collectors' Club.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Van Gogh set up his studio in the mangle room until he went to live with Sexton Johannes Schaftrat.

<sup>50</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 413: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 15 December 1883.

exception of his brother Theo, would never recover and only a year and a half later would his father die from a fatal stroke.<sup>51</sup> It's been thought that the two cloaked figures in black are his sister Wil and mother, seeing that the painting was made in September of 1885. Van Gogh's father had died just that March and this same imagery of mourning figures can be seen in several other works during his stay.

One of Van Gogh's early subjects when living in Nuenen were weavers. "*Weaver, Interior with Three Small Windows*, (1884) is one example out of a whole series that the artist did on this type of worker.<sup>52</sup> It is this particular painting that embodies all the visual elements of a Brabantine Weaver. A man sits with his loom that seems to be engulfing him. He himself is barely visible. The room is dusty and dark. There is barely any color but earthy tones of brown. The loom is large, filling up most of the canvas, while a black fabric can be seen being woven. The machine has claw-like structures that reach out. A person can almost hear the clacking of the loom, as they are invited to watch. Other than that, there is only silence. The space is small and cramped almost to the point of feeling claustrophobic. The only source of light comes from three windows. The view is not a blue sky but a crisp golden brown. There are yellow trees that can be seen meshed in the tiny space of the windows, while the roof of a building can be slightly differentiated.

The profession of weaver during the time of the artist's stay was on the verge of disappearance. A new age of advanced machinery was dawning, which was putting the trade out of business. It was in larger cities like Eindhoven and Tilburg that textiles were starting to be produced by factories with the use of steam powered machines.<sup>53</sup> Smaller villages like Nuenen

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<sup>51</sup> Naifeh Steven and Gregory White Smith. 2011. *Vincent Van Gogh : The Life* First ed. New York: Random House.

<sup>52</sup> Fig. 15

<sup>53</sup> Zemel, Carol. "The 'Spook' in the Machine: Van Gogh's Pictures of Weavers in Brabant." *The Art Bulletin* 67, no. 1 (1985): 123–37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3050891>.

still had populations of workers doing it by hand. The writer Carol Zemel states, “The steam-driven machines, in any case, were generally limited to only part of textile production - to spinning, dyeing, or finishing processes. As a result, long after spinning had moved to the mills, weaving was still conducted outside the factories...” (Zemel, 130, 1985).<sup>54</sup> The weavers now worked to benefit the factories rather than selling their products to others.<sup>55</sup> This only resulted in the weavers' existence becoming more dire as their income hit an all time low. Van Gogh, writing to his brother, commented “On that piece he [The Weaver] makes a net profit of, say, 4.50 guilders in that week.”<sup>56</sup> The weavers lived simply; their diet consisted of bread and coffee.<sup>57</sup> Half of their profits were spent on basic necessities and the rent of the actual loom.<sup>58</sup>

As with many other types of workers Van Gogh felt sympathy towards the weavers. His reactions bordered on warmth and pity as he spent hours in the cramped cottage. In a letter to Anthon van Rappard, he described the loom as “...that black monster of begrimed oak with all its slats...”<sup>59</sup> Many times he describes the loom to almost feel as if it were alive. He then goes on to compare the figure of the weaver to a “goblin” or “apparition” as if the worker were a creature from a fantasy world.<sup>60</sup> Van Gogh focused more on depicting the loom than the actual worker. The artist made a point in illustrating the worker as a product of his environment. He did this by blending in the figure with their visibility being almost non-existent. He wanted to give a sense of the difficult toil and make the viewer feel the dirty conditions that these people were living in.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 479: Vincent to Theo van Gogh on or about Friday, 23 January 1885.

<sup>57</sup> Zemel, Carol. “The ‘Spook’ in the Machine: Van Gogh’s Pictures of Weavers in Brabant.” *The Art Bulletin* 67, no. 1 (1985): 123–37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3050891>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 437: Vincent to Theo van Gogh on or about Thursday, 13 March 1884.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

Van Gogh particularly wanted the viewer to imagine that such a monstrous machine was worked by “sweaty hands.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, when painting the “*Potato Eaters*” the artist wrote, “You see, I really have wanted to make it so that people get the idea that these folk, who are eating their potatoes by the light of their little lamp, have tilled the earth themselves with these hands they are putting in the dish, and so it speaks of MANUAL LABOR and — that they have thus honestly *earned* their food.”<sup>62</sup> The artist also wanted their appearances to be that of a “dusty potato.”<sup>63</sup>

It’s imaginable that the artist found inspiration to paint weavers from contemporary literature. Van Gogh was a voracious reader and read everything from the Bible to French Naturalism. Zemel connects Van Gogh with two writers who spoke about the shift for artisans into an industrializing world. The first writer she mentions is George Eliot (1819-1880) In Eliot’s novel, “*Silas Marner*” (1861), the plot focuses on the life of a weaver named Ravenloe. We know from Van Gogh’s letters that he had read this book several times. It is no doubt that the artist read this particular passage from the novel, “the rattle of the handlooms . . . heard in hamlets and villages ... and the pale eager faces of the handloom weavers, men and women, haggard from sitting up so late at night to finish the night’s work”<sup>64</sup> The second writer Zemel mentions is Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). His focus was not solely on the weaver, but the working man in general as in his book, “*Past and Present*” (1843) which talks about the fall of society in Britain. The artist himself quoted certain lines of the book as can be seen in his letters as he once wrote, “Carlyle rightly says, Blessed is he who has found his work.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 497: To Theo van Gogh. Nuenen, Thursday, 30 April 1885.

<sup>63</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 499: To Theo van Gogh. Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 2 May 1885.

<sup>64</sup> Zemel, Carol. “The ‘Spook’ in the Machine: Van Gogh’s Pictures of Weavers in Brabant.” *The Art Bulletin* 67, no. 1 (1985): 123–37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3050891>.

<sup>65</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 108: Vincent to Theo van Gogh Dordrecht, Friday, 16 March 1877.

“*The Old Church Tower at Nuenen*”<sup>66</sup> (*The Peasants Churchyard*) (1885) shows the dilapidated church that sat just outside the village. The building sits amidst a half dead field. The structure of the church dominates the center, rising out of the ground. The church is an earthy brown while the very faint texture of the bricks can be seen. X’s are marked across the church but who’s to say if they are mere cracks or an imitation of crosses. The exterior is chipped while grass grows along the bottom edge. In the sky birds fly, their bodies black silhouettes. Scattered around the church are the graves of peasants, their crooked crosses of varied sizes. The sky is a mix of blue and gray that gives the scene a sense of emotional gloom. The background is mostly bare, putting more emphasis on the sky. The only thing in the background is a small cottage. There is an ominous presence to the painting, for the viewer can feel the abandonment and the imminent ruin of the structure of the church.. It’s plausible to feel the cloudy Dutch weather and the cold wind. There are no people in sight, only a feeling of death. This church was in decline and abandoned by the time of the artist's arrival. The building had been around since the middle ages before “collapsing” in 1792.<sup>67</sup> It was finally demolished in 1885 when Van Gogh painted it.

The artist had always been surrounded by religion. He grew up in a strict and religious household. As a child he attended church every Sunday and listened to his father preach. Outside of the artist's immediate family his grandfather, Vincent van Gogh (1789-1874) was also a pastor and preached in the Dutch city of Breda.<sup>68</sup> The artist also had an uncle in Amsterdam who dedicated his life to the church.<sup>69</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, before Van Gogh became an artist he felt that his calling was to be a part of the clergy. He wrote long letters in the 1870’s

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<sup>66</sup> Fig. 16

<sup>67</sup> Gogh Vincent van Louis van Tilborgh Marije Vellekoop and Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam. 1999. *Vincent Van Gogh : Paintings : Volume I : Dutch Period 1881-1885 Van Gogh Museum*. London Wappinger Falls NY: Lund Humphries ; Distributed in the USA by Antique Collectors' Club.

<sup>68</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#)

<sup>69</sup> Johannes Paulus Stricker (1816-1886) [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#)



quoting and copying passages from the Bible. At one point he even wrote to Theo, “Read no more Michelet or any other book (except the Bible) until we’ve seen each other again at Christmas..”<sup>70</sup> The Bible became his main source of reading along with books such as “*The Imitation of Christ*” (1418) by Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471) and “*The Pilgrim’s Progress*” (1678) by John Bunyan (1628-1688). As religion was a guiding light for Van Gogh, he became extremely overzealous to the point of self harm. In Amsterdam he would hit himself with a cudgel as a method of self flagellation.<sup>71</sup> When living in the Borinage, he gave away all his clothes and luxuries to the miners earning himself the name “The Christ of the Coalmine.”<sup>72</sup> What happened to Van Gogh’s deep belief in religion when he switched to art? He chose to stay away from organized Christianity which he never appreciated seriously again once he became an artist. Instead of following in his father's footsteps as he once had, his faith was now in nature.

Van Gogh hardly ever depicted religious imagery. There are only a few instances of these types of works in his oeuvre. Nuenen was the main period where he painted places of worship and he also painted a still life of his fathers bible.<sup>73</sup> It was not until 1888 and 1889 that the artist returned to this subject with a series of less known works. Painting religious scenes proved to be very difficult for Van Gogh as it required him to paint from memory which he highly disliked. In 1888, he had tried painting Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, but in the end was highly dissatisfied and reported to the painter Emile Bernard, “I never work from memory — there will be colour in it, which will suit you, but to repeat, here I’m doing a study for you that I would prefer not to do. I mercilessly destroyed an important canvas — a Christ with the angel in

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<sup>70</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 46: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Paris, on or about Thursday, 9 September 1875.

<sup>71</sup> [Mendes da Costa to Het Algemeen Handelsblad : December 2 1910 \(webexhibits.org\)](#)

<sup>72</sup> Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam) Accessed: February 18th, 2024

<sup>73</sup> Fig. 17: “*Still Life with Bible*” (1885)

Gethsemane”<sup>74</sup> The image of a church did not appear again until Van Gogh was living in the village of Auvers during the last two months of his life. Unlike the artist's churches from Nuenen, the “*Church at Auvers*” (1890) is sumptuous in color with a sky of cobalt blue and twisting paths painted in energetic lines.<sup>75</sup>

“*The Old Church Tower at Nuenen*” is thought to signify the decline of Christianity. In a letter Van Gogh explained his intentions writing, “And now this ruin says to me how a faith and religion moldered away, although it was solidly founded — how, though, the life and death of the peasants is and will always be the same, springing up and withering regularly like the grass and the flowers that grow there in that churchyard.”<sup>76</sup> For Van Gogh the peasants were more real than any church. There is also the thought that the Church hovers over the graveyard crosses which shows the power that the church had over the simple everyday lives. It is interesting to note that years later when ill in the Arles Hospital, Van Gogh recounted, “During my illness I saw again every room of the house at Zundert, every path, every plant in the garden, the views from the fields round about, the neighbors, the graveyard, the church, our kitchen garden behind-down to the magpie's nest in a tall acacia in the graveyard.”<sup>77</sup> His dream was not about Nuenen, but still manifested similar images of the church and cemeteries. A feeling of nostalgia for the Brabant countryside which would always represent his origins.

“*Cottage*” (1885) is a painting depicting a typical Brabantine home for peasants.<sup>78</sup> An earthy colored hut sits amongst a darkened plot of land. There is a slight dent in the roof while it

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<sup>74</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 698: Vincent van Gogh to Emile Bernard. Arles, on or about Friday, 5 October 1888.

<sup>75</sup> Fig. 18

<sup>76</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 507: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 9 June 1885.

<sup>77</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter: 741 Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Arles, Tuesday, 22 January 1889.

<sup>78</sup> Fig. 19

supports a chimney in the middle. The whole building looks as if it were melting. It is surrounded by bushes and a tree whose bare branches blow in the wind. It almost looks like an ominous black apparition. A streak of orange sunlight illuminates the left side of the cottage. The sky is a dull mix of gray and a touch of green. Standing in one of the doorways is a woman, her dim white bonnet barely standing out against the darkness. She is almost camouflaged within her surroundings. When looking closer at this painting the viewer will see a small dot of orange. It is supposed to be the fire from the hearth which Van Gogh has made visible from outside the house.

Like many of Van Gogh's Nuenen paintings, the work is desolate and quiet. Peasant cottages were made of simple materials. The walls were either stone or clay.<sup>79</sup> The house was protected by a thatched roof and the sides had struts made out of wood.<sup>80</sup> The inside of the cottage had a fireplace and sometimes even two.<sup>81</sup> Barely visible in the painting is a barn in the background.<sup>82</sup> Similar to the weavers, the population and cottages were in decline.<sup>83</sup> Van Gogh always gravitated towards shacks and huts. He was not averse to living well below his social status. When living with the miners, he resorted to living in a hut and sleeping on the ground.<sup>84</sup> In The Hague he sometimes camped in the dunes of Scheveningen.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Gogh Vincent van Louis van Tilborgh Marije Vellekoop and Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam. 1999. *Vincent Van Gogh : Paintings : Volume I : Dutch Period 1881-1885 Van Gogh Museum*. London Wappinger Falls NY: Lund Humphries ; Distributed in the USA by Antique Collectors' Club.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Naifeh Steven and Gregory White Smith. 2011. *Vincent Van Gogh : The Life* First ed. New York: Random House.

<sup>85</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 234: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. The Hague, Thursday, 1 and Friday, 2 June 1882.

Van Gogh described peasant cottages as “human nests.”<sup>86</sup> He would end up creating a whole series of cottages. In the artist's own words he once remarked, “I now really must go bird’s nesting with a number of variations of these “*people’s nests*”, which remind me so much of the nests of wrens — that’s to say, paint them.”<sup>87</sup> Van Gogh was also fond of birds, but their homes in particular appealed to him more; he compiled a collection of birds’ nests in his studio.<sup>88</sup> It’s remembered that he would send young boys out to find them in exchange for a guilder or two.<sup>89</sup> Similar to finding actual birds’ nests Van Gogh was more interested in the downtrodden state of the building than the actual people that dwelled there. In another painting of cottages, Van Gogh wrote, “The thing struck me greatly; those two cottages, half decayed under one and the same thatched roof, reminded me of a couple of worn-out old folk...”<sup>90</sup> Similar to the weaver’s loom Van Gogh found a sense of liveliness in the cottages.

The four paintings chosen give a diverse perspective of the many images that Van Gogh created in Nuenen. It shows the array of subject matter from cottages to churches. Nuenen defines Van Gogh’s Dutch period with his use of a dark palette and fascination with the lower class. It shows the power that these influences had on him at the time shaping the early part of his career. Nuenen is also the first real period that Van Gogh started painting in oils, the use of which only increased as time went on.

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<sup>86</sup> Gogh Vincent van Louis van Tilborgh Marije Vellekoop and Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam. 1999. *Vincent Van Gogh : Paintings : Volume I : Dutch Period 1881-1885 Van Gogh Museum*. London Wappinger Falls NY: Lund Humphries ; Distributed in the USA by Antique Collectors' Club.

<sup>87</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 507: To Theo van Gogh. Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 9 June 1885.

<sup>88</sup> Naifeh Steven and Gregory White Smith. 2011. *Vincent Van Gogh : The Life* First ed. New York: Random House.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 506: To Theo van Gogh. Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 2 June 1885.

The artist's departure from Nuenen in autumn 1885 was a defining transition in his career, for it was the last time that Van Gogh would ever set foot in the Netherlands. The tensions with his mother and sisters had worsened and he fled from the family home. His sisters had blamed him for being too harsh to their mother who was getting older and still in a state of mourning. In the town he was the village scapegoat, and was falsely accused of impregnating one of the peasants. Therefore, he was banned from painting his favorite subjects.<sup>91</sup> His next stop would be Antwerp, a city that offered more opportunity for finding new subject matter. Despite never returning to the Netherlands, Van Gogh would always remember the Brabant countryside; the land that he was born and raised on. As Van Gogh once said, “There will always remain in us something of the Brabant fields and heath.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Van Gogh was falsely blamed for impregnating Gordina de Groot one of the peasants from the “*Potato Eaters*.” The child’s father turned out to be another man

<sup>92</sup> [van Gogh's Letters - Unabridged \(webexhibits.org\)](https://www.webexhibits.org/vanGogh/letters/): Memoir of Vincent van Gogh. Accessed February 22nd, 2024



Fig. 14: “*The Vicarage at Nuenen*” (1884) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 15: “*Weaver Interior with Three Small Windows*” (1884) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 16: *“The Old Church Tower at Nuenen”* (1885) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 17: *“Still Life with Bible”* (1885) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 18: "Church at Auvers" (1890) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 19: "Cottage" (1885) Vincent van Gogh



## CHAPTER 3: ANTWERP



*"Grote Markt"* (1885) Vincent van Gogh

At the crossroads of Europe sits the city of Antwerp, a large port town in the Belgian region of Flanders. The city is only one hour north of the capital Brussels. Modern day visitors can travel to and from both cities by train in an hour. Antwerp is known for its cultural heritage of fine art by Rubens and Van Dyck and medieval architecture. Van Gogh arrived in Antwerp in November 1885 and would stay only about three months. The city at the time had a population of around 200,000 people.<sup>93</sup> It was written by Karl Baedeker that, “Antwerp is the most interesting town in Belgium.”<sup>94</sup> Van Gogh’s time in Antwerp was short but significant for it was the first time since becoming an artist that he would be exposed to living in a large well known city. Antwerp also gave the artist a chance to practice drawing the figure and a variety of cityscapes from the view outside his window to cathedrals and castles. During my own trip to Antwerp I was surprised to see that most of the locations where Van Gogh had lived still remained. The artist's lodgings still exist; visitors can find a plaque that commemorates the artist's stay. The academy still functions for art students and remains in the same location, its’ white facade glowing in the sun as the sign reads “Academie.”

*“Houses Seen from the Back”* (1885) is an oil painting that depicts a view from Van Gogh’s accommodation.<sup>95</sup> A group of houses can be seen clumped together. Some of their roofs are covered in snow. The scene is muted, the sky not blue but a yellowish, green. The center of the painting is quite cluttered with roofs divided into sections and small chimneys. There are no figures or animals in the scene but a small glowing dot of orange coming from inside one of the windows. The work emits a quiet winter day’s silence where the hours are short and the weather is cold. The buildings are gray and almost seem to be alive. The roofs are a reddish brown and

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<sup>93</sup> Baedeker Karl. 1885. *Belgium and Holland Handbook for Travellers by K. Baedeker ... 8th Edition*. Leipsic: K. Baedeker.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Fig. 20

can be seen where the snow has melted. There is a faint billow of smoke coming from out of a chimney in the foreground. It darkens the yellow sky in the top right.

Van Gogh had moved to 194 Lange Beeldekensstraat upon his arrival.<sup>96</sup> It was located on the eastern part of the city and the houses themselves had been constructed during the 1860s.<sup>97</sup> He painted this work from the stairs of his lodgings as was deduced by photos taken decades after by the Van Gogh scholar Marc Edo Tralbaut.<sup>98</sup> The artist had written that he lived on the second floor above a paint merchants shop.<sup>99</sup> It was discovered that the shop was owned by William Henricus Brandel (1857-1892) and his wife Wilhelmina Huberta Steegmans.<sup>100</sup> There has been no clarification though if this couple were also the landlords. Van Gogh described his small abode as a “cubby hole” for it suited him well in the beginning, but as someone who could never stay in one place, problems arose in the end.<sup>101</sup> By February 1886, he became suspicious, writing, “I don’t trust the people where I live; if you send a letter with money, as you did recently, it’s safer just to register it for that reason.”<sup>102</sup>

This image of the backs of houses can already be seen throughout the artist's oeuvre. As written in the Hague Section, “*Rooftops*” was done in the same manner. Not mentioned is “*Carpenter’s Workshop Seen from the Artists’ Studio*” (1882).<sup>103</sup> A detailed drawing that depicts the backyards of Van Gogh’s accommodation on the Schenkweg. Several figures can be seen drying their laundry, a man pushing a wheelbarrow and men at work in the background. It's an

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. The other name for the address was “*Rue des Images*”

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 544: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, on or about Thursday, 26 November 1885.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 545: To Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, Saturday, 28 November 1885.

<sup>102</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 564: To Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, Thursday, 18 February 1886.

<sup>103</sup> Fig. 21

industrious scene that shows the everyday life of the common man. In Nuenen, Van Gogh had drawn the backyard of the parsonage multiple times in different seasons. “*Houses seen from the Back*” is no different in the artist's fascination to portray a certain feeling and mood of scenes that not many at the time would find beautiful.

“*Quayside with Ships in Antwerp*” (1885) is a less known painting that depicts the docks of Antwerp.<sup>104</sup> In muted tones of brown and black are boats at a harbor. Their masts and chimneys can be seen with steam blowing out of the tops. On the land are a few figures walking, their bodies black silhouettes. There are only white dots for their hats that stand out. One of the figures is completely clad in black and almost looks to be in a hurry. The rough sky is painted in greens and pinks and has a roughness to it. The artist has painted little streaks of red on the sides of the boats. In the background on the right looks like the brown outline of a building that is barely visible. The sea is rough painted in an impasto and quick strokes. The atmosphere is similarly dreary like his paintings from Nuenen. It is far from the luxurious part of the city, but rather the industrious area, where the viewer can feel the smokiness.

The Docks were a busy area of commerce located in the northern part of the city.<sup>105</sup> It was the arrival location for steam ships and merchants from around the world. The area housed warehouses and the Entrepôt (Customs Office).<sup>106</sup> The docks could support around 200 boats.<sup>107</sup> This was one of Van Gogh's places of interest from the very beginning. He enjoyed watching the chaos of urban life and called it an “incomprehensible confusion.”<sup>108</sup> In the same letter he wrote

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<sup>104</sup> Fig. 22

<sup>105</sup> Baedeker Karl. 1885. *Belgium and Holland Handbook for Travellers by K. Baedeker ... 8th Edition*. Leipsic: K. Baedeker.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 545: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, Saturday, 28 November 1885.

that the wharfs were, “...more tangled and fantastic than a thorn-hedge...”.<sup>109</sup> His fascination was not so much the boats but the different cultures that he saw. The artist commented on the liveliness of the Belgian Sailors with their “exaggeratedly ruddy faces” devouring mussels and quenching their thirst drinking beer.<sup>110</sup> He watched a ship from America arrive importing buffalo horns and hides.<sup>111</sup> He saw a Chinese girl and described her as, “quiet as a mouse, small, like a bedbug..”<sup>112</sup> He compared Germans to “Bavarian Beer” and saw a “delicate” English girl.<sup>113</sup> It is also interesting to note that it was for the first time in Antwerp that Van Gogh encountered Japanese prints. In a letter to Theo, he wrote, “My studio’s quite tolerable, mainly because I’ve pinned a set of Japanese prints on the walls that I find very diverting.”<sup>114</sup> These would be influential for the artist for the rest of his career.

Van Gogh also frequently ventured to the local bars and brothels down by the wharves. This area was perfect for Van Gogh in seeking out the down to earth working environment, where the artist could find weather-beaten people who were perfect as models. “*Quayside with Ships in Antwerp*” is his only oil canvas depicting the Antwerp docks that is known. The theme of the docks can be seen again in Van Gogh’s later canvases from Arles such as “*Quay with Men Unloading Sand Barges*” (1888) and “*Coal Barges.*” (1888)<sup>115</sup> Unlike Van Gogh’s version from Antwerp, the first Arles painting mentioned here is meticulous in detail in the planks of the wood and the boat. It's painted in vivid greens and yellows that depicts workers down by the Rhône

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. and also [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 546: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, on or about Sunday, 6 December 1885.

<sup>114</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 545: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, Saturday, 28 November 1885.

<sup>115</sup> Figs. 23 & 24

river. It's very indicative of his later more refined style. The latter depicts dock workers at sunset, the sky a mesmerizing yellow and orange and a hue of green.

Van Gogh started his courses at the Antwerp Academy of Fine Arts in January 1886. The artist was never one for structured education from the time he went to boarding school at age eleven to when he temporarily studied at the Fine Arts academy in Brussels. Antwerp was no exception, for his studies would be abrupt and short lived. His reasoning for applying was his determination to improve his drawing of the anatomy. It was also that he had been struggling to find models; therefore, the academy gave him easy access to draw people free of charge. The downside was that the artist highly disliked the rigid rules that the academy imposed on their students and wrote, “Very well — I know for sure that I’ll certainly come last, because all the drawings by the others are the same, and mine is completely different. But I saw the drawing that will be considered to be the best being done — I was sitting just behind — and it’s correct, it’s anything you like, but it’s DEAD and so are all those drawings that I saw.”<sup>116</sup>

Van Gogh’s whole time here proved to be very difficult, for he was an outsider and developed problems with his teachers. The artist became a student of the Classical Statues class that was taught by François Vinck (1827-1903).<sup>117</sup> He also was taught by Eugène Siberdt (1851-1931) with whom he clashed with in the end.<sup>118</sup> Van Gogh frightened other students with his eccentric appearance and unique style of working. It was recalled many years later by a student named Victor Hageman that “Van Gogh burst into the Academy like a bomb, and his

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<sup>116</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 561: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, on or about Thursday, 11 February 1886.

<sup>117</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 564: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, Thursday, 18 February 1886.

<sup>118</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 555: Vincent to Theo van Gogh, Antwerp, on or about Thursday, 28 January 1886.

clothes – a blue stockman’s smock and a fur cap – and his furious manner of painting and drawing caused a sensation.”<sup>119</sup>

“*Standing Female Nude from the Side*” (1886) shows a model that was drawn during Van Gogh’s time at the academy.<sup>120</sup> A woman stands with one of her arms above her head while the other touches her face. She almost stands in a contrapposto pose as she bends one of her legs while she seems to be putting all her weight on the other foot. Her dark hair is done up into a bun as her bangs overshadow her face. The artist has depicted her with a protruding stomach and buttocks while her legs are muscular. The model has enlarged feet and one of her legs is not in proportion with the structure of her body.

Van Gogh’s woman was seen by fellow art students as a fleshy, hardworking woman rather than a goddess of antiquity.<sup>121</sup> The artist even acknowledged in his own letters that his figures were different and compared them to “woodcutters” and “peasants.”<sup>122</sup> The drawing was famous for the negative criticism it received. Though fairly unknown amidst the some two thousand works that the artist did during his lifetime it is remembered that this drawing was the breaking point for him and his academic studies. As Victor Hageman recalled, “One day in the drawing class of the Academy of Antwerp, the students were given, as if by chance, a cast of the Venus de Milo to copy. Van Gogh, struck by one of the essential characteristics of the model, strongly accentuated the width of her hips and subjected the Venus to the same deformations that

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<sup>119</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 553: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, Tuesday, 19 or Wednesday, 20 January 1886.

<sup>120</sup> Fig. 25

<sup>121</sup> Brooks, David, *Les Marges: “Van Gogh in Antwerp”*, The Vincent van Gogh Gallery, October 23rd, 2023. [The Vincent van Gogh Gallery \(vggallery.com\)](#)

<sup>122</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 564: Vincent to Theo van Gogh Antwerp, Thursday, 18 February 1886.

he brought to *The Sower* by Millet and *The Good Samaritan* by Delacroix...”<sup>123</sup> The story continues, “When the honest M. Sieber saw this he tore Van Gogh’s sheet of paper with the furious strokes of his crayon, correcting his drawing while reminding him of the immutable canons of art.”<sup>124</sup> It’s famously remembered that Van Gogh, full of rage, yelled, “You clearly don’t know what a young woman is like, *God damn it!* A woman must have hips, buttocks, a pelvis in which she can carry a baby!”<sup>125</sup> This only shows that Van Gogh stuck with his belief in depicting reality while the art world was still dedicated to depicting the ideal. It defines the artist as a modern thinker as he rebelled against tradition in art.

It's relevant to compare this with another drawing Van Gogh did at the academy called “*The Discus Thrower*” (1886).<sup>126</sup> It depicts a classical statue of antiquity of a nude man bent over with a disk in his hand. The artist drew the plaster cast from the back. His muscles and spine are clearly shown running down to his buttocks. It has the effect of Chiaroscuro, a contrast of dark and light areas on the body. He also uses the technique of cross hatching. The figure sits on a pedestal with his face not visible to the viewer. The drawing exudes a sense of masculinity, but also still falls along the line of Van Gogh’s typical style of the time which is a sort of quickness and ruddy look taken from his time in the Netherlands. Compared to the “*Standing Female Nude seen from the Side*” this drawing follows more of the academic style. It shows that Van Gogh could draw academically, but instead he just chose not to.

Another place Van Gogh went were dance halls. The works he made here were small sketches. “*Dance Hall*” (1885) depicts a lively scene of people dancing.<sup>127</sup> The drawing is

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<sup>123</sup> Brooks, David, *Les Marges: “Van Gogh in Antwerp”*, The Vincent van Gogh Gallery, October 23rd, 2023. [The Vincent van Gogh Gallery \(vvgallery.com\)](http://vvgallery.com)

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Fig. 26

<sup>127</sup> Fig. 27



quickly done, the people made up of mere lines. On the main floor are the outlines of several couples. A man and a woman can be seen on the left while everyone meshes into the background. There are black and reddish lines that highlight the individual planks of the floor. The room itself is scarcely drawn with only the levels of balconies shown. In those are clumps of figures with blue lines scribbled over them. There is barely any color other than some of the couples clothes that are filled in. This goes as well for the womens' dresses and their tops. The work is different from the typical Van Gogh drawing because it was done in chalk.

*"Couple Dancing"* (1885) is also a part of the same mini series.<sup>128</sup> It focuses on two women dancing, their arms intertwined with each other. Their dresses are outlined in black while the artist shows their red stockings and shoes. One of the women can be seen with a reddish bow in her hair. Their dresses show a sense of puffiness as they sway to the music. Behind them are a line of several other people. A group of women sit on the right, barely visible. They almost look like hens. In the middle some couples are completely drawn in blue while others are still in black. The background is very smudgy with just random lines that seem to indicate that the figures are in a closed space. This drawing shows the beginning of Van Gogh's experimentation with complementary colors seeing that he used one of his favorite combinations which were blue and orange.

*"Two Women in a Balcony Box"* (1885) is the third drawing.<sup>129</sup> This time it is not focused on the dancers, but on the spectators. The women are more detailed in their facial features and dress. The figures themselves are crudely drawn. The woman on the left looks out over her box, her hand resting on her cheek. She wears a blue dress and bluish-black gloves. She wears a headpiece that can't fully be interpreted as to the kind, but resembles a sort of bonnet. The

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<sup>128</sup> Fig. 28

<sup>129</sup> Fig. 29

woman on the right is drawn very similarly, her facial features less defined with her eyes as small lines along with her mouth and ear. In the background there seems to be another box of people as they can be seen separated by the balcony wall.

The actual dance hall where these drawings were made is unknown. It is assumed it was one that was located down by the harbor for the artist wrote “One evening I saw a popular dance for sailors &c. down by the docks — it was quite charming and all *very respectable*.”<sup>130</sup> Apart from this there was only one other Dance Hall that Van Gogh visited which was the Scala. Established in 1884, The Scala was located on the Anneessensstraat and served as a place with a theater, ballroom and live music.<sup>131</sup> The interior was rather luxuriously decorated and supported a theme of, “an exotic architectural style” as mentioned by a guidebook.<sup>132</sup> Van Gogh himself was not a frequent visitor to flamboyant venues such as the Scala but he did find interest in the audience during his venture there as he wrote, “I thought it was tedious and hackneyed, of course, but — I amused myself looking at the audience.”<sup>133</sup> In the same letter he also described the people he saw, “...probably some inn landlady or other, with an ugly and irregular face, but with vivacity and piquancy à la Frans Hals. She danced excellently in an old-fashioned manner — among others, once with a well-to-do little farmer type who had a large green umbrella under his arm, even while he was waltzing amazingly fast. Other girls were wearing ordinary jackets and skirts and red scarves — the sailors, cabin-boys &c., quite charming. Retired ship’s captain types who came to watch. Extraordinarily authentic.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 546: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, on or about Sunday, 6 December 1885.

<sup>131</sup> Baedeker Karl. 1885. *Belgium and Holland Handbook for Travellers by K. Baedeker ... 8th Edition*. Leipsic: K. Baedeker.

<sup>132</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 546: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Antwerp, on or about Sunday, 6 December 1885.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

Van Gogh could care less for the actual spectacle in a public place, but always found more interest in the faces of the crowds. This can be seen in later canvases such as “*The Arena at Arles*” (1888) and “*Dance Hall at Arles.*”<sup>135</sup> Both of these works show jammed packed spaces of people, with a specific focus on heads. Unlike the drawings from Antwerp, these were done in oils and in Japanese style with flat planes of color and dark outlines. These scenes of entertainment were a common subject among the impressionists such as Edgar Degas and Mary Cassatt. They themselves and others had depicted scenes of the operas, circuses and lively cabarets in Paris, unknown to Van Gogh.

It is important to note that Van Gogh had little knowledge of Impressionism around this time. Years later when living in Arles, he expressed his first thoughts on the movement as he wrote, “...people have heard of the Impressionists, they have great expectations of them... and when they see them for the first time they’re bitterly, bitterly disappointed and find them careless, ugly, badly painted, badly drawn, bad in colour, everything that’s miserable. That was my first impression, too...”<sup>136</sup> It was during Van Gogh’s time in Paris that he finally accepted the Impressionist’s lighter palette which dictated his later works. His own reasoning for disliking impressionism before was that he was following the dull colors of the Hague School and artists such as Jean-François Millet (1814-1875) and Israëls. He believed in a realist style of painting which was more popular in the Netherlands. It was also that Impressionism was not very much accepted in the Netherlands at the time and also that the artist had no interest in altering his early style of painting.

Van Gogh had fallen once again into destitution towards the end of his Antwerp stay. The artist lived meagerly on coffee and bread and from this he became emaciated, suffered from

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<sup>135</sup> Figs. 31 & 32

<sup>136</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 626: To Willemien van Gogh. Arles, between Saturday, 16 and Wednesday, 20 June 1888.

stomach problems and lost almost all his teeth. The academy had sent Van Gogh down to a beginners drawing class, but he had already left Antwerp before he could even attend. The idea of Van Gogh going to Paris had been talked about between the brothers but Theo had requested that his brother at least wait until June. This would not be the case as Van Gogh, in dire circumstances, arrived in Paris at the end of February 1886. The next period of Van Gogh's life would be an extremely influential time in transitioning from his Dutch years to his French years. This is not to say that Van Gogh's work wasn't already changing in Belgium. It was rather that the country reflected the artist's progression for it was a mix of French and Dutch giving him an easy pathway from an old to a new style.

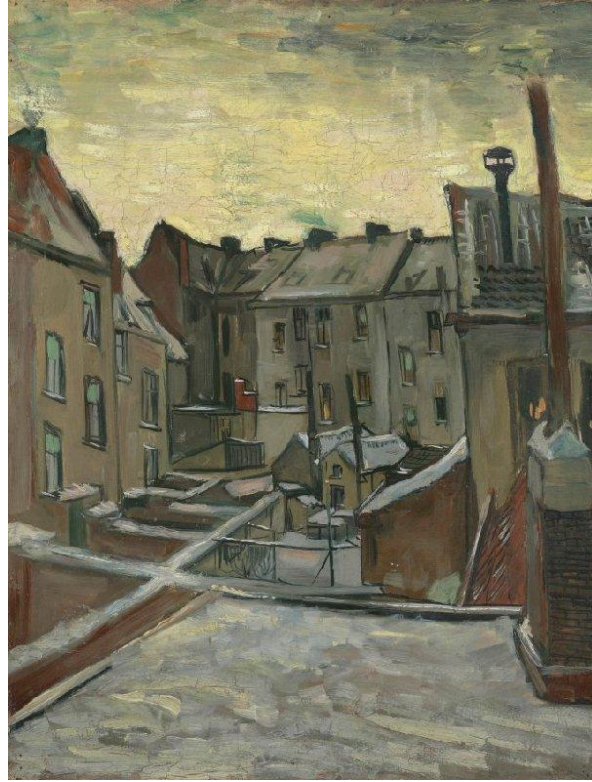


Fig. 20: *"Houses seen from the Back"* (1885) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 21: *"Carpenters Workshop Seen from the Artists Studio"* (1882) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 22: "*Quayside with Ships in Antwerp*" (1885) Vincent van Gogh

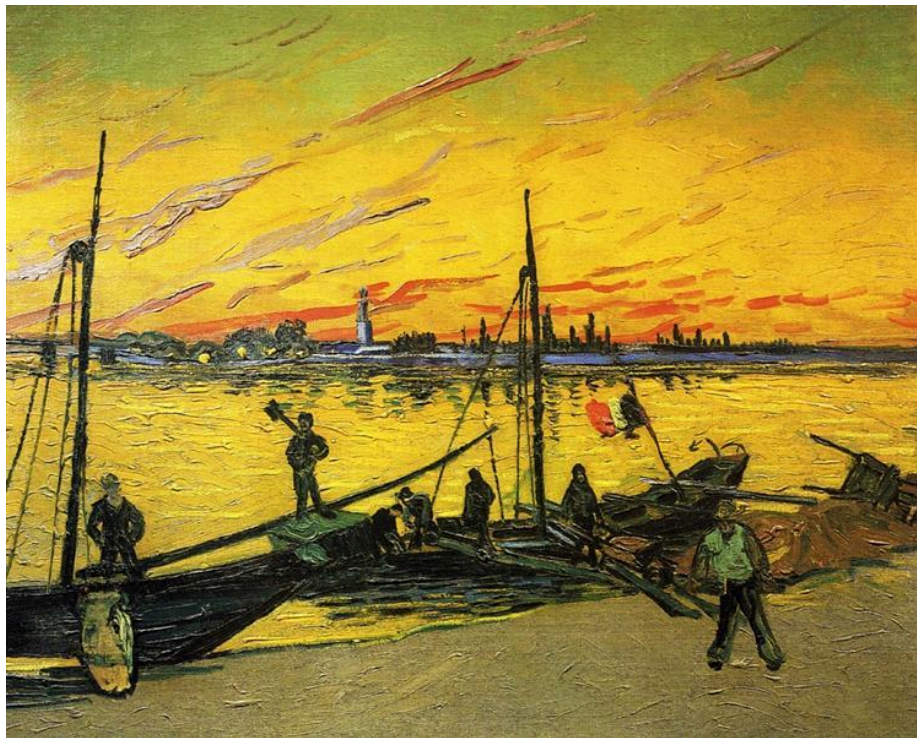


Fig. 23: "*Coal Barges*" (1888) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 24: *“Quay with Men Unloading Sand Barges”* (1888) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 25: *“Standing Female Nude from the Side”* (1886) Vincent van Gogh

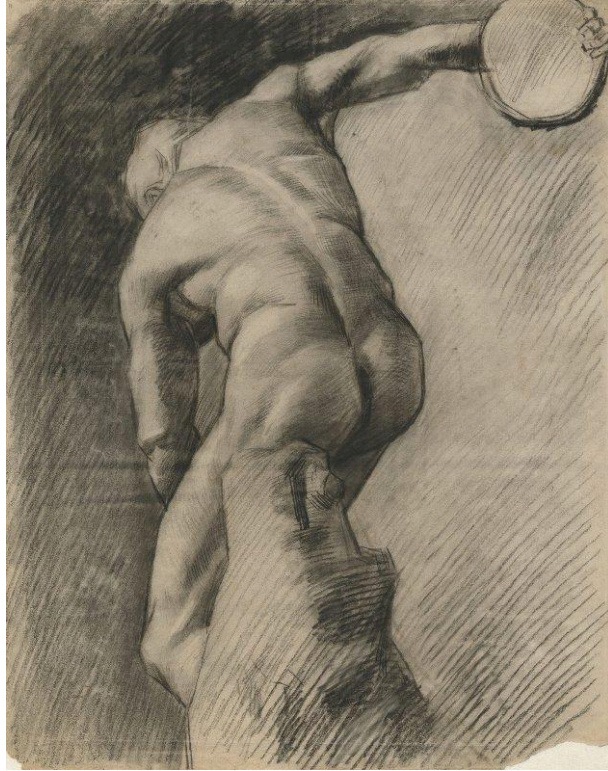


Fig. 26: *"The Discus Thrower"* (1886) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 27: *"Dance Hall"* (1885) Vincent van Gogh





Fig. 28: *"Couple Dancing"* (1885) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 29: *"Two Women in a Balcony Box"* (1885) Vincent van Gogh

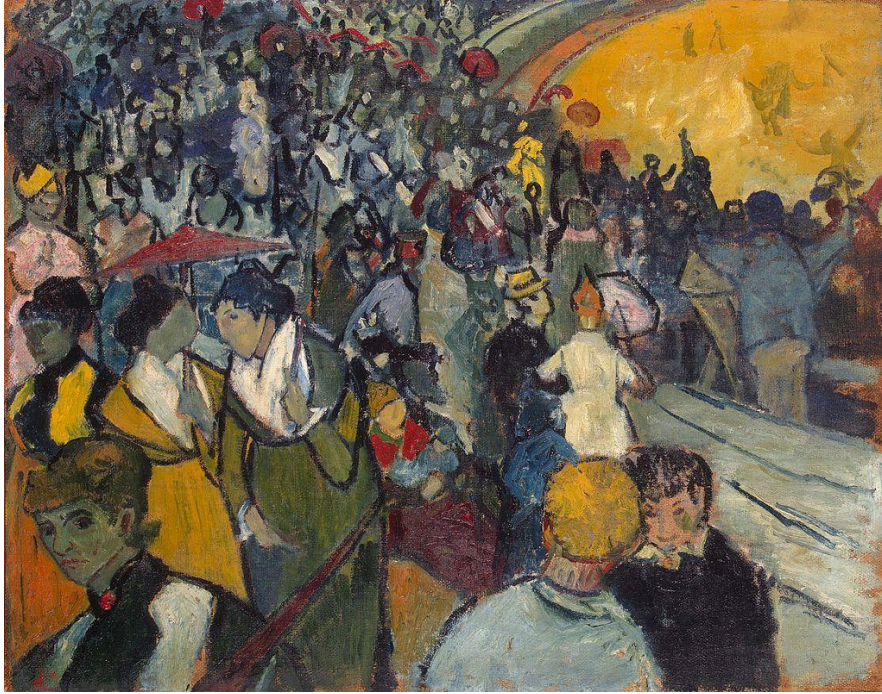
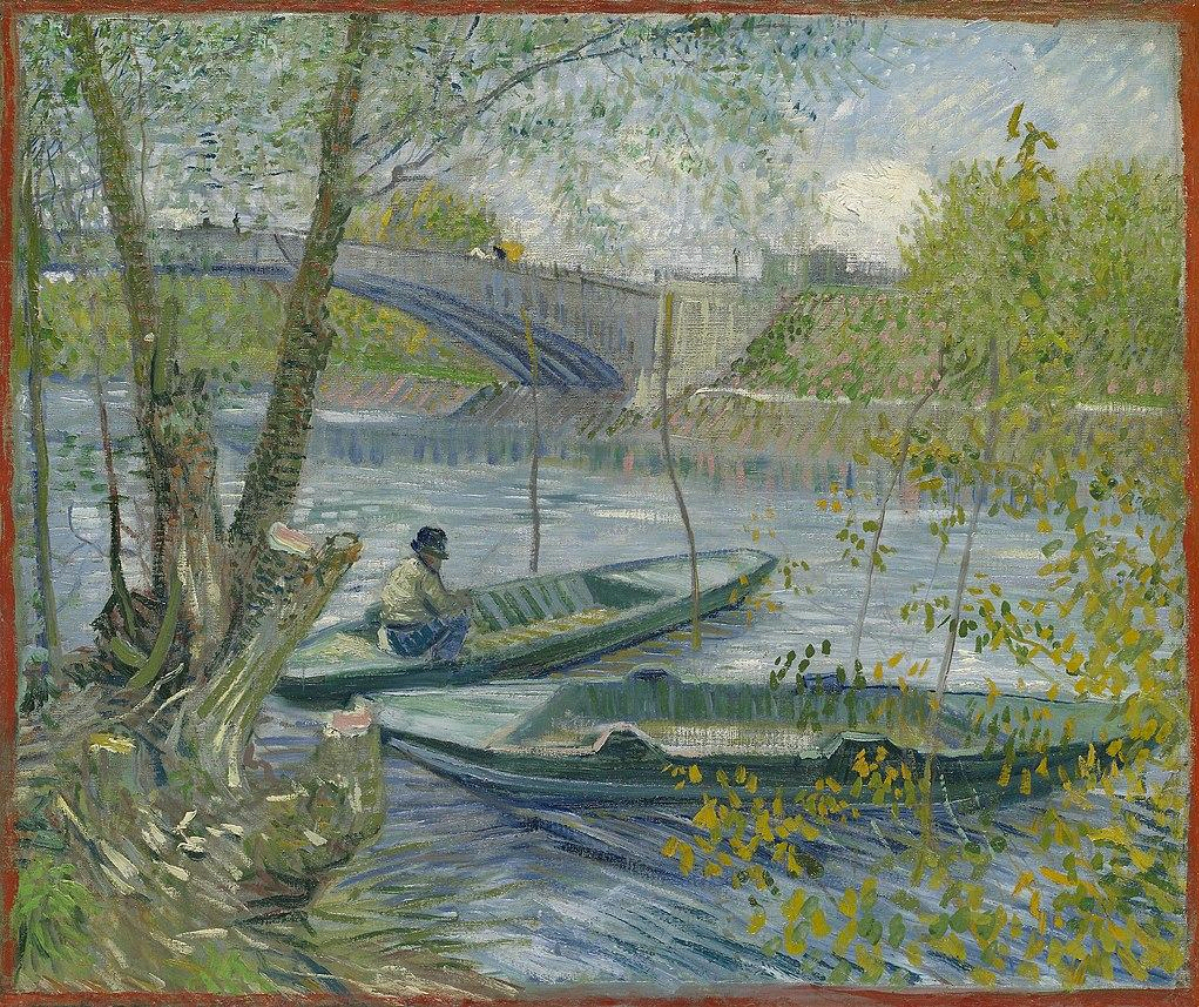


Fig. 31: "Arena at Arles" (1888) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 32: "The Dance Hall at Arles" (1888) Vincent van Gogh

## CHAPTER 4: PARIS



*"Fishing in Spring"* (1887) Vincent van Gogh

Paris is one of the main hubs in Europe today. The capital is known for its fine arts cafe life, and the Eiffel Tower. From the French capital, people can travel in any direction to Germany in the East to Italy in the South to England and Belgium in the North. In the 19th century Paris was very much a city of a culture. There was a population of around two million inhabitants.<sup>137</sup> It was home to elegant brassieres, opera houses, circuses and parks. The dandyish flaneur could find themselves traveling by cab, omnibus, steamboat or even the train to the suburbs. The district of Montmartre was where many nightclubs were located and where people of different artistic trades settled. The Van Goghs were no exception, for Theo had been living there permanently since 1884. He had been made manager of the Goupil gallery and worked at 19 Boulevard Montmartre.

Paris serves as one of the midway points on the Van Gogh Route where the modern day visitor can continue on their way north to the Netherlands or go south to Provence. It remains a less known period for the artist stopped writing frequent letters, but nevertheless his whereabouts can still be traced from the recountings of other painters and surviving landmarks. Van Gogh and his brother Theo's apartment still stands at 54 Rue Lepic in Montmartre, privately occupied. There is a plaque on the building that commemorates their stay and the building is famous for its big blue doors. Unfortunately, the many cafes that Van Gogh frequented no longer exist nor do the paint shops where he bought supplies. The suburb of Asnières still exists though the area has been modernized. The Musee d'Orsay offers a large collection of Van Gogh works along with the notable French painters of the late 19th century which can substitute for the lack of still existing locations.

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<sup>137</sup> Baedeker Karl. 1884. *Paris and Environs : With Routes from London to Paris and from Paris to the Rhine and Switzerland : Handbook for Travellers : With 10 Maps and 30 Plans* 8Th rev. ed. Leipzig: K. Baedeker.

Van Gogh arrived in Paris on the last day of February 1886. He came without warning and on a small torn piece of paper he wrote, “My dear Theo, don’t be cross with me that I’ve come all of a sudden. I’ve thought about it so much and I think we’ll save time this way.”<sup>138</sup> Also in the note Van Gogh had asked Theo to meet him in the Louvre. The artist had reached a breaking point in Antwerp and abruptly left for Paris to escape his creditors, destitution and deteriorating health. Interestingly enough he arrived in Paris the same day that Sigmund Freud left for Vienna.<sup>139</sup>

“*View from Theo’s Apartment*” (1886) was painted from the window of 54 Rue Lepic.<sup>140</sup> A cluster of buildings penetrate the foreground, peeking up from the bottom. Painted vertically, the right side of the scene is framed by a rising building, its chimneys touching the upper right. Nestled in the background, the city goes farther and farther back until the horizon meets the sky. The speckled sky takes up the upper left of the painting, it being a mix of blues and yellows. The building on the left is scarcely detailed, the window shutters mere lines while the smallest building is easier to see. The red shutters pop, the texture of its exterior covered in dots. There is a calming effect to the work in the artist's use of cool colors, a sense of solitude without any form of life being depicted. Much like Van Gogh did in Antwerp, the scene expresses a sense of life for it shows habitation through cosmopolitanism.

The style of the work resembles that of the Neo-impressionists. Van Gogh used a pointillist technique with the image being created out of small dots of color. This surely was after the influence of artists such as Georges Seurat and Paul Signac. It’s noted that Van Gogh had become acquainted with Signac during his stay in Paris and he even visited Van Gogh in Arles in

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<sup>138</sup> Fig. 33: [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 567: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Paris, on or about Sunday, 28 February 1886.

<sup>139</sup> *Vincent and Theo : The Van Gogh Brothers*. 2017 First ed. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

<sup>140</sup> Fig. 34

1889. It's important to understand that Van Gogh's style of pointillism was not completely authentic. Instead of following pointillism exactly, the artist diverged to using dashes and filled in certain areas with color. For example, in the painting of the Rue Lepic he used dashes of color for the window shutters and for the sides of the different buildings. This style of painting didn't last long. There are only a handful of other paintings from the Paris period that demonstrate his experimentation in pointillism such as "*Interior of a Restaurant*" (1887) and "*Self Portrait*" (1887).<sup>141</sup>

The Van Gogh brothers moved to 54 Rue Lepic in June 1886. They settled on the fourth floor in Montmartre just down the hill from the cemetery. Before this Theo had been living on the Rue Laval which was only a few streets away from their new accommodation. There is only one painting that shows the interior of the brothers apartment which is "*Portrait of Alexander Reid*."<sup>142</sup> It depicts the Scottish art dealer sitting in Theo's armchair. Very vaguely in the background the viewer can see paintings hung on the walls. There are only brief details of the interior as written by Jo van Gogh Bonger in her memoir, "The new apartment on the third floor had three rather large rooms, a small room and a kitchen. The living room was comfortable and cozy with Theo's beautiful old cabinet, a sofa and a big stove, for both the brothers were very sensitive to the cold."<sup>143</sup> The apartment was also in the heart of the area. It sat just off the Boulevard de Clichy and was just north of Fernand Cormon's studio where Van Gogh studied for a few months. The lodgings were also just around the corner from 7 Rue Tourlaque where Henri de Toulouse Lautrec worked and held parties. There were also several paint shops and cafes that were within walking distance with Theo's office also in the vicinity.

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<sup>141</sup> Figs. 35 & 36

<sup>142</sup> Fig. 37

<sup>143</sup> Gogh Vincent van and V. W. van Gogh. 1927. *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh to His Brother 1872-1886 : With a Memoir by His Sister-In-Law J. Van Gogh-Bonger : In Two Volumes : With Illustrations*. London Boston & New York: Constable & Co. ; Houghton Mifflin.

Montmartre was famously home to Le Chat Noir, Le Moulin de La Galette and a host of other places of entertainment. The area is well known for being built on a hill, with streets sloping up and down. It was the same in the 19th century. It was quoted in the 1880's by Félicien Champseur that, "In this bizarre land swarmed a host of colorful artists, writers, painters, musicians, sculptors, architects, a few with their own places but most in furnished lodgings, surrounded by the workers of Montmartre, the starchy ladies of the rue Bréda, the retired folk of Batignolles, sprouting up all over the place, like weeds. Montmartre was home to every kind of artist."<sup>144</sup> Such artists included Degas, Monet and Renoir. The area was also still somewhat rural; Van Gogh depicted windmills and rolling hills several times. "*The Hill of Montmartre with Stone Quarry*" (1886) and "*Vegetable Gardens in Montmartre*" (1887) are samples.<sup>145</sup>

"*Agostina Segatori Sitting in the Café du Tambourin*" (1887) shows the Italian Proprietress sitting in her cafe.<sup>146</sup> The figure sits rather expressionless with her eyes staring out into the distance. She sits at a tambourine shaped table, her arms resting as she holds a cigarette between her fingers. Next to her lies an umbrella while in front of her is an ashtray. The red of the table pops out as it runs along the edge. There is a stack of plates with a mug of beer on top. Segatori wears a spotted blue skirt and a faded greenish top. She wears a feathery headpiece of red and blue. Her skin resembles the same color while her eyes are crooked. One slants higher than the other. The background is painted vaguely with only various objects that are discernible. On the left there are two chairs, their seats, a vivid yellow. On the top right a Japanese print can faintly be seen, the kimonos slashes of thick color. Next to that is a shelf where various glasses have been placed. There seems to be an emptiness to the room as there are no other figures. The

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<sup>144</sup> Myers, Nicole. "The Lure of Montmartre, 1880–1900." *In the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mont/hd\\_mont.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mont/hd_mont.htm) (October 2007)

<sup>145</sup> Fig. 38 & 39

<sup>146</sup> Fig. 40

brushstroke style is very different from that of Van Gogh's view of the Rue Lepic. The style is not pointillism anymore but it resembles the work of the Japanese. There are more flat planes of color but it's not wholly in the Japanese style as his later paintings from Arles would be. There is a smoothness and simplicity to the image. It goes to show the evolution of styles that the artist was experimenting within these two years.

Van Gogh was a visitor of cafes thronged with many writers and artists living in Paris at the time. He was a bohemian living during the fin de Siècle. The Cafe du Tambourin was located on the Boulevard de Clichy.<sup>147</sup> It had opened in 1885, and was a rather sleazy joint frequented by Italian criminals and pimps.<sup>148</sup> The interior is remembered for having tables shaped like tambourines and the staff wore traditional Italian dress.<sup>149</sup> It was run by Agostina Segatori, an Italian from the streets of Naples. Her years in Paris had made her a model of Édouard Manet, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Jean Léon Gérôme.<sup>150</sup> Between 1886-1887 she became acquainted with Van Gogh and very few knew that she also had an affair with him. The depth of their relationship is still unknown, but Van Gogh painted her at least two other times, "*Portrait of Agostina Segatori*" (1887) and "*Portrait of an Italian Woman*" (1887).<sup>151</sup> There is even speculation that "*Nude Woman on a Bed*" (1887) is also Segatori due to the similar facial appearance and hair.<sup>152</sup> Van Gogh's relationship with Segatori is known to have ended sometime in 1887 for several reasons. The first is that Le Tambourin was falling into bankruptcy due to its dangerous clientele. The second is that Segatori was probably in love with another man.

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<sup>147</sup> Naifeh Steven and Gregory White Smith. 2011. *Vincent Van Gogh : The Life* First ed. New York: Random House.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Figs. 41 & 42

<sup>152</sup> Fig. 43



Cafes and restaurants were not just places where Van Gogh could dine, but it gave him opportunities to exhibit his work. It is recounted that at Le Tambourin, the artist hung up some paintings in hopes that he might attract the attention of customers.<sup>153</sup> At Segatori's cafe the plan fell through, no works were sold and due to the issues mentioned above, Van Gogh ended up getting into a fight which resulted in his own paintings getting thrown at him. He ultimately was exiled from the establishment all together.<sup>154</sup> In one of the very few letters written at the time Van Gogh expressed, "you can be sure of one thing, and that's that I won't try to do any more work for the Tambourin."<sup>155</sup>

This is not the only time that Van Gogh got in a scuffle with cafe and restaurant owners. "*Portrait of Etienne Lucien Martin*" (1887) shows the proprietor of The Grand Bouillon Restaurant du Chalet.<sup>156</sup> In the picture is a stocky man with a black mustache wearing a skull cap. It was here that Van Gogh planned to have an exhibition for himself and some of his fellow artists. Martin had been looking for decoration to adorn his empty walls.<sup>157</sup> There were only three other artists that contributed, those being Toulouse Lautrec, Louis Anquetin (1861-1932) and Émile Bernard. Van Gogh called his small group "Le Petit Boulevard" to distinguish them from the big names of Impressionism whom he dubbed as "Le Grand Boulevard."<sup>158</sup> The exhibition did not last long for not only were there disputes with the owner, but Van Gogh argued about who was allowed to be exhibited and who wasn't. Émile Bernard refused to allow the

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<sup>153</sup> Naifeh Steven and Gregory White Smith. 2011. *Vincent Van Gogh : The Life* First ed. New York: Random House.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 572: Vincent to Theo van Gogh. Paris, between about Saturday, 23 and about Monday, 25 July 1887.

<sup>156</sup> Fig. 44

<sup>157</sup> Naifeh Steven and Gregory White Smith. 2011. *Vincent Van Gogh : The Life* First ed. New York: Random House.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

neo-impressionists to take part while Van Gogh was against artists such as Odilon Redon (1840-1916).<sup>159</sup>

The exhibition in the end proved to be a failure and was abruptly cut short after Van Gogh quarreled with everyone. The artist's paintings frightened the hungry customers and were ordered to be taken down.<sup>160</sup> It was reminisced by one visitor that, “There was no catalogue, no announcement in the paper, no review. No “public” came. The restaurant’s regular patrons “paid more attention to the dish of the day than to the new décor...”.<sup>161</sup> These scenes show the growing interest that Van Gogh had with marketing his work at the time.

The portrait of Agostina gives an insight into the artist's growing fascination with Japanese art. The ports of Japan had only reopened in 1853 after several centuries of it being unattainable for foreigners. The fascination for everything Japanese had reached the west, particularly Paris and Japonisme was all the rage, especially in the art world. Van Gogh himself became an avid collector of Japanese Prints. It is known that he got his prints from the dealer Siegfried Bing (1838-1905) who was a collector of Asian art. His shop was located a few streets away from 54 Rue Lepic at Rue Chauchat 19.<sup>162</sup> Van Gogh admired the works of Hokusai (1760-1849) and Hiroshige (1797-1858). He also got Theo into the hobby of collecting Japanese art and demanded in a letter, “But take the Hokusai’s as well. There are 300 views of the sacred mountain and scenes of manners and customs. There’s an attic at Bing’s and in it there’s a heap of 10 thousand Japanese prints, landscapes, figures, old Japanese prints too. One Sunday he’ll let

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Van Gogh Route: Bing, Accessed April 9th, 2024. [Home - Van Gogh Route](#)

you choose for yourself, so take plenty of old sheets too.”<sup>163</sup> The influence of Japanese art would stay with the artist until his last days.

“*Bridges across the Seine at Asnières*” (1887) is one of many paintings that Van Gogh made during his trips to the Parisian suburbs.<sup>164</sup> The scene depicts the Seine. The viewer's perspective is from the land looking out at the ongoing action. Two bridges are visible. One of them has a train on it puffing its way to unknown places. Vaguely passengers can be seen in the windows, their faces just small dots of orange, black and green. A trail of black steam can be seen dissipating into the wind. In the background factories can be seen, their tall chimneys rising to the sky. Under the bridge closest to the viewer, the dark silhouette of a man can be seen in a boat. Across from him is another boat similar to a tugboat, its exterior done in red lines. In the foreground are several small boats docked to poles. On the left, a woman stands on an overlook, her dress and parasol painted in a vivid red and pink. The artist went as far as to show the wear and tear of the bridge and the individual bricks of the supports that hold up the structure. The water is choppy and the small patches of vegetation are alive.

This particular bridge that Van Gogh captured was the Pont du Chemin de Fer.<sup>165</sup> As shown in a photograph taken in 1905, the perspective is almost identical to where the artist stood eighteen years prior.<sup>166</sup> The suburb of Asnières was a popular weekend hotspot for Parisians during the 1880s. In 1886, it held a population of around 15,000 people and was famous for its

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<sup>163</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 640: To Theo van Gogh. Arles, Sunday, 15 July 1888.

<sup>164</sup> Fig. 45

<sup>165</sup> Gerritse, Bregje, Jacquelyn N. Coutré, Jena K. Carvana, Charlotte Hellman, Joost van der Hoeven, Teio Meedendorp, François Lespinasse, and Richard Thomson, eds. *Van Gogh and the Avant-Garde : Along the Seine*. First edition. Yale University Press, 2023.

<sup>166</sup> Fig. 46

middle class leisure activities.<sup>167</sup> This particular suburb boasted several restaurants, country clubs, and parks.<sup>168</sup> There were weekly rowing competitions and people could ride horses and attend balls.<sup>169</sup> Asnières was nestled between the small neighborhoods of Clichy, Courbevoie and Colombe. The easiest way for city dwellers to travel there was by taking a train from the Gare Saint Lazare located in the center of Paris.<sup>170</sup> Asnières was also located just down the river from La Grande Jatte which was so famously painted by Georges Seurat.<sup>171</sup> Despite a sense of luxuriousness in these small environs they were also industrial areas with several factories that had been pushed to the outskirts during Hausmann’s transformation of Paris. A writer in 1856 even observed, “The lush green landscape is juxtaposed with patches of arid earth bald like the head of an old man” and he went on to comment how the factories had, “chimneys poking up like obelisks.”<sup>172</sup>

It's been estimated that Van Gogh only spent about three months of 1887 traveling to Asnières and the other surrounding areas.<sup>173</sup> In this small period of time he created some forty paintings.<sup>174</sup> Van Gogh’s work here was an embodiment of the new style that he was painting in, which was quick dashes in light but soft colors. There is a full sense of movement compared to the peasant paintings of Nuenen or even the very first canvases that the artist did when he arrived in Paris. After experimenting with the style of pointillism, Asnières was where he tried out the

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<sup>167</sup> Gerritse, Bregje, Jacquelyn N. Coutré, Jena K. Carvana, Charlotte Hellman, Joost van der Hoeven, Teio Meedendorp, François Lespinasse, and Richard Thomson, eds. *Van Gogh and the Avant-Garde : Along the Seine*. First edition. Yale University Press, 2023.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Fig. 47 “*A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*” (1884-1886)

<sup>172</sup> Gerritse, Bregje, Jacquelyn N. Coutré, Jena K. Carvana, Charlotte Hellman, Joost van der Hoeven, Teio Meedendorp, François Lespinasse, and Richard Thomson, eds. *Van Gogh and the Avant-Garde : Along the Seine*. First edition. Yale University Press, 2023.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

style of Impressionism. Unlike when living in Holland, Van Gogh now had respect for the work of the impressionists, particularly that of Monet. Theo had been offering works by Monet at this time at his gallery, so Van Gogh would surely have been exposed.<sup>175</sup> Not only did he paint in a similar style he also painted the same subject matter of French leisure.

Van Gogh also had connections with artists living in Asnières, specifically Émile Bernard whose parents had bought a house there. Dating from 1886, there is a preserved photo, one of only two that exists, of Bernard sitting with Van Gogh.<sup>176</sup> Here Van Gogh faces away from the camera, his back completely turned to the viewer. His head is covered completely by a hat not exposing his identity. It would not be hard to imagine that the artist turned away from the camera on purpose, for he disliked photography. The location of the photo is set next to the Vins Restaurant. Clearly, Van Gogh formed bonds with other artists, despite his social difficulties. With Van Gogh, Bernard painted almost the same compositions that were done around this time such as *“Iron Bridges at Asnières”* (1887).<sup>177</sup> A work that's very similar to Van Gogh's *“Bridges across the Seine at Asnières.”* Here Bernard depicts the many bridges while figures can be seen walking on the path while a train goes by across the bridge. What makes the two paintings different is that Bernard's is done in a cloisonnist style while Van Gogh's borders more on impressionism with its' light and fleeting strokes.<sup>178</sup>

The other artist Van Gogh was also involved with was the neo-impressionist Paul Signac. He owned a house in Asnières so the artists probably met there. When speaking about Van Gogh many years later Signac recounted, “Yes, I knew Van Gogh from, [art supplies dealer], Pere Tanguy's. I met him on other occasions at Asnières and Saint-Ouen; we painted on the banks of

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Fig. 48

<sup>177</sup> Fig. 49

<sup>178</sup> Cloisonnism was a style that focused on painting flat planes of color. Besides Émile Bernard, Paul Gauguin also painted in this style.

the river; lunched at the guinguette [a small cafe] and returned to Paris on foot, along the avenues of the Clichy. Van Gogh wore a blue zinc workers smock and had painted dots of color on the sleeves. He stuck right by me, shouting, gesticulating, and brandishing his large size-30 canvas so that he spread wet paint onto himself and the passers-by.”<sup>179</sup> It was known that Monet had painted in the neighboring suburbs of Gennevilliers and Argenteuil, and further west, Renoir painted in Bougival, so Van Gogh was not alone painting in these suburbs.

The most important development during Van Gogh’s time in the Parisian suburbs was his use of color. It was here more than at any other place where the artist really focused on learning to use color. He ditched his somber palette of the north, and opted for colorful, vivid strokes that were airy. He even remarked in one of his letters, “And when I painted the landscape in Asnières this summer I saw more color in it than before.”<sup>180</sup>

In 1888, two years after living in the capital, Van Gogh was ready to leave. The city life had become too overwhelming as he complained in a letter after his departure, “It’s that bloody filthy Paris wine and the filthy fat of the steaks that do that to you — dear God, I had come to a state in which my own blood was no longer working at all, but literally not at all, as they say.”<sup>181</sup> He had been persuaded by fellow artists to explore the south of France. He might have heard this from Toulouse Lautrec, who was a native of the south or possibly he wanted to follow the steps of the painter Adolphe Monticelli (1824-1886) whose style he admired and who had lived in Marseille. Van Gogh officially departed in the middle of February for Provence. The reason for his decision to stay in Arles is somewhat unknown. The artist was originally bound for Marseille,

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<sup>179</sup> Gerritse, Bregje, Jacquelyn N. Coutré, Jena K. Carvana, Charlotte Hellman, Joost van der Hoeven, Teio Meedendorp, François Lespinasse, and Richard Thomson, eds. *Van Gogh and the Avant-Garde : Along the Seine*. First edition. Yale University Press, 2023.

<sup>180</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 574: Vincent to Willemien van Gogh. Paris, late October 1887.

<sup>181</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 628: Vincent van Gogh to Emile Bernard Arles, on or about Tuesday, 19 June 1888.

but the landscape around Arles attracted him so much that he ended up settling there.<sup>182</sup> The only time that Van Gogh would return north was in the last two months of his life in 1890 in Auvers. Paris had opened up Van Gogh's world progressing him forward from a painter of the past to a painter of the future.

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<sup>182</sup> [The letters - Vincent van Gogh Letters](#) Letter 577: To Theo van Gogh. Arles, Tuesday, 21 February 1888.

457  
 Mon cher Theo, ne m'en veux pas d'être venu tout d'un trait  
 J'y ai tant réfléchi & je crois que de cette manière nous  
 gagnons du temps. Serai au Louvre à partir de midi  
 Réponse s.v.p pour savoir à quelle heure tu pourrais  
 venir dans la salle carrée. Quant aux frais je te le  
 répète cela revient au même. J'ai de l'argent de reste cela  
 va sans dire et avant de faire aucune dépense je préfère  
 te parler - Nous arrangerons la chose tu verras  
 Ainsi viens y le plus tôt possible je te serre la main  
 Vincent

Fig. 33: "Letter 567: "Vincent to Theo van Gogh Sunday, 28 February 1886"



Fig. 34: "View from Theo's Apartment" (1886) Vincent van Gogh



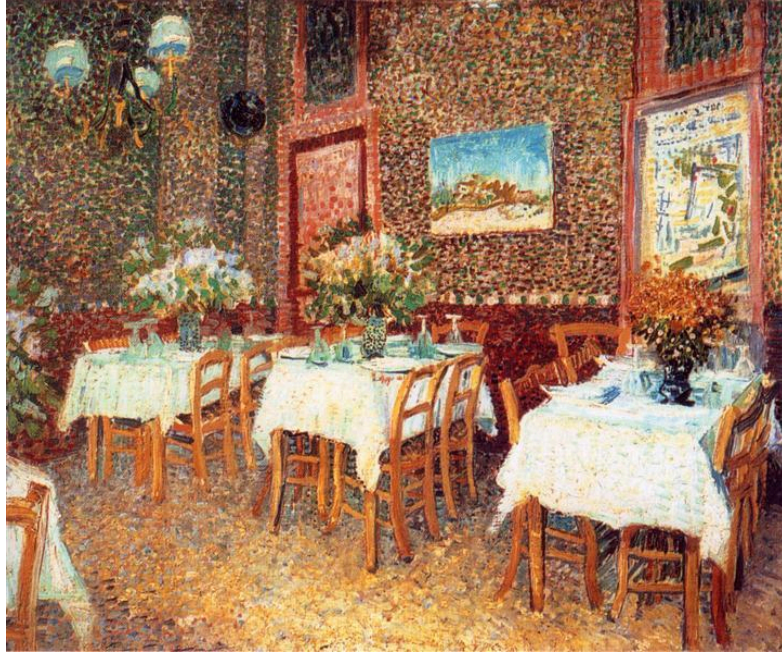


Fig. 35: *"Interior of a Restaurant"* (1887) Vincent van Gogh

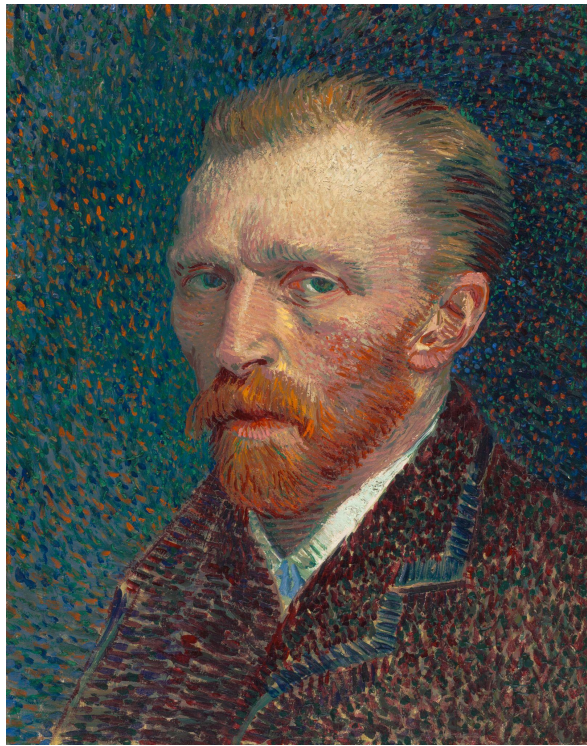


Fig. 36: *"Self Portrait"* (1887) Vincent van Gogh

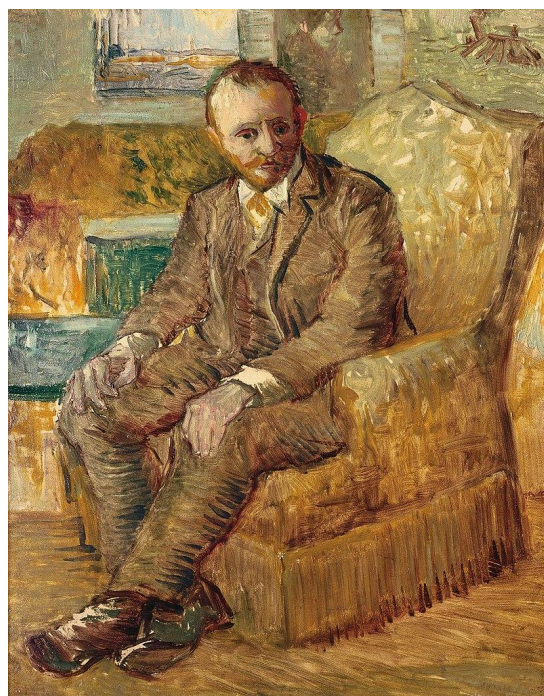


Fig. 37: *“Portrait of Alexander Reid”* (1887) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 38: *“The Hill of Montmartre with Stone Quarry”* (1886) Vincent van Gogh

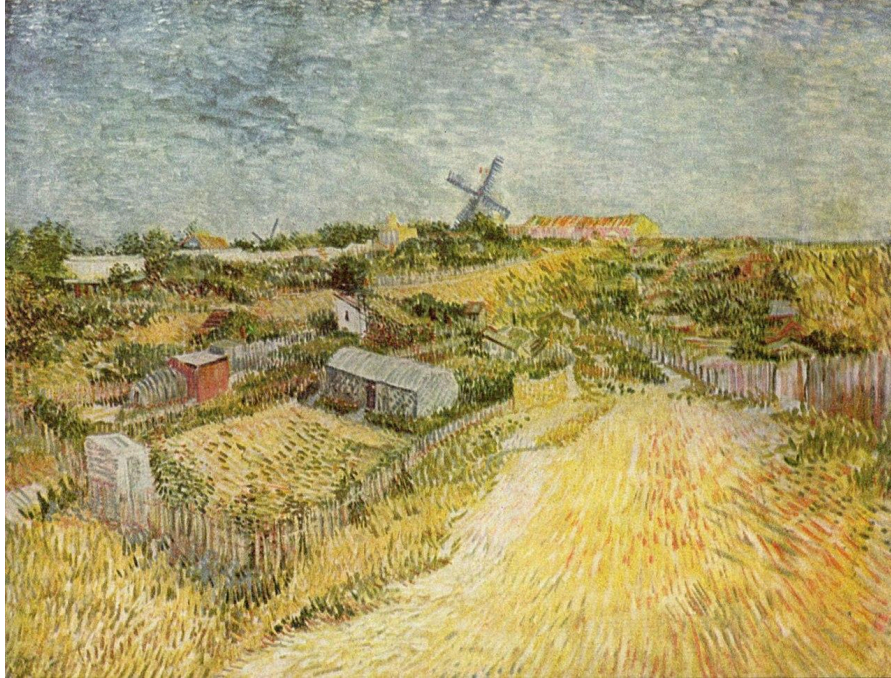


Fig. 39: "Vegetable Gardens in Montmartre: *La Butte Montmartre*" (1887) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 40: "*Agostina Segatori sitting in the Cafe du Tambourin*" (1887) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 41: *“Portrait of Agostina Segatori”* (1887) Vincent van Gogh

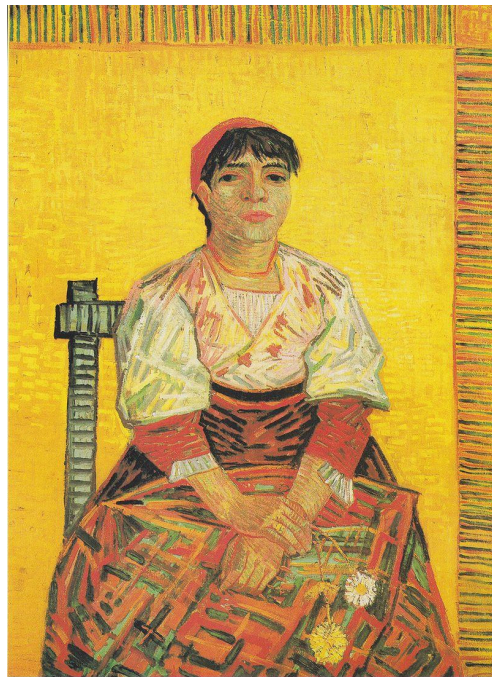


Fig. 42: *“Portrait of an Italian Woman”* (1887) Vincent van Gogh

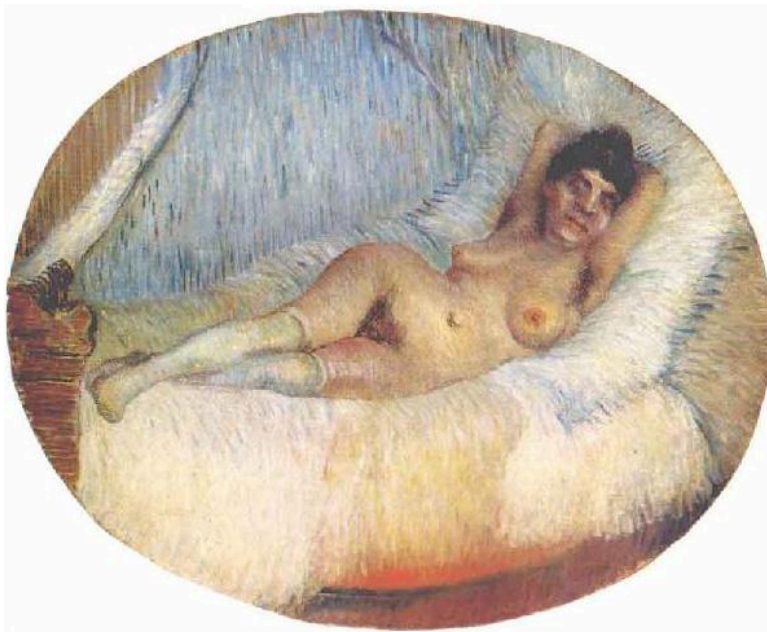


Fig. 43: *“Nude Woman on a Bed”* (1887) Vincent van Gogh

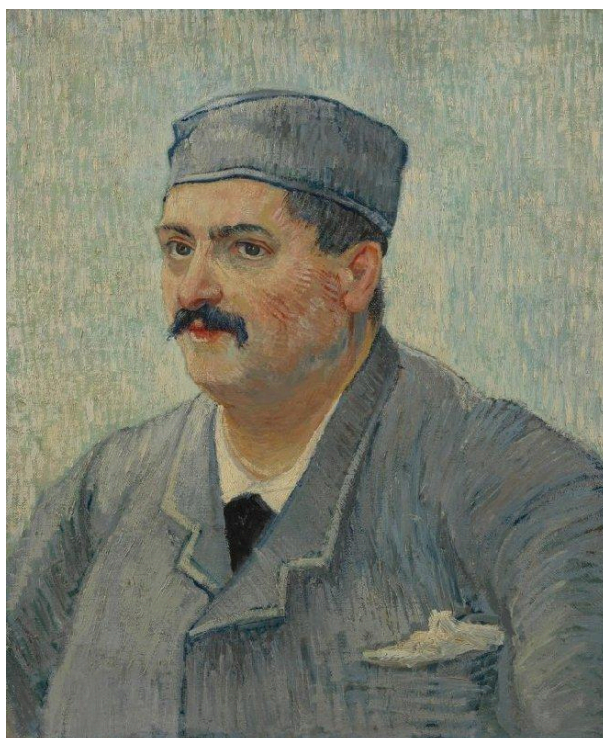


Fig. 44: *“Portrait of Etienne Lucien Martin”* (1887) Vincent van Gogh

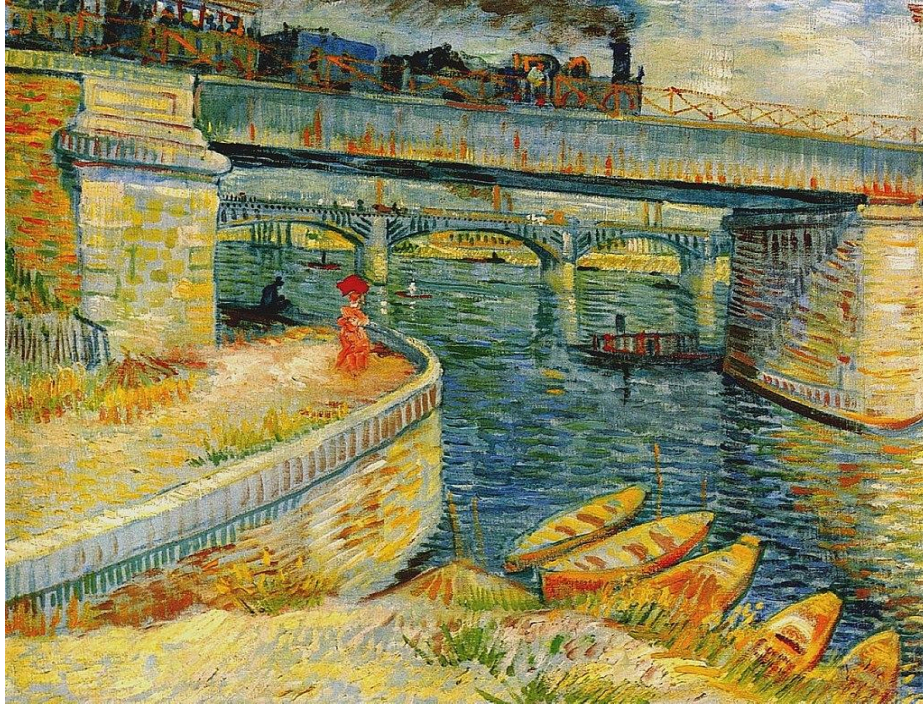


Fig. 45: “*Bridges across the Seine at Asnières*” (1887) Vincent van Gogh

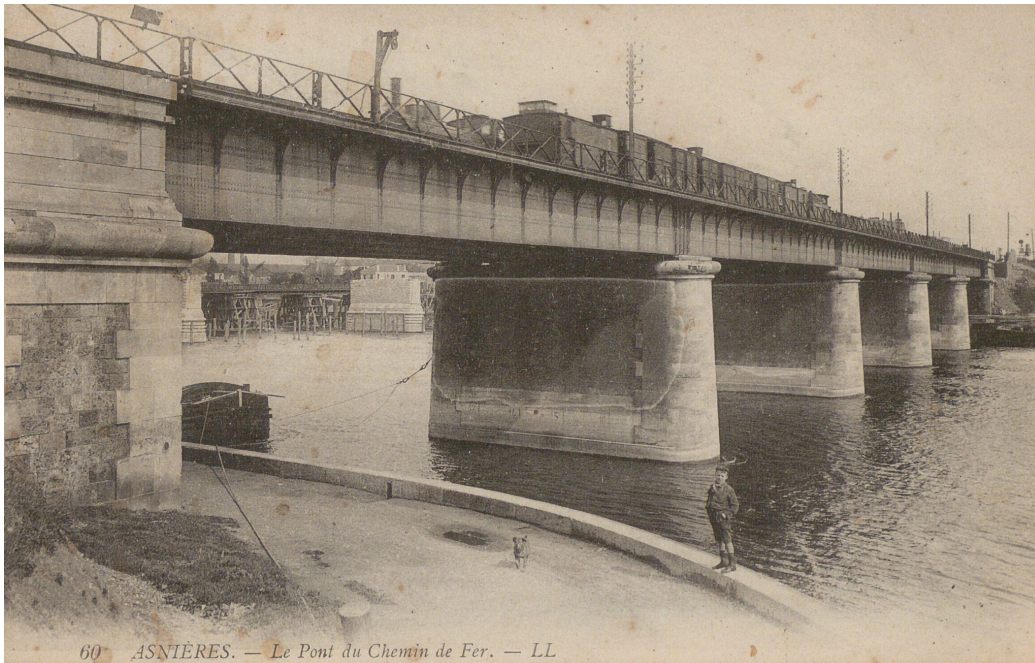


Fig. 46: “*Photograph of Le Pont du Chemin de Fer*” (1905)



Fig. 47: "A Sunday on La Grande Jatte" (1884-1886) Georges Seurat  
Source: Wikipedia



Fig. 48: "Photograph of Émile Bernard & Vincent van Gogh (Back turned)" 1886  
Source: Wikipedia



Fig. 49: *“Iron Bridges at Asnières”* (1887) Émile Bernard  
Source: Wikipedia



# CONCLUSION

Van Gogh's artistic career only lasted ten years. He chose this profession at age 27 with generally no formal training. The Hague, Nuenen, Antwerp and Paris make up more than half of Van Gogh's short career. From his beginnings on the Schenkweg to his time in the Parisian art world the artist was constantly traveling on his own pilgrimage while shaping his vision. The artist's time in Arles is the quintessential period that many now know and is usually the hotspot for people walking the Van Gogh trail. Arles has very little from the artist's time. The famous Yellow House was destroyed during World War II and the Langlois Bridge is also gone. There still remains the cafe he dined at and a few churches. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate periods of Van Gogh's life that are usually overshadowed by his more celebrated periods but deserve to be credited in making the artist that so many know and love today.

Van Gogh never forgot about where he came from and the early stages of his career. As shown with Van Gogh's 1888 canvas dedicated to Mauve, he always kept an appreciation for his mentor. Even when living in the asylum in the last year of his life he developed a nostalgia for home. It had then been five years since he left the Netherlands. While struck down with one of his mental crises, he even created a series of paintings depicting peasant cottages from his native region by memory.<sup>183</sup> This was then followed by a few paintings of potato farmers digging which resemble his works of figures from Nuenen.<sup>184</sup> The only difference in his 1890 depiction is the work is less realistic, done in vivid colors of yellow and blue and loose brushstrokes. Van Gogh had fused his origins with his mature style, connecting the phases of his career that had constantly been transformed by the different environments he lived in.

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<sup>183</sup> Figs. 50 & 51: "*Cottages: Reminiscence of the North*" (1890) & "*Cottages and Cypresses: Reminiscence of the North*" (1890)

<sup>184</sup> Fig. 52 & 53: "*Two Peasants Women Digging in Fields with Snow*" (1890) & "*Peasants Lifting Potatoes*" (1890)



Fig. 50: "*Cottages: Reminiscence of the North*" (1890) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 51: "*Cottages and Cypresses: Reminiscence of the North*" (1890) Vincent van Gogh



Fig. 52: *“Two Peasants Women Digging in Fields with Snow”* (1890) Vincent van Gogh

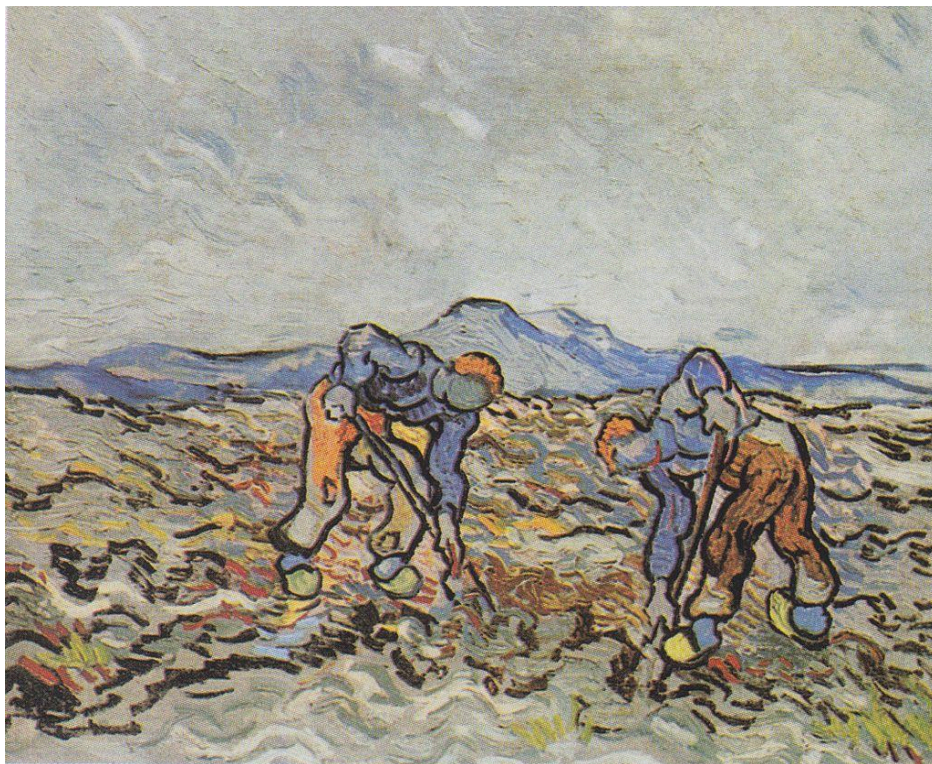


Fig. 53: *“Peasants Lifting Potatoes”* (1890) Vincent van Gogh



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