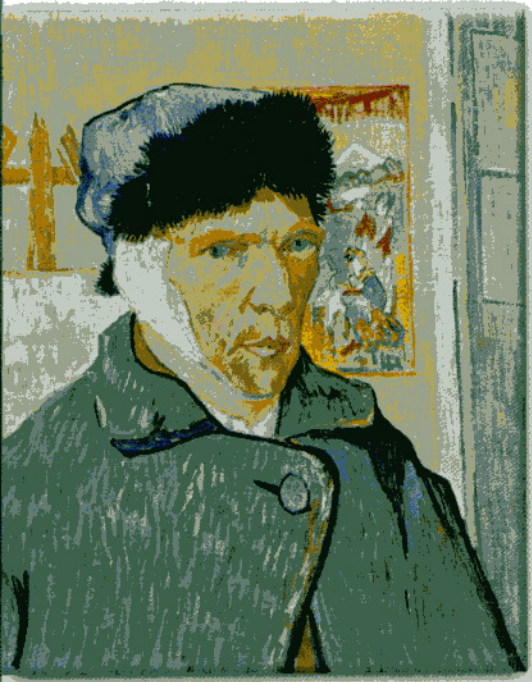


The Last Days of

In the swirling intensity of his final works we glimpse a genius in torment



It was May 17, 1890. Vincent Van Gogh had just arrived in Paris from the south of France. His brother Theo was there to welcome him to his new home at the foot of Montmartre. For years Vincent had been sending canvases to his brother. And now, here in Theo's apartment, scores of them crowded every square inch of wall and floor space. It was the first time that so many of Vincent's paintings had been assembled in one place, and it was a magnificent sight.

Viewing his handiwork that day,



Vincent radiated joy and confidence. Theo's new bride, Jo, had heard many tales about her brother-in-law, and found him "strong, with broad shoulders, a healthy colour, a gay expression, his entire appearance indicating firm decision."

But it did not take her long to learn what Vincent already knew in his heart, that this was a momentary flash of happiness. Seven years earlier he had written to Theo, "Not only did I begin painting late in life, but it may be that I shall not live for many years, between six and ten, for instance." Now he was 37 years old, and he felt his time was running out.

His creative powers were at their height. He had just filled two years with a concentrated outpouring of genius such as the world of art had rarely seen. His friend Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec had urged him to go south to the ancient city of Arles, where Lautrec was sure the bright sun and hot colours would liberate the passionate eye of the moody young Dutchman who had amazed and irritated the artists of Paris.

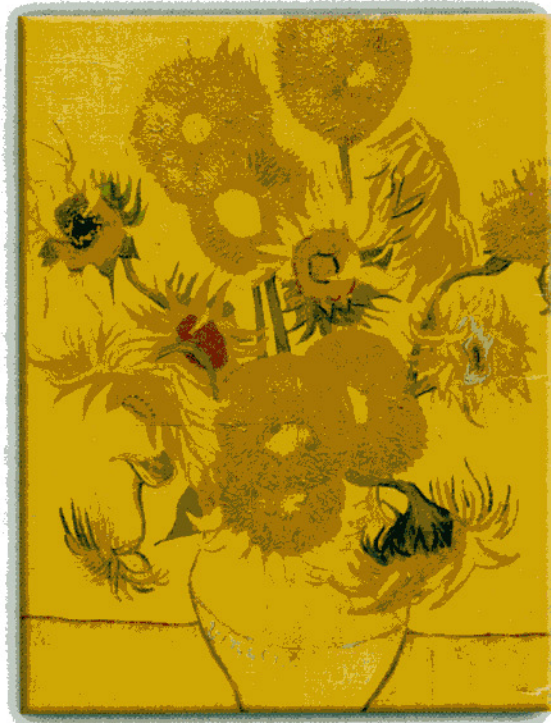
In no time Vincent had shaken off the gloomy tones of his early painting and mastered a style of bold, slashing strokes of pure contrasting colours. He had turned out paintings "full of sulphur," as he said, at a fantastic rate - sometimes more than one a day. He had worked side by side with the artist he admired most, Paul Gauguin, and each had stimulated the other to intoxicating discoveries.

In addition, Vincent was beginning to make an artistic name for himself. Leading painters of the day - Edgar Degas, Lautrec, Georges Seurat, Camille Pissarro - were offering friendship and encouragement. A prominent art critic described Vincent as "this robust and true artist, with the brutal hands of a giant, with the nerves of a hysterical woman, with the soul of a mystic, so original and so alone. He is the only painter who perceives the coloration of things with such intensity, with such a metallic, gemlike quality."

But it was also at Arles that Vincent went mad. There has been

endless speculation on the exact nature of Van Gogh's disease, ranging from advanced syphilis to manic depression. The latest theory is that he was not mad, but suffered from Ménière's Disease, a crippling disorder of the inner ear. Whatever the reason for his instability, Vincent was always a man of extremes. He pushed his nervous and emotional endurance beyond human limits. In Arles he worked long hours, ate irregularly and inadequately, drank gallons of coffee and absinthe, smoked incessantly.

"I admit all that," he once wrote to



Theo, "but at the same time it is true that to attain the high yellow note I attained last summer, I really had to be pretty well keyed up." To achieve that "yellow note," he would sit all day out in the boiling cauldron of summertime Arles, "in the full sunshine without any shadow, and I enjoy it like a cicada."

Continuously existing at fever pitch, he swung between euphoria and despair, exuberant self-confidence and stifling self-doubt. On December 23, 1888, the balance snapped on the famous occasion when he cut off part

Vincent Van Gogh

of his right ear and delivered it to a prostitute with the words, "Keep this object carefully."

His life from then on was a series of recoveries and relapses, at unpredictable intervals. The painter Paul Signac, who came to see him one day in the Arles asylum, reported that he found him perfectly sane, but before he left, Vincent had to be restrained from swallowing a bottle of turpentine.

By the spring of 1890, when he arrived at Theo's apartment, Vincent had, he hoped, put all that behind him. Perhaps the intensity of the south had unsettled him, and he would be better under the familiar grey skies of the north.

His friend Pissarro recommended

Doctor Gachet and Vincent took to each other from the start. Vincent found him "something like another brother, so much do we resemble each other physically and mentally." Gachet was of Flemish origin; he had Vincent's bony face and flaming red hair and beard. Vincent was also convinced he shared the same tendency to melancholy and nervous instability. He did two versions of a portrait of Gachet, full, he said, of the "broken-hearted expression of our time."

Gachet's enthusiasm for these paintings was something new and encouraging for Vincent, whose previous portraits had been mostly of uneducated people. With Gachet, a man whose house was crammed with



a Doctor Gachet, an amateur painter himself, who had taken care of many Parisian artists. Gachet lived in Auvers-sur-Oise about 20 miles north of the city, and he would be delighted to look after Vincent.

So Vincent moved to Auvers and found cheap lodgings above a café belonging to the Ravoux family, just a few steps from the doctor's house. The village quiet pleased him. "It is of a grave beauty," he wrote to Theo, "the real countryside." Auvers was, and is, perched on a hill, with lovely views of the verdant Oise valley on one side and of immense wheatfields stretching to the horizon on the other.

Cézannes, Monets, Pissarros - works given him in exchange for medical consultations - he had for the first time a model he could talk to about his painting.

"Working like one possessed," Vincent completed 36 paintings in the 71 days he spent in Auvers, plus innumerable drawings. He painted in many moods, from serenity to near hysteria. He painted flowering blossoms with the tight precision of a Japanese print. He painted troubling landscapes in which everything seems a little askew. He painted the featureless little town hall of Auvers, festooned with tricoloured flags and

bunting for Bastille Day, and made it look positively jolly. He painted the quiet old parish church and filled it with a volcanic force. He painted Dr Gachet's 19-year-old daughter, Marguerite, in a shimmering white dress, at her piano. He painted poppies, chestnut trees, gardens, golden wheat fields.

Metabolism. His spirits picked up. "I feel completely calm and in normal condition," he wrote to his mother. "The doctor here says I should throw myself entirely into my work and in this way find distraction. Besides, since I gave up drinking, I do better work than before, and that much at least is gained." He began to make plans for the future. He would rent a house in Auvers.

In January 1890 Theo and Jo had a baby whom they named Vincent. They brought the infant to visit his uncle, who had a great time showing him the farm animals and finding him a bird's nest. "Since you were good enough to call him after me," he later wrote to Theo, "I should like him to have a spirit less unquiet than mine."

For despite everything, there was no quiet in Auvers. Even the arrival of the the adored new nephew was disturbing to Vincent. It reminded him that for years his sole support had been the 50-franc notes Theo kept slipping into the envelope when

he wrote to him. The brothers always regarded this as an investment that would pay off Theo handsomely when Vincent's career came to full bloom. But Vincent had only recently sold his first painting, and now there was for Theo the added responsibility of his wife and baby.

It tormented Vincent to think that he was being a burden on his brother. A new tone crept into his letters to Theo: "Only when I stand painting before my easel do I feel somewhat alive. This is the lot which I accept and which will not change. And the prospect grows darker; I see no happy future at all."

In a pattern familiar from the onset of his earlier attacks, Vincent became deceptively calm. "I am entirely absorbed," he wrote to his mother in late July, "by that immense plain covered by fields of wheat." A few days later he produced one of the most tormented and disturbing of all his works, "Crows Over the Wheatfields."

Symbolism. The wheatfield is a tangled mass of spasmodic diagonal yellow strokes; the sky is a hectic blue; red and green paths lead into the wilderness of grain but go nowhere. Flying across the whole canvas are black crows, figures of inexorable doom. Describing some of his last landscapes to Theo, Vincent wrote, "I did not need to go out of my way to express sadness and the extreme of loneliness."

The familiar melancholy had him in its grip. He must have sensed that this was no disease of the south; he was doomed to an unending series of recurrences. He was alone, he had lost faith in himself. In his last letter



Vincent wrote to Theo: "In my own work I am risking my life, and half my reason has been lost in it."

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And thus it happened.
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Extremism. He put the letter in his pocket and picked up a revolver borrowed from Ravoux. He walked into the fields, pointed the gun at his chest, fired and fell to the ground. Finding he was only wounded, he got up and staggered home. When Vincent did not come to dinner, Ravoux went to find him in bed. "I tried to kill myself but missed," Vincent said.

Dr Gachet did not dare remove the bullet, but left his patient calmly smoking his pipe. Alerted by the doctor, Theo came the next morning, and the brothers were together all day.

But Vincent had given up. "He himself wanted to die," Theo later wrote to his sister, Elisabeth. "When I tried to convince him we would cure him, he replied, 'The sorrow will never end.' He was very calm. Among his last words were 'I wish I could go home now.' And thus it happened. In a few moments he found the peace he had been unable to find on earth."

He died on July 29, 1890.

His friend, the painter Emile Bernard, came to Auvers for the funeral. "Many people arrived," Bernard wrote later, "mostly artists. There were also people from the neighbourhood who loved him, for he was so good and so human. We climbed the hill of Auvers talking of him, of the bold forward thrust he had given to art, of the great projects that always preoccupied him. We arrived at the cemetery overlooking the fields ready for reaping, under a wide blue sky he might have loved still. And then he was lowered into the grave." Theo was griefstricken and fell gravely ill. Prior to his death on January 25, 1891, he was told that his brother had at last had an exhibition, hastily improvised by Emile Bernard in Montmartre.

Some paintings were exhibited in Brussels in February 1891, and in Paris in March. That April Bernard arranged an exhibition of 16 Van Goghs in a small Paris gallery.

From that day, an unending succession of shows, books, articles and films have carried the name of Vincent Van Gogh to the far corners of the world. Theo's son lived to see the 1971 inauguration of the Vincent Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. The record attendance at this year's centenary exhibition confirmed his uncle's place as one of the best-loved artists of modern times.

