Van Gogh in Arles: The Studio of the South

The brief two months that Vincent spent living with the artist Paul Gauguin in Arles led to the most notorious episode in the history of art: Van Gogh's self-mutilation, in which he sliced off part of his own ear while in the midst of a psychotic episode. Vincent would require two weeks of hospitalization before he was released. He then agreed to have himself admitted to a hospital in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, not far from Arles.

In the eight months leading up to Gauguin's arrival for his ill-fated visit on October 23, 1889, Van Gogh had already generated a new body of work that fully embodied the exhilaration he felt in Arles. He found the landscape to be mesmerizing. The dazzling colors of Provence, to him reminiscent of Japanese woodblock prints, impelled him to discover ever more vivid combinations of complementary hues now laid on with a new confidence that produced astonishing results. Van Gogh's dedication to the direct observation of nature, however, was one of the sore points that led to the rift with Gauguin. In this gallery, we see examples of the direction in which Gauguin and his followers had traveled, as the adherents of the group known as the School of Pont Aven. Gauguin had already modelled Vincent's fantasy of an artist's colony in the work that he, Paul Sérusier, and Émile Bernard, among others, produced in the relative isolation of Brittany in northwestern France. But to Van Gogh, any chimeras invented in the studio rather than directly from nature could only be wrongheaded.

Van Gogh and His Japanese Prints

When Van Gogh took the bold step in 1886 to acquire some 660 Japanese woodblock prints from the dealer Siegfried Bing, his motivation was in fact commercial. He was still living with Theo in Paris, who was growing resentful of his freeloading brother, and Vincent looked to the prints as an easy way to turn a profit. The mysterious archipelago nation of Japan had only recently opened its borders, after centuries of isolation. The resultant mania for all things Japanese (known as *Japonisme*) was a widespread Western phenomenon by the time that Van Gogh somewhat impulsively decided to take advantage of it. His business venture did not pan out as he had hoped, but the resultant trove of woodblock prints in his possession did give him the opportunity to study them at length. What is more, the prints now had an added relevance, given the new directions in painting pursued by his friends Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Émile Bernard, and Louis Anquetin in Paris. Like them, Van Gogh looked to the bright colors, graphical use of contour lines, and decorative flatness of Japanese prints as a fresh means of painterly expression. The prints made their way, literally, into certain paintings in which we see them copied as decorative elements on the wall. They also provided Van Gogh with the defamiliarizing devices of cropping, elevated perspective, and bold use of line that had become common in the work of so many progressive artists, from Monet to Gauguin.

Vincent van Gogh, Père Tanguy, 1887. Oil on canvas. Musée Rodin

Featured in this gallery are examples of Van Gogh's mature style of the last two years, in which the influence of Japonisme is clear. One of the most conspicuous developments for Vincent, aside from the bursting luminosity of his palette in response to his "Japan" (as he thought of Arles) was the habitual use of the reed pen—an implement whose suppleness can produce something of the calligraphic effects associated with the brush in Japanese ink painting. Van Gogh's mastery of this technique, unique to him, also underpins the notational rhythm of his brushwork in painted canvases that seem to pulsate with patterns of vibrant hue.