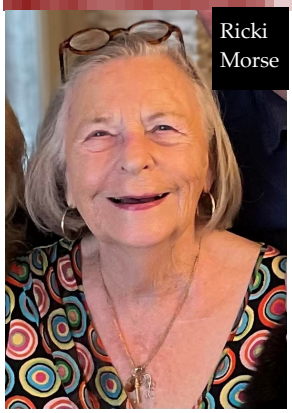
The Yellow House: Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin

By Ricki Morse

Part of an ongoing series for the Van Gogh exhibit, Fall 2022


Ricki Morse

In 1888 Paul Gauguin accepted Vincent van Gogh's invitation to leave Brittany (on the northwest coast of France) and join him in Arles where Vincent had settled in a yellow house, renting additional rooms to create an artist's co-operative for sharing ideas and fellowship. The two had met in Paris, seen each other's work, exchanged an animated correspondence and now exchanged self-portraits, a reflection of their kinship in "post-impressionism," a vague description which only pointed to what they were not.


Vincent Van Gogh, *Self Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin,* 1888, oil on canvas, Fogg Museum, Harvard Univ. Vincent wrote Theo, " to stress my own personality in a portrait . . . had conceived it as the portrait of a bonze, a simple worshiper of the eternal Buddha."

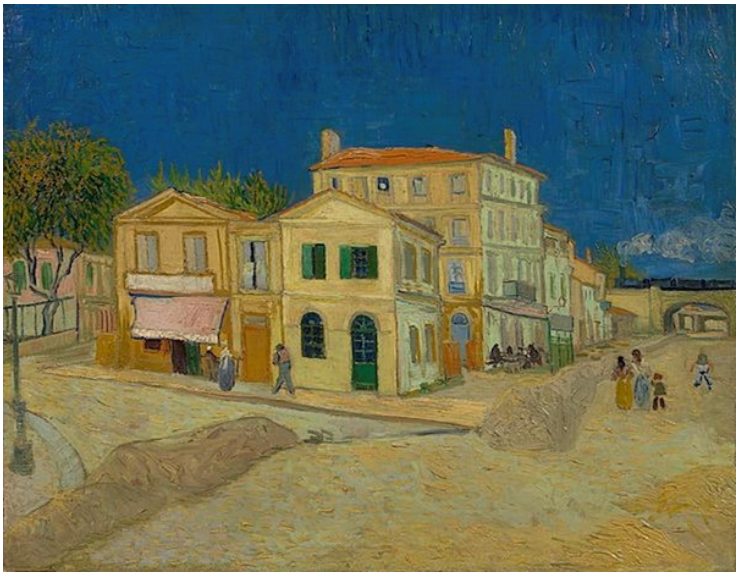
Vincent was 35, had worked with his brother Theo as an art dealer and had been painting for 10 years while Paul, reared in Peru, had been a seaman and a stock broker before beginning to paint. At 40 he left his wife and children to lead an independent life free of the "falsities" of society. Vincent had decorated the yellow house with his paintings—including his first sunflower paintings—acquired some furniture, and was feeling hopeful, relieved for the time of the depression which plagued his life.


Paul Gauguin, *Self Portrait dedicated to Van Gogh (Les Miserables)*,1888, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Gauguin sees himself as the artistic version of the convict, outcast and martyr, Jean Valjean, hero of Victor Hugo's famous novel.

Vincent's desire to create an artistic community sprang from his need for informed and creative dialogue with other artists, discussing their current work as it was being painted. His correspondence with Theo had for years been his outlet, often including sketches of the day's work. "When you've looked at these studies for some time . . . you'll perhaps get a better idea than I could put into words of the things that Gauguin, Bernard, and I have sometimes talked about and that have occupied our thoughts; it's not a question of returning to the romantic or to religious ideas—not at all. However, by taking from Delacroix more than may be apparent in terms of color and a drawing style that is spontaneous rather than imitatively precise, it's possible to express a countryside purer in nature than the suburbs and cafes of Paris." *To Theo, June 1898 from Saint-Remy.*

It feels uncanny and almost magical to look in on the lives of two people who changed the trajectory of painting. Neither had sold any work. Both were deeply involved in painting in a more expressive way, less factually realistic yet truer to the artist's experience of the scene.

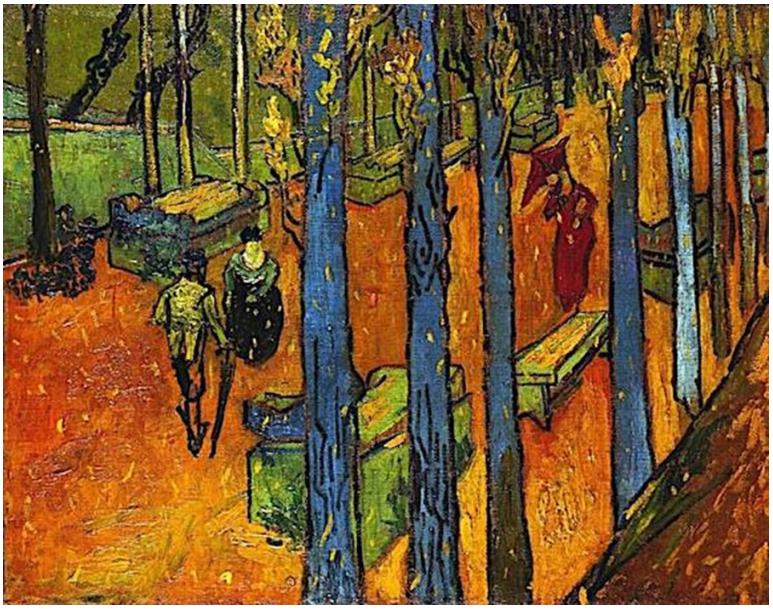
In the yellow house, Paul had the corner room and Vincent the room to the left. They had breakfast



Vincent Van Gogh, *The Yellow House*, 1888, oil on canvas. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

at the café under the pink awning next door and dinner up the street behind their house. Down the road we see the railroad arches and a passing train along the Rhone where it empties into the Mediterranean. The ditches along the road were soon to bring gas lights to Vincent's studio. It was late October and the leaves were showing brilliant color as the two men set up their easels above Les Alyscamps outside Arles. All that remains of this ancient Roman necropolis, consecrated in the 3rd century, is a few empty sarcophagi along an avenue of cypress trees. On the hill above rises the domed tower of a Romanesque church, St. Honorat. These paintings embody Vincent and Paul's widely different judgments about Cézanne. Paul held Cézanne in the highest regard. "He admired Cézanne's disciplined, rational approach: it was a way of working ruled by the head (as he felt art should be)." Vincent disliked Cézanne's work. "He found his parallel brush strokes almost 'timid' and 'conscientious'."

Paul's *Blue Tree Trunks* imposes a dramatic design on the landscape, as seen through the leafless cypress trunks against the yellow path which grounds the vista. The strolling couple are glimpsed passing behind a tree trunk and our eye follows the suggested curve of the path to the distant church tower against a yellow sky. Vincent's *Falling Leaves*, on the other hand, is alive with movement, it is happening in this moment rather than fixed in time—the drifting yellow leaves move against the blue trunks, green sarcophagi and figures moving along the orange/red walkway. The central couple face one another for a moment, while an enigmatic dark red figure with a parasol approaches. The scene feels glimpsed rather than studied. Expressionistically, we are seeing the scene through the artist's eyes and feelings, paint applied rapidly in his "ferocious impasto."



Vincent van Gogh, *Falling Leaves*, Nov. 1888, oil on canvas, Kroeller-Muller Museum, Amsterdam.

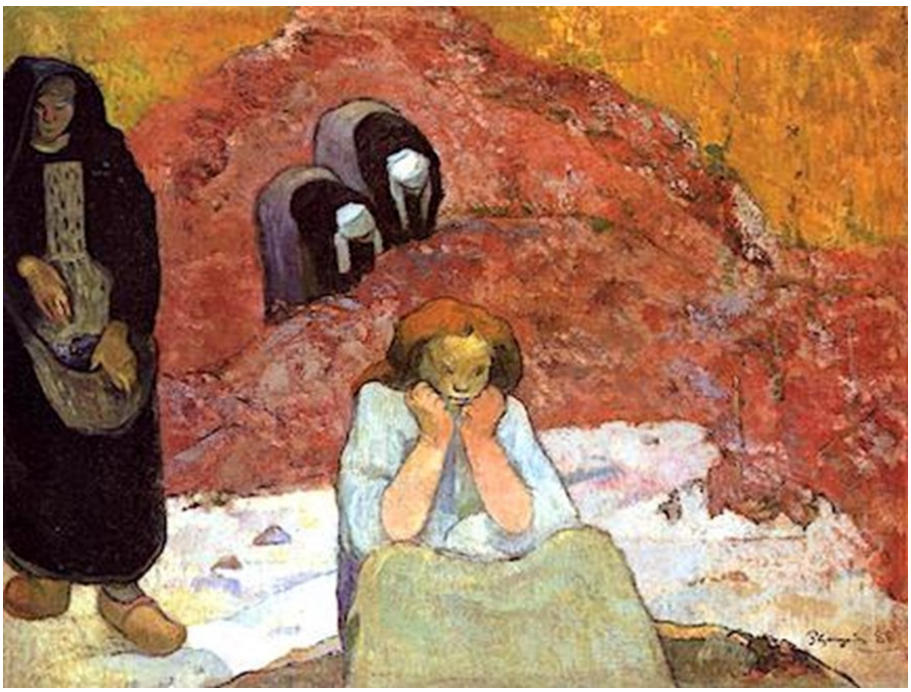
Paul Gauguin, *Blue Tree Trunks, Arles,* Nov. 1888, oil on canvas, Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen.

Life in the yellow house was improving. Vincent was a devoted reader of fiction, filling shelves with the latest publications and participating in a three-way exchange of letters with Paul and Émile Bernard, which encouraged Paul to complete a work he had long envisioned from his Catholic background. Paul intended to express symbolic meaning, labeled as synthetism. In *Vision After the Sermon*, Breton women share a vision, inspired by the sermon they have just heard, of Jacob wrestling with an angel. It was immediately dispatched to Theo in Paris who had just found a buyer for another of Paul's works. Paul used some of the proceeds to outfit a kitchen and Vincent acquired a gas stove, as the gas line was now complete. Paul began making home-cooked meals, fulfilling one of Vincent's dreams for his artists' community.

Paul Gauguin, *Vision After the Sermon*, 1888, oil on canvas, State Museum of Scotland.

Paul often worked in the studio on remembered images coalesced with scenes in Arles to produce synthesized images like *Grape Harvest in Arles* with its Breton women harvesting grapes in a scene clearly reminiscent of Millet. The bent Breton women and dark woman in clogs suggest the abstracted forms Millet introduced, while the central tired suffering woman, fists pressed to her cheeks, embodies the workers' plight. Gauguin's amalgam of idea and image expresses his understanding of art's purpose.

Though deeply influenced by Millet, in *The Red Vineyards* (next page) we see Vincent moving into the forward-looking edge of his style. The canvas throbs with activity, from the shimmering surface of the water to the individual actions of the workers. The sense of organized work in the Gauguin has given way to separate figures, their variously colored jackets dancing over the arbor. The row of of olive trees edging the vineyard reflects the blues of the jackets, the red of the grapes coloring the whole vineyard. And the setting sun casts a hard-edged light, outlining the figures and enhancing their movements. The canvas virtually jumps with energy. More than Millet, we think of Jackson Pollock in the spontaneity of the paint strokes.



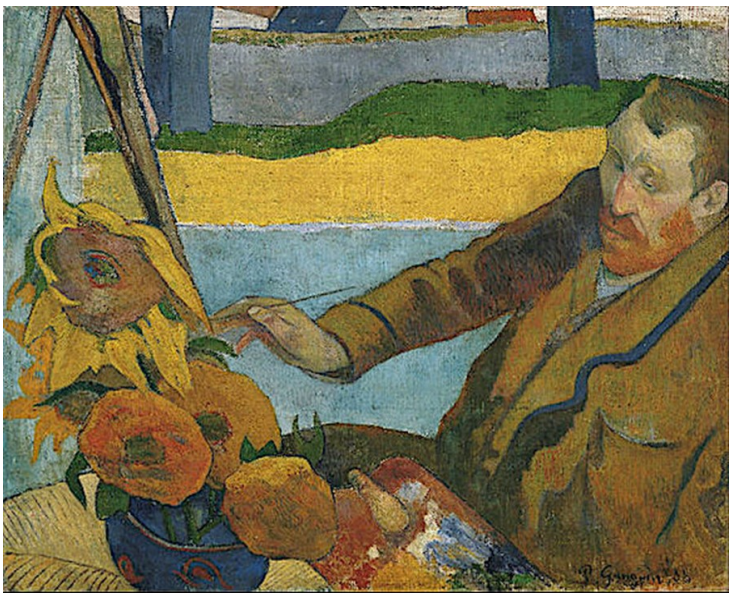
Paul Gauguin, *Grape Harvest in Arles*, (Human Misery) 1888, oil on jute sackcloth, Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen.

In early December Paul began thinking about returning to Martinique. He had sold some paintings, so had the

means to return to the Antilles, and Vincent was erratic, highly nervous, irascible, forgetful, and given to making fantastical connections between everyday events, and fearful that Paul would leave. Paul delayed his departure and offered to paint a gift portrait of Vincent to calm their relationship—*The Painter of Sunflowers.* Vincent was working incessantly and drinking heavily. Over the last weeks he had produced 25 paintings, some of his finest. Paul was reluctant to leave out of loyalty to Vincent and Theo, but increasingly concerned.

Vincent van Gogh, *The Red Vineyards*, 1888, oil on burlap, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. This is the only painting Van Gogh sold in his lifetime.

One evening late in December, Paul remembers he prepared their dinner and went out for a walk. Vincent followed him, running toward him brandishing a straight razor. Paul stopped and stared at his friend, sending him hurrying away. Back in the yellow house, Vincent cut off his own ear. (He had no memory of the event.) Theo arranged for Dr. Gachet, a family friend and fellow art collector, to place Vincent in a mental hospital and to supervise his care in Saint-Remy, where he continued to produce remarkable paintings. Paul visited him often during these last two years of his life and after Paul moved to Samoa, their communication continued through letters.



Paul Gauguin, *Painter of Sunflowers*, Dec., 1888, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Declared cured, Vincent settled in Auvers sur Oise, north of Paris, under Dr. Gachet's care. There Vincent produced 76 paintings in about a month.

Vincent died at 37 in what is now thought to have been an accident with a gun. In his short life as a painter, just over a decade, he produced almost 900 canvases and is the most famous painter of the Modern era, influencing the 20th century schools of Expressionism, Fauvism and Modernism.

Sources:
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David Sweetman, *Paul Gauguin, A Complete Life*, 1995, Holder and Stoughton, London.
Vincent Van Gogh, *Van Gogh's Letters*, 2013, Hachette Books, New York.