

# Vincent van Gogh in Auvers

— Dr Wouter van der Veen\* —  
January 2015



## AUVERS-SUR-OISE: A VILLAGE IN THE PARIS HINTERLAND

When the landscape painter Charles-François Daubigny moored his studio-boat in Auvers-sur-Oise around 1860 he could not have known at that time that this long stretched-out village less than thirty kilometers from Paris – the gateway to the 'French Vexin' region – would one day become the first port of call for all lovers of Impressionist painting. There was a good reason: in 1860 Impressionism still had to be invented. Daubigny's open-air painting on the banks of the Oise helped to give birth to it, and Auvers, where the artist finally settled in 1861, was to become one of the nerve centres of the movement.



Daubigny's floating studio

For Daubigny, Auvers possessed everything that a painter could hope for in a village: it was authentic, picturesque and typical of the region. And in 1846 a railway line linked it to Paris. After a journey of less than an hour Parisians could escape from the frantic hustle and bustle and polluted air of the capital; their escape lasted the whole of Sunday or sometimes longer.



Daubigny's floating studio

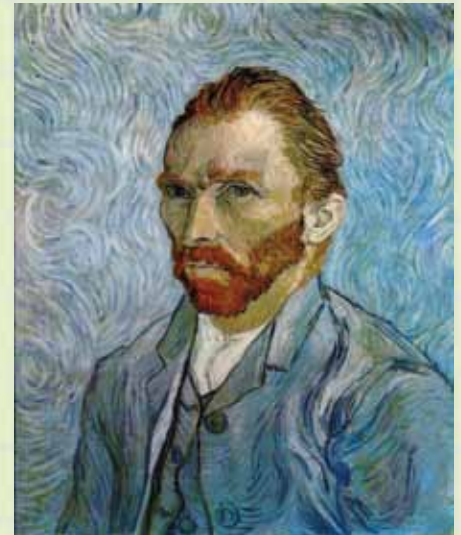
\*Wouter van der Veen: co-author with Peter Knapp of Vincent van Gogh in Auvers, Chêne



## VINCENT VAN GOGH

Thirty years later, by May 1890, the village had been visited notably by Honoré Daumier, Camille Corot, Camille Pissarro and even Paul Cézanne. But in that month Auvers-sur-Oise took on a new dimension in art history when Vincent van Gogh came to stay for a short but highly creative and prolific time. In less than 70 days he created close to 80 works, some of which were to be among his greatest paintings, such as *Wheatfield with Crows*, *Portrait of Dr Gachet*, or *The Church of Auvers*.

Van Gogh chose Auvers because that is where he found the tranquillity and artistic inspiration that he needed after a period of mental turmoil, for which he had been treated in a clinic near Saint-Rémy de Provence. He was under the care of Dr Gachet, who was both a medical man and a well-informed contemporary art lover and thus a pillar of support in the event of a relapse. He was above all someone who Van Gogh could talk to. Gachet understood him and could encourage him artistically.



Self portrait by Van Gogh, 1889

This picture, which is in the Musée d'Orsay, was painted in Saint-Rémy de Provence. Van Gogh brought it with him to Auvers-sur-Oise to show his innovative approach to the art of portrait painting.

## “AUVERS IS GRAVELY BEAUTIFUL”



The farm of Jorgus (Tate, London)

«Here it is far enough away from Paris to be real countryside.»

Letter by Van Gogh to his brother Theo, Auvers-sur-Oise, 25 May 1890

Auvers provided Van Gogh with the tranquillity that he needed. At the same time he loved the expanses of verdure, vast fields of wheat, the company of other artists and a certain amount of lively activity: the village at that time could boast of no fewer than twelve cabarets and a casino. The banks of the Oise were regularly covered with boating enthusiasts and city folk on country outings. People were free to paint or just stroll by, enjoying the healthy, convivial atmosphere of this brief country idyll so close to Paris. Vincent wrote about it to his brother Théo. Describing the village where he had chosen to reside, his words may strike us today as surprisingly modern: *“Really it’s gravely beautiful, it’s the heart of the countryside, distinctive and picturesque.”*

## THE BEGINNINGS OF RECOGNITION

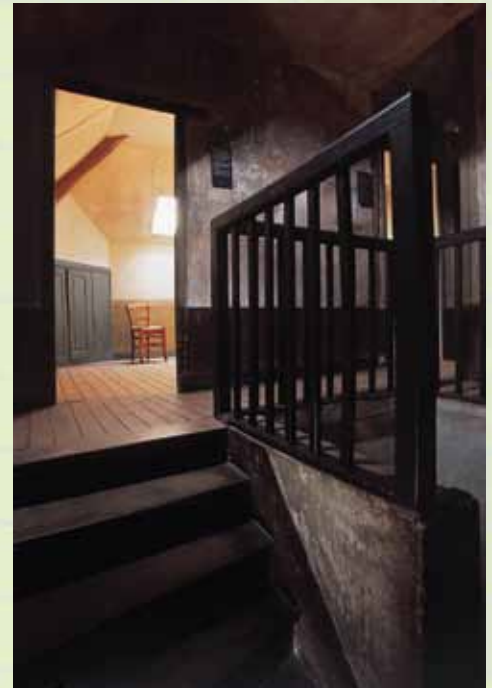
Three months before he arrived in Auvers, Van Gogh, who wished to be known just by his Christian name, Vincent, had at last enjoyed critical acclaim. An article in the *Mercure de France* had indeed poured praise upon him, deeming him to be a worthy successor to the great painters of the Dutch Golden Age, such as Rembrandt or Vermeer.

So when Van Gogh moved in to the Auberge Ravoux - a modest establishment where he had agreed on a price of daily bed and board for 1 franc and 2,50 francs respectively - he was a man full of hope and energy and artistic plans.

It was there that he learned from Théo that one of his paintings had been bought by the Belgian artist Anna Boch for 400 francs.

Unfortunately the optimism was short-lived. Van Gogh once again became the victim of the evil demons that were always waiting to haunt his mind. He shot himself in the chest in circumstances that are impossible to determine - but continue to be the subject of the wildest speculation.

He died on 29 July 1890 in room no 5 of the Auberge Ravoux.



Van Gogh's room in the Auberge Ravoux

## ANTONIN ARTAUD AND KIRK DOUGLAS

The Auvers period of his life is the one that lends itself the most easily, and quite rightly, to the 'demythification' of Van Gogh, who is all too often considered to have been poor, deranged and unappreciated. It is a Romantic vision that has clung to him tenaciously, presenting him from the very first moments following his tragic death as a martyr sacrificed on the altar of art.

This false notion was reinforced by the lurid biography written by Irving Stone, *Lust for Life* (1934), then by Antonin Artaud's lyrical pamphlet *Le Suicide de la Société* (1948) and finally the film version of *Lust for Life* (1956), which achieved almost cult status, starring Kirk Douglas as a caricatural Van Gogh, archetype of the doomed artist.

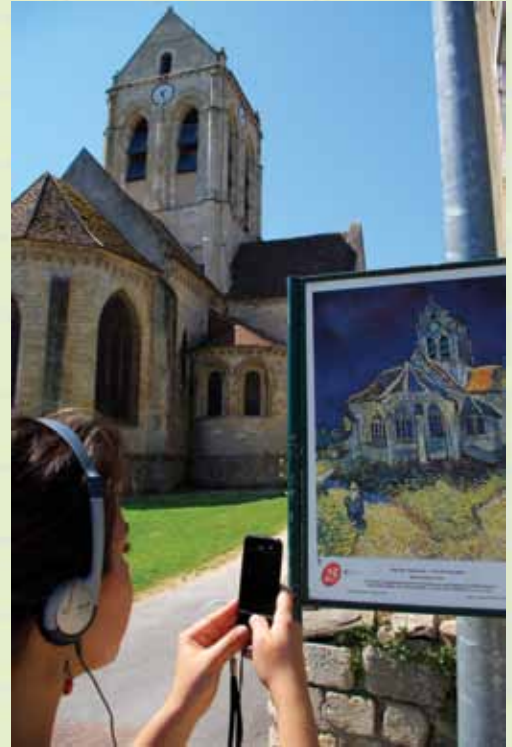
Recent research reveals the artist to have been just the opposite. He was lucid, cultivated and acknowledged in avant-garde art circles. And he was not without the means to live decently and paint as much as he wished.



## AUVERS, AN OPEN-AIR MUSEUM

Auvers still attracts as many people as it did in the nineteenth century, and for the same reasons that it was popular at that time with Parisians on a Sunday outing. Now as then the visitor can escape from the frantic pace of civilization and all the stress of the internet era. Once in Auvers, the visitor has the time and space to ponder upon life, to reflect a little and relax. The village in the course of time has kept its old-style charm despite growing urban pressures.

The range of activities and attractions is as rich as ever. There is something for every kind of visitor: the church of Notre-Dame, Daubigny's studio, Town Hall square, Absinth Museum, House of Dr Gachet, the Château of Auvers, Van Gogh's room in the Auberge Ravoux, and the Cemetery. All of these visitable places are within easy walking distance of one another and can be guaranteed to satisfy the visitor's intellectual and cultural curiosity. The fields round about the village and the banks of the Oise are an opportunity to recharge one's batteries from the contact with nature. To fully understand the spirit of the place and discover Van Gogh's universe there is nothing like a visit to Auvers-sur-Oise, following in the footsteps of so many other 'pilgrims' in recent years. The soul of Auvers has not changed in nearly 150 years, when one thinks hard about it. This is not a breathtaking discovery, but it is at least excellent news!



The Auvers-sur-Oise Tourist Office's audio-guide «In The footsteps of the artists»

## A VILLAGE AT THE HEART OF MODERNITY FOR OVER 150 YEARS

In 1999 the American economist John Naisbitt prophesied that the biggest economic sector of the 3rd millennium would be that of technology...the next biggest being everything that enabled us to escape from technology! With this in mind he created the notion of High Touch to contrast with High Tech. Auvers-sur-Oise is creating in 2014 an imaginative program of activities to unite these two realities, which are not mutually exclusive. At a time when the whole world is becoming a chaotic place, with information flying round the planet at the speed of light and billions of individuals exchanging innumerable messages and goods every day, Auvers-sur-Oise is proud to be there for visitors looking for a haven of peace, a place where time is at the service of mankind and not the reverse.



Vincent van Gogh : Rainy landscape with train»  
Pushkin State Museum-Moscow

«I seek to find an expression for the desperately swift passing away of things in modern life.»

Letter by Van Gogh to his sister Wilhelmina, 13 June 1890»



Vous êtes prié d'assister aux Convoi, Service et Inhumation de

**Monsieur Vincent VAN GOGH**

ARTISTE PEINTRE

Décédé en son domicile, à Auvers-sur-Oise, le Mardi 29 Juillet 1890, dans sa  
37<sup>e</sup> année ;

Qui se feront le Mercredi 30 Juillet, à 2 heures  $\frac{1}{2}$  précises, en l'Église  
d'Auvers-sur-Oise.

On se réunira 2, place de la Mairie, à Auvers-sur-Oise.

*DE PROFUNDIS.*

De la part de : Madame veuve VAN GOGH, sa mère, et de Monsieur Théodore  
VAN GOGH, son frère.

Départs de Paris-Nord : 7 h. 25, 9 h. 25, 10 h. 25, 11 h. 25, 1 h. 25, ~~2 h. 25~~, 3 h. 25.

## JULY 1890 : VAN GOGH'S FUNERAL IN AUVERS-SUR-OISE

On 27 July 1890, the painter Vincent van Gogh tried to end his life by shooting himself in the chest. After two agonizing days, he died in his little attic room at the Auberge Ravoux in the presence of Theo, his brother, closest confidant and unflinching supporter.

On Wednesday 30 July, many friends and acquaintances of the artist had come to Paris and the surrounding regions to pay a last tribute to him.

Theo had tried to arrange for the funeral to be held in Auvers' Notre-Dame church which had been immortalized by Vincent a few weeks earlier, but the priest refused. A man who had not only committed suicide, but was also a Protestant, was not to have a religious service. Theo had to correct the death announcements, which had already been printed, by hand.

The ceremony therefore took place at the Auberge Ravoux, which was decorated with sunflowers, yellow dahlias and the artist's last paintings.

After the priest at Auvers refused the loan of the hearse, bier and ropes, his colleague at Méry-sur-Oise resolved the situation by supplying what was needed to transport Van Gogh's coffin from the Auberge Ravoux to the Auvers cemetery. The fields were drenched in dazzling sunlight. Doctor Gachet, Vincent's friend and doctor, made a moving speech before the sorrowful mourners.

Six months later, Theo died at the age of 33 in the Netherlands, where he was buried. He left behind his young wife, Johanna Bonger, and their son Vincent Willem van Gogh, who was barely a year old.

In 1914, Johanna had Theo's remains moved so that the two brothers could be reunited after death in Auvers-sur-Oise

*« He was [...] an honest man and a great artist; he had only two aims, humanity and art. It was art that he prized above everything and which will make his name live. [...]. His funeral was a crowning finale that was truly worthy of his great spirit and his great talent. »*

Emile Bernard, letter to the art critic Albert Aurier, Paris, August 2nd, 1890.

*« People must know that he was a great Artist, which often goes hand in hand with being a great Man. In time, he will be recognized and there will be many who regret that he left us so soon. »*

Theo van Gogh, letter to his sister Lies, Paris, August 5th, 1890.



Skylight of Van Gogh's room at the Auberge Ravoux

Letter of August 2nd, 1890

The painter Emile Bernard describes the burial of Van Gogh to Albert Aurier, art critic  
(full transcript)

My dear Aurier,

Your absence from Paris means that you have not heard the dreadful news which however I am obliged to tell you without delay: Our dear friend Vincent died four days ago.

I think that you will have already guessed the fact that he killed himself.

On Sunday evening he went out into the countryside near Auvers, placed his easel against a haystack and went behind the chateau and fired a revolver shot at him. Under the violence of the impact (the bullet entered his body below the heart) he fell, but he got up again, and fell three times more, before he got back to the inn where he was staying (Ravoux, place de la Mairie) without telling anyone about his injury. He finally died on Monday evening, still smoking his pipe which he refused to let go of, explaining that his suicide had been absolutely deliberate and that he had done it in complete lucidity. A typical detail that I was told about his wish to die was that when Dr. Gachet told him that he still hoped to save his life, he said, «Then I'll have to do it over again». But, alas, it was no longer possible to save him. . . .

On Wednesday 30 July, yesterday that is, I arrived in Auvers at about 10 o'clock. His brother, Theodore van Gogh, was there together with Dr. Gachet. Also Tanguy (he had been there since 9 o'clock). Charles Laval accompanied me. The coffin was already closed, I arrived too late to see the man again who had left me four years ago so full of expectations of all kinds. . . The innkeeper told us all the details of the accident, the offensive visit of the gendarmes who even went up to his bedside to reproach him for an act for which he alone was responsible . . . etc...

On the walls of the room where his body was laid out all his last canvases were hung making a sort of halo for him and the brilliance of the genius that radiated from them made this death even more painful for us artists who were there. The coffin was covered with a simple white cloth and surrounded with masses of flowers, the sunflowers that he loved so much, yellow dahlias, yellow flowers everywhere. It was, you will remember, his favorite colour, the symbol of the light that he dreamed of as being in people's hearts as well as in works of art.

Near him also on the floor in front of his coffin were his easel, his folding stool and his brushes.

Many people arrived, mainly artists, among whom I recognized Lucien Pissarro and Lauzet, the others I did not know, also some local people who had known him a little, seen him once or twice and who liked him because he was so good-hearted, so human. . .

There we were completely silent all of us together around this coffin that held our friend.

I looked at the studies; a very beautiful and sad one based on Delacroix's *La Vierge et Jésus*.



Convicts walking in a circle surrounded by high prison walls, a canvas inspired by Doré of a terrifying ferocity and which is also symbolic of his end. Wasn't life like that for him, a high prison like this with such high walls--so high. . . and these people walking endlessly round this pit, weren't they the poor artists, the poor damned souls walking past under the whip of Destiny? . . .

At three o'clock his body was moved, friends of his carrying it to the hearse, a number of people in the company were in tears. Theodore van Gogh who was devoted to his brother, who had always supported him in his struggle to support himself from his art, was sobbing pitifully the whole time.

The sun was terribly hot outside. We climbed the hill outside Auvers talking about him, about the daring impulse he had given to art, of the great projects he was always thinking about, and of the good he had done to all of us.

We reached the cemetery, a small new cemetery strewn with new tombstones. It is on the little hill above the fields that were ripe for harvest under the wide blue sky that he would still have loved... perhaps.

Then he was lowered into the grave. . .

Anyone would have started crying at that moment... the day was too much made for him for one not to imagine that he was still alive and enjoying it...

Dr. Gachet (who is an art lover and possesses one of the best collections of impressionist painting of the present day) wanted to say a few words of homage about Vincent and his life, but he too was crying so much that he could only stammer a very confused farewell. . . (the most beautiful way, perhaps).

He briefly outlined Vincent's achievements, stating how sublime his goal was and how great an admiration he felt for him (though he had only known him a short time). He was, Gachet said, an honest man and a great artist, he had only two aims, humanity and art. It was art that he prized above everything and which will make his name live.

Then we returned. Theodore van Gogh was broken with grief; everyone who attended was very moved, some going off into the open country while others went back to the station.

Laval and I returned to Ravoux's house, and we talked about him. . .

But that is quite enough, my dear Aurier, quite enough, don't you think, about this sad day. You know how much I loved him and you can imagine how much I wept. You are his critic, so don't forget him but try and write a few words to tell everyone that his funeral was a crowning finale that was truly worthy of his great spirit and his great talent.

With my heartfelt wishes

Bernard





Photography Erik Hesmerg - © Institut Van Gogh

Graves of Vincent and Theo van Gogh in the communal cemetery of Auvers-sur-Oise.

As a tribute to the bond of friendship and loyalty that united Vincent and Theo, the son of Doctor Gachet planted ivy from his father's garden over the two graves, thereby transforming them into one tomb.

In the weeks after the funeral, Theo received many messages of affection and condolence:

« *A great artist is dead* » - Eugène Boch, painter and friend of Vincent.

« *I was really so fond of the artistic soul that was your brother. He leaves behind a great vacuum among the young artists.* » Camille Pissarro, painter and friend of Vincent.

« *You know he was a true friend to me and that he was an artist, something that is rare in our age. We shall continue to see him in his artworks. As Vincent often said: The stone shall die, but the word shall remain.* » Paul Gauguin, painter and friend of Vincent.

« *My sincerest condolences Mr Van Gogh. Your brother was warm-hearted and a true artist.* » Ernest Quost, painter admired by Van Gogh.

« *Men such as he do not entirely die. He leaves behind a body of work that is a part of himself and which, one day, you and I are sure of it, will revive his name and revive it eternally.* » Albert Aurier, art critic and great admirer of Van Gogh's work.

# Extraits Livre d'Or

Journalist



*" Si j'avais su que c'était si beau, j'aurais emmené les enfants."*

D.C. Valière  
l'Express

*For those who have experienced life's disappointments, Van Gogh's room is a chance to imagine themselves a misunderstood artist for a day.*

Nicholas Lequesne  
Time News Magazine

*Auvers, sa lumière changeante sous les brumes matinales qui montent des berges de l'Oise, ses champs dorés sur le plateau du Vexin... on imagine l'éblouissement de Van Gogh.*

Thierry Morvan  
l'Humanité Dimanche

*" The Van Gogh room is bare, a black canvas on to which visitors can project their own reactions."*

Rodrey Balt  
The Sunday Telegraph

*" For Van Gogh's fans, there's room at the inn."*

Ginger Danto  
The New York Times

*" The little attic room where Van Gogh died is so dingy, so tragic, so poignant that it leaves you slightly drunk at the thought of finally beginning to understand the inner torment of an extraordinary artist."*

Paul Betts  
Financial Times

Parmi les nombreuses vidéo dédiées à Auvers-sur-Oise ayant paru sur Youtube, une contribution de Samuel Julien, 13 ans, nous a particulièrement touchés. Le jeune vidéaste conclut son propos de 4 minutes par les mots "c'est un endroit où on est en contact avec l'histoire"  
<http://youtu.be/pMg-ZxYSCbo>

# Extraits Livre d'Or

Institut Van Gogh // Auvers-sur-Oise

*" C'est gravement beau.*

*La passion de Vincent et de l'authenticité, un exceptionnel sens de l'accueil... tout cela est réuni à l'Auberge Ravoux. Mille bravos pour cette réussite unique et toutes les initiatives qui l'accompagnent. La magie de Vincent fonctionne à merveille. "*

Jean-Marie M.

*" Moi, César  
13 ans, je suis  
venu, j'ai vu et  
je suis conquis !"*

*" La convivialité,  
L'émotion,  
La gastronomie,  
Le bonheur  
à Auvers... "*

François M.

*" Quelle merveilleuse  
journée ! Nous ressentons  
une grande émotion !  
Est-ce l'âme de Van Gogh  
qui préside cette journée ?  
Peut-être, en tout cas, c'est  
merveilleux !"*

Une famille des Yvelines



*" Il y a des endroits hors du temps,  
Pour toujours. "*

Vincent F.

*" On vient sans savoir, on repart désolé de ne pas avoir su avant qu'il existait si près de Paris un paradis d'où l'on repart serein, ébloui. Merci mille fois d'avoir fait vivre aussi bien Van Gogh dans l'émotion et à travers le temps. "*

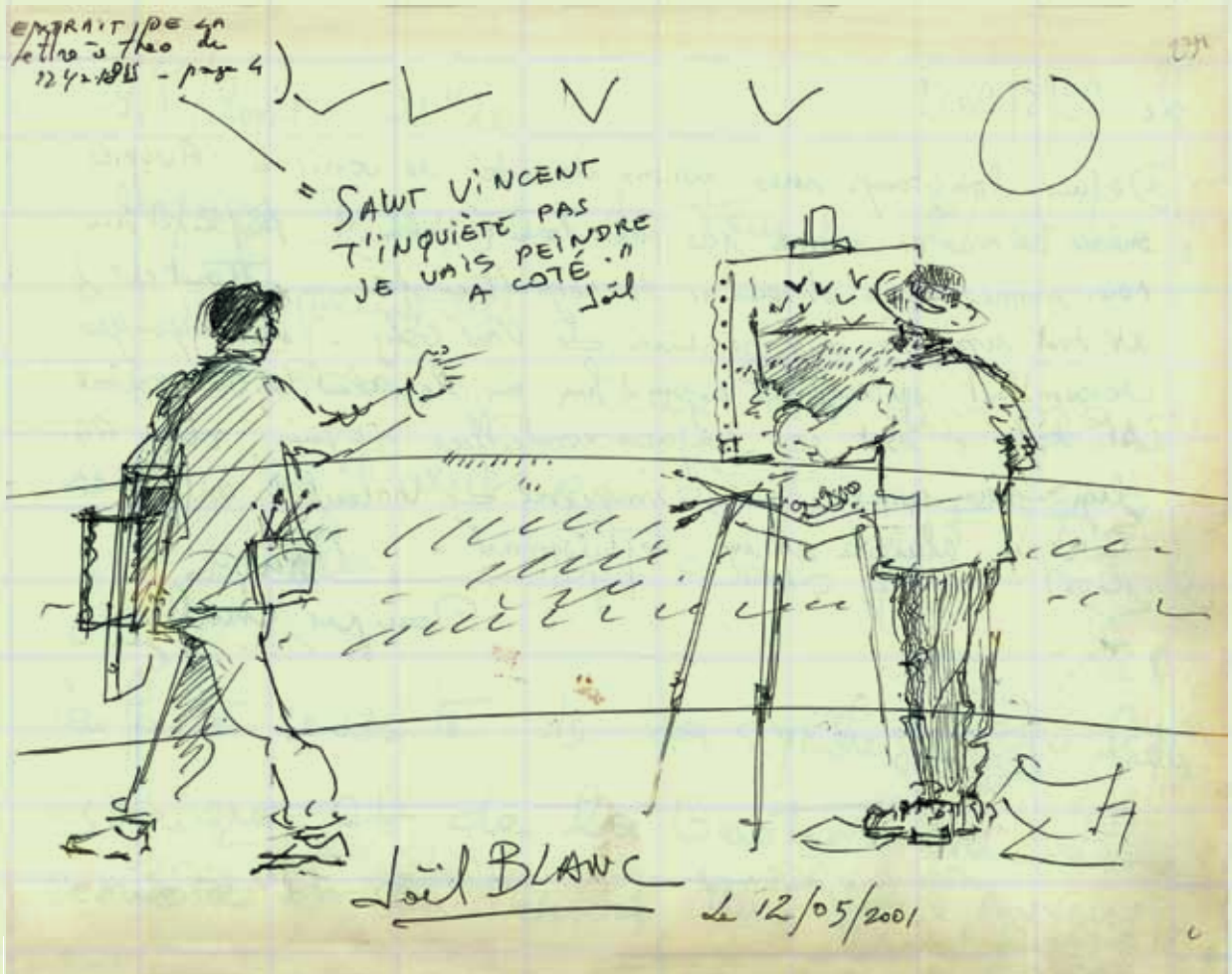
Mimi M.

*" A beautiful village  
A wonderful lunch  
A unique view of history"*

William H.

*" Sur ses tableaux comme dans son  
auberge, c'est le triomphe de la vie !"*

Gautier V.



*" Merci d'avoir (p)réservé la chambre  
de Vincent pour l'éternité"*

Catherine R.

*" Il y a bien longtemps que je voulais venir,  
merci d'avoir su préserver son petit coin de  
campagne et l'endroit où il repose."*

Mme A.

*" What a moving tribute to  
Monsieur Van Gogh!*

*Please continue to preserve the  
memory of his genius.*

*Thank you for this unforgettable  
experience."*

Lisa F.