



Painting as Life

Saint-Rémy and Auvers 1889–1890

"To suffer without complaining is the only lesson one should learn in this life," van Gogh wrote in May 1889 to his brother Theo, although he had every reason to wrangle with his fate. At the age of 36 Vincent went of his own accord into the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole nursing hospital for the mentally ill near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, 17 miles from Arles.

His hopes and plans for the future were completely destroyed. The incurable illness came increasingly to the fore, and the attempt by the locals of Arles to have him put away lay heavy on his heart. He felt discarded by society, and Theo's approaching wedding left him fearful of losing the support of his helpful, beloved brother, added to the failure of his most desirous dream, a communal "studio of the south", which was shattered upon Gauguin's departure.

The insight "that I finally feel incapable of taking a new studio and of staying there alone, neither here in Arles, nor anywhere else ... I would like to stay temporarily in the asylum, because of my own peace of mind as well as that of others," was hard-won, although he had long ago broken with all conventions. There was nothing left for him to do but to accept his situation: "I am ready to play the rôle of a madman, although I have not at all the strength for such a rôle." Despairing, he clung to his brother: "If I didn't have your friendship, I would be driven to suicide without giving it a second thought, and cowardly as I am I would do it in the end."

The asylum, where van Gogh spent almost a year, was about two miles from Saint-Rémy in a rather lonely district, surrounded by cornfields, vineyards and olive groves – motifs which appear again and again in his paintings. Lugging from the dark hallways and barred windows of the cheerless rooms, life in the men's quarters must have been very depressing for him.

The patients were left completely alone, since the director of the asylum, Dr. Peyron, who ruled it with rigorous thrift, just kept the patients alive and neglected to actually help them; he was not even a specialist in mental illnesses. Van Gogh received no medical attention apart from twice-weekly baths. Yet his life was more bearable in every sense than that of the other unhappy patients. He was allowed to withdraw, to read and work, and to leave the asylum so long as he was accompanied.

At this stage van Gogh was diagnosed as suffering from epileptic fits. Periodically he experienced fits of unpredictable length, going through a hazy stage,

"I painted a large picture of the village church – the building has a violet appearance against a flat, deep blue sky of pure colour; the stained-glass windows are like ultramarine coloured spots; the roof is violet and orange in parts. At the front is something green in bloom and pink-coloured sun-burnt sand. It is almost like the studies I made of the old towers and cemetery in Nuenen – the only difference now being that the colour is more expressive and richer."

—VINCENT VAN GOGH

PAGE 64
The Church at Auvers, 1890
 Oil on canvas, 94 x 74 cm (37 x 29 in.)
 Paris, Musée d'Orsay



The Sower, 1888
Oil on canvas, 64 x 86.5 cm (25 1/8 x 33 7/8 in.)
Omerio, Kröller-Müller Museum



*"This man will either become mad
or else leave us way behind."*

— CAMILLE PISSARRO

The Sower, 1888
Oil on burlap on canvas,
73.5 x 95 cm (30 x 36 1/8 in.)
Zürich, Stiftung Sammlung E.G. Bührle

