

The Langlois Bridge at Arles  
with Women Washing  
Arles, March 1888  
Oil on canvas, 54 x 64 cm (21.3 x 25.4 in.)  
F. 197, III (L68)  
Ottobri, Koller-Müller Museum



**The Sower**  
Arles, June 1888  
Oil on canvas, 64 x 80.5 cm (25.2 x 31.7 in.)  
F. 412, III 1470  
Ottawa, Kröller-Müller Museum

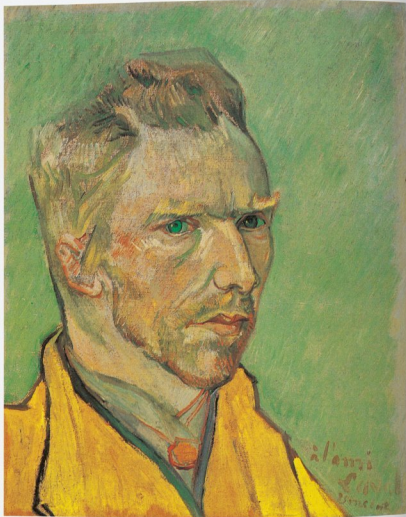


**Haystacks in Provence**  
Arles, June 1888  
Oil on canvas, 75.5 x 93 cm (28.9 x 36.6 in.)  
F. 415, III 1483  
Ottawa, Kröller-Müller Museum





**Starry Night over the Rhône**  
Arles, September 1888  
Oil on canvas, 75 x 92 cm (28.7 x 36.2 in.)  
F. 474, 101 0302  
Paris, Musée d'Orsay



## Genius and Error: Gauguin in Arles October to December 1888

On 8 October 1888, Gauguin wrote to his friend and supporter Emile Schuffenecker: "Theo van Gogh has sold some ceramics for me, for three hundred francs. So I shall be going to Arles at the end of the month and will probably remain there for a long time, since the point of the stay will be to work without financial worries until I am launched. In future he will be paying me a modest allowance every month." A week later his euphoria had already evaporated: "Even if Theo van Gogh were in love with me, it wouldn't be my good looks that prompted him to support me down south. He's a cool Dutchman and has seen how the land lies, and he intends to take matters into his own hands as far as possible, and that exclusively." Gauguin was evidently uneasy about his agreement with Vincent's brother. It was indeed a kind of prostitution. He was financially dependent on the sums that Boussod & Valadon had offered him. This was the gallery for which Theo van Gogh organized exhibitions of young painters. The price Gauguin himself had to pay was to live with the other van Gogh, the oddball, in Arles. True, he valued his art highly; but he found the company of Vincent van Gogh rather beneath his dignity. It had in fact been only at Vincent's insistence that Theo had agreed to the arrangement. The artists' community would capture the south on canvas and then conquer the capital – that was Vincent's idea. Gauguin was wary from the start, feeling that his own future lay in the tropics. But he needed the money; and, once Theo had actually begun selling his work, things started moving.

Vincent himself had been in a state of excitement ever since the summer when the possibility of Gauguin's joining him was first raised. His childlike impatience mounted steadily with every delay devised by his uneasy fellow artist. Gauguin distrusted the whole business. He felt his own light was being hidden under a bushel, and feared his talent was being sacrificed to business interests. Nonetheless, on 23 October he finally arrived in Arles. In the two months that he was to spend there, Gauguin was not to show himself from his most attractive side; he behaved brusquely and arrogantly, and surely had a share in the blame for van Gogh's fit. But Gauguin was cornered, and felt he had been manoeuvred into a hopeless situation in which his lack of success combined with a sense that van Gogh had called him to a provincial, uninspiring region to produce extreme frustration. He quickly recognised that in Arles he would never achieve the success he craved. Gauguin was disoriented from the start. And it was in that frame of mind that he encountered the anxious, well-meaning van Gogh – and found that he went terribly on his nerves. From the outset, Gauguin fell in with the role of abbot that he was expected to play in van Gogh's monastic Yellow House. He ran the household and insisted on the same kind of orderliness in their life as we can see characterizes his work when we compare it with van Gogh's. Van Gogh the monk was demoted to a novice, with his own consent. With complete dedication he tried to comply with the authority of Gauguin – whose dictates took over his everyday life much as they took over his art.



Trunk of an Old Yew Tree  
Arles, late October 1888  
Oil on canvas, 91 x 71 cm (35.8 x 28 in.)  
F 573, JH 1845  
Helly Nahmad London

Self-Portrait  
Arles, November–December 1888  
Oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm (18.1 x 15 in.)  
F 524, JH 1834  
Private collector



## Olive, Cypresses and Hills Van Gogh's Compacted Landscape

Unlike his fellow inmates, van Gogh had not been committed to the asylum. He could leave the cloistered halls once the day's work was done and retire to his cell. He was under as much supervision as was thought necessary and had as much independence as was considered feasible; and van Gogh believed that the therapy would help. Even if he described ever-widening circles around it in those months, the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum was the centre of his life. He needed subjects. At first he was satisfied with what he found in the immediate vicinity. The low wall that enclosed the asylum remained for weeks a mental borderline that he would not cross. Concerned for his own recovery, the voluntary patient stayed inside bounds that he was not obliged to observe. The fact of it was that he hoped to find security there.

And so he repeatedly turned his attention to the no-man's-land between the wide and exciting world out there and his own smaller, confined world. He painted the field and the stone wall, his mental barrier. Beyond it, though, was an absorbing landscape whose distinctive features he was only now beginning to register. From afar he focussed on points that were typical of the landscape of Provence, points that he had found disturbing when he was in Arles because they did not fit in with the beauty of his Japanese utopia. It was only now that he acquired his fondness for what was characteristically Mediterranean in the region: the cypress trees, the olive groves and the sparse vegetation on the hills. What attracted van Gogh was not the picture-postcard picturesqueness of a geographical area which even at that time threatened to be overrun with tourists. He was fascinated by the grotesque shapes of the vegetation and rocks; and rather than adapt them to a picturesque impression he took them as they were, because they afforded a natural version of his own need for the distorted and deformed. All he needed to do was look; the motifs already had that quality of bizarre originality, of darkness, of the demonic, which he increasingly sought in his art.

So when he looked across the wall (cf. p. 507), he found a whole world of subjects awaiting him. There was a range of hills, the Alpilles, with countless olive trees at their feet and an occasional solitary cypress crowning them to counteract the gentle ups and downs of the hills with a bold vertical. Little by little, van Gogh ventured closer to his new find: there was less of the field in his pictures and the landscape beyond came within reach. *At the Foot of the Mountains* (p. 502) identifies the crowns of individual trees merging into the foothills – a presentation possible only once the artist came closer. The immense cypresses on page 512 are seen so close that the top of one is cropped by the upper edge of the picture. Only the field remains to add an element of distance. Before van Gogh overcame that distance he first painted all his new discoveries in a single canvas, and (characteristically, given his wariness of closer contact) he did it from memory and imagination. The painting was to become one of his most famous works: *Starry Night* (pp. 516–517).

Cypresses  
Saint-Rémy, June 1889  
Oil on canvas, 95.3 x 74 cm (36.7 x 29.2 in.)  
© 015, JH 1746  
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art