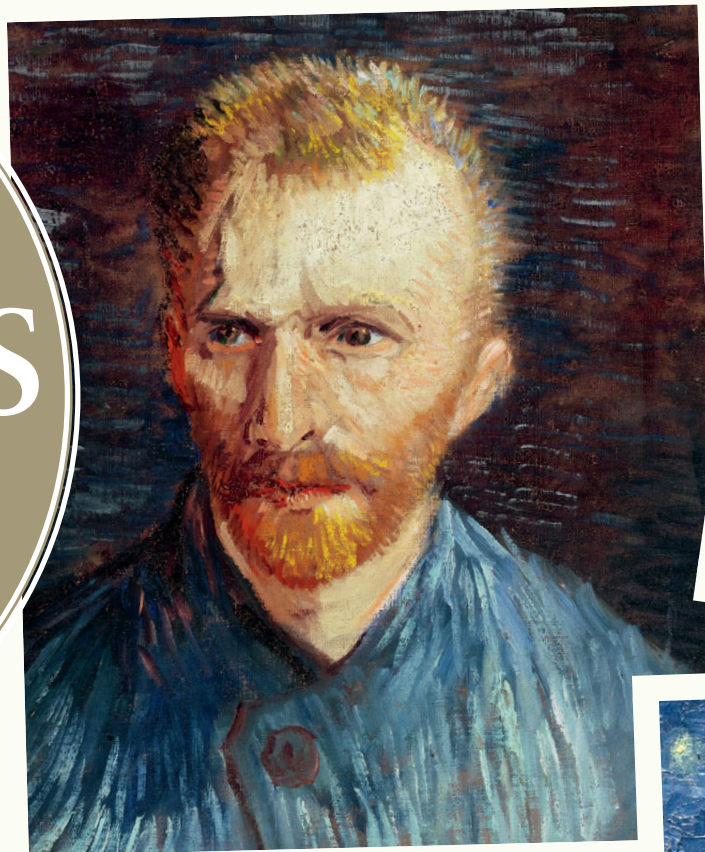


VINCENT VAN GOGH

STROKES OF GENIUS

On the 125th anniversary of Vincent van Gogh's death, **Jon Bryant** examines the artist's brief but productive time in France



Room Five at the top of the stairs at the Auberge Ravoux in Auvers-sur-Oise has not been let out for 125 years.

It remains exactly as it was when Vincent van Gogh died there from gunshot wounds, having struggled back, bleeding, to the tiny auberge. Whether his injuries were self-inflicted or, as a 2011 biography argues, he was shot by a young man he knew, they ended the life of a man who sold only one painting during his lifetime but who became one of the most celebrated and iconic artists in history and a trailblazer for modern art.

Van Gogh, who was born in Holland in 1853, lived at 37 addresses across his home country, Belgium, England and France. He spent the last four years of his life in France and although he claimed to have been happiest in Brixton, London, where he fell in love with his landlady's daughter, Eugenie, it was his troubled yet artistically prolific time in Arles, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence and Auvers-sur-Oise where his masterpieces were created.

From February 1886 to February 1888, van Gogh lived in Paris with his younger brother Théo, who ran a gallery. Vincent would have seen many of Claude Monet's paintings and early Impressionist works by Paul Gauguin. He visited Toulouse-Lautrec every week in his studio and was introduced to most of the avant-garde artists of the day.

It was in Paris that he was influenced by pointillism and where he developed his style of rapid, striated brushstrokes, bright colours and the thick application of paint known as impasto. He became interested in the Japanese woodblock prints that influenced his style with their small figures and elevated views. He painted 200 works in Paris but comparatively little is known of his time there since, because he was living with his brother, he did not write to him.

Van Gogh penned hundreds of letters and most of what we know about his life and art comes from their contents. He left Paris '*bien navré [sorry] et presque alcoolique*' for the south of France and settled in Arles. He rented the Yellow House in Place Lamartine and hoped to create a centre for artists. He sent word to Gauguin, then in Brittany, to join him and painted several versions of the sunflowers with which he intended to decorate his colleague's room.

Gauguin eventually arrived in October 1888 and the two artists began living together. They visited Montpellier but their relationship deteriorated rapidly and they argued constantly about art. It was in Arles that van Gogh cut off part of his ear with a razor and gave it to a local prostitute called Rachel. While he was

recovering in hospital, Gauguin took the chance to slip away.

After several more psychotic episodes and a petition from locals against the '*fou roux*' (mad redhead), van Gogh committed himself to the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in nearby Saint-Rémy-de-Provence in May 1889. One month later, he painted the swirling *Starry Night*.

The portraits of local people in Arles and reed-pen sketches gave way to the gardens of the asylum, fruit tree blossoms and landscapes around Saint-Rémy and the Alpilles mountain range, which he was able to paint on supervised walks.

Fits of despair and hallucination continued to plague him and in May 1890, van Gogh moved to Auvers-sur-Oise, 20 miles north-west of Paris, to be nearer his brother and Dr Paul Gachet, who had been recommended by other artists. He paid three and a half francs per day for full board at the Auberge Ravoux and painted more than 70 works in the 70 days he was there. He died on 29 July, 1890, aged 37, from an infection caused by the gunshot wound and was buried in the municipal cemetery. Théo died six months later.

For details of events in Europe marking the 125th anniversary of van Gogh's death, visit www.vangogheurope.eu

PHOTOGRAPHS: SELF-PORTRAIT 1887; COURTESY OF THE VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM; FRANCES WYSOCK/Hemis.fr; MATTHIEU COLIN/Hemis.fr; BERTRAND RIEGER/Hemis.fr



THINGS TO SEE

Musée d'Orsay and Musée Rodin, Paris ①

The Musée d'Orsay has some of van Gogh's greatest works, including a portrait of Dr Gachet, *Starry Night over the Rhône* (pictured) and *The Church at Auvers-sur-Oise* (tel: (Fr) 1 40 49 48 14, www.musee-orsay.fr). The Musée Rodin's three works include a portrait of Le Père Tanguy. Tel: (Fr) 1 44 18 61 10 www.musee-rodin.fr

Arles ②

The Fondation Vincent van Gogh holds exhibitions and modern art installations devoted to the artist or inspired by him. An exhibition of van Gogh's drawings runs until 20 September. The Yellow House was destroyed during World War II, but the café that featured in his paintings survives, decorated in bright yellows and re-named the Café Van Gogh. Tel: (Fr) 4 90 93 08 08 www.fondation-vincentvan-gogh-arles.org

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence ③

The Van Gogh Walk (€8) around Saint-Rémy includes panels showing his works at the location they were painted. Van Gogh's room in the asylum is now a museum and explains how 'madness' was treated in the 19th century. The smartphone application *Les Paysages Français de Vincent van Gogh* was launched this year. Tel: (Fr) 4 90 92 05 22 www.saintremy-de-provence.com

Auvers-sur-Oise ④

The Auberge Ravoux, also known as the Maison van Gogh (tel: (Fr) 1 30 36 60 60, www.maisondevangogh.fr), is now a restaurant, lodgings and museum. You can also see the artist's grave, and visit Dr Gachet's house; the Absinthe museum; the Daubigny garden museum; and the Château d'Auvers, all of which are hosting events in 2015. *Sur les Pas de van Gogh in Auvers* runs until 20 September. www.surlespasdevangogh.eu