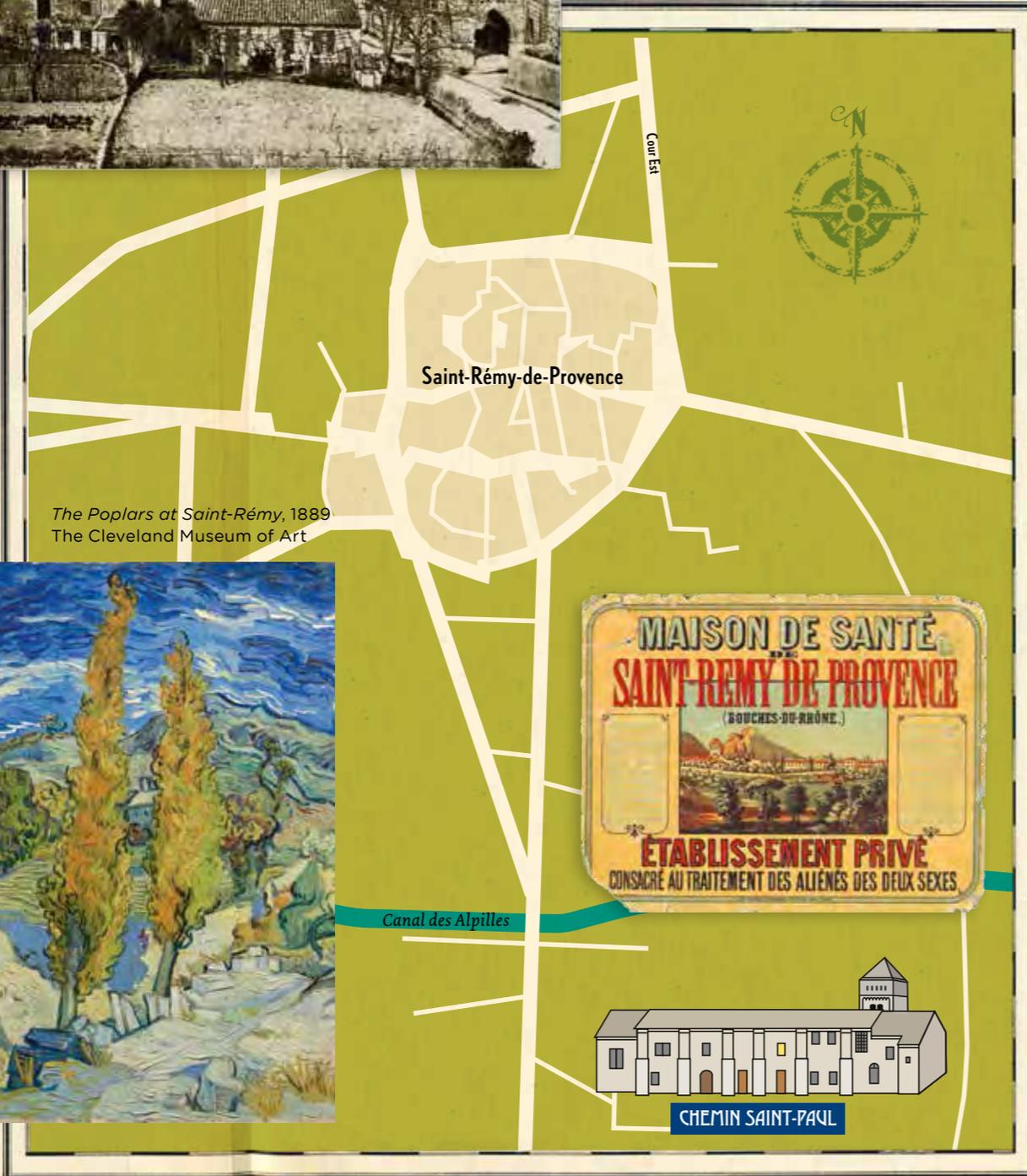




Postcard of Saint-Rémy, 1889

MAP N° 22: SAINT-RÉMY-DE-PROVENCE



The Poplars at Saint-Rémy, 1889  
The Cleveland Museum of Art



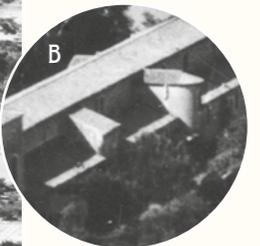
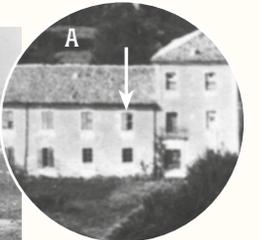
CHEMIN SAINT-PAUL

# SAINT-RÉMY-DE-PROVENCE



1853

1889-1890



The Saint-Paul-de-Mausole psychiatric institution  
A. Vincent's room  
B. Vincent's studio

## THE CLINIC

The psychiatric clinic was about a kilometre and a half to the south of the town of Saint-Rémy. It consisted of a complex of buildings called Saint-Paul-de-Mausole, which had once been a monastery, so it was an ideal place for a 'private institution dedicated to the treatment of the insane of both sexes', as the clinic advertised.

According to the doctor, 'Mr van Gogh is subject to attacks of epilepsy, separated by long intervals,' and so it was 'advisable to place him under long-term observation'. A day after his arrival, Vincent told the recently married Theo and Jo that it was good that he had come to Saint-Rémy. He referred to the place as a 'menagerie', but he could see that the patients were treated well. 'Although there are a few people here who are seriously ill, the fear, the horror that I had of madness before has already been greatly softened,' he wrote. Vincent realised that he could simply see 'insanity' as an illness, and this made him less fearful of his own situation. The change of environment would do him good.

The page with Vincent's name from the psychiatric clinic's admissions register



## VINCENT'S ROOM

Vincent had a small room on the first floor of the men's ward, 'with grey-green paper with two water-green curtains with designs of very pale roses enlivened with thin lines of blood-red. [...] Through the iron-barred window I can make out a square of wheat in an enclosure [...], above which in the morning I see the sun rise in its glory. As there are more than 30 empty rooms—I have another room in which to work.' This extra room was in the other wing of the building and had a view of the garden.



*Window in the Studio, 1889*  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

1. The window in the room where Vincent had his studio, 1950s
2. Vincent's room in the 1950s



*Fountain in the Garden of the Asylum, 1889*  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



*Garden of the Asylum, 1889*  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

## THE GARDEN

Vincent was confined within the grounds of the clinic for the first few weeks. He was allowed to go and paint in the garden, though, which attracted the attention of his fellow patients: 'They all come to see when I'm working in the

garden, and I can assure you are more discreet and more polite to leave me in peace than, for example, the good citizens of Arles,' he wrote to Jo, his sister-in-law.

By the second day of his stay, Vincent was already working on

two paintings, one of irises and one of a large lilac bush, which also includes some irises. Another feature of the garden can be seen in the background: the wall designed to stop the patients from escaping.



*Lilacs, 1889*  
The Hermitage, St Petersburg



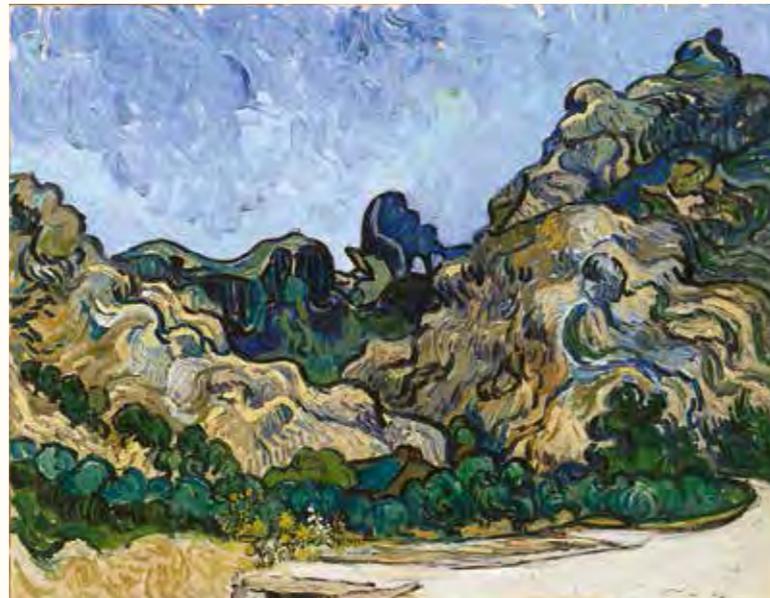
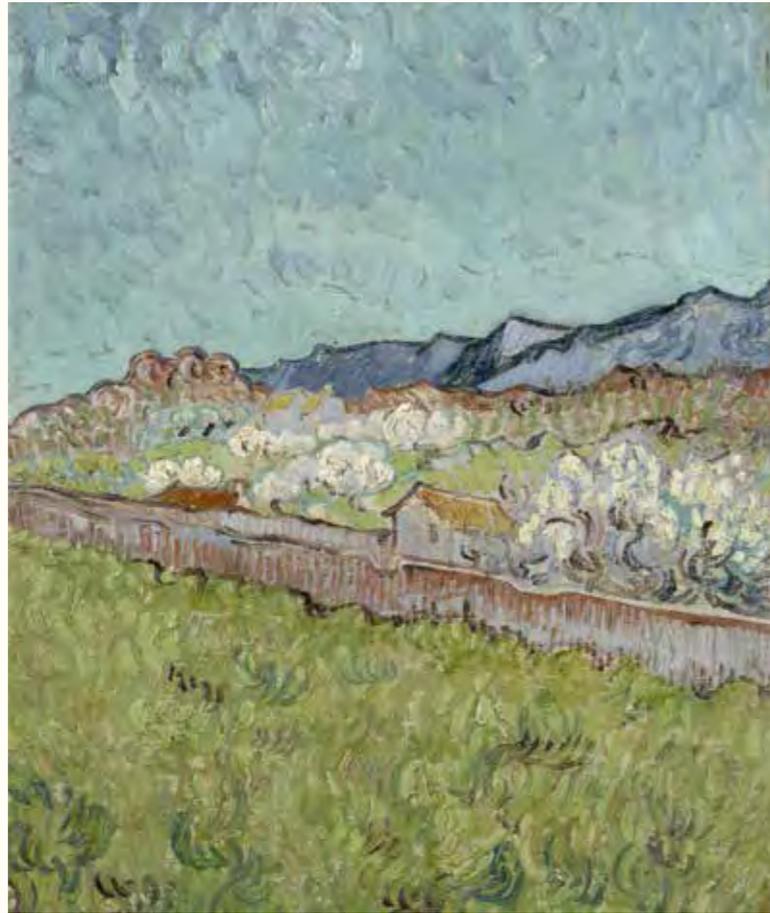
*Irises, 1889*  
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

## THE ALPILLES

Saint-Rémy was on the other side of the mountains that Vincent had seen in the distance on his walks around Arles: the Alpilles. In a letter from the institution he described them to Jo as 'little grey or blue mountains, with very, very green wheatfields at their foot, and pines.' Vincent could see the Alpilles from the window of his room, and they appear in various paintings that he made in Saint-Rémy. When he was not permitted to leave the grounds, he drew and painted them from the garden or through the window of his room, and when he was allowed to go further afield, he sometimes headed into the Alpilles to set up his easel in the middle of the rugged landscape. He always had to be accompanied by an orderly from the hospital.

*View of the Alpilles, 1890*  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Vincent painted the mountain landscape with, in the foreground, part of a wall inside the clinic grounds.



*The Alpilles with a Hut, 1889*  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York



*Entrance to a Quarry, 1890*  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



## The hydrotherapy baths

'Now I take a bath twice a week, and stay in it for 2 hours,' Vincent wrote to Theo. Bathing, officially referred to as 'hydrotherapy', was part of his therapy. In the nineteenth century, hydrotherapy was a commonly prescribed treatment for psychiatric patients, as it was believed to have a calming effect. The bathing involved alternating between hot and cold baths, or taking a cold shower after a hot bath. It seemed to work for Vincent, but his description of a newcomer to the clinic shows that it did not always have the desired effect: 'he scarcely calms down, although he's in a bath all day long'.

## THE ABANDONED QUARRY

A little over two months after Vincent's admission to the clinic, it happened again. One windy day, he was painting the entrance to an abandoned quarry at the foot of the Alpilles. In those rough and rugged surroundings, Vincent was suddenly overcome by an immense feeling of loneliness. He felt an attack coming on, but still finished his painting.

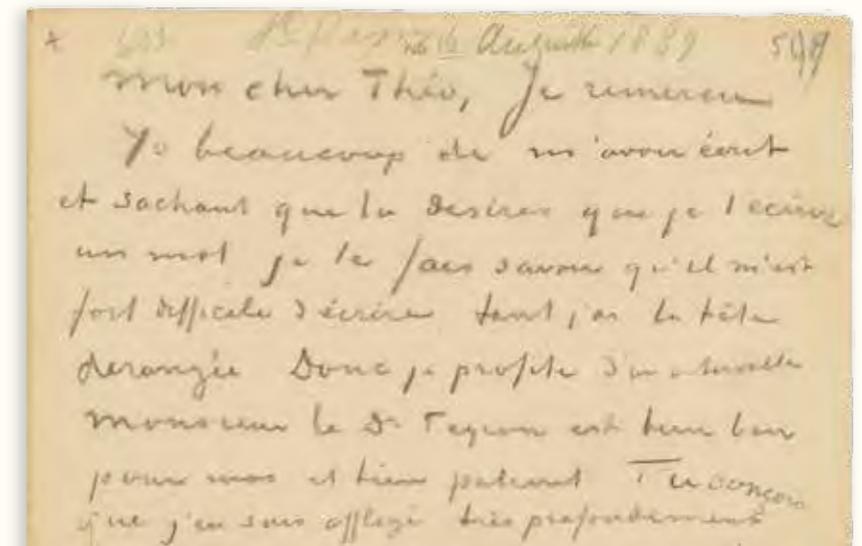
## 'ABSOLUTELY DISTRAUGHT'

Once he was back at the hospital, Vincent was very confused, and the situation quickly went from bad to worse. Not only did he 'pick up filthy things and eat them', but he also drank paraffin, which he snatched from the boy who was filling the lamps. As he had also swallowed oil paint and turpentine, he was no longer permitted to paint, even though Vincent said it was necessary for his recovery. He just sat in his room for a month. Eventually he was allowed to paint again, but still indoors. It would be at least another month before he could cautiously venture outside again.

He wrote to Theo: 'For many days I've been absolutely distraught, as in Arles, just as much if not worse, and it's to be presumed that these crises will recur in the future, it is ABOMINABLE.'

Letter from Vincent to Theo, 22 August 1889  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

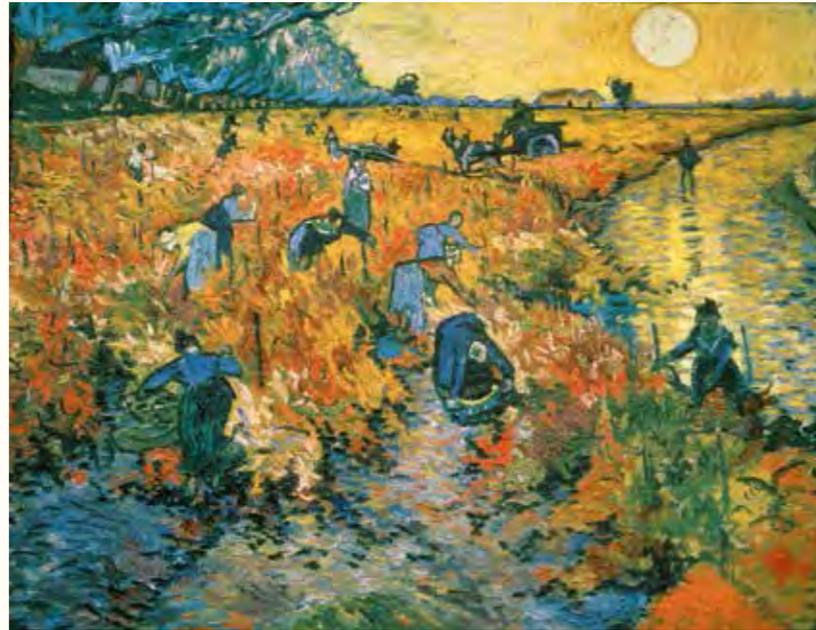
Vincent wrote the first letter after his attack in black crayon. As his carers were scared he might hurt himself, he was not allowed to have a sharp pen.



## GRADUAL RECOGNITION

While Vincent struggled with his health, the art world began to show appreciation for his work. Six of his paintings were exhibited in Brussels at the beginning of January 1890. One of them was even sold: *The Red Vineyard*, which Vincent had painted at Montmajour. It was purchased by Anna Boch, the sister of his good friend Eugène.

In response to the exhibition, the art critic Albert Aurier wrote a very positive article about Vincent's work in the *Mercure de France*. But when Theo submitted Vincent's work for a large exhibition in Paris and it received good reviews there, too, it all became too much for him. 'Please ask Mr Aurier not to write any more articles about my painting, tell him earnestly that first he is wrong about me, then that really I feel



too damaged by grief to be able to face up to publicity. Making paintings distracts me—but if I hear talk of them that pains me more than he knows.'

*The Red Vineyard*, 1888  
Pushkin Museum, Moscow

This is the only painting that was sold during Vincent's lifetime

A poster for the 1889 World's Fair



## To Paris?

Vincent's doctor, Théophile Peyron, went to Paris in September to see the 1889 World's Fair. He also planned to visit Theo while he was there. Vincent

saw an opportunity: 'Yesterday I asked Mr Peyron point blank: since you're going to Paris, what would you say if I suggested that you be good enough to take me with you?' But the doctor thought it was too soon. And Theo also responded with caution, even though Vincent had written to him passionately to explain why he wanted to leave Saint-Rémy: 'Yes, we must be done here, I can no longer do both things at once, working and doing everything in my power to live with the odd patients here—it's unsettling.' When Theo and the doctor decided that it would be more sensible to wait a little longer, Vincent accepted this, but reluctantly: 'Nevertheless, if an attack recurs I still want to try a change of climate, and even to return to the north as a stopgap.'

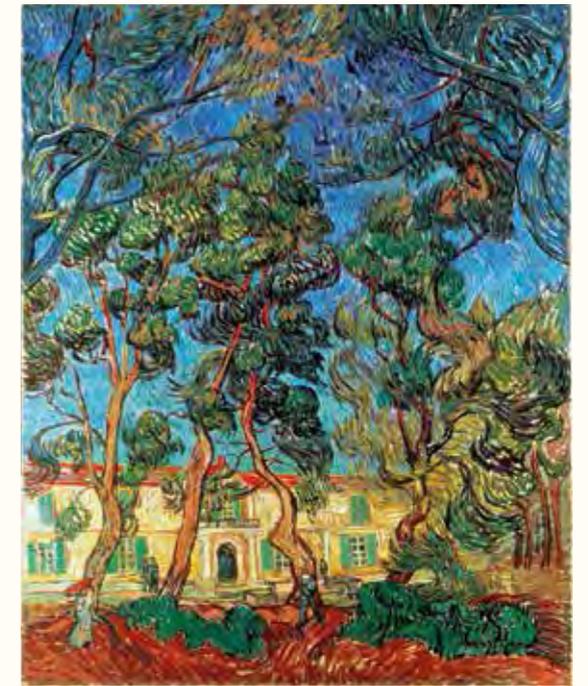
## OUTSIDE AGAIN

After his attack, Vincent stayed indoors for a long time. He mainly copied prints of works by other artists. 'It's a study I need, for I want to learn.' When he had recovered to some extent, he began to work outside once again. If he had enough paint and canvas, he painted, and when he had used them up, he would draw until his order of painting materials arrived. Vincent first talked to Theo about Auvers-sur-Oise as a possible place to live in October.

Auvers was an artists' village, just a stone's throw away from Paris, and a doctor lived there who would be able to keep an eye on Vincent. That was important, because he didn't want the police to take him off to an institution next time he became ill.

→ *Trees in the Garden of Saint-Paul Hospital*, 1889  
Armand Hammer Museum of Art, Los Angeles

*Almond Blossom*, 1890  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



## HEADING NORTH

It was a few months before Vincent was ready to leave. He had attacks in December and January. As soon as he could, he went back to work. From his bed-

room, he could see the almond trees just beyond the walls of the institution. In February, he painted *Almond Blossom* as a gift for Theo and Jo's newborn

son, who had been baptised Vincent Willem and already had a good pair of lungs on him. In the letter that Theo wrote to give Vincent the good news, he expressed the wish that his son would be 'as determined and as courageous as you'.

Soon after that, Vincent had another attack. This time it took him two months to recover and start working again. He had spent a year in the clinic, where he had made around 150 paintings and just as many drawings.

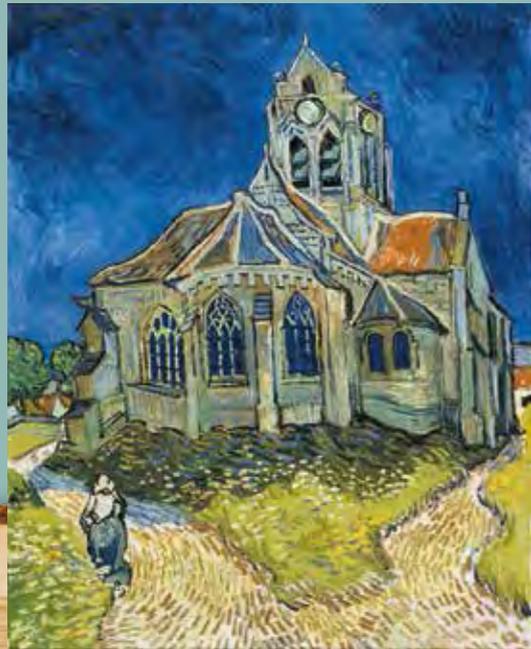
'Remember that I warned you around 6 months ago that if I was seized by a crisis of the same nature I'd wish to change asylums?' Vincent wrote to Theo at the beginning of May 1890 that the time had come to make the move. He wanted to go north, to Auvers. He would not recover in Saint-Rémy; that much was clear.





1853 ..... 1890

# AUVERS-SUR-OISE



*The Church at Auvers, 1890*  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

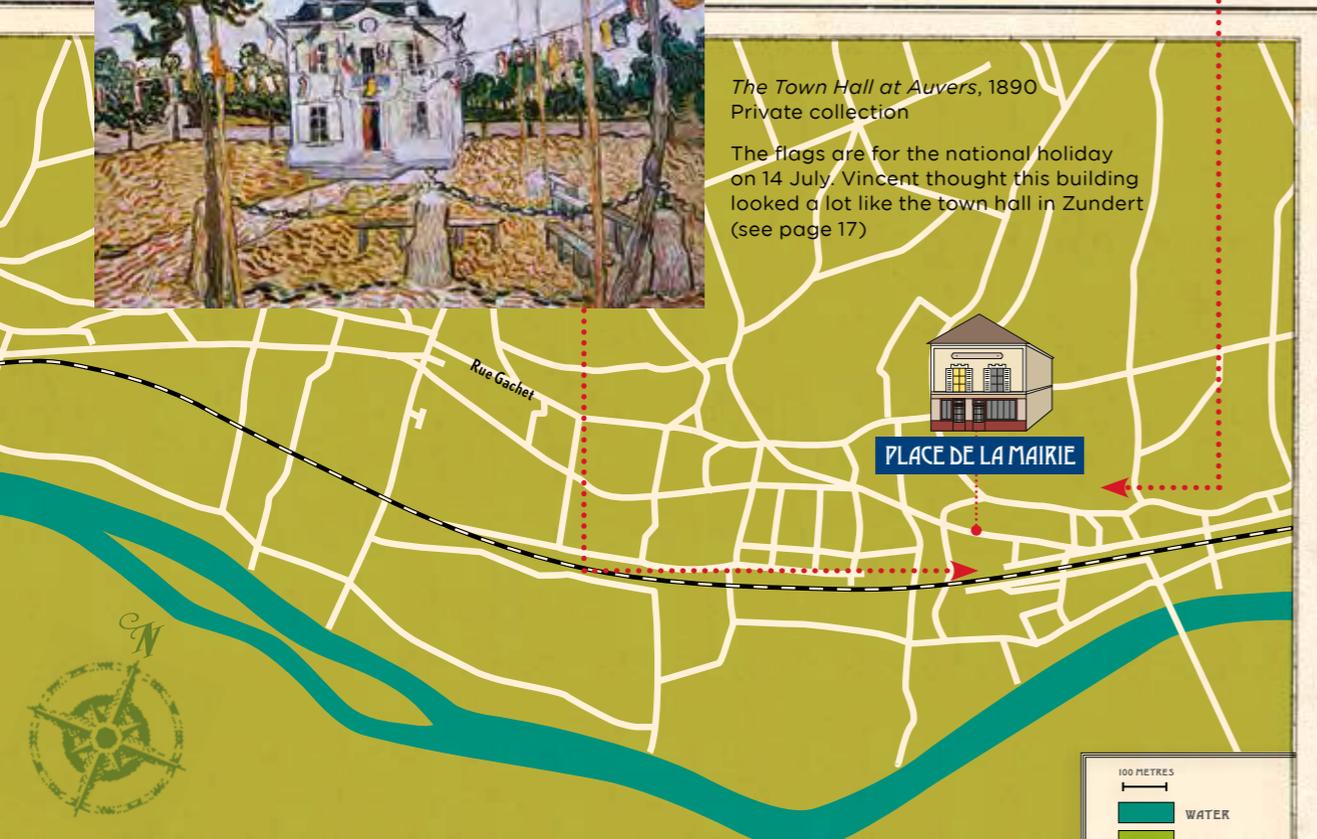


Postcard showing the church at Auvers

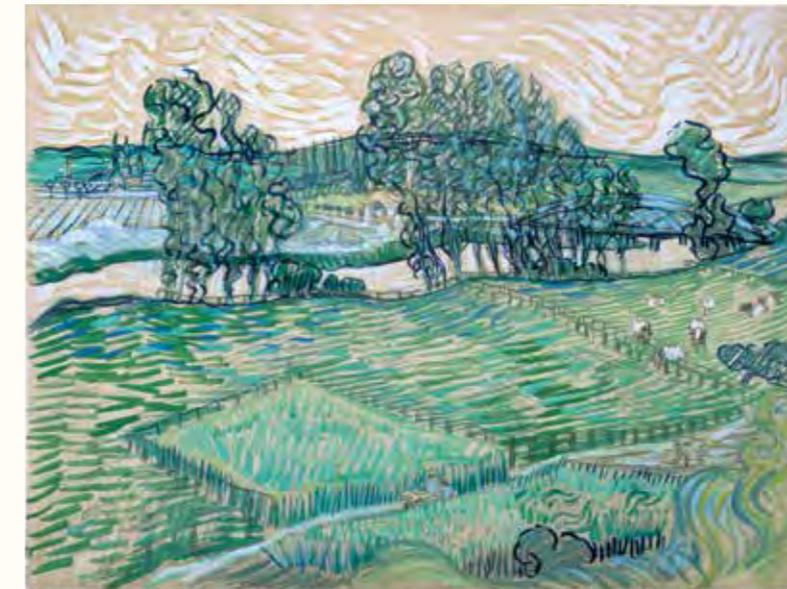


*The Town Hall at Auvers, 1890*  
Private collection

The flags are for the national holiday on 14 July. Vincent thought this building looked a lot like the town hall in Zundert (see page 17)



MAP N° 23: AUVERS-SUR-OISE



*Landscape with Bridge across the Oise, 1890*  
Tate, London



Theo van Gogh, 1889

## A STOP IN PARIS

Vincent left the clinic in Saint-Rémy in spring. He travelled alone, but he was well prepared, having sent his luggage ahead by goods train a few days before. He had arranged with one of the guards to have his paintings that were still drying sent on afterwards, and he had written to Arles to ask for his beds and his mirror, which were in storage, to be delivered to him. Vincent had agreed with Theo that he would travel to Auvers-sur-Oise via Paris and spend a few days with Theo and Jo. He had not yet met his sister-in-law and his nephew, and he was looking forward to seeing his brother again after two years. He could not remember much about Theo's visit to Arles when he was ill.

Vincent arrived at Gare de Lyon in Paris in the morning. Theo met him at the station and they rode to the apartment in an open carriage. Jo was on the lookout. She had expected to see a sick man, 'but here was a sturdy, broad-shouldered man, with a healthy colour, a smile on his face, and a very resolute appearance'. Vincent was thrilled to meet his nephew, who was named after him. He stayed in Paris for three days and was in fine spirits. When he had had enough of the noise of the city, he travelled onwards to Auvers, thirty kilometres to the northwest of Paris.



Jo van Gogh-Bonger and the infant Vincent Willem, for whom Vincent painted his *Almond Blossom*, 1890



*Marguerite Gachet in the Garden, 1890*  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris



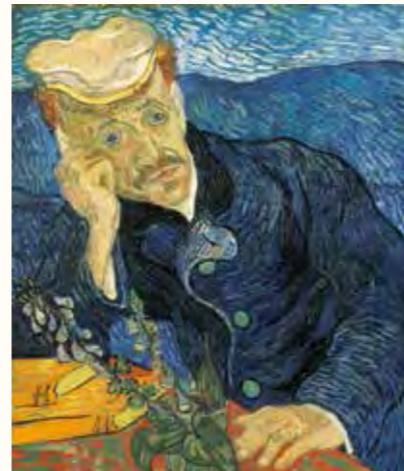
Dr Paul Gachet

#### DR GACHET'S HOUSE AND GARDEN

After his arrival in Auvers, Vincent was taken care of by a homeopathic doctor, Dr Paul Gachet. Gachet lived with his daughter, Marguerite, and son, Paul Jr, in a house on a hillside, that was 'cluttered with all sorts of things'. The doctor also had an apartment in Paris, where he saw his patients. When he was in Auvers, he did not work as a doctor, but as a fanatical amateur artist he agreed to keep an eye on Vincent, his fellow painter. He had been recommended to the Van Gogh brothers by a friend, the artist Camille Pissarro. Vincent thought he could also become friends with the doctor: 'Despite the fact that he's an odd fellow, the impression he made on me isn't unfavourable.'

Vincent soon became a regular visitor to Dr Gachet and his children. The doctor concluded within a short time that Vincent's attacks would most probably not recur. When Theo and Jo visited from Paris for the day, the doctor invited them for lunch in the large garden. Vincent met them from the train. He had brought along a bird's nest for his nephew. In the doctor's garden, he showed him all the animals that were scurrying around. He couldn't help laughing when little Vincent was startled by a rooster crowing. 'Et le coq fait cocorico!', he cried out, according to Jo. 'And the rooster says cock-a-doodle-doo!' It was a nice day, which left him with 'a very pleasant memory'.

*Portrait of Dr Gachet, 1890*  
Private collection



Houses in Auvers, c. 1900

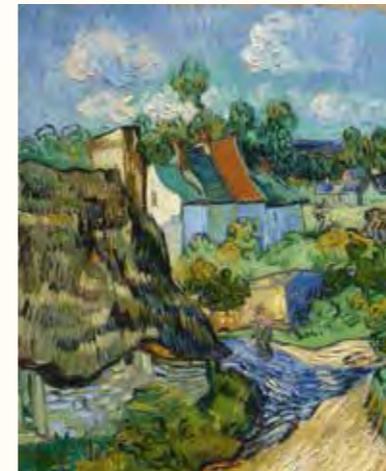


#### HOUSES IN AUVERS

When Vincent wrote to Theo and Jo after his arrival in Auvers, the first thing he said was that the town was very beautiful: 'it's the heart of the countryside, distinctive and picturesque'. He particularly liked the old thatched roofs of some of the houses, which were becoming rare, he wrote, and he 'really seriously' wanted to paint some pictures of them. If there was interest, he could sell them and recoup some of the costs of his stay in Auvers.

*Farmhouse, 1890*  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

*Houses in Auvers, 1890*  
Boston Museum of Fine Arts





Portrait of Adeline Ravoux, 1890  
Private collection

### AUBERGE RAVOUX

When Vincent arrived in Auvers, Dr Gachet wanted him to stay at an inn near his house, which cost six francs a night. Vincent thought that was far too much and he found a cheaper place, near the station: an auberge run by Arthur Ravoux. It cost only three and a half francs a night to stay there, and if he didn't like it, he could always move. But it never



Auberge Ravoux in the 1950s

came to that. Vincent probably enjoyed his time with Monsieur and Madame Ravoux; their inn was also a restaurant and a wine shop. Years later, the Ravoux family's eldest daughter, Adeline, remembered an interesting fact about the artist who had once painted her portrait: Vincent did not drink a drop of alcohol.



Vincent's room  
at Auberge  
Ravoux in  
the 1950s



The inn in 1890, with owner Arthur Gustave Ravoux and his daughter Germaine on the left. His eldest daughter Adeline is standing in the doorway.



Place de la Mairie,  
c. 1900