

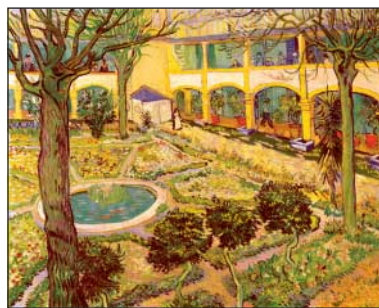
ON DECEMBER 23, 1888, AT 11:30 PM, VINCENT VAN Gogh (1853-1890) crossed the courtyard from his house to the La Maison de Tolérance brothel, asked for Rachel, and gave her a part of his left ear wrapped in paper, instructing her to “Guard this article carefully.” Vincent had no recollection of what he had done. Still the local newspaper in Arles, France, *Le Forum Républicain*, referred to his actions as those of “a poor lunatic,” a designation that has affected his reputation since that time. The police went immediately to the yellow house that he shared with Paul Gauguin and found Vincent sleeping deeply. Gauguin, threatened by Vincent, had spent the night at a hotel. When he arrived home about 7 AM and learned what had happened he immediately notified Theo, Vincent’s loyal brother and art dealer, in Paris. On receipt of Gauguin’s telegram Theo took the next train from Paris to Arles.

Vincent was distraught when Gauguin told him earlier that month of his plans to leave Arles. His departure meant the end of Vincent’s dream of an artist colony, the Studio of the South, where he hoped artists could express the religious impulse in post-Impressionist painting. Vincent, like his father and grandfather, had pursued the ministry and he had lived for a time as an evangelist. But he turned away from traditional religion to find his new calling in his art. Sensitive to rejection, he was losing not only someone he admired but also his hope for the new artistic endeavor.

Vincent was hospitalized in Arles under the care of Dr Félix Rey and initially placed in an isolation cell-like room. Theo wrote to his fiancé that Vincent alternated between lucidity and rambling philosophical and theological arguments and complaints of past miseries. He arranged for Pastor Frédéric Salles from the Protestant Reformed Church to monitor Vincent’s progress in hospital and to report back to him in Paris. Theo spent Christmas Day with his brother and returned to Paris the next day accompanied by Gauguin, who was never to meet with Vincent again.

Vincent was moved to the general medical ward as his condition improved and on New Year’s Day 1889 wrote Theo that he was very much improved; his doctor concurred. By January 7 Vincent was discharged and back at work in his studio. The nature of his recovery suggested to his physicians an underlying diagnosis of larvate (mesial temporal lobe) epilepsy with hallucinations aggravated by absinthe (a stimulant and convulsant in high doses) and alcohol abuse, poor diet, and chronic stress. That month Vincent completed still life paintings and several self-portraits (*Self-portrait With Bandaged Ear* and *Japanese Print*), a portrait of Dr Rey, and one of his friend Joseph Roulin’s wife (*La Berceuse*). On January 28 he wrote “the unbearable hallucinations have stopped for now, reducing themselves to a simple nightmare on account of taking potassium bromide, I think.” (<http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let743/letter.html>)

Vincent’s newfound optimism soon faded. Local townspeople read about the ear-cutting episode and tormented him. A gang of teenagers amused themselves by insulting him on



Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), *Courtyard of the Hospital at Arles*, 1889, Dutch. Oil on canvas. 72 × 92 cm.

the street and throwing cabbage stalks at him. Vincent abused alcohol and absinthe; suspicious of being poisoned he was re-hospitalized in February. Later that month about 30 citizens of Arles petitioned the mayor that Vincent be returned to his family or be committed to an asylum, claiming that “he does not dispose of his full mental faculties, that he indulges in excessive drinking after which he finds himself in such a state of excitement that he does not know what he says or does and that his instability inspires public fear.” The Yellow House was closed, and Vincent was allowed to sleep at the hospital. Pastor Salles informed Theo on March 12 that the neighbors worked on one another’s feelings, but Vincent’s behavior was not the kind that required a man to be certified insane or confined; his every act, innocent or not, was scrutinized.

On April 30 Vincent wrote to his sister Wilhelmina that although he was calm and actively working, there were 4 crises in the preceding months when he did not know what he had said, wanted, or done, so he had decided to enter the asylum in Saint-Rémy. He described 2 paintings of the hospital in Arles, one of the medical ward with rows of beds and another of its inner court (*Courtyard of the Hospital at Arles*; cover)—“an arcaded gallery like those one finds in Arab buildings, all white-washed [with] an antique garden with a pond in the middle, and eight flower beds, with forget-me-nots, Christmas roses, anemones, ranunculus, wall flowers, daisies and so on.” He concluded, perhaps reflecting his recent dysphoria, that “three gloomy black tree trunks pass through like serpents, and in the foreground four big dismal clusters of somber box shrubs” (<http://www.webexhibits.org/vangogh/letter/19/W11.htm>).

Vincent, accompanied by Pastor Salles, entered the Asylum at Saint-Rémy as a voluntary patient on May 8 with the understanding that, after a period of observation, he would be allowed to paint on its grounds. The focus of his treatment was hydrotherapy; potassium bromide was discontinued. It was a protected place where, free of stigma, he produced some of his best work. Despite all we have learned since Vincent’s time, the stigma of mental illness unfortunately continues to this day.

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Courtesy of the Oskar Reinhart Collection ([http://www.roemerholz.ch/e/e\\_sor.htm](http://www.roemerholz.ch/e/e_sor.htm)), Winterthur, Switzerland/Bridgeman Art Library International, New York, New York.

**Editor’s Note:** Dr Harris is a member of the editorial board of the *Archives of General Psychiatry*.