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In a Small Room: A Painter's Last Hours

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AUVERS-SUR-OISE, France — Adeline Ravoux was only 12 when Vincent van Gogh died in an upstairs room at her father's inn here, having exhibited what the painter's friend Dr. Paul Gachet called "the sovereign disdain that he felt for life." Gachet and the other village physician, Joseph Mazery, judged that medical intervention was useless for the gunshot wound in van Gogh's stomach and, besides, Vincent was determined to do it again if they gave him the chance.

So, for nearly 30 hours the Ravoux family kept a death watch for their favorite boarder. Dreadful for the father, Arthur Gustave Ravoux, 42, because he had lent van Gogh the pistol. Horrible for the girl, because Monsieur Vincent was always kind to her and had had her sit for a portrait with a nice blue background. Her recollections, summoned many years later, provide important details about the painter's last days, days that for her had immense gravity.

Van Gogh spent only a short time in Auvers. But from an artistic standpoint it was almost obsessively productive. Seventy canvases in 70 days. Reclining on one elbow alongside the languid river Oise, Auvers offered the peace and northern light that van Gogh wanted after two and a half years in Provence, the last 12 months of which he was confined to an insane asylum. Camille Pissarro had been right to recommend Auvers, for its beauty and for Dr. Gachet, who as a collector (and small-gauge painter) would appreciate and encourage van Gogh's work and who as a physician might comprehend Vincent's vast disturbances.

About what pushed Vincent to suicide then, at the age of 37, there are a dozen hypotheses. He himself never said. The most he told his brother Theo, in whose arms he would die, was, "This is how I would like to go."

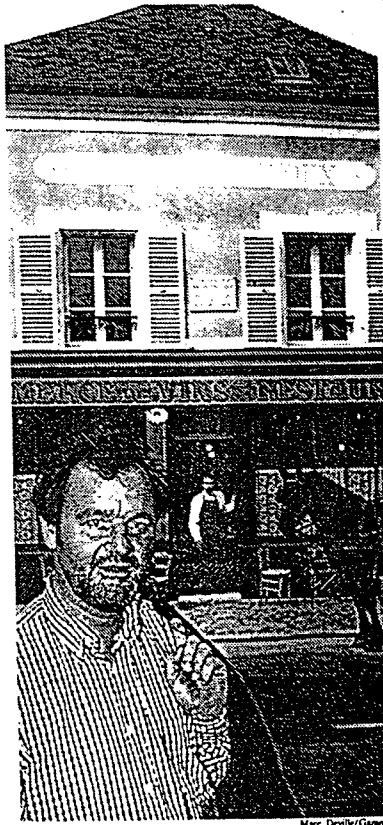
As for Adeline, she was concerned at the time less with motive than with the scary groans from the third-floor chamber and the rude visit of two gendarmes, who insisted on questioning the suspect. Vincent had broken the law by trying to kill himself. His calm defense was, "Whatever I did is nobody's business. I am free to do what I want with my body." All this while sitting up in bed smoking his pipe.

Ravoux volunteered that it was he who had furnished the pistol because of Vincent's complaint that flocks of crows were a distraction as he painted in the fields above the village. (The pistol, never found, thus may have played a part in the brooding double-square canvas that some think may have been his last and somehow prefigured his death: "Crows Over the Wheat Field.") Van Gogh declined to corroborate Ravoux's confession.

Vincent had been a model lodger up to then. He rose at daybreak and was usually in bed by 9. With the 150 francs a month that Theo provided, Vincent kept current on his room and board, a cost of 3.50 francs a day. In contrast to the dissolution of the Paris and Arles years, he barely drank. He was punctual for meals.

So his missed dinner on Sunday July 27, 1890, was all the more remarkable. Shortly after 9, at nightfall, van Gogh returned to the inn, staggering a little. On the outside of his buttoned jacket he held one hand to his stomach as with the other he grasped the rail of the billiard table for support.

What's the matter? Ravoux asked. "Oh, nothing. I have hurt myself." Vincent climbed the two flights of stairs to his room. The Ravouxes called Drs. Gachet and Mazery. A



Janssens in front of his Auberge Ravoux.

letter was carried to Theo in Paris, 40 kilometers (25 miles) and an hour's train ride away. "I believe it is your duty to come in the event of any complications," Gachet wrote to Theo.

Theo arrived on the next train and afterward scarcely left his brother's side. He wrote a short letter to his wife. "How I wish we could give him faith in life," he said. At 1:30 in the morning of the 29th, Vincent died. The death certificate, signed by Theo, Ravoux and the mayor, Alexandre Galim, cited no cause of death.

A coffin was made by the carpenter Vincent Levert, hastily and not well, according to Anton Hirschig, a young Dutch painter who had the room next to Vincent's in the attic

for the funeral the next day. The closed casket was set on the billiard table, covered by a simple white cloth and surrounded with masses of yellow blossoms. Dr. Gachet brought a bouquet of sunflowers. The walls of the inn were hung with Vincent's paintings. Because the death was a suicide, Henri Tessier, 44, the cure of Auvers, refused to let the mourners use the parish hearse. Across the river, in Méry, they found a less dogmatic priest. In mid-afternoon Vincent's body was carried uphill to the cemetery amid the wheat fields he loved.

Theo was inconsolable. He outlived his brother by barely six months. In 1914 his remains were brought from Holland and reburied in the Auvers cemetery, next to Vincent.

As for the Ravouxes, they left Auvers in 1893. Ravoux took with him two paintings that van Gogh had given him: the portrait of Adeline and the Auvers town hall, which is just across the street from the inn. (A couple of years later, Ravoux sold both of them, for a total of 40 francs, to some foreigners passing through.)

The inn stayed open pretty much as it was, more of a place for townspeople to congregate than a shrine. Now and then artists held exhibitions there. People could visit van Gogh's room, furnished with an iron bed, a small table and a chair, but there wasn't much of a fuss. The room, whitewashed when Vincent inhabited it, fell into relative decay. Its walls became mottled with age.

Then in 1986, Dominique-Charles Janssens, a Belgian businessman operating on a recent passion for van Gogh, bought the inn for 3 million francs. Janssens has invested several times that sum to restore the inn, with a sharp eye for detail, authenticity and taste.

Now, after seven years, the Auberge Ravoux will reopen to the public on Monday. The main room on the ground floor will seat 40 for two- and three-course lunches and dinners at period tables and chairs. A bright landscape mural, uncovered beneath several layers of paint, is the main decoration. In the courtyard behind the inn, Janssens has had built what he calls a *guinguette* that will serve brasserie-style meals; it can seat 100.

Upstairs on the second floor, Janssens has installed a book shop, stocked with books and posters having to do with van Gogh and art. But he also will offer books on wine, as a reminder that Ravoux was principally a wine merchant.

On the third floor, Janssens has done a minimalist restoration of Vincent's room. It is small — 3.2 meters (10.5 feet) along one side, 2.86 meters along the other — and dark (with a single skylight window, about twice the size of a telephone book, in the slanting roof). It is easy to understand why Vincent preferred to work outdoors. The walls have been preserved in the state of dilapidation they were found, even to the point of injecting silicone to stabilize the cracks. The furniture has been removed, allowing the viewer to fill the chamber with his imagination.

Next door, however, Hirschig's room has been furnished. And next to that is a small auditorium where a 9-minute video on van Gogh's time in Auvers will be displayed to the five visitors at a time who will be allowed to mount the stairs.

The entrance fee to the inn is 25 francs; for students and senior citizens, 15 francs. Children younger than 12 are admitted free. Van Gogh's room, the video display and bookstore are open seven days a week from 10 A.M. to 6 P.M. The restaurants are open until 11 P.M.