

WHEAT FIELD WITH CROWS, BY VINCENT VAN GOGH, AFP/GETTY IMAGES; BELOW, SELF PORTRAIT, COURTESY INSTITUT VAN GOGH.

Will Vincent get his wish?

BY SHEILAGH MCEVENUE
In Auvers-sur-Oise, France

As dreams go, it certainly was a simple one. Yet, it would prove tragically elusive to Vincent Van Gogh. But now, the Belgian owner of a small café in France has made it his mission to make Vincent's modest wish come true. Dominique-Charles Janssens, a friendly man with salt-and-pepper stubble on his chin, leans towards me conspiratorially: "People tell me I'm crazy," he says, "but, you see, I have a plan."

I'm on a sketching holiday in Auvers-sur-Oise, a little town just 30 km north of Paris, which is how I come to be having lunch and chatting with Janssens at his café, the charming Auberge Ravoux.

Like many plans, Janssens's involves a global strategy, the Internet and a team of shareholders. There's even a potential role for a certain Canadian hotelier.

It's a story that begins in 1985, the day Janssens, then marketing director of a French multinational food conglomerate, had a serious car accident while passing through Auvers-sur-Oise. He was intrigued to learn that his accident had occurred a few metres from the little inn where Van Gogh had died. So, while convalescing, he passed the time reading the letters Vincent had written to his beloved brother, Theo, who had been the artist's sole emotional and financial support. One letter in particular touched Janssens. Vincent had written, "Someday I believe I will find a way to have a show of my own in a café."

Vincent never got his show. On July 27, 1890, a few weeks after the letter was sent, he shot himself in the chest in a field on the edge of town, then staggered back to the tiny garret he'd leased above the café at the Auberge Ravoux. Two days later, aged 37, he died.

"I was so moved by these letters — the humanity of this man," says Janssens, "so I make inquiries

about Auberge Ravoux." The following year, he heard it was up for sale. Several prospective purchasers (including Pierre Cardin) were said to be interested. But the owner was impressed by Janssens's passion to preserve the soul of the café and the deal was signed.

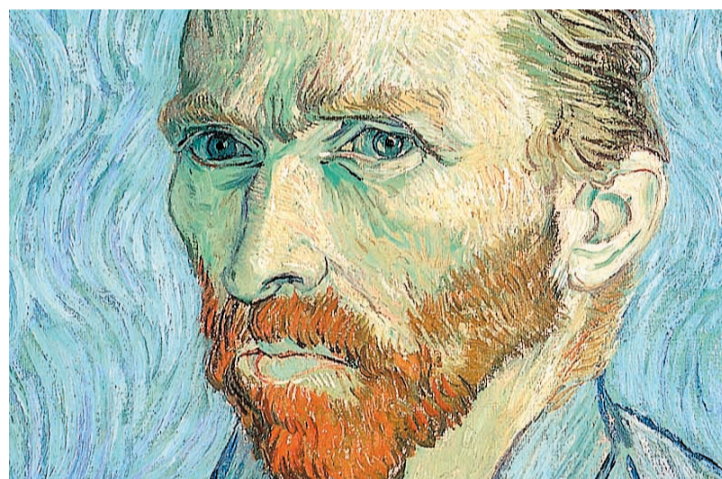
Then began a long and intense period of research that saw the café carefully restored to the way it had been 100 years earlier. Properties adjacent to the site had to be purchased to prevent their falling into the hands of fast-food and souvenir vendors. After an investment that would eventually total US\$15-million (contributed by Janssens, his family and a family friend), the Auberge Ravoux reopened in 1993. Since then, art lovers from around the world have come to Auvers to see Vincent's room (because of the suicide, it was never rented out again — one can still see the nail holes in the walls where he hung his paintings) and to dine on simple French fare in the intimacy of the café where he once ate.

Now Janssens is ready to mount the little show that Van Gogh always wanted.

There is a popular misconception that Van Gogh died in the south of France, at Arles. In many ways this has been lucky for Auvers, for it has protected the town from excessive commercialization and the hordes of tourists who overwhelm Provence. Still, with some 400,000 visitors each year — Janssens insists they are "pilgrims, not tourists" — Auvers does enjoy its share of renown.

Van Gogh's painting career was surprisingly short, just 10 years, but the frenzy of creativity produced some 2,000 works of art. At Auvers — where he had moved to be close to Theo, who lived in Paris — he completed 70 paintings and drawings in 70 days: scenes of village life, gardens, thatched cottages and wheat fields, and portraits of the locals, including his friend Dr. Gachet.

Vincent Van Gogh said that someday he'd like to have a show in a café. Now, the proprietor of the café where he spent his final days says he'd like to give him one.



Even today, Auvers is very much a Van Gogh landscape, so little has changed. To walk through Auvers is to walk through the paintings — *Church at Auvers, Town Hall, Houses at Auvers, Daubigny's Garden* to name just a few. Up the hill is the cemetery where Vincent is buried in a simple ivy-covered grave. (Theo, who died six months later, lies next to him.) There's a stone wall behind Vincent's headstone and just beyond the wall lies the site of his ominous *Wheat Field with Crows*. The fields are still there — and so are the crows.

But, of course, to see the paintings themselves, you have to go to Paris or Amsterdam. And that is why Janssens is determined to buy a Van Gogh for Auvers, and hang it in the café, or rather, in Vincent's room upstairs.

"There is a very beautiful painting — a small one," Janssens says, as he pours a little more wine. "It's in a private collection, lying in a vault somewhere in Zurich. It could be available."

The subject?

"The fields of Auvers."

Of course, there remains the small problem of raising the US\$38.7-million dollars it will cost to purchase the painting. But Janssens is optimistic.

Removing his tweed jacket, he lays out his strategy: "I've been negotiating with some very large companies — you know, airline companies, Internet companies, credit-card companies, that sort of thing. My idea is to make it a joint venture between France and the Netherlands."

Now comes the surprise. "The plan is to sell shares in the painting," he says, with a hint of mischief. "Donor shares, that is."

And who would he sell them to? "Oh, just normal people. People like you."

The lunch crowd is finishing up the remains of their meals and Janssens hops up from the table, "Would you excuse me, please, just for a moment. I want to have a word with that man over there by the window. *Un journaliste, je crois*, from Tokyo." Janssens gives

me a knowing look, then taps lightly on my shoulder: "Don't go away, I have more I want to tell you."

While he heads for the man's table, I take the opportunity to polish off the remains of Auberge Ravoux's delicious gigot d'agneau, which I have been happily savouring. A few minutes later Janssens plops himself back down at my table, but not before he's worked the room a bit.

"Do you know where it is that you are sitting?" he asks brightly. I give him a quizzical look.

"I am saying here. *Oui, oui*, right here." He slaps the table with the palm of his hand. "It is here that Vincent's body was lying before they buried him. And Theo and Vincent's friends put the paintings all around him" — he makes a sweeping gesture — "*comme ça*."

Really? "*Mais, bien sûr*," Janssens assures me. "Now, what was I telling you? Ah yes, the shares. So, this is how it works: You will invest, say, \$75.

Then you will be given a key. And this is the key to Vincent's room. But here it gets to be fun. You see, it will be an Internet key, and because you will be shareholder, you will have the exclusive right to see your painting hanging in Vincent's room anytime you want. You can show it to your friends, if you like. They will see it on the Web cam in — *comment dit-on?* — real time. Now, if you give a lot, say, \$750,000, then OK, you will have your name engraved on a plaque on the door outside Vincent's room."

But how will he publicize his plan, I ask.

"That's the other part of the strategy. You are from Canada, *non?* Toronto, *non?* But that man lives in Toronto — *n'est-ce pas?* — the one who has Four Seasons hotel. I am right, *non?*"

You must mean Isadore Sharp, I venture.

"*Oui, oui*. Do you know him?"

Well, no, not personally. Do you?

"*Mais, non...but*," — eyebrows

shoot up impishly — "I would like to talk to him."

"You see, my idea is simple. We take our painting on a tour of the world. I will have my people build an exact replica of Vincent's room — you know, like a stage set that can be knocked down and moved from town to town. Then we will hang the real Van Gogh painting there, just as it will be when we will have it here."

"Then, my idea is to ask *le plus bel hôtel du monde*" — here the arms stretch wide — "to help *le plus petit hôtel du monde*" — here thumb and forefinger pinch together. "And we can say we are the smallest because" — big shrug — "we have only one room, and that is the room of Vincent. So you see, I would prefer Four Seasons hotel because it *really is le plus bel. Non?* And they are in all the big cities of the world. Do you see?"

I do see. Now Janssens is in full flight, "For example, we bring the Van Gogh to Four Seasons in Toronto — perhaps for a week, maybe more. The hotel makes for us a gala evening, and lots of people come to see the Van Gogh and buy shares in the painting. After the gala, the public will want to see the Van Gogh, too, so they will come there and buy some shares."

"Then we move to another Four Seasons in another big city — New York, San Francisco, Tokyo." He takes a breath. "Do you see how perfect it would be? Not just for us, of course, but for the *grand hôtel*, too. Imagine how great is *publicité* for Four Seasons to have Van Gogh there! Do you see it? Grand hotel is helping little hotel, and together they are making Vincent finally to have his show at the café."

Leaning back in his chair, Janssens closes his eyes, imagining it all. "Oh, yes," he says quietly. "I think it is perfect."

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It was a frenzy of creativity: At Auvers-sur-Oise, in the 70 days before he died, Van Gogh produced 70 paintings and drawings



LEFT, COURTESY OF INSTITUT VAN GOGH; RIGHT, PHOTOGRAPH BY CAECILIA DI MONTIGLIARI.

Auberge owner Arthur Ravoux (far left) in 1890. His daughter, Adeline, 13, whom Van Gogh painted, is in the doorway. Today, Auberge Ravoux is owned by Dominique-Charles Janssens, who carries on the tradition.