

28 Septembre 1993

Auvers-sur-Oise Journal

All the Inn Needs Now Is the Ghost of van Gogh

By MARLISE SIMONS
Special to The New York Times

AUVERS-SUR-OISE, France — Dominique-Charles Janssens said he had never given much thought to Vincent van Gogh. The Dutch painter was far from the Flemish business executive's mind that day in 1985 when he drove into Auvers-sur-Oise in northern France.

But as a result of that drive, Mr. Janssens gave up his career and sold virtually everything he owned to become the innkeeper of the Auberge Ravoux, the house where van Gogh spent his last days, produced some of his greatest works and died, two nights after he returned from the wheat fields where he had shot himself.

On a recent weekend, as the inn reopened as a cultural center and restaurant after a six-year restoration guided by Mr. Janssens, he was beaming, incredulous at the long lines of people willing to wait more than two hours to peer into the modest tavern and the artist's tiny garret bedroom.

"Can this be believed?" he exclaimed. "Everybody told me I was crazy."

Van Gogh's Moving Letters

In 1985, Mr. Janssens, then marketing director of an international food conglomerate, was driving through Auvers, 20 miles north of Paris, when a car careened into him from behind. From the police report, he learned that he was hit on the village square in front of an old cafe called The House of van Gogh.

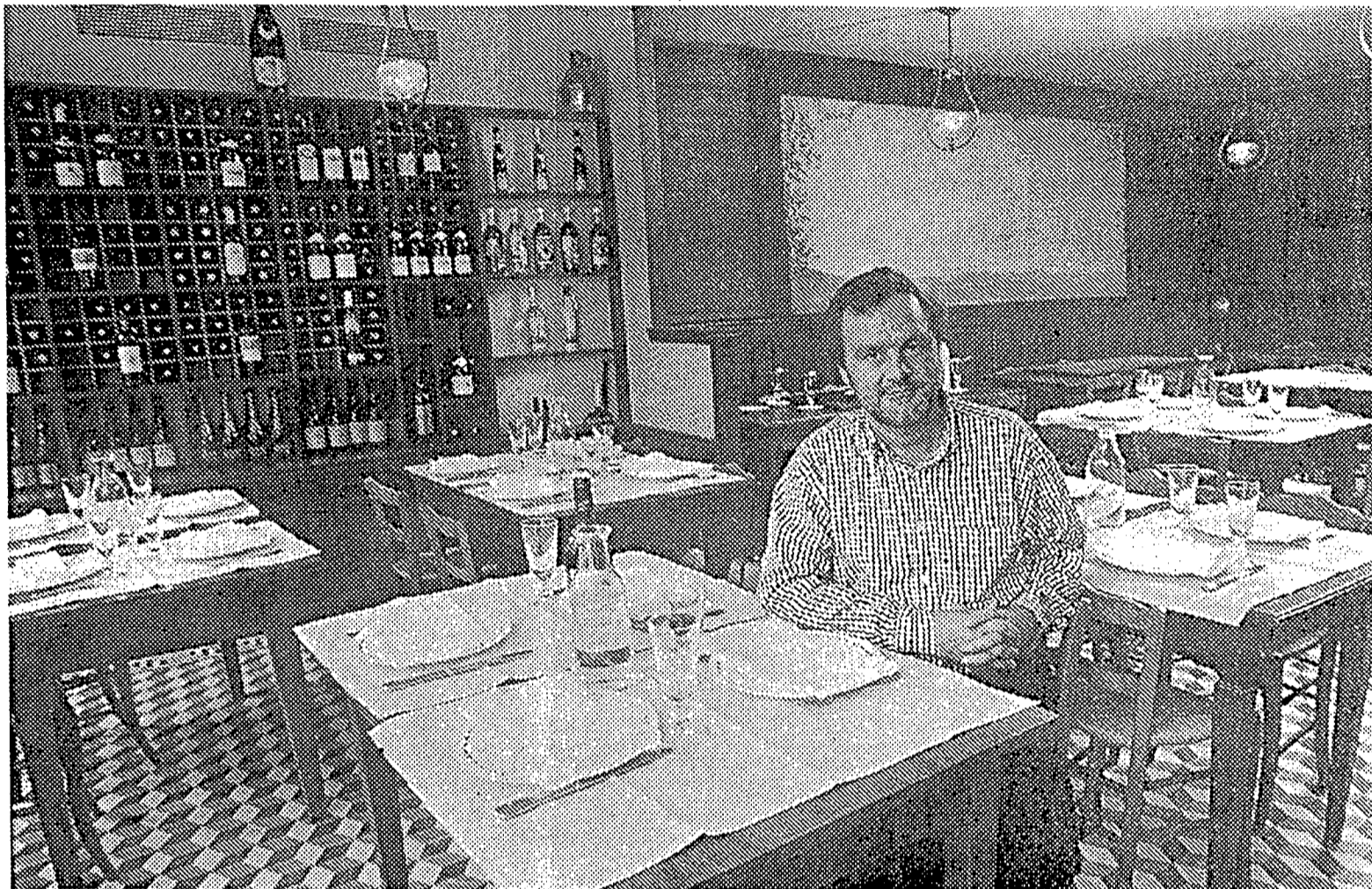
After first dismissing the name as a commercial ploy, he soon learned that the building came by its name honestly. And as he lay recovering from his back injuries, the coincidence inspired him to read van Gogh's letters, including some written at the inn.

"I was so moved," Mr. Janssens recalled. "I discovered the person behind the painter, not just a drunk who cut off his ear, who went to prostitutes. I found a great humanist."

Mr. Janssens kept going back to the rundown cafe, always finding it closed, invariably with tourists peering through its windows. He found out that the owner, a widow, wanted to sell it. The dilapidated building did not interest the local or national governments, but there were bids from Pierre Cardin, the couturier, and several other large companies.

Convinced that destiny had sent him here, Mr. Janssens pleaded with the owner, promising to preserve the inn's spirit and turn it into a center worthy of "this simple and great man." The house was promised to him for \$500,000.

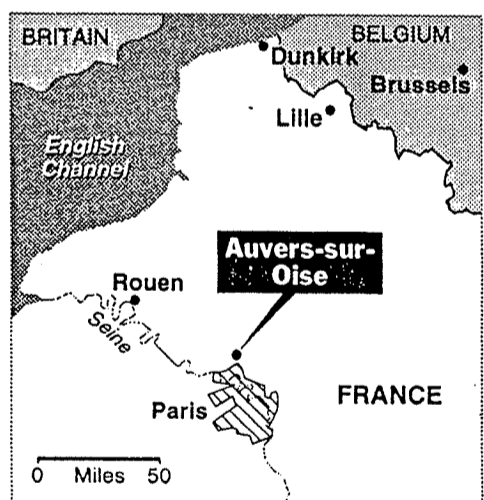
"That was the easy part," he said. "I must have seen 75 banks. They all



Marc Deville/Gamma

Dominique-Charles Janssens gave up almost everything he owned to buy the Auberge Ravoux in Auvers-sur-Oise, outside Paris. After restoration,

the house where Vincent van Gogh spent his last days and produced some of his greatest works has reopened as a cultural center and restaurant.



The New York Times

Van Gogh's house in Auvers-sur-Oise has been restored.

told me I was dreaming. Finally I found one."

Then, he said, "the 'Sunflowers' complicated everything." By that he meant the 1987 auction of one of van Gogh's sunflower paintings, which sold for \$39.9 million, then a record price for a painting. With the painter's name on many lips, some French officials lamented that the house was in the hands of a foreigner and suggested that the state buy it. The matter was even debated in the French Senate.

"There were pressures from the town hall," Mr. Janssens said, noting that his taxes were audited three times in a row. "That's how it's done in France," he said. Mr. Janssens held out.

It took six years of study and repairs and an investment of almost \$6 million, fighting rot in walls and beams, repairing old floors and laying imitations, to restore the house to its 19th-century condition. Restorers say it merited the effort because this is the only house where van Gogh lived that is still intact.

Much work went into recreating the modest atmosphere as van Gogh might have known it. The downstairs room that served as wine shop and cafe is again a restaurant, with rustic tables, pewter-covered bar and a mural found behind eight layers of wallpaper. Even the hand-blown decanters and glasses were copied from van Gogh's painting "The Absinthe Drinkers."

Bedroom Remains Empty

Under the roof, the painter's small bedroom, with its tiny skylight, remains empty; even the cracks in the wall have been preserved. The story goes that the garret was never used again because of the shadow of suicide. It used to have a high iron bed with thick springs, under which van

Gogh kept his paintings.

He worked nonstop in Auvers, drawing its church, rough farmhouses and windy roads leading to the fields. In his 70 days here, he made as many paintings and drawings.

It was also in this garret that the painter agonized that fated July 27, 1890, when he came home in the evening, clutching his chest in the spot, just below the heart, where he had fired a bullet. It was also here that his friend, Dr. Paul Gachet, and another physician concluded that they could do nothing for him and where his brother, Theo, sat with him until he died on July 29. Both Vincent and Theo are buried at the local cemetery.

Wandering through the inn, with his round face and figure and easy smile, Mr. Janssens looks more the innkeeper than the custodian of an artistic genius. But he is acting as both, having studied every detail of van Gogh's passage here. He has changed the name back to Auberge Ravoux and keeps a large photograph of the inn in 1890, showing Arthur Ravoux, innkeeper at the time, and his daughter Adeline, of whom van Gogh made three portraits.

The innkeeper's next project is to fulfill a wish of the painter, who wrote to Theo, "One day I think I will find a way to have my own show in a cafe."