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ALEX CRETEY-SYSTEMANS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

## Where van Gogh Comes to Life

A journey to the landmark places proud of their legacies as artistic settings for the Dutch painter.

By NINA SIEGAL

A few months ago, I stood at the corner of a busy roundabout called Place Lamartine, across from the Roman gates leading into Arles in southern France, on a spot that was pivotal in the life of Vincent van Gogh. Behind me was the Rhone River, where he painted sparkling reflections from the quay on one particularly memorable starry night. Before me was a run-down commercial strip leading toward vast fields of the sunflowers he painted time and again.

It was where Vincent van Gogh's Yellow

House once stood, the sun-drenched Provençal home that was the subject of his 1888 oil painting, where he took a period of "enforced rest" as he put it, in a pale violet-walled "Bedroom" he depicted in oil paintings three times that year.

The little house contained legends: It was where one of the world's most famous artists pushed his painting technique to its peak with works such as "Café Terrace at Night," "Sunflowers" and "The Sower." And it was where his personal life turned a dramatic and tragic corner. Here, van Gogh had a tumultuous fight with his friend, Paul

Gauguin, and sliced a blade through his own ear, before admitting himself to the local mental hospital.

From March to August, I traveled to many of the landmarks of van Gogh's artistic life, beginning in the Belgian mining town of Mons, where the 27-year-old Dutchman was fired from his job as a missionary working among local coal miners for "undermining the dignity of the priesthood" by opting to live in the same squalid conditions as the miners — and where he instead began to draw. From there, I traveled to his renowned painting locations, Montmartre in

Paris and Arles and St. Rémy in Provence, and ultimately to the Parisian suburb of Auvers-sur-Oise, where his life was cut short in his 37th year.

I was on the trail of the artist during Van Gogh Europe 2015, the year that commemorates the 125th anniversary of his death, observed by cultural events and exhibitions related to van Gogh throughout the Netherlands, Belgium and France. What struck me was that, considering how famous and beloved van Gogh is, there are a number of historical landmarks of his life that have not

A vineyard as seen in van Gogh's "Vignes Rouges" landscape, with tall, elegant cypresses near St.-Rémy-de-Provence, France.

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CULTURED TRAVELER | BRISTOL, ENGLAND

## If These Walls Could Talk

Don't call it graffiti. Street art, like this piece by Alex Mack, has helped make a name for the town of Bristol, England.



ANDY HASLAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The work of street artists remains a source of pride for residents and a tourist draw.

By SARAH DOYLE

I was standing in front of Jesus. And he appeared to be break-dancing. Not only that, he was 28 feet tall.

"This piece was inspired by the break dancers who performed for Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in 2004," said Rob Dean, a street art expert and guide in Bristol, England. Jesus saluted me — upside down — his flexed feet reaching toward heaven, a shroud of gold glitter shimmering around his body.

I was astonished. This was graffiti? It turned out the answer was no. According to Mr. Dean, break-dancing Jesus is considered "street art," a term used to distinguish imaginative urban art from gang-related vandalism. The term "graffiti" refers to the

bubble-style borders that surround a "tag," or the skeleton of words or letters inside.

On a trip to London last winter, I decided to journey two hours east to Bristol, the town made famous by Banksy, Cary Grant, Wallace & Gromit and Massive Attack (though not necessarily in that order). It was recently named the 2015 European Green Capital by the European Commission. With about 442,500 residents, Bristol boasts a surplus of parks, with over 450, and narrow alleyways, most of which lend themselves to walking. This was good news to me, for I had signed up for a walking tour with WHERE THE WALL, a company devoted to showcasing the town's famed street art and the place where Mr. Dean works.

Our tour began in the working-class neighborhood of Stokes Croft, the scruffy, urban crust of Bristol's primarily placid interior. For decades, the gritty enclave was defined by its many massage parlors and

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# Where van Gogh Comes to Life



VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION)

Vincent van Gogh, "Self-Portrait with Grey Felt Hat," 1887, Paris.

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been preserved, or are neglected. A few spots, however — such as van Gogh's room at the asylum in St.-Rémy-de-Provence and his hotel room in Auvers-sur-Oise, where he died — have been handsomely renovated to great effect for visitors interested in the artist's life, and for the local communities, which benefit economically from this form of gentle cultural tourism.

Hoping to replicate these strong examples, officials involved in Van Gogh Europe 2015 said their aim was to promote the forgotten sites, to focus attention on the fact that many sites linked to van Gogh were still in need of preservation.

"There's a huge amount of interest worldwide in van Gogh's paintings, and there's a great audience for his work in museums," Frank van den Eijnden, chairman of the Van Gogh Europe Foundation, said in a phone interview. "But generally there is less money for restoration and preservation of van Gogh heritage, mainly the local heritage sites that you can find in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. We needed more attention for all the organizations involved, and especially from the governments that were linked to these locations. We really want van Gogh heritage to be a world heritage in the coming years."

Mostly, in places where van Gogh lived, there are a number of plaques featuring van Gogh images or words from his letters, in sometimes inscrutable locations. In St.-Rémy-de-Provence, for example, there is a plaque that shows his "Green Wheat Field With Cypress" posted in front of the white stucco wall of a private home.

I wasn't a van Gogh fan when I embarked on this journey. I moved to the Netherlands nine years ago to do research for a novel on Rembrandt, and my passion lies more in the Dutch old masters. My trouble with van Gogh's work was that, to me, it had the familiarity of cereal boxes — or, as Andy Warhol might have it, soup cans — copied and reproduced to the point of unseeability. Even when I was standing among the originals, the freshness of his work evaded me. Also, I was weary of what seemed like a triteness in van Gogh's biography, the tortured-genius-who-never-sold-a-painting-in-his-life.

I often write about van Gogh, because I'm an American art journalist based in Amsterdam, where tourists flock by the millions to the largest trove of his paintings anywhere in the world, the Van Gogh Museum, at the center of Amsterdam's sprawling Museumplein (museum square).

But when I learned that van Gogh once sat down in front of one of Rembrandt's most famous works, "The Jewish Bride," in the Rijksmuseum (also on Museumplein, next to the Van Gogh Museum) and confided to a friend, "I should be happy to give 10 years of my life if I could go on sitting here in front of this picture for two weeks, with only a crust of dry bread for food," I began to think about van Gogh and his creative process. That painting, to which Rembrandt applied yellow paint in such thick impasto that it lifts right out into three-dimensionality, was the link for me into the world of van Gogh.

So, that is what brought me, in the heat of July, to the busy intersection in Arles, to see if, in a place that he once inhabited, I could find traces of van Gogh's soul. But there was no more Yellow House. It was demolished in the 1940s in World War II, I would find out later. In front of me was a white plaque affixed to a pole that stood on the sidewalk, with an image of van Gogh's painting, all shades of golden hay, fresh butter and sunlight, under a stippled blue sky. There was that impasto yellow again, straight out of Rembrandt's palette. But no van Gogh.

Disappointed, I got back in my car and decided to try to find another van Gogh location on my list: Langlois Bridge, a drawbridge on the outskirts of Arles, which he depicted nine times in 1888. I knew it was still there because it's now called Pont Van-Gogh.

## The Borinage, Belgium

I began my journey not in van Gogh's birth-

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place, but in the location where van Gogh the artist came to life: in the gritty, drab eastern coal-mining region of Belgium called the Borinage, where van Gogh at age 25 went to minister to the destitute, soot-blackened workers of the coal pits. Because this is where he was rejected from the priesthood and began his artistic career, the city of Mons has declared this the "birthplace of the artist," with a host of events and an exhibition of his early work at the Museum of Fine Arts, in Mons, which ended in May. (Van Gogh's birthplace was in Zundert, the Netherlands.)

Van Gogh lived in a few locations in Mons; but he found himself ashamed to be living so well while the people to whom he ministered lived in overcrowded huts, and so he jettisoned his middle-class possessions and moved into smaller and simpler homes. He had started out in a large home up the hill from the local mine, in a red brick house he rented from a landlord named Jean-Baptiste Denis.

Everyone I spoke to told me that Maison Denis was only about a 15-minute drive outside Mons, but it took me an hour of driving in circles. It's not on any map and I got there by chance: I asked directions from a man who happened to be a private van Gogh tour guide in the area. Finally, there it was: At the bitter end of a seemingly endless stretch of ramshackle rowhouses at 221, rue Wilson was a square red brick house with a red tile roof, only a bit larger than the houses that surrounded it.

The home was one of the sites that Mr. van den Eijnden of the Van Gogh Europe Foundation had told me was nearly dilapidated, but thanks to fund-raising by a local foundation for Van Gogh Year, renovation of the house was underway. The house was still shuttered and there was a large fence around the property, but I walked to the edge of the backyard, where it bordered a grassy field blanketed in wildflowers that followed all the way down the hill to where I could see the colliery of the Marcasse mine, now closed. The refurbished house has since opened as Maison Van Gogh in Colfontaine, and can be visited on weekends from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The attraction's previously poor state was in sharp contrast to the other landmark van Gogh home in the Borinage, in the village of Cuesmes, Maison Van Gogh, a quaint cottage on a plot of grass at the end of a gravel road where van Gogh lived in 1879 and 1880. This was the location where he regrouped after he was told to abandon his ministry because he had disgraced the church, and where he wrote a letter to his brother, Theo, telling him he would like to try his hand at art. "Try to understand the last word of what the great artists, the serious masters, say in their masterpieces; there will be God in it," he wrote. "Someone has written or said it in a book, someone in a painting."

Inside this tourist site (which has an admission fee of 4 euros, or about \$4.25 at \$1.06 to the euro) I was one of only a few visitors, and watched a short biographical video, looked at some of van Gogh's early, clumsy sketches displayed in a glass vitrine and spent a few minutes among his spartan furnishings — a small wooden writing table, a chair and a wood-burning stove.

## Nueneen, the Netherlands

After he had resolved to devote himself to art, van Gogh moved back to the Netherlands, to live with his parents for two years in the town of Nueneen, where his father was the local minister. This town is proud of its legacy as the place where the itinerant artist remained for the longest stretch of his adult life, and where he painted "The Potato Eaters," which is now known as his early masterpiece.

Nueneen has turned the former town hall into the Vincent, with a museum largely devoted to van Gogh's family relationships, a cafe and a gift shop. The center is at the heart of Van Gogh Village Nueneen, and the starting point of an outdoor museum, a 22-point walking or biking tour that takes you to some lovely locations where van Gogh painted, and to the Starry Night bike path that lights up with swirls of twinkling stones after dark.

It is also directly across the street from van Gogh's family home, a two-story brick



THE NEW YORK TIMES

Right, from top, a plaque landmark for the Arles, France, location of "Le Jardin de la Maison de Santé à Arles"; the garden at the hospital at St. Paul de Mausole in St.-Rémy-de-Provence; the gravesites of Vincent van Gogh and his brother, Theo, in Auvers-sur-Oise, France.

house, now a private residence that one can't visit. Next to it is the home of Margot Begemann, the girl next door, who fell in love with the artist and tried to poison herself with strychnine when her family objected to the affair. Her family home, called Nune Ville, which came on the market recently by chance, has become a focus of efforts by local historic preservationists who would like to turn it too into a van Gogh heritage site.

Over last summer, when I visited, most of the rooms of the stately home were given over to contemporary artists who had created room-size installations inspired by van Gogh, in an exhibition called "The Vincent Affair," which ended in October. Since then, attempts to find investors who could help turn the site into a permanent tourist spot have stalled, Mr. van den Eijnden said.

## Montmartre, Paris

Van Gogh didn't stay in Nueneen long after the end of the Margot Begemann affair. He moved first to Antwerp, Belgium, and then to Paris, where his brother Theo had a job as an art dealer with the leading art gallery, Goupil & Cie. Van Gogh moved into his brother's third-floor apartment at 54, rue Lepic in Montmartre, which is a private res-





MUSÉE D'ORSAY

idence now, and designated only by a marble plaque: “Dans cette maison Vincent van Gogh a vécu chez son frère Théo de 1886 à 1888.” (“In this house Vincent van Gogh lived at his brother Théo’s place from 1886 to 1888.”) And some plastic sunflowers dangle from the window grate.

The Rue Lepic arcs upward through Montmartre, passing the old windmills, and ultimately arrives at the Sacré-Coeur. On the way up, one can discover many prime landmarks of the nearly two years that van Gogh spent here, including the apartment of his friend Henri Toulouse-Lautrec and the oldest surviving Parisian vineyard, where van Gogh sometimes painted, now on Rue Saint Vincent.

The area, which was a hamlet outside Paris when van Gogh lived there, was critical to his progress as a painter, because it is where he met many of the Impressionists and other artists, including his friend Paul Gauguin, and imitated and explored various Parisian painting styles. There are no physical landmarks one can enter and explore in Montmartre to get a sense of how he lived, though there are museums, like the Musée d’Orsay, that now contain his work.

**Provence, France**

Finding original artworks by van Gogh in most of the locations I visited would have been nearly impossible except for the special exhibitions designed for Van Gogh Year. The Fondation Van Gogh in Arles, an expansive exhibition space topped with an artwork of colored glass refracting Provençal light through its roof, which opened in 2014, is a notable exception. Through an agreement with the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the foundation will have one original van Gogh painting on display year-round.

The final stages of van Gogh’s life are the

best preserved, and they are also the most moving. After he cut off a part of his ear in Arles, he was admitted to the Arles hospital in Provence, where he painted the lush gardens that are still on display free to the public, as Espace Van Gogh. When he found that this was not sufficient treatment, his brother secured a spot for him at the asylum in St.-Rémy-de-Provence, about 30 minutes to the north. The drive there took me past the endless stretches of sunflowers now so closely associated with his art, and through the foothills of the range of small mountains at the base of the Alps, called the Alpilles, where he painted a series of “Wheat Fields” and his most famous “Starry Night.”

The municipality of St. Rémy has done van Gogh tourists a service by creating a 19-point walking tour from the city center called Promenade de van Gogh, which can be complemented with an app called Van Gogh Natures that adds information about paintings he made in and around the asylum. I followed this self-guided tour up the hill, finding myself softly whispering: “Vincent, where are you? Are you here?” I realized, for the first time on my journey, that I had come in search of a ghost.

The destination was the St. Paul de Mausole, a Romanesque former religious cloister that is part of a still-functioning mental hospital, and its sumptuous surrounding gardens. Depending on the season when you visit, you can find all the beautiful irises and lilies that inspired van Gogh’s paintings. And around the asylum are the twisted olive groves and the tall elegant cypresses that he captured with dense, emotional brushwork.

Inside the cool cloister, through its medieval stone halls and up the shallow Romanesque stairs, is van Gogh’s preserved former room at the asylum. The steel bars on the windows are a jarring counterpoint to



VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH STICHTING)



KRÖLLER-MÜLLER MUSEUM, OTTERLO, THE NETHERLANDS



VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION)

By van Gogh: far left, “The Starry Night,” 1889; above, “The Sower,” 1888; and left, “Sunflowers,” 1889. Top, “The Bedroom,” 1888; Below, in Arles, France, the setting for “The Starry Night.”

the easel positioned next to his wrought-iron bed, but what is more shocking is the room next door with two steel baths used for administering “hydrotherapy treatments” — only a hint of the therapeutic tortures he might have endured here. I wandered through the gardens for a moment of calm after seeing the hospital cell, my mind raging with thoughts of van Gogh’s suffering, and wondering how he managed to paint at all during the time he was at the asylum — let alone make 143 oil paintings and 100 drawings.

**Auvers-sur-Oise, France**

Van Gogh’s troubles did not end, though he finally left the St. Rémy hospital. He made his way back to northern France, to the town of Auvers-sur-Oise, about a 30-minute drive from Paris. It is where I visited the most poignant landmark, Van Gogh’s Room in the historic inn Auberge Ravoux. This tiny second-floor room (even smaller than his room at the asylum) remained empty for years after van Gogh died, suffering the curse of any French hotel room that was thought to be the scene of a suicide, and has been restored entirely through the efforts of a citizen, Dominique-Charles Janssens.

**IF YOU GO**

**IN THE NETHERLANDS**



**Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam** (Museumplein 6; 31-20-570-5200; Vangoghmuseum.nl) is the world’s largest trove of artworks by van Gogh. It is in the heart of Amsterdam, with a permanent exhibition of his work as well as temporary exhibitions that relate his works to other great artists.

**Vincentre / Van Gogh Village Nuenen** (Vincentre Berg 29, Nuenen; 31-40-283-9615; for biking and walking tours, April through October), a small museum, is the beginning of an open-air walking tour that takes you through important locations for van Gogh’s painting in Nuenen, where he lived with his parents for two years, and fell in love with Margot Begemann. (Above, van Gogh’s father’s Reformed Church in Nuenen.)

**Van Gogh Starry Night Bike Path** (vangoghvillagenuenen.nl/het-vincentre.aspx), which lights up at night, begins at the Opwettense watermill in Nuenen and ends at the Collse Watermill in Eindhoven.

**Van Gogh House in Zundert** (Markt 27, Zundert; 31-76-597-19 99; vangoghhuis.com), where van Gogh was born, was torn down in 1903, but the new house was built in 2008 with a permanent exhibition about his birthplace, Zundert.

**IN BELGIUM**



**The Borinage: Maison Van Gogh** (Rue du Pavillon 3, Cuesmes; en.maisonvangogh.mons.be), just outside of Mons, in bucolic Cuesmes, is a little brick house and museum that tells the story of van Gogh’s time in this part of Belgium. (Above, inside Maison Van Gogh in Cuesmes, the Borinage.)

**Maison Van Gogh in Colfontaine** (Rue Wilson 221, formerly rue du Petit-Wasmes, Colfontaine; mons2015.eu/en/maison-van-gogh-colfontaine), also known as Maison Denis, the newly renovated house van Gogh rented when he arrived in Mons to be an evangelist, is near the Marcasse Mine.

**BAM/Musée des Beaux-Arts in Mons**

(Rue Neuve, 8, Mons; 32-65-39-5939; www.bam.mons.be/) had an exhibition dedicated to van Gogh in the Borinage in 2015, but that show is now over. But exhibitions are often linked to the painter, who had a tremendous influence in Mons.

**IN FRANCE**

**Fondation Vincent Van Gogh in Arles** (35 rue du Dr. Fanton; Arles; fondation-vincentvangogh-arles.org/), in the center of the old city of Arles, is a great place to begin a tour of van Gogh locations throughout Arles. Exhibitions are connected to van Gogh’s work; and at least one original van Gogh painting is on display in the museum all year round.

**St. Paul de Mausole Monastery**

(Chemin St. Paul, 13210 St.-Rémy-de-Provence; 33-4-90-92-77-00) is the “asylum” where van Gogh received treatment in St.-Rémy-de-Provence, and where you can visit his former room and see the lush gardens and landscapes he painted during his time there. Different flowers are in bloom throughout the year; check for seasons for irises, almond blossoms and sunflowers.

**Maison de Van Gogh** (Place de la Mairie, Auvers-sur-Oise; 33-1-30-36-60-60), the restaurant and inn Auberge Ravoux, the last place where van Gogh lived, and where he died. You can see the tiny room he inhabited, and eat a classic French meal at the lovely restaurant downstairs.



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