

# Building a house of memory

Dominique Janssens has spent 20 years sharing his love of Van Gogh with the world, Michael Reid writes

**D**ominique Janssens wasn't always a Van Gogh aficionado. Until 1985, he knew only the outline with which many people are familiar: severed ear, turbulent life, death by suicide in his 30s. A car accident, however, changed that. Laid up in hospital after his Volvo was rammed at traffic lights at 120kmh by a drunk, Janssens learned from police reports the accident had occurred outside the Auberge Ravoux, the inn at Auvers-sur-Oise, 30km north of Paris, where Van Gogh had boarded for the last two months of his life and to where he staggered to lie in his deathbed for two days after shooting himself in a nearby field.

The painter died aged 37 on July 29, 1890, in his attic room at the Auberge Ravoux where he had been boarding, from the effects of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the chest. It is not unlikely that his painting, *The Fields*, was hanging on the wall as he lay dying.

During his recuperation, Janssens absorbed himself in the life of Van Gogh. He read Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo, and then read them all again. At 37, the same age as Van Gogh when he died, Janssens' life took an about-turn. The Belgian former dairy company marketing manager has become the guardian of the Van Gogh legacy in Auvers and beyond, and for more than 20 years, has dedicated his life to helping the artist achieve his modest aim of "having an exhibition of my own in a cafe".

"I knew the Hollywood version – the man who cut his ear off, went with prostitutes, committed suicide," Janssens says. "But through his letters I got a vision of him as so much more than a crazy man. Because of the letters, I decided to make a house of memory."

Janssens bought the run-down Auberge Ravoux in 1987 and spent several years researching and managing its painstaking restoration. He travelled the world looking at 200 museum houses – Shakespeare's in Stratford, Mozart's in Salzburg, Hemingway's in Key West – but was inspired most by Anne Frank's house in Amsterdam. "An empty room that said so much."

The House of Van Gogh is now a successful restaurant and museum but to Janssens, it offers something less tangible, a place where visitors – pilgrims he calls them, not tourists – might come to appreciate life's simple beauties, much as Van Gogh did, while all the time fighting his demons.

Indeed, the painter's vision, as expressed in his paintings and letters, has inspired Janssens' own life philosophy and touches all aspects of his project.

"We are living in a period where everybody is impressed with themselves, everybody wants to be important, to be famous," he says. "I want people to come back to their roots. As Van Gogh said, 'How difficult it is to be simple.'"

Janssens has spent millions of dollars restoring the Auberge Ravoux and surrounding buildings to their 1890 state. In the same dining room Van Gogh and his fellow artists ate, visitors can savour hearty regional dishes of the period. The lamb, marinated for 12 hours, cooked for seven,



Bringing Van Gogh to life, clockwise from top left, Van Gogh's *The Fields* (Wheat Fields) painted in 1890 in Anvers-sur-Oise, France, the Auberge Ravoux dining room, Dominique Janssens, and the Auberge Ravoux inn's exterior in the late 19th century.

**Pictures: AP and Institut Van Gogh**

and served with sauteed potatoes, is a house specialty. The crusty bread, local wines and desserts, such as red wine poached pears with cinnamon and vanilla, make for a memorable dining experience. The embroidered curtains, oak tables and patterned tableware add to the authenticity.

The second and third floors of the Auberge Ravoux have been transformed into a museum, comprising the stark attic room where the artist lived and died – superstition meant the "suicide room" was never rented again – a theatre featuring a sight and sound show of Van Gogh's life, and a bookstore. In the courtyard, the painter's life story and that of the inn is told on a series of wall-mounted storyboards.

Van Gogh spent the last 70 days of his life in Auvers and produced as many paintings in the most productive phase of his 10-year career as an artist. It remains a popular area for artists and tourists.

From the House of Van Gogh, visitors can explore the same leafy lanes Van Gogh walked, easel on his back, to a day's painting in the surrounding countryside. Not far from the museum, past traditional stone cottages, is the

church dating to the 11th century that Van Gogh captured in *Church at Auvers*; above that, the wheat fields that inspired a series of canvasses, and the adjacent cemetery where Van Gogh is buried alongside Theo.

Barely an hour by train from Paris, nestled between the river Oise and the gentle wooded hills and fields of the Vexin plateau, the village is a world away.

To this day it retains the tranquillity that so charmed Van Gogh and his fellow artists. Other points of interest include the Absinthe Museum, celebrating the tipples of choice for many artists of that time; the house of Dr Paul Gachet – Van Gogh's friend and the subject of one his most famous paintings (*Portrait of Dr Gachet*) – and the house and garden of the artist Charles Daubigny, one of the older impressionists who also befriended Van Gogh and the likes of Paul Cezanne and Camille Pissarro during their time at Auvers.

The most recent chapter in Janssens' project was perhaps his most ambitious.

Soon after Sotheby's announced Van Gogh's *The Fields* – depicting the aforementioned paddocks above Auvers – was to be put up for

auction on November 7, Janssens' Van Gogh Institute launched an international campaign to raise funds to bid for the painting.

There has been much debate over the years as to which was Van Gogh's final painting. Some say the brooding *Wheat Field with Crows* was his last, but others believe *The Fields* was his final work – in a letter to his brother Theo on July 10, 1890, he described painting what experts believe was *The Fields*.

"They are vast fields of wheat under troubled skies, and I do not need to go out of my way to try to express sadness and extreme loneliness. I hope you see them soon – for I hope to bring them to see you in Paris as soon as possible, since I almost think that these canvases will tell you what I cannot say in words, the health and restorative forces that I see in the country,"

He shot himself on July 27.

When *The Fields* became available, Janssens was understandably excited.

A Van Gogh doesn't become available too often and *The Fields* is one of only an estimated 10 works by the Dutch master left in private hands. It was not the first time Janssens had sought to hang an original Van Gogh at the



Later years, left, the room where Van Gogh spent his last days, top, a self-portrait of the artist (1887) and his painting *The Church at Auvers-sur-Oise* (1890).

museum, but previous attempts had been stifled by a snooty French cultural bureaucracy, he says, wary of allowing a Van Gogh to pass into the hands of a private gallery.

To fund the purchase, Janssens, at 59, still a bundle of nervous energy and ideas, launched a website, [vangoghsdream.org](http://vangoghsdream.org). All donors are to receive a personal access code to view the painting if/when it finally returns to the room where it dried, through a webcam in the attic room.

Despite considerable interest, the sale deadline came around too quickly to enable the institute to raise sufficient money for a bid. It remains optimistic, however, it might yet land the prized painting, which was passed in at the New York sale. During the online drive, several private collectors contacted Janssens, though he has declined to say whether negotiations are underway for fear of driving the price higher. Sotheby's was hoping *The Fields* would fetch up to \$US35 million (about \$A39 million) but it failed to attract a bid of more than \$US25 million (\$A28 million).

If nothing else, the online initiative has provided the institute with a solid financial

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base to pursue Van Gogh's dream to a successful conclusion and the website remains open for contributions. Under French law, money can be kept for three years to fund another purchase. All is in readiness to receive the prize exhibit at the museum, including an armour-proof glass case and other high-tech

gadgetry. "When I see the unanimous acclaim this unique project has received, how unreservedly thousands of anonymous donors and celebrities subscribed to it, how much support it got from hundreds of newspapers and television stations around the world, reflecting the public's continuing fascination for Vincent, I have no doubt we shall realise Van Gogh's dream," Janssens says. "When there's a will, there's a way and when there's a dream, there's a way."

Until now, Janssens has described the Van Gogh room as "a silent space where there's nothing to see but everything to feel. It was left empty so visitors can furnish it with their thoughts." One day, though, Janssens is determined they might also have one of the master's finest works to contemplate, just as Van Gogh wanted.

■ *The Auberge, renamed the House of Van Gogh, reopens March 1 after closing for the northern winter. For details, email [info@vangoghfrance.com](mailto:info@vangoghfrance.com)*

# WHAT'S ON

## Storytelling for under-5s

Wednesday 21 November 10–10.40 am

Enjoy stories with children's storyteller Paola Tulley, especially for children under-5. An opportunity to dance, watch puppets and participate in the storytelling. Free  
Boab Tree

## Playlunch with Friends

FRIENDS

Wednesday 21 November  
10.40 am – 12 noon

The perfect way to round off a storytelling session! Relax with a coffee while children participate in fun and games in the Friends Lounge. Ideal for children under-5. Cost (including morning tea): \$7 per family; \$5 per Friends family. Bookings essential on (02) 6208 5048.

Friends Lounge

## Museums of the World

FRIENDS

Thursday 22 November 3–4.30 pm

Hear Anne Bisson, Cooperation and Culture Counsellor from the Embassy of France, present an insight into the museums of France. Cost (including light refreshments): \$7 per person; \$5 for Friends. Bookings essential on (02) 6208 5048.

Friends Lounge

## Pacific Museums: Workshop

Thursday 22 and Friday 23 November  
9 am – 5 pm

Join us for these two linked workshops aimed at exploring and enhancing cultural engagement and dialogue between Australian and Pacific museums. Costs apply. Bookings essential. For more information or to make a booking telephone (02) 6208 5021.

Visions Theatre

For a full event calendar please visit  
[www.nma.gov.au](http://www.nma.gov.au)



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