

## THE LAST, GRAY GARRET OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

By Peter Mikelbank December 29, 1990

AUVERS-SUR-OISE, FRANCE -- It began five years ago with a car crash, a bad one. He was rear-ended, hard, by a drunk at a red light on an unfamiliar road in a small town in the French countryside.

Reading the police report in his hospital bed, Belgian businessman Dominique-Charles Janssens noticed the recorded location of the accident: the street outside an inn named Maison van Gogh. He assumed this was a conceit, a commercial appropriation of a famous name.

But a gendarme told him no, his misfortune had taken place outside the rooming house in which Vincent died.

Janssens was not unsophisticated about art, but he knew little of van Gogh beyond the banal: Famously melancholic. 'Starry Night.' The ear. Still, Janssens is a man who does not entirely believe in the randomness of coincidence, does not entirely dismiss the possibility of destiny; and so in his hospital bed, with an uncertain sense of mission, he began devouring all he could about van Gogh. It was a phrase from one of the artist's letters to his brother, Theo, that first caused Janssens's pulse to quicken.

"One of the first letters I read was one where he said Auvers was 'gravement beau' {gravely beautiful}. This is not an expression the French use." It was, in fact, an expression Janssens had heard before, at home, from his parents, in Dutch. Janssens and Vincent shared Dutch ancestry, they shared a certain conciliatory sensibility one must adopt if one is a foreigner in France, and, Janssens began to believe, they shared a certain indomitable romantic faith in the potential of man. A lust, if you will, for life.

"Before," Janssens says, "I only had an image of the absinthe drinker, the ear thing, the man who hired prostitutes. In the hospital, I discovered a humanist."

# The Washington Post

After two months of convalescence, he was released, and his first stop was Maison van Gogh. Padlocked. A neighbor told Janssens the owners were away for the summer, but that the house was for sale.

Janssens thought it would make a nice museum.

So he bought it.

The climb to Vincent's garret is a twisting, creaking ascent into desolation.

This room in Auvers is not like his room in Arles (which no longer exists) with its bright yellow bed, framed pictures and ample furnishings; this is a grim and colorless Braque painting, a five-sided closet, smaller than imaginable, with a steep angled roof forcing a stooped step to a single tiny skylight.

It is empty of the items that were there in Vincent's day: a bed, a chair, an easel and a calendar. These things are in storage. A discoloration reveals where the calendar was tacked; it hung there untouched for nearly 100 years. Juillet, 1890.

This is where Vincent came to live in the spring of that year, after being released from the asylum at St. Remy into the private care of one Dr. Gachet, a local homeopath and art collector who had earlier treated Renoir and Cezanne for depression.

Vincent could afford only a poor man's lodgings; he took the first room at the top of the stairs because it was cheapest, looking out only onto the corridor. "On my own," he wrote Theo, "I have found an inn where I shall pay 3.5 francs a day.... The address here is Place de la Mairie, Chez Ravoux... ."

The room is like an aging photograph or a still life in sepia. Gray paint and plaster peel back off inch-wide cracks running the walls from floor to roof. The room is hypnotic, sorrowful, almost sinister. The light is gray, the air suffocating, the space almost psychotically confining. To imagine how a sad little man or anyone could return nightly to create in such surroundings...

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Yet it was here that Vincent worked on 70 canvases in as many days, portraits of the country village scenes, its church and thatched cottages, creating what is considered his best work: impassioned landscapes restating the feel of "Starry Night," and portraits characterized by harsh modern color. By summer, his faith in Gachet gone, Vincent's canvases and letters grew darker and brooding. In late July, in a sketch of wheat fields and troubled skies, he drew a pistol to his side, and, for the first time in his wounded, wretched life, succeeded.

Bleeding profusely, van Gogh staggered back to the inn, climbed the stairs and cried out, "I've shot myself and this time didn't miss."

Two nights later, Theo at his bedside, Vincent died.

A suicide letter semi-explained: "My life is threatened at its very root and my steps, wavering."

A local obituary summarized the life of this man thus:

"Van Gogh, Vincent, 38. A Dutch stranger and painter."

As tradition dictates, "The Suicide's Room at Ravoux" was never rented again. It was never altered, never prettified. It is precisely as he left it, in all its bleakness.

"Now you understand," Janssens says gravely as a visitor emerges after long moments within the dark.

In Janssens's plan for the place, the furniture will be restored, and the adjoining attic lodgings partly converted "into contemplation space, modeled after a similar space in Anne Frank's house.

"People need a place to stop afterward, and, very quietly, we'll show slides of his words and paintings. It will be very effective, I think."

But first, he's got to finish building the museum. It has been five years in the planning, and there's a tale in that. It's about the Frenchman's famous mistrust of foreigners, about the collision between

# The Washington Post

commerce and art, and of the lesson of van Gogh, that dreams may all too often outreach practicalities.

## The Town van Gogh Built

Except for three stoplights along a blacktop main street, Auvers today remains much the same village painted by Vincent -- and also by Corot, Daubigny and Pissarro. Willows shelter red-tiled roofs, and narrow back lanes wind into chestnut groves. In fall, a dense fog rises off the Oise, holding the village in its cold embrace until April. In spring, it remains framed by the wheat fields Vincent painted. Only 25 minutes from Paris, it has so far avoided the sadder fate of ambitious sprawling neighbors. Its population of 6,000 is merely twice what it was in van Gogh's day.

Auvers has no factories. A spokesman for the mayor's cabinet describes the village's business as "cultural."

Industrial would be closer to the truth. It has one industry, and that is van Gogh.

In an average year, more than 50,000 people come to Auvers to celebrate Vincent. To visit his grave, one must trek up a lonely hill, past the church and through fields to a stonewall cemetery where, covered with a bed of ivy, a granite stone reads simply, "Here lies Vincent van Gogh... ."

Vincent and Theo lie side by side.

Down in the village, there are two postcard shops on Charles de Gaulle Street, and a T-shirt rack in a tearoom, but no exploitative knickknacks, no VincentLand, no Pizza to Gogh for the French, Dutch and Japanese busloads, yet. Until this summer, the biggest thing to ever hit here was the 1955 film "Lust for Life," and in tabacs, pensioners speak of "Kerk Doog-lass" with the reverence West Texas spinsters reserve for porch swing nights and James Dean in "Giant."

This year, however, was the Vincent van Gogh centennial. "The streets were black with people," says one local.

# The Washington Post

And so Auvers plowed \$1 million -- more than 40 percent of its annual budget -- into promotion and physical improvement in preparation for its Vincent centennial. New signage. Two municipal parking lots. Art shows, lectures and plays.

The tourists came, saw the grave site and wandered the town, but they did not get to see Maison van Gogh, Auvers's literal and figurative centerpiece. For years one of the town's most popular tourist attractions, it has been closed to the public since Janssens bought it and began an elaborate restoration to turn it into a shrine and spectacular modern museum to Vincent van Gogh.

It is as though Auvers gave a party but forgot to buy beer. Some tourists were disappointed.

And therefore, so were some townspeople.

The Belgian, the Buyer

To walk the streets of Auvers with Dominique-Charles Janssens is to tread cobblestones cautiously. Sometimes, when he enters a room, there is sudden silence.

In village cafes here, filled with the conspiratorial steep of dark coffee, tobacco and red wine, there are those who refer to him only as "that stranger."

We have entered Irene Fouilleul's restaurant. Mme. Fouilleul politely introduces him to the half-dozen patrons in the cozy dining room: "Monsieur Janssens, the new proprietor of Maison van Gogh."

A short, fiftyish man with hard black eyes rises slowly from his table, where he is dining alone before an empty bottle of burgundy. He approaches Janssens. His eyes smolder. His lips are amply moist. He stands a little too close.

"You're Dutch," he says, half question, half accusation.

"Belgian, actually," says Janssens.

# The Washington Post

The stranger ponders this.

"What you have done to this village," he says at last, "is the same as if I came to Belgium and killed three of your cathedrals."

Janssens, all courtliness, invites him to sit, asks for elaboration.

It turns out the man has a personal gripe. He is distressed that in his renovations Janssens has torn down a section of the inn's restaurant that contained a fireplace that he calls "the chimney van Gogh." He used to have a seat there, his favorite.

Removing that removed the soul of Vincent from the inn, he says.

Janssens nods gravely. "The Van Gogh Chimney," he says, almost gently, was a fake. It was built as an addition in the late 1950s, when "Lust for Life" renewed public interest in the town. Van Gogh never laid eyes on the Van Gogh Chimney.

The man drinks this in slowly. He asks a few questions about the renovations.

Patiently, Janssens explains his grand plans: restoration of the inn in loving detail. Construction out back of a vast barn -- similar to a barn that was there in the 19th century -- which would become one of the most important art museums in the world, with 25 van Goghs at an estimated value of \$1 billion dollars for a four-month exhibit at the opening. A computerized security system that would tune the humidity so finely that it would automatically adjust the air to compensate for a visitor's wet raincoat.

Scheduled completion date, 1992.

The man is clearly mollified, plainly impressed. He asks for an invitation to the opening. A solemn promise is tendered. The two part, fast friends.

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This has been pretty much how it has gone in Auvers for Dominique-Charles Janssens, right from the start. Nothing has been easy; he has had to explain himself at every turn; he has had to fight for acceptance, and has yet to fully receive it.

In September 1985, when he first met the owner of Maison van Gogh -- one Madame Tagliana -- she said, "We have many people who want to buy it, and you're too young." Janssens was 37, a successful exporter but a novice at real estate.

There were competitors from across the globe, including Pierre Cardin and the French Communist Party. There were offers as high as \$1 million; Janssens's was a mere half of that, a pool of his own money and what he could raise from a supportive Belgian bank.

As it turned out, Janssens had two advantages over his competitors: He was the only one to submit elaborate plans, and they called for what Tagliana considered a sensitive and loving restoration. Secondly, he got an assist from coincidence. Or destiny, if you prefer.

"One of the reasons Madame finally sold the house to me," he smiles, "is that my wife {who is French} was born in the same month in the same village in the same year, by the same doctor, as her daughter."

"When Monsieur Janssens proposed his project," says Tagliana, cradling the dollhouse-like model, "we were very happy. It's a beautiful project. Now the inn will be as before."

Once he had the house, Janssens had to try to put together \$15 million in financing for the restoration and construction of the museum. It seemed like a gargantuan figure for a single person to finance.

"You have to remember that I bought the house in '86," says Janssens. "At that time people weren't speaking much of van Gogh. Then in '88, 'Sunflowers' sold for \$54 million.

"Then, suddenly, interest came."

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## A Promise to Keep

While the house has remained dark and idle, Janssens has actively invested time, organizing three tax-free foundations (in France, the United States and Japan) to realize a cultural and educational facility dedicated to Vincent. The Institute van Gogh (which he created, heads and continues to support) has in five years pieced together "a logistical base" of legal, architectural, construction and project-funding support. He's recruited corporate partners, including Price-Waterhouse and Bouygues, the world's largest construction firm, and IBM France.

He anticipates 250,000 visitors a year. Seven hundred thousand ticket requests have already been received, Janssens says.

Which will be great if the funding coalesces. It's not all there yet. He's raised less than half.

Janssens acknowledges there are considerable obstacles to overcome.

It is an open secret that the town of Auvers had first crack at owning Maison van Gogh. In 1985, before entertaining other offers, Madame Tagliana proposed to sell the inn to the town. The town fathers demurred.

There is another administration in place now, with another mayor, and this mayor says bluntly that his predecessor made a terrible mistake.

"Alas!" Jean-Pierre Bequet begins, even before a question is raised. Looking outside, through his office window directly in front of the City Hall, which van Gogh painted in a scene of pastel isolation, Bequet nods dispiritedly toward a straggle of tourists peering into the darkened facade of the Maison van Gogh.

"It will prove to have been a historic error. We could have bought it, developed it ourselves and placed a concessionaire into the restaurant, but neither Auvers, the region's conseil general or the minister of culture wanted to support that, so the family found their own solution. For me, it is a pity. It's very sad to have it closed this year.

# The Washington Post

"When will the Maison van Gogh be opened? I hope the soonest possible, but the exact year and date, you'll have to ask Mr. Janssens."

And if Janssens develops financial problems? Will the town help him?

"It is not reasonable," says Bequet with a small smile, "for the village to step in as partner. You can't expect it to become a public-private project. It can't be a mixte. He has his permits to begin now, and my view is that the inn should open as soon as possible."

In France, government has broad powers to appropriate private property in certain cases, such as an owner's failure to meet financial responsibilities. Might that happen here?

Bequet does not answer that directly. He says this: "The project is extremely important. Perhaps, it is too large for one man. Too gigantic... ."

Each time he visits the village, Janssens makes a point of passing the cemetery. "People leave a paint brush, a sake bottle or a poem on the tombs. And I take them. Sometimes, they're very touching."

He plans to exhibit them.

Reaching the grave site, he lowers a hand to weed the ivy free of dead flowers and debris and lowers his head.

He stands there for a few moments, and steps back to let a group of tourists through.

"In one letter," he whispers, "Vincent wrote: 'Some day or other, I believe I will find a way of having an exhibition of my own in a cafe.'"

"And I have made him my promise."