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ART

ART; For van Gogh's Fans, There's Room at the Inn

By GINGER DANTO; Ginger Danto is the Paris correspondent for Artnews.

AUVERS-SUR-OISE— A century ago, on the advice of his brother, Theo, and the painter Pissarro, Vincent van Gogh traveled from Paris to Auvers, a small village along the banks of the River Oise, where a certain Dr. Gachet awaited to treat him. Just 20 miles north of the capital, Auvers is "far enough from Paris to be real country," wrote van Gogh in the first of many letters to Theo describing his new surroundings. Despite its healing effect on the former tenant of the asylum at Saint-Remy, Auvers would be van Gogh's final destination. His time there was one of intense activity - van Gogh made 70 paintings in as many days - culminating in the artist's suicide, exactly one hundred years ago this Friday, in the fields not far from his lodging.

To walk through Auvers today is to see van Gogh's paintings from this final frenzied phase come to life, as the village remains virtually unchanged from the time of the artist's visit. The village hall with its square of gnarled trees, the Romanesque church straddling a hillside, the modest farmhouses of rough-hewn stone along roads winding out to the countryside where the Auverois still toil in their wheat fields, and even the crows flying overhead uncannily recall van Gogh's celebrated depictions.

As for the garret van Gogh rented in a local inn, superstition precluded its further use. What became known locally as the "suicide's room" remained closed through a succession of owners, and looked much as it had to its last tenant when it was classified a national historic monument in 1985.

That year Dominique Janssens, a Flemish entrepreneur en route to his home in Paris, had a car accident in Auvers. "I learned in the police reports that my accident happened in front of something called "van Gogh's house," said Mr. Janssens, during a recent interview in Auvers. At the time, he said, he considered the name a commercial tactic to lure patrons to the tumbledown cafe overlooking the village square. The coincidence nevertheless prompted Mr. Janssens to choose the complete letters of van Gogh as reading material during his recuperation.

"I'd had the stereotypical image of van Gogh: a man who went after prostitutes, drank absinthe and cut his ear off," he said. "One knew the negative aspects of his life, the life of a drunk and a loner who managed to paint masterpieces. When you read the letters, you find that there is a humanist hidden behind a maligned painter. When you discover this, you discover another van Gogh."

Mr. Janssens learned that the cafe, formerly the Auberge Ravoux, had indeed been home to van Gogh, who wrote to Theo upon his arrival May 21, 1890, that his address was "Place de la Mairie, chez Ravoux." One of nine inns operating in Auvers when van Gogh arrived, the Ravoux family's simple, slightly bohemian, establishment, proved the most appealing to the artist's modest taste and pocketbook.

Increasingly intrigued by his research, Mr. Janssens returned to the scene of his accident to find camera-laden tourists peering into the dark facade of the cafe, which was closed for vacation. At the village hardware store next door, where "Irises"-stenciled ashtrays and other van Gogh memorabilia are nestled among new bird cages and tools, he learned that the cafe was for sale. Feeling that destiny had sent him, he decided to buy "van Gogh's house" and restore it as a cultural center "worthy of the humanist."

This lofty goal helped Mr. Janssens, then 41, obtain the property over such noteworthy bidders as the couturier Pierre Cardin, and begin its renovation, which is still under way. "At first they didn't want to sell it to me - they thought I was too young," he said of Regine and Roger Tagliana, who had bought the Auberge Ravoux in 1952. With Madame running the kitchen, and Monsieur presiding between the bar and a makeshift gallery on the second floor for local painters, the Taglianas sustained the inn's traditional ambiance of an artists' rendezvous, and weathered the filming on location of Vincente Minnelli's "Lust for Life," a biographical portrait of the painter. But after Roger Tagliana died in 1983 his wife tired of the business, and by the time Mr. Janssens happened on Auvers was seeking a buyer.

Mr. Janssens, the export director for a multinational food company, had learned through an eclectic business career that he could make and lose large quantities of money, and that neither was as important as doing what he really wanted. "Life is but a passage, so it is best to do what you are passionate about," he told Mrs. Tagliana, and thus convinced her of his nascent passion for van Gogh. But more important to her than his infectious enthusiasm and his plans was the fact that both her daughter and his wife had been born in the neighboring town of L'Isle Adam, in the same month and delivered by the same doctor. With that impressive credential, Mr. Janssens bought the inn for \$500,000.

A year after his discovery of Auvers, Mr. Janssens had gained a dilapidated building with a unique history, and traded an important position in international business for the career of innkeeper. "Everyone thought I was crazy," said Mr. Janssens, who sold everything he had to buy the inn. "Then 'Sunflowers' was sold and they said, 'Well, his project is not so crazy after all.' People always come to the rescue of victory," he added, quoting a French proverb.

A man so taken with van Gogh's writings that his speech is peppered with quotations, Mr. Janssens was motivated to respond belatedly to one in particular. "One day or another I believe I will find a way to have an exhibit of my own in a cafe," he said, quoting a letter van Gogh wrote to Theo on June 10, 1890. "A hundred years later, van Gogh's dream will come true," added Mr. Janssens, who has enlisted the British art historian Ronald Pickvance, organizer of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's van Gogh shows in 1984 and 1986-7, as curator of an exhibit of 25 works from van Gogh's Auverois period. The show, to open late next year, will inaugurate an exhibition hall being built behind the inn.

As for the Auberge Ravoux, it is being restored to look - and partly function - much as it did when van Gogh first walked through Auvers. "You see I still have the floor," Mr. Janssens said excitedly, kicking at the worn tiles van Gogh allegedly trod over on his way out to paint. "And the same wallpaper," he added, pointing to the dim floral pattern that still covers patches of the interior. Here in the front cafe van Gogh's preferred "cuisine de deux plats" (two courses) will be served, while the five-course meals eaten at Dr. Paul Gachet's, van Gogh's physician and sometime portrait subject, have inspired the menu for an elegant restaurant in the back. "Food is very important to the French," said Mr. Janssens, whose preoccupation with the merits of boeuf bourgignon over blanquette de veau attests to his pleasure in his new role as innkeeper.

Elsewhere in the inn, a library and slide show will provide information about van Gogh as well as about Auvers, a village that attracted many artists in the second half of the 19th century, including Cezanne, Monet, Berthe Morisot, Renoir and Pissarro. It is doubtful that references and hearty lunches, however, will equal the impact of a visit to van Gogh's room. Accessible from the kitchen by a narrow wooden staircase, the room, spare and dark but for a swath of sun coming through a tiny skylight, "has a way of making each person who enters confront himself," said Mr. Janssens. A metal frame bed, dresser, chair and wall calendar - all said to have been used by van Gogh - complete the barren decor that surrounded an artist whose canvases of the time are ablaze with color and light. Van Gogh described Auvers as "seriously beautiful," and found inspiration in sights so benign that they easily escape an ordinary visitor's eye - from Daubigny's garden, and that of Dr. Gachet, glimpsed through an iron gate kept bolted by the present owners, to a view of rooftops, or an outdoor stairway. One of the few places in Auvers van Gogh did not paint is the village cemetery, where he is buried beside Theo. Mr. Janssens stops at the cemetery on each of his frequent visits to Auvers.

Alternately courted and condemned by the French Ministry of Culture, which has come to realize its oversight in having left the Auberge Ravoux in private hands, Mr. Janssens decided to keep his project independent from the state. To secure private sponsors for his \$10 million budget, he founded the nonprofit Institut van Gogh out of his home in 1987. He has since gathered a small team to work with him in his Paris headquarters in the back offices of a bank. The frenzied pace Mr. Janssens's life has acquired since he discovered Auvers, and the opinion of some that he has gone mad make him feel a special affinity with van Gogh. Unlike van Gogh, Mr. Janssens stands to recoup some of his investment from the 250,000 visitors expected annually once the Auberge Ravoux opens in late 1991. That he may once again be solvent, however, is not Mr. Janssens's goal. "I did not buy a business," he said. "I bought the soul of a house that must be perpetuated."

Photo: The future van Gogh museum, before it closed for renovation (Institut Van Gogh, Paris)
(pg. 30)