Vincent Van Gogh arrived in Arles by train on Monday, February 20, 1888, with an idea to found an artist colony in the south “Wishing to see a different light, thinking that looking at nature under a bright sky might give us a better idea of the Japanese way of feeling and drawing. Wishing also to see this stronger sun, because one could not understand Delacroix’s pictures from the point of view of execution and technique without knowing it, and because one feels that the colors of the prism are veiled in the mist of the North.”

Oddly and by happenstance, when he arrived, he found the countryside covered in snow, and among his first paintings were soft landscapes of snow covered fields. He found lodging in the Hotel-Restaurant Carrel, but his stay ended badly over a billing dispute after only two months. Vincent signed a lease on May 1st for a small four-room two-story semi-detached house on the Place Lamartine, not far from the train station. Its stucco exterior was bright ochre, and it became known by Van Gogh’s paintings as *La Maison Jaune*, the Yellow House.

The house needed painting, renovation and furnishings, and before this could be accomplished, he left the Hotel Carrel on May 7th for cheaper lodging at the Café de la Gare neighboring the Yellow House on the Place Lamartine. The Café de la Gare was owned by Joseph and Marie Ginoux, and it was there he met the postman, Joseph Roulin and his family, who lived close by on the other side of the Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée railroad bridge over the Rue de Montmajour. The Ginoux and Roulin families became Van Gogh’s close friends, and they all would pose as portrait subjects for him, and later, Paul Gauguin.

Van Gogh used the Yellow House as a studio and storage for his materials during the summer, but he did not finally move in until mid-September. He had continued with his idea to form an artists’ colony, a “Studio in the South” throughout the summer and implored Paul Gauguin to leave Pont-Aven to join him in Arles. After multiple delays and occasionally antagonistic correspondence, Gauguin arrived in Arles on October 23, 1888, to occupy a room Van Gogh had prepared for him in the Yellow House.
Van Gogh and Gauguin had met in Paris in Montmartre, with Gauguin introducing Van Gogh to Camille Pissarro and others of the Impressionists. They admired and respected each other’s work, and they found common ground in Arles for similar subjects, both portraits of personalities who had befriended Van Gogh and landscapes, often painting side by side in locations, such as the antique Roman cemetery, *les Alyscamps*.

Despite their mutual respect in art, Van Gogh’s stressful view of the world and his peculiar place within that world and Gauguin’s mercurial temper did not mix well. They got on each other’s nerves and increasingly argued in the confined space of the Yellow House, leading to Gauguin’s stormy departure for a hotel, provoking Van Gogh’s ultimate crisis of distress and self-mutilation on the evening of December 23, 1888. When Gauguin learned from the police the next morning what had happened, he sent a message to Van Gogh’s brother, Theo, and left Arles for good, leaving an astounding body of joint work but putting an end to Van Gogh’s idea of an art colony in the south.

Van Gogh was taken into charge by the police who admitted him into the hospital Hôtel-Dieu where he was visited by his brother, Theo, and eventually released to return to the Yellow House on January 7, 1889. He begins working again, sometimes “furiously”, but has hallucinations and hears voices. A delegation of neighbors are alarmed by his return to the Place Lamartine and petition the municipality in February to have him returned to his family or to a mental institution.

Van Gogh is returned to the hospital where he is put in the care of Dr. Felix Rey, who had treated him after his self-mutilation. He is allowed out on supervised excursions to paint and draw but continues to live at the hospital as the Yellow House is locked by the police. The municipality finally has him admitted to the asylum of St. Paul-de-Mausole in St. Rémy-de-Provence on May 8, 1889, thus ending just over fourteen months of feverish innovations in drawing, representation of forms, composition and color, definitively opening the door from Impressionism to what would be called Modern Art. Today this has evolved into Postmodernism with its mistaken idea that if one is original enough, one can be considered a great artist.

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Vincent Van Gogh *Self Portrait*  
1888, 46 x 38 cm  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Self-Portrait12.jpg

Paul Gauguin: *Van Gogh peignant des tournesols*  
“Van Gogh painting sunflowers”  
December 1888, 73 x 91 cm  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam  
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_Gauguin_104.jpg

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By the end of World War I, France was the world leader in aviation and photography, and a project was initiated in 1919 to photograph the entirety of France from the air. The project did not reach Arles until 1936, but the view differed little from the Arles of almost fifty years earlier, when Van Gogh lived and worked there. Arles was a medium-sized regional town in 1888, with about 24,000 inhabitants. By 1936, the town and its neighboring communes had grown by about another 5,000 people, but the physical changes of the town proper were minimal. The 1936 aerial photograph provides a good overview of sites related to Van Gogh:
To prepare for the landings of American and French armies in Provence on August 15, 1944, American B-24 and B-26 aircraft operating from Italy carried out extensive missions across the south of France, targeting largely railroad installations and bridges. Arles was attacked three times, on June 25th, July 17th and August 6th. The objectives were railyards and the two bridges: le Pont de Tringuetaille, the road bridge from the center of Arles to the commune of Tringuetaille across the Rhône; and the railroad bridge, le Pont des Lions, situated just north of the Place Lamartine where the Yellow House was situated.
While the targets of the bombing missions were bridges and railroad installations, considerable destruction was inflicted on the town, especially the neighborhoods surrounding the Place Lamartine where the Café de la Gare and The Yellow House were situated. The Café de la Gare was totally destroyed, and The Yellow House sustained such considerable damage that it eventually was torn down after the war. The “quartier réservé” where the streets reserved for the “maisons de tolérances” were situated, was severely damaged, as were many other parts of the town.

The reconstruction of the town after the war resulted in mostly utilitarian and graceless buildings of non-consequential interest. Added the gradual deindustrialization of the town and the general desertification of commerce in the town center, Arles today resembles little of the regional town with a thriving local economy experienced by Van Gogh, taking substantial imagination today to reconstruct how the sites he visited looked when he did his work there. The body of his drawings and paintings, though, is an essential and living documentation that still inspires visitors in the mental reconstruction of an important and all too brief epoch in the history of modern art.

1. **THE HÔTEL-RESTAURANT CARREL**

Van Gogh arrived in Arles late in the afternoon on Monday, February 20, 1888, on the train from Paris, a 15- or 16-hour journey, and found the town covered in two feet of snow! He would have left his baggage and materials at the station and walked to find his hotel, the Hôtel-Restaurant Carrel on the rue Amedée Pichot, a short walk from the Porte de la Cavalerie at the entrance of the medieval town. He must have learned about the hotel in Paris, as he apparently went there directly, although there were other places to stay closer to the train station.
The hotel was operated by Albert and Catherine Carrel. It was a two-story building with a roof terrace from which Van Gogh would draw views of the town. His room apparently fronted onto the street, directly above and across from a pork products butcher shop, the Charcuterie Reboul. This, with its snow on the street, would be the subject of one of three paintings, perhaps the first, he completed the week he arrived in Arles.

His stay at the Hôtel Carrel did not go well. Its restaurant was locally popular, but Van Gogh complained in letters to his brother that the food was disagreeable and contributed to his stomach problems, while the owners complained that he was always wanting to eat whenever and whatever he wanted. He had no place to store an increasing stock of paintings (he would complete 30 in his first month) and would leave his canvases to dry in the corridor.

His stay came to an end with a dispute over the bill, in which the owners added charges for the extra space taken by his materials and canvases. Van Gogh refused to pay, and the Carrels confiscated his materials.

Van Gogh took Monsieur and Madame Carrel to court and won, the court obliging the Carrels to return to him his materials. By that time, he was gone, though, having signed a lease on what would become known as The Yellow House on May 1st and moving into the Café de la Gare on May 7th.

The Hotel-Restaurant Carrel was totally destroyed in the bombardment of June 25th, 1944, along with the neighboring properties behind. It was rebuilt as an apartment building of no particular distinction in 1952. The shop of the Charcuterie Raboul survived the bombardments, and the shop space still exists, although sometimes abandoned but renovated with a now-modern shop front and today a barber shop.

2. THE CAFÉ DE LA GARE

The Place Lamartine was a landscaped garden at the Porte de la Cavalerie north of the 12th century ramparts constructed by the Knights Templar; before 1842, it was known as the Place, or Jardin, de la Cavalerie. The garden was divided into a triangle around a central pond and fountain, bordered by the Avenue de Montmajour on the east and the Rue de la Gare on the west. A street across the northern edge was divided by the Impasse Lamartine, which dead-ended to the north against the embankment of the Lunel branch of the Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée (PLM) railroad.

Van Gogh began painting and drawing in and around the Place Lamartine soon after his arrival in Arles and spent much of the months of March and April 1888 working in the fields and orchards north of the town. He would have crossed through the Place Lamartine every day and become a familiar sight to the merchants and occupants of the Place.

In March, he painted a view facing north along the double row of trees leading from the Place Lamartine along the Rue de la Gare to the overpass of the Lunel-PLM railroad. To paint this, Van Gogh would have stood
almost immediately behind the Café de la Gare. It is quite possible that was when he came to know Joseph and Marie Ginoux, the operators of the Café, as well as the widow, Marguerite Venissac, owner-operator of the next door Auberge Venissac.

The Café de la Gare is seen in the photo at right directly behind the Place Lamartine directly through the Porte de la Cavalerie. To its right was a garden at the corner of the street and the Impasse Lamartine, where clients could be served outside during clement weather. Behind the garden is the Auberge Venissac on the Impasse. To the right is the building with two semidetached houses, one of which (behind the trees) would become Van Gogh’s “Yellow House”.

La Place Lamartine
vue de la Porte de la Cavalerie, c 1900
Photo Collection Privée
Source : Bernadette Murphy
« L’Oreille de Van Gogh, Rapport d’Enquête »
Editions Actes Sud

Avenue of Plane Trees near Arles Station
« Le train bleu »

House of the Roulin Family, N° 10, rue de la Montée des Cordes

« Avenue of Plane Trees near Arles Station »

La nuit étoilée sur le Rhône

Photo aérienne prise le 18 juin 1942 (better resolution than photos from 1936), IGN Geoportail.gouv.fr
While Van Gogh’s relationship with the Carrels deteriorated, he became an habitué of the Café de la Gare and began having his meals at Marguerite Venissac’s restaurant. He also was in need of a more appropriate place to work and use as a studio.

One of the regulars at the Café de la Gare was a retired train conductor, Bernard Soulé. In his retirement, he had become a member of the Arles municipal council and had a small business managing properties for absentee landlords. One of the buildings he looked after was N°2, Place Lamartine, the semi-detached house in the building across the Impasse from the Café de la Gare. It had been formerly owned and occupied by the parents of Marie Ginoux and sold when her parents died two years previously, remaining unoccupied since. Madame Ginoux apparently approached Monsieur Soulé on behalf of Van Gogh and suggested he rent to him the house with her personal reconnaissance.

Van Gogh signed the lease for the house on May 1st. Having been empty for two years, the house was in need of renovations, painting and furnishings, and he agreed to undertake this as part of his lease. In the meantime, with his accelerating rupture with the Carrels, he also needed a place to live. Although the Café de la Gare was not a hotel, Joseph and Marie Ginoux agreed to rent him a room until Van Gogh completed his renovations. He moved into the Café de la Gare on May 7th.

In spite of the need for renovations to the house he had just rented, Van Gogh’s working preferences were to paint, and in the four months of May, June, July and August, he executed 61 paintings and innumerable drawings. His working methods usually were to work up his ideas for compositions with preliminary drawings.

The drawing techniques he developed were extremely effective and attractive as independent works of their own, composed for the most part of small, short lines and dots, with curvilinear outlines to give body to forms and movement to the compositions. He was a master of spatial or “aerial” perspective, working from bolder, strong lines in the foregrounds to weaker and thinner marks to provide the sense of distance and space.

Among his earliest paintings in Arles, View of the Charcuterie Raboul and the Avenue of Plane Trees near Arles Station (see page 6 above) seem to have been painted with no preliminary drawings, and they are painted with relatively thin paint in one, or possibly two, sessions. There were times he also painted in great frenzy, slashing away at the canvas with thick strokes to complete a painting in one rapid session. This was unusual, however, as Van Gogh’s normal technique was to paint in dominant forms with relatively thick layers of usually higher, lighter tones of colors related to the forms (skies, roads, trees, sides of buildings and so on) and then employing his brushes in a manner similar to his drawings to sketch in the details over the under coatings, often outlining his forms to give them substance.

Since there are few instances in such cases of colors from his design brushstrokes blending with colors underneath, his typical manner of drawing on the canvas appeared to apply wet paint over dry paint. Given his prolific production, this would imply multiple paintings underway at once, letting the under coats of his latest to dry while he worked up the designs of previously prepared canvases.
The summer of 1888 was extraordinarily productive, with Van Gogh tackling multiple subjects of interest: landscapes both long expansive views of fields and close-ups of gardens, farms, orchards, countryside lanes, still-lives of various subjects, interiors, portraits, copies of earlier artists’ paintings in different settings, revised copies of previous paintings of his own and even sea views, taking a short trip to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in May and early June. Van Gogh seemed to especially enjoy views of Arles in the distance from the surrounding fields.

Some of the most memorable paintings from this summer were executed close to home around the Place Lamartine. The quartier is bounded by the river Rhône to the west and the railroad lines to the east, both providing interesting motifs. Across the southern part of the Place flowing from the east is the Roubine du Roi (see far right of aerial photo on Page 3).

In local Camargue usage, roubine signifies a drainage or irrigation ditch used in the cultivation of rice fields and the alimentation of saline pans for the collection of salt.

Van Gogh had walked over from the Hôtel Carrel in April to watch and sketch in ink the women washing on the Roubine du Roi. He returned again to the same spot on June 6th to work out a more elaborate ink drawing (left) of the scene at sunset to develop into a large and colorful oil painting, which he did later the same month.
The positioning of the drawings and painting is just outside the town limits as they then were, with the chimney and buildings of the municipal gas works and the bell tower of the Carmelite Convent in the background. The buildings on the right in the preparatory ink drawing would be the Gendarmerie and other buildings around the Place Lamartine.

The river Rhône at the eastern edge of the Place Lamartine offered other more varied motifs with disappearing horizon lines, bridges cutting across the compositions and the animated activities of boatmen and workers loading and unloading the river transport. The banks of the Rhône, a short walk from the Café de la Gare, offered a sweeping view of Arles with an interesting receding perspective, charged with content, providing Van Gogh the material for one of his best drawings.

Van Gogh undoubtedly studied this scene in after-dinner and nighttime walks from the Café de la Gare and was inspired by the open, clear night sky full of brilliant stars. He returned at the end of September to sketch out an idea to paint what became the first of four famous

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**Starry Night**
September 28, 1888, Ink Drawing
Whereabouts unknown
http://www.vggallery.com/drawings/p_1515.htm

**Bords du Rhône à Arles**
July 1888, Ink Drawing
Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam
http://www.vggallery.com/drawings/p_1472a.htm

**Arles - Les Bords du Rhône**
Ancienne Carte Postale, v 1905

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paintings featuring a starry night and precursor to the iconic “Starry Night” Van Gogh painted almost a year later at the asylum in St. Rémy-de-Provence.

Van Gogh’s attention included interiors with still lives and many portraits of personalities he encountered in his excursions around, those he met in the restaurant of the Auberge Venissac and various personalities who frequented the Café de la Gare.

One of the latter was the postman, Joseph Roulin, an impressive personality with a distinctive beard providing a dramatic image. Van Gogh met the Postman Roulin in the Café de la Gare in April, soon after his arrival in Arles, and painted four portraits of him in that month, alone. Roulin lived a ten-minute walk from the Café de la Gare at 10, rue de la Montée des Cordes, with his family, his wife, two sons and an infant child. Van Gogh became a friend of the family and painted all their portraits at one time or another, returning to Postman Roulin with a drawing and two portraits in August, one more in November and three more the following April.
Van Gogh had his meals in the restaurant of the Widow Venissac’s **auberge** and he found there a lively crowd with interesting personalities to paint and draw. He painted two identical pictures of the interior of the Venissac restaurant, one of almost entirely dark colors, quite possibly a later copy, with the figures and objects in identical settings as the original.

The painting is sometimes identified as the Restaurant Carrel, but given Van Gogh’s deteriorated relationship with the Carrels, it is difficult to imagine he would have returned to the Hôtel Carrel in August to do a painting.

The Café de la Gare next door to the Auberge Venissac was a “night café” in that it stayed open all night. Van Gogh wrote to his brother, Théo, that it attracted people who either had no place to go or could not afford a hotel, so would come to drink the night away. It was there that Van Gogh met the Postman Roulin and many others who would sit for portraits.

Joseph-Michel and Marie Ginoux, the owners of the commercial activities of the Café de la Gare, were congenial people and became fast and reliable friends for Van Gogh, as did the Roulin family and others Van Gogh met. The Ginoux and the the Roulins would come to Van Gogh’s aide on many occasions, particularly during spells of depressions and personal distress, which increased in tempo in the fall of 1888.

Van Gogh surely was an exceptional addition to the Arlésien urban scene, a foreign presence stomping along the streets and countryside roads, with his flaming orange hair, painting materials and frenetic manner of working. However, he never seemed to meet with personal antagonisms or harassments, as he never complained about such a thing, and there is no documentation to that effect. Altogether, the people he met were friendly and supportive of what he was trying to do.

### 3. The Yellow House

While Van Gogh’s working preferences certainly were understandable, and humanity has profited mightily from his astounding production the summer of 1888, the renovations and refurbishments to his new house were not getting done. Time was passing, and after much back and forth correspondence, Paul Gauguin was finally agreeing to come to paint together as soon as he could put together the money to make the trip.

Using money sent by his brother, Théo, in early September Van Gogh completed the furnishings to include a separate room made up for Gauguin, buying two beds, several chairs and table and other random items, buying a mattress and moving into the house at long last on Sunday, September 16th.
Van Gogh’s house was the small house on the right in the center of the painting with green door and shutters at the corner of the Place Lamartine and the Avenue Montmajour (see aerial photo on Page 7). Its twinned house on the left was a small grocery store the *Épicerie Crévoulin*, owned and operated by François and Marguerite Damase-Crévoulin. Marguerite was the niece of Marie Ginoux of the Café de la Gare, a portion of the garden of which with tree is seen at the extreme left of the painting. The Auberge Venissac, where Van Gogh had his meals, is the beige building with green shutters at the left behind the tree in the café garden.

The Avenue Montmajour is seen to pass under the bridge of the Lunel branch of the PLM railroad (with the train on it) and on under the overpass of the main rail lines arriving to the Arles station. Van Gogh was attracted to complicated compositions and had walked along this street so many times toward the fields north of Arles toward Tarascon as well as to the house of the postman Roulin’s family just to the right of the second bridge. Viewed from the other way, at the intersection of the Roulins’ street, the rue de la Montée des Cordes, these bridges and road constructs would provide an interesting composition with plunging perspectives.
While waiting for the arrival of Gauguin “from one day to the next”, Van Gogh was frustrated and aggravated by the Mistral wind in mid-October which prevented him from working outdoors for several days. He begins a painting of his bedroom in the Yellow House on October 16th, completing it the following afternoon.

This painting would suffer water damage in 1889, so Van Gogh painted a second version, now in the Art Institute of Chicago and a smaller version now in the Musée d’Orsay in Paris.

Paul Gauguin finally arrives by train from Pont-Aven in Brittany on October 23rd at around five in the morning. He stops first on his way to the Yellow House at the Café de la Gare, where Monsieur and Madame Ginoux recognize him from a self-portrait he had sent as an exchange gift to Van Gogh. Van Gogh is happy to have Gauguin with him and is optimistic about the work Gauguin will be able to accomplish in Arles, although news of Gauguin’s successes selling his work, with Vincent’s brother, Théo, his art dealer, is an unhappy reminder of his own failure to have anyone interested enough to buy his work.

By late October, the leaves had started to turn and both Van Gogh and Gauguin found interesting motifs to paint, if not side by side at least working on similar subjects. They explored and painted together the rows of popular trees that line Les Alyscamp, the ancient Roman necropolis situated at the southeastern edge of the city (see aerial photo on page 3).
By early November, Van Gogh and Gauguin had begun to visit the town together, frequenting its cafés and the brothels in the nearby quarter of the Cavalerie, just south of the Place Lamartine. They visited the Roman arena to see bullfights and dance halls to mingle in the crowds, painting their experiences back in the Yellow House studio. Gauguin also walked off to find his own landscapes, some of which repeated sites previously explored by Van Gogh. This included the Roubine du Roi, nearby the Place Lamartine, in a painting of the same subject of washerwomen at work but in a far more constrained and compact composition.

After months of daily interactions with the Ginoux couple at the Café de la Gare, it seems Van Gogh never had the courage to ask Madame Ginoux to pose for him. Apparently, it was Gauguin who had immediately struck up a close relation with Marie Ginoux when they met upon his early morning arrival in Arles, and it was he who persuaded her to pose.

Excitedly, Van Gogh wrote his brother, Théo, “I have an Arlesienne at last, a figure (size 30), slashed on in one hour, background pale citron, the face gray, the clothes black, black, black, with very harsh Prussian blue. She is leaning on a green table and seated in an armchair of orange wood.”

Van Gogh obviously found the portrait appealing, as he soon painted a second version with a different still life (of books) as a prop (although some people believe this may have been done as a copy six months later just before leaving Arles). The second version is more carefully executed, colorful, and more refined and very likely influenced by the simultaneous portrait Gauguin made of Madame Ginoux from her other side.

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**Gauguin**: Les Laveuses à Arles I
*La Roubine du Roi*
*Washerwomen at the Roubine du Roi Arles*
November 1888, 75.9 x 92.1 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Washerwomen_at_the_Roubine_du_Roi_Arles_1888_Paul_Gauguin.jpg

**The Arlesienne (Madame Ginoux)**
5 November 1888, 92 x 73 cm
Musée d’Orsay, Paris
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vincent_van_Gogh_-_The_Arlesienne_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

**The Arlesienne (Madame Ginoux with Books)**
November 1888, 91.4 x 73.7 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
http://www.vggallery.com/painting/p_0488.htm
Gauguin placed Madame Ginoux in her usual working setting of the same room in the Café de la Gare painted by Van Gogh in early September (see “The Night Café” on page 12, above). He added animation to provide interest and possibly a story or two, with what looks to be the Postman Roulin chatting with three women at a table, one of whom seems to still have on her rolled paper hair curlers. A soldier in the uniform of a Zouave, subjects also painted by Van Gogh in June and September, next to a slumbering man, reflected the nature of the Night Café, with the drifting smoke and cat under the billiard table providing the painting with additional character.

Gauguin gave, or left, with Van Gogh the preparatory sketch he made of Madame Ginoux’s pose at the table, which Van Gogh then copied in four large oil paintings more than a year later in February 1890, during his stay at the asylum in St. Rémy-de-Provence, so he clearly was fascinated by Gauguin’s results.

Gauguin’s portrait was not as simple, bold and dramatic an execution as Van Gogh’s, but it was a more accomplished painting. Given Van Gogh’s incessant insecurity and chronic paranoia, perhaps it would have been best had Gauguin not come to paint with him.

As November wore on, and the rain and Mistral wind kept them indoors much of the time, they began to get on each other’s nerves. Their discussions became often heated debates, then arguments of increasing intensity. Gauguin began to try to influence Van Gogh to not stick with nature so much and create paintings from his imagination, advice that did not go down so well.

The Roulin family was there to calm Van Gogh down and provide a congenial home setting, and he turned to a series of portraits of all six of the Roulin family members in November, completing 13 by early December.

Gauguin joined Van Gogh in at least one session to paint the portrait of the postman Joseph Roulin’s wife, Augustine, although not simultaneously with Van Gogh, as she is dressed differently.
As November turned into December, Van Gogh concentrated on his portraits of the Roulin family, and Gauguin roamed around for motifs. Gauguin was generally unsatisfied with his findings and found the countryside meager in offering what he was looking for. They continued to paint and live their lives together, though, in spite of Gauguin’s testimony in letters that Van Gogh was increasingly difficult to live with.

In early December, constrained indoors and aggravated by the constant wind of the Mistral, both began portraits of Joseph Ginoux, Marie Ginoux’s husband at the Café de la Gare, and they did self-portraits. Van Gogh would complete 16 paintings in December, all of them indoors: completing his series of the Roulin family, various colorful personages in the Café de la Gare or other drinking venues, still-lives in the studio and two paintings in the studio from drawings he had made as spectators with Gauguin at a night in the *Folies Arlésiennes* dance hall and a bullfight in the Roman arena. Van Gogh and Gauguin, however, increasingly got on each other’s nerves and often argued. It was becoming clear that Gauguin was not happy in Arles and wanted to leave. This distressed Van Gogh no end, meaning the end of his dream of a “studio in the south”.

It probably was not helpful either that both of them had become fixated on national newspaper reportages on a then-ongoing murder trial of the “Prado Affair”, a previously unsolved series of gruesome murders in which the aggressor used a razor to slash the throats of Parisian streetwalkers to steal their jewelry.

Between flare-ups of anger and attempts at conciliation, Van Gogh and Gauguin frequently would leave the house after dinner and head over to one of the brothels or various bars in the neighborhood, typically the Bar du Prado or the Café de l’Alcazar. These were two bars adjacent to the Gendarmerie National Police building across the Avenue de Montmajour from the Yellow House (see left and the aerial photo, page 7). There, they would spend the evening drinking absinthe, probably not a good idea, given Van Gogh’s worsening depression and unstable mental health. Their arguments turned often to art and religion, as in, “What's the meaning of all this?” Probably not a good idea, either.

Matters came to a crisis as Gauguin began to make solid plans to leave and purchase his train ticket to do so. Saturday, December 21st began a torrential downpour which would last all day and into the next. The evening of the 22nd found them together after dinner at the Café de l’Alcazar drinking absinthe when a distressed Van Gogh got angry and threw his glass at Gauguin in a fit and stomped out. Gauguin found him at home in bed asleep when he returned, and the next morning, the 23rd, received Van Gogh’s contrite apologies for his behavior the prior evening.

The rain continued all day the 23rd, which Gauguin spent writing letters and planning his departure. To escape the gloom that prevailed in the house, Gauguin left in the evening after dinner for a walk around the Place Lamartine, when he heard steps following him and turned to find Van Gogh in a deranged state, confronting him with an open razor in his hand. Gauguin glared back, and Van Gogh returned to the house. Gauguin, however, went downtown to the Hôtel Thévet on the Place du Forum to spend the night.

What happened next in Van Gogh’s head is not known, but the results were recorded in the police reports, having sliced the lower part of his left ear off in a fit of mental anguish, wrapped it in cloth and walked over to the Maison de Tolérance N° 1 at the entrance to the Rue du Bout d’Arles before midnight to deliver the package, a *cadeau* (“gift”), to “Rachel”, which he did and left. The police were summoned and found Van Gogh in his house on his bed, soaked in blood, and took him to the Hôtel-Dieu hospital.
Gauguin learned what had happened from the police when he returned the next morning to pick up his stuff. He took the time to write a telegram to Van Gogh’s brother, Théo, to explain what he had learned about what had happened and then left for the train station. Gauguin and Van Gogh continued to correspond until the very end when Van Gogh ended his life in Auvers-sur-Oise a year and a half later, but they never again met.

4. The Maison de Tolerance N° 1

At the time of Van Gogh’s stay, there were two zones in Arles reserved for prostitution ("quartiers réservés"), one just inside the southern entrance to Arles at the Porte du Mercat-Nou (or “Marché-Neuf”), and the other at the north in the quartier of the Porte de la Cavalerie inside the medieval ramparts, south of the Place Lamartine. In these zones, streets were specified in which brothels, or "maisons de tolerance", could function under health services and police supervision. In the Quartier de la Cavalerie, between the Chapelle Saint-Isidore and the Convent of the Carmelites, there were two streets so designated to the west of the Porte de la Cavalerie and seven to the east.

Extrait d’Ancienne Plan de Ville d’Arles de l’architecte Auguste Véron, 1871
https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8440451v

In letters to his brother as early as March 1888, Van Gogh had mentioned his “amorous exploits” on the Rue des Récollets. This was the street at the southern edge of the reserved zone leading to the Convent of the Carmelites and would have been a short walk from the Hôtel-Restaurant Carrell. He and Gauguin later apparently spent considerable time there and in the Rue des Glacières (street of the ice-makers). Clearly, also, Van Gogh was a habitué of the Maison de Tolérance N° 1 on the Rue du Bout d’Arles.

The shortest access to that house from the Yellow House would have been across the public gardens that were part of the Place Lamartine along the Route d’Avignon, across the Roubine du Roi and through a gate in the medieval ramparts. In September 1888, Van Gogh began a series of paintings of this garden, which he called the Poet’s Garden. He eventually would complete five paintings there, all different.
The maisons de tolérance were relatively non-distinctive and usually from the outside resembled any other house in a residential neighborhood. They could be problematic to neighbors, though, as they commonly were marked by lines of soldiers waiting to get in, which frequently led to fights and other noisy disturbances. Inside, they typically resembled bars.

Not long after Gauguin’s arrival, Van Gogh painted a scene he probably had sketched while visiting one of the maisons, probably in the company of Gauguin. It is relatively small and painted quickly with outlining added later, so it could be that he painted it in the brothel before the actual motif. Maybe Gauguin is the fellow playing cards.

Van Gogh gave this painting the title, « Le Lupanar (la Salle de café) ». Lupanar is from the Latin, *lupa*, signifying “public girl”.

The maisons de tolérance were numbered in accordance to their registration as such, the numbers having no particular correspondence with the street numbers of the houses themselves. In the “reserved zone” of the quartier de la Cavalerie, there were ten such houses at the time Van Gogh lived there. The commerce at the Maison de Tolérance N° 1 was owned and operated by Madame Virginie Chabaud, who owned several such houses in Arles.

Since the police report that detailed the events of Van Gogh’s macabre visit the night of December 23rd recorded his gift to “Rachel”, historians naturally have assumed that she was one of the prostitutes, a fact long
entered into the Van Gogh folklore. It seems the “gift” was received by one Gabrielle, otherwise known as “Gaby”. Exhaustive research into police and municipal records by Bernadette Murphy and published in her extraordinarily readable book “Van Gogh’s Ear, the True Story”, in 2016, she makes clear that there indeed was a Rachel, but instead of a prostitute, she was a sixteen year old girl who worked in several of the maisons as a maid and cleaning lady. How, or what her relation was to Van Gogh is impossible to know.

5. L’HÔPITAL HÔTEL-DIEU

When the police arrived to find Van Gogh in terrible condition in his bed after returning to the Yellow House, they took him to the hospital, l’Hôtel-Dieu, located in the southern part of downtown (see aerial photo on page 3). The doctor on duty was a young man only 23 years old, barely out of medical school, Dr. Félix Rey.

Van Gogh was treated in the hospital for two weeks and finally released by Dr. Rey on January 7th. He celebrated his return to the Yellow House by dinner with the postman, Joseph Roulin, and began painting again. He painted a portrait of Dr. Rey, who was becoming a friend as well as his medical practitioner, and he began to paint still-lives including copies of the sunflower series he had begun the previous August and that virtually would become his historical trademark.
Once again alone in the house, Van Gogh undertook a couple of self-portraits of himself with his bandaged ear, in which he appears to be calm, but he was not in good shape. He suffered from hallucinations, heard voices and troubled his neighbor friends Monsieur and Madame Ginoux with erratic and unsettling behavior. He already had suffered a night in isolation at the hospital during his stay there after being caught trying to wash himself in a coal bin. He continued to paint, but February was not a productive month with only one painting completed, a masterpiece, however, a portrait of the postman’s wife, Madame Roulin. She is pictured holding the cord that rocks the cradle of her infant child, Marcelle, hence the title La Berceuse.

As February drew on, Van Gogh’s neighbors became increasingly nervous about his presence with his strange behaviors, especially given the story about his razor. He suffered moments of intense crises provoking Dr. Rey to have him return to the hospital for two weeks, as well as evoke for the first time a recommendation that he be transferred to an institution.

In mid-February, at the initiative of the people who normally gathered next door at the Epicerie Crévoulin, as well as the Café de la Gare, a petition was circulated among inhabitants of the neighborhood to demand the municipality that Van Gogh be interned in an asylum or returned to his family. The petition, signed by thirty people was delivered to the mayor February 25th, and Van Gogh was transferred back to the hospital in Arles in the care of Dr. Rey on February 26th to await the results of the police inquiry and solicitation of witnesses.

The meticulous research of Bernadette Murphy published in “Van Gogh’s Ear, the True Story”, in 2016, has revealed the motives of at least some of the petitioners were not as humanitarian or motivated by neighborly harmony in intent as later portrayed. The two principals in the petition story were Bernard Soulé, the mandatory-manager of the property rented by Van Gogh, and Marguerite and François Crévoulin, the owner-operators of the épicierie next door. Now that Van Gogh had renovated his portion of the Yellow House, Monsieur Soulé was interested to break the lease to better realize its now-enhanced value. Similarly, Monsieur Crévoulin was interested to expand his business by incorporating Van Gogh’s portion of the building into an enlarged enterprise.

In any event, the police inquiry was completed on March 6th, the result of which was to retain Van Gogh in the hospital under the care of Dr. Rey until such time as a position in an asylum could be identified.

Dr. Rey encouraged Van Gogh to paint, allowing him supervised excursions outside the hospital. The environs of the hospital were familiar to Van Gogh, being close to the downtown public gardens south of the Roman arena along the Boulevard des Lices, a popular evening time Arlésien promenade. He and Gauguin had worked together there at the time of their paintings of Les Alyscamps in November.
It also was close to other scenes Van Gogh had painted, such as *Le Pont de Trinquetaille* on the Rhône and *La Terrasse du Café la nuit* on the Place du Forum (see left on the aerial photo on page 3), the latter becoming one of four in what has become known as Van Gogh’s “starry night” paintings.

Altogether, Van Gogh completed 14 paintings in April, including four landscapes executed on the outskirts of Arles and three different copies of a portrait he had done the previous August of the postman, Joseph Roulin. His most compelling achievements in the hospital in Arles, however, were done in the hospital itself, a view of the interior courtyard and one of the hospital men’s ward where his bed was situated.

*Dormitory in the Hospital in Arles* appears to have been his last painting in Arles. Van Gogh had had his ups and downs during April and generally recovered from four markedly difficult crises, finally coming to terms with his own recognition of his illness, wishing himself to move to an asylum for treatment. He left Arles for good on Wednesday, May 8th, 1889, accompanied by one of the friends he had made in Arles, the Protestant pastor, Frédérick Salles, for Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in St. Rémy-de-Provence.
EPILOGUE

Time has not been kind to the remains of sites frequented by Vincent Van Gogh in Arles, the most dramatic and destructive event being the June 25th and August 6th bombardments in the run-up to the 1944 invasion of Provence by allied forces in World War II. Reconstruction tended to eliminate the previous character and charm of replaced buildings, and subsequent redevelopment programs have detracted from the city.

After Van Gogh’s departure, François Crévoulin, or his successor, finally combined the two buildings of the Yellow House into one commercial entity and by the 1920s had become a popular bar-tabac, the Civette Arlésienne.

The bombardment of June 25th, 1944, destroyed much of the Quartier de la Cavalerie south of the Place Lamartine and parts north of the Place Lamartine. The Auberge Venissac, the Café de la Gare and the Yellow House were all severely damaged, rendering them uninhabitable. The subsequent bombardment of August 6th, targeting the railroad bridge just north of the Place Lamartine, obliterated the Auberge Venissac and the Café de la Gare.

The Café de la Gare and the Yellow House were replaced by temporary structures after the war. They were finally torn down in 1958 and their sites cleared to prepare for a reorganization of the Place Lamartine. A new street was built in 1961 across what had been the lots of the Yellow House and the Auberge Venissac, and the Place Lamartine was cleared of its public park.

The Gendarmerie Police Station with its pendants, the Bar du Prado and the Café de l’Alcazar, was not damaged in the war but demolished in 1965 to prepare the adjacent land area for the development of a Monoprix supermarket-department store. The Monoprix was built in 1970 in a now much-outdated and unattractive architecture of an incongruous nature, and the Place Lamartine was transformed into a parking lot and traffic circle.

The railroad bridge north of the Place Lamartine, Le Pont des Lions, was destroyed in the August 6th, 1944, bombardment and never rebuilt, rendering the Lunel branch of the PLM railroad defunct. The railroad overpass over the Rue de la Gare seen in Van Gogh’s painting, “Le Train Bleu” (see page 6, above), was dismantled in 1958, and one row of the trees along the street was cut down in 1962 to prepare for an enlargement of the street. However, the painting site still exists more or less as it was and can be visited.

The house of the Roulin family at 10, rue de la Montée des Cordes, was not damaged in the war and still exists as it was, and the view of Arles from the banks of the Rhône (see “Starry Night” drawings and painting on page 10 and 11) remains essentially as Van Gogh painted it.
The Roubine du Roi (see page 9 and Gauguin’s painting on page 15) still exists, but the wheat fields and vineyards which bordered its northern bank no longer exist and are now long-replaced by single family housing developments. The gas works in the background of Van Gogh’s painting and drawings that had illuminated Arles’s public gas lamps were largely replaced in 1924 by street illumination with electricity. Gas de France liquidated the remains of the gas works in 1964, and the site was transformed into light industrial uses. The last vestiges of these activities were demolished last year to prepare for what looks to be a residential development program.

What Van Gogh painted in a series he called the “The Poet’s Garden” in the south-eastern part of the Place Lamartine just north of the medieval ramparts (see paintings on page 19) still exists with a few replanted trees but otherwise transformed into a parking lot.

The Carmelite Convent in the quartier réservé of the Porte de la Cavalerie (see plan on Page 18) was closed and transformed into a boys’ school in 1904. Consequently, the maisons de tolérance in the Rue des Glacières and the Rue du Bout d’Arles, including the Maison de Tolérance N° 1, were closed and that street’s name was changed to the Rue des Ecoles.

The quartier of the Porte de la Cavalerie, where the brothels were situated, was severely damaged in the bombardment of June 25th, 1944, and what had been the Maison de Tolérance N° 1 was caught up in the conflagration and burned. The remaining walls were finally demolished in 1953 and the lot transformed into parking and remains unoccupied today. As an aside, legal prostitution was abolished in France in 1946, bringing an end to the era of “maisons-close” frequented and made famous by so many artists of the late 19th century.

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