

ARTS

A Museum Without Art

A sleepy French village showcases the legacy of Vincent van Gogh—but has none of his paintings

By NICHOLAS LEQUESNE AUVERS

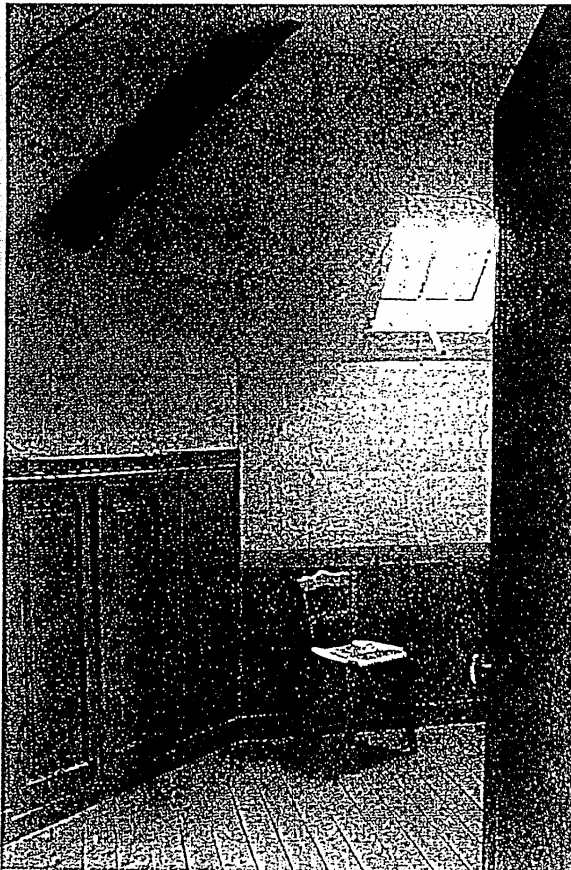
ON MAY 20, 1890, VINCENT VAN Gogh arrived by train at what turned out to be his final destination. Auvers-sur-Oise was then a village of 2,000 souls stretched out between the bank of the River Oise and a rocky escarpment riddled with quarries providing stone for the new boulevards being constructed in nearby Paris. It was also home to a colony of artists that once included Daubigny, Corot and Cézanne. Van Gogh rented the cheapest room at the Auberge Ravoux, an inn in the center of town, and wrote that Auvers was “gravely beautiful.” It certainly inspired a period of frenzied creativity. By the time he shot himself on July 27, he had produced 72 paintings of Auvers and its inhabitants.

Today, passengers arriving at the station are more likely to be tourists than penniless painters. Each year, 400,000 visitors converge on Auvers from all over the world, climbing up past its 11th century church to the cemetery where Vincent lies beside his devoted brother Theo beneath a thick blanket of ivy. Japanese visitors leave offerings of sake at the grave while Americans have been known to ask for a room at the town hall, deceived by its French title of Hôtel de Ville. Signs mark the spots where Van Gogh and others set up their easels. Yet unlike the 2 million visitors who throng to Paris’ Musée d’Orsay every year, these latter-day pilgrims never see a single physical example of the Impressionists’ craft.

“It would be great if we could show paintings, but they’re just too expensive,” explains Jean-François Arocas, director of the Château d’Auvers. “Instead, we try to encourage people to go and see the originals.” Owned by the regional council, the Château opened in 1994 and aims to both entertain and educate. An interactive exhibition allows visitors to move through various stage-like sets evoking the Impressionist era. Film director Patrice Cros has adapted 21st century NASA technology to the 19th century master, using stereoscopic 3-D images to take visitors

inside some of Van Gogh’s most famous paintings. The result is spectacular and unashamedly commercial. “I’m not the guardian of Van Gogh’s memory,” says Arocas. “My job’s selling Auvers.”

Down the hill from the castle, the Auberge Ravoux offers a stark contrast. When Belgian businessman Dominique-Charles Janssens bought the place in 1985,



ROOM WITHOUT A VIEW: Van Gogh's tiny garret is sparsely furnished so that “visitors furnish it with their thoughts”

the council hadn’t yet woken up to the commercial possibilities of the Van Gogh connection: “I’m the guardian of the only one of Van Gogh’s residences which remains intact,” he says. Janssens is a jealous protector of the site’s intimacy, turning away tour groups and buying up neighboring properties to prevent them from being turned into souvenir shops and pizza parlors. His actions have brought allegations of élitism which—up to a point—he accepts.

“But it’s not a selection by money,” he explains; “it’s by education and sensibility. I always tell people there’s nothing to see, but everything to feel.”

Janssens’ attachment to the Auberge has something of the religious calling. He was sales manager for a Belgian multinational when a drunk driver smashed into the back of his car at a red light in Auvers one dark night in 1985. Reading the police report in his hospital bed, he discovered the accident had taken place just a few steps from the building where Van Gogh died. Recovered from his injuries, Janssens devoted himself to buying the Auberge and transforming it into a shrine to the painter’s memory.

Janssens has spent \$12.5 million, some of it his own, supplemented by bank loans, restoring the Auberge to its original state, with food from the period on offer in the dining room where Van Gogh ate his meals. Experts who worked on the prehistoric caves at Lascaux were recruited to recreate the grimy white walls flecked with brown patches of damp on the narrow staircase leading to the artist’s garret. Climbing the stairs in groups of six, visitors open the door of a tiny room with a single attic window. The floor is empty; the walls are bare. “The idea is that visitors furnish it with their thoughts,” says Janssens.

If Janssens has his way, the walls won’t remain bare forever. On June 10, 1890, Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo: “Some day or other I believe I will find a way of having an exhibition of my own in a café.” The Belgian has risen to the challenge and is now trying to raise \$30 million to buy one of the cornfield landscapes Vincent painted at Auvers. “Ever since I bought this place, people have thought I’m crazy,” Janssens smiles. “We’ll be the only café in the world with a painting by Van Gogh.”

Until Vincent’s dream comes true, Auvers will go on being a life-size art museum without a single exhibit. But the tourists who tread its winding streets are drawn by something else. “You get the feeling it hasn’t changed,” says tourist David

Blanquet, standing beside Vincent’s grave. “If you took away the tarmac, it would be just like it is in the paintings.” Whether standing at the spot where Van Gogh set up his easel and pondering the play of light on the landscape or climbing the back stairs to his cell-like retreat, visitors to Auvers are walking in the master’s footsteps. For those who have experienced life’s disappointments, it’s a chance to imagine themselves a misunderstood artist for a day. ■