

Starry-Eyed Innkeeper Plans to Buy a Painting for van Gogh's Final Abode

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AUVERS-SUR-OISE, France, Oct. 14 — The [Vincent van Gogh](#) painting nearest to this village, where the artist lies in a modest grave, probably hangs some 20 miles away at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. But Dominique-Charles Janssens, who owns the country inn here that was van Gogh's final abode, has a bold plan to change that.

Plan, though, may be too optimistic a word. It is Mr. Janssens' dream to see an authentic van Gogh hanging on the wall of the tiny attic room where the artist died on July 29, 1890. Two days earlier he had shot himself in the stomach while working at his easel in a nearby field.

Mr. Janssens, an affable 59-year-old Belgian, knows exactly which painting he wants and he says he has a rare opportunity to get it: "The Fields" (also known as "Wheat Fields"), one of the last works van Gogh painted, is to be auctioned at Sotheby's in New York on Nov. 7.

Buying such a work may seem utopian, Mr. Janssens said, but borrowing a painting for his country inn has proved impossible. He came closest, he said, when the Pushkin Museum in Moscow offered to lend a work, but that effort was blocked by France's cultural bureaucracy.

"People have called me a megalomaniac, yet this plan is not my dream, it was the dream of van Gogh," said Mr. Janssens, quoting from the painter's correspondence. Just seven weeks before his death, van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo in Paris: "Some day or other I believe I shall find a way of having an exhibition of my own in a cafe."

As Sotheby's estimates the painting's value from \$28 million to \$35 million, and bidders may drive the price higher, Mr. Janssens is now trying to raise money through private donations and from an appeal to van Gogh lovers through a Web site (vangoghsdream.org).

If the foundation he has created, Institut Van Gogh, can buy "The Fields," he said, all donors will receive a personal access code to view the painting at any time through a Web cam in the attic room. The fund-raising effort began on Oct. 8, but he declined to say how much has been raised so far.

The plan is dismissed as a mad fantasy by some curators and art dealers. "Sure, it's heroic and wonderful, but unrealistic," said Neal Fiertag, a Paris art dealer specializing in the 19th century. "Besides, van Gogh's images have already been turned into a mass commodity. You wonder if this will create more of a commercial circus."

Walter Feilchenfeldt, a Swiss dealer and van Gogh scholar, who sold "The Fields" to its current owner (whom he will not name), said he saw no problem with its return to the little village inn. He knew the building well, he said, describing it as "very respectfully and tastefully restored."

“I have a certain sympathy for Mr. Janssen,” Mr. Feilchenfeldt added. “He lives for this dream. If he has the right money, yes, he should have it.”

There has been much debate about which work was the last by the self-taught painter, an enigmatic and often troubled man who nonetheless wrote hundreds of thoughtful and lucid letters.

In his final 70 days at Auvers, van Gogh worked nonstop, producing oils and drawings of its residents, rough farmhouses and fields of wheat and potatoes, much like those he knew during his youth in the Netherlands.

Mr. Feilchenfeldt, like other specialists, said he did not consider the “The Fields” on sale at Sotheby’s to be the artist’s final canvas; that, he said, is probably the unfinished “House in Auvers.” But he is confident, he added, that “The Fields” is among van Gogh’s last works.

Wouter van der Veen, a Dutch specialist in van Gogh’s writing, noted that in a letter, probably written on July 10, 1890, the artist tells his brother Theo that he has just finished three wheat field paintings. “They are vast fields of wheat under troubled skies, and I did not need to go out of my way to express sadness and extreme loneliness. I hope you see them soon.”

In van Gogh’s last letter to his mother and his sister Willemien, also thought to be from mid July, he tells them he is “quite absorbed in the immense plain with wheat fields” and is feeling “calmer than last year,” less agitated, “perhaps too calm.” He says he has always believed that seeing landscapes similar to those of his youth “would have that effect.” He painted about a dozen images of the Auvers wheat fields.

Over Sunday lunch at the inn, Mr. Janssens said he wanted to return “The Fields” to the artist’s room precisely because it speaks to his mood at the end of his life. “It was in his room when he died,” he said.

The garret is already something of a shrine, thanks to Mr. Janssens’ crusade to rescue the country inn from neglect. It began accidentally when, a sales manager at the time, he was injured in a car crash in 1985 in front of the inn, Auberge Ravoux. While recovering, he was given a book of van Gogh’s letters and decided it was his destiny to buy and restore the inn. “I was very moved,” he recalled. “I was 37, just like van Gogh,” who died at 37.

The process took six years and included jousting with creditor banks and with local officials who objected to a foreigner taking over such a symbolic property. As the new owner he set out to recreate the atmosphere as van Gogh might have known it. The downstairs room that had been serving as a wine shop and cafe is again a restaurant, with rustic tables, a pewter-covered bar and glasses and decanters copied from van Gogh paintings. “I wanted a living space, not a museum,” Mr. Janssens said.

A narrow staircase leads to the small attic room with its bare walls, skylight and a single chair. “It was left empty so visitors can furnish it with their thoughts,” Mr. Janssens said. “It often has a strong impact on people; some cry, some have fainted.”

One wall now has a bullet-proof glass case where he hopes to install an authentic van Gogh canvas. He said he had already taken a series of steps to secure the room and the house. Admission to the attic is about \$7.

Village authorities concede that Mr. Janssens has become an unofficial guardian of the artist's memory. He has raised funds to buy and restore adjacent buildings and has organized the display of placards with reproductions of village scenes painted not only by van Gogh but also by Cézanne, Corot and Pissarro, who spent time here.

One placard stands by the village's 11th-century church, a famous van Gogh subject, and others are in the wheat fields and by the cemetery where both Vincent and Theo are buried under a thick blanket of ivy. On a recent autumn day, visitors had left yellow flowers and notes in Japanese and Korean writing. Local residents said that foreign visitors regularly come to sprinkle the ashes of their loved ones on the tombs.

Before Mr. Janssens' efforts to put the village back on the map, it might have seen a few thousand visitors a year, mostly art students, painters and historians. Last year some 400,000 people came, drawn by the artist's mystique.

If the Institut Van Gogh foundation falls short in the effort to buy "The Fields" at Sotheby's, it is legally allowed to continue raising funds for another three years. Mr. Janssens says he will not stop until he has brought a van Gogh painting back to Auvers and installed it in the little room with no view.