

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

A new exhibition tracks the turbulent nine weeks that artists Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin lived and painted together in the south of France

By Joseph Harriss, *Smithsonian*, December, 2001

"MY DEAR GAUGUIN," SAID A CONTRITE, SOBER VINCENT van Gogh, "I have a vague memory that I offended you last evening." The offense having been nothing more than a glassful of absinthe thrown at his head, Paul Gauguin readily forgave his high-strung friend. But his doubts about their two-month experiment in communal living in the Provençal town of Arles were confirmed the next night, when van Gogh, distraught over Gauguin's impending departure, ran after him in the street hurling wild accusations. Gauguin turned to confront him, whereupon van Gogh returned to the house they shared. There he used a razor to cut off part of his left ear, which he carefully wrapped and presented to a young woman at the local brothel. Van Gogh was hospitalized, and Gauguin left for Paris the next day. But after van Gogh's discharge from the hospital, he begged Gauguin in a letter not to speak ill of "our poor little yellow house." Some dreams die hard.

The creative sparks that flew when these two opinionated avant-garde artists came together in the South of France is one of the most dramatic episodes in the history of art. The tense friendship and unspoken rivalry between van Gogh and Gauguin in late 1888 in Arles produced works that helped set the stage for much of what we know today as modern art. It has also so inspired writers and filmmakers that most of the Western world knows what happened to van Gogh's ear. But while both of these painters have been studied exhaustively over the past 100 years, their interaction and mutual influence have never been addressed in a major exhibition.

This fall, the Art Institute of Chicago and Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum joined forces to fill that gap with a stunning, comprehensive show entitled "Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South." Six years in the making, and with financial support from the Federal Council on the Humanities and the Ameritech Foundation, the show brings together 135 major works drawn from the two museums' own collections and from more than 60 public and private collections around the world. New findings from the archives and technical research using microscopic study, x-radiography, thread counts, and fiber- and paint-sample analysis have allowed curators to piece together an almost day-to-day picture of the pair's collaboration.

"We have many of the great pictures upon which these two artists' reputations rest," says the Art Institute's Douglas W. Druick, co-curator of the show, including "paintings such as several of van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, *The Yellow House*, two versions of *Starry Night*, along with Gauguin's *Human Miseries* and *Vision of the Sermon*." Some of these have not been seen together since they were painted in 1888. Also on view are several that the two worked on simultaneously, each in his own evolving style. "It's exciting," says Louis van Tilborgh, curator of paintings and sculpture at the Van Gogh Museum, "because this gives us a chance to see these two treating the same subjects at virtually the same time."

When van Gogh met the 39-year-old Gauguin at a Paris art gallery in November 1887, the Dutch painter was at a pivotal point in his life. Then 34, he had finally emerged from many years of false starts and failures, having worked for an art dealer in London and Paris before turning to teaching and lay preaching, then moving on to theology studies and missionary work. He was 27 before he discovered his vocation as an artist. When he first joined his brother Theo, an art



The vastly different artists (in self-portraits they exchanged in early October 1888 - Gauguin's is at left) engaged in an intense creative dialogue in the little *Yellow House* (with green door, on a corner, in van Gogh's rendering) they shared in Arles.

dealer in Paris, in March of 1886, he was still painting in the dark, heavy style of his early masterwork *The Potato Eaters*. But he soon began experimenting with colorful pointillist brushwork and light-filled Impressionism.

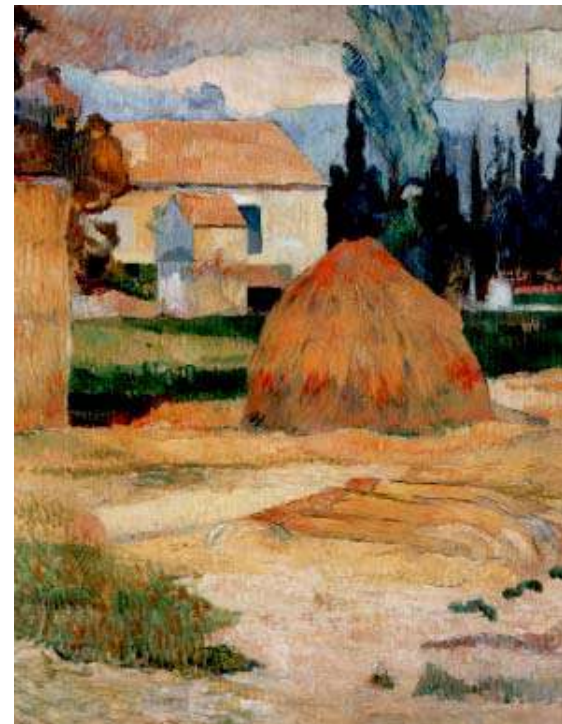


Though Gauguin, too, came late to art (he was 25 when he started painting), he had been doing Impressionist canvases since the late 1870s and had worked with such masters as Camille Pissarro. That experience, plus his adventuresome, knockabout background as a sailor who had cruised the world, a stockbroker who had left his wife and children to devote himself to painting, and a wanderer who had lived on the Caribbean island of Martinique, greatly impressed the unworlly van Gogh. Despite their differences, the two quickly found they had much in common, as both were seeking new forms of artistic expression and both had great regard for each other's work. Van Gogh praised the "high poetry" of Gauguin's painting, while Gauguin admired van Gogh's passionate approach to art and, with cool calculation, saw that the Dutch artist's brother could be useful in promoting and selling his work.

In a gesture of mutual respect, the two exchanged paintings in late 1887: van Gogh gave Gauguin two studies of cut sunflowers, while Gauguin reciprocated with a canvas done in Martinique of a woman, boy and cow on the bank of a dried-up river. Gauguin then left for Pont Aven, in Brittany, where there was an artists' colony. Van Gogh, in turn, was drawn by the rarity of the light of southern France, wishing to see nature under a brighter sky, because, he wrote to Theo, "one feels that the colors of the prism are veiled in the mist of the North." On February 20, 1888, he arrived by train in Arles.

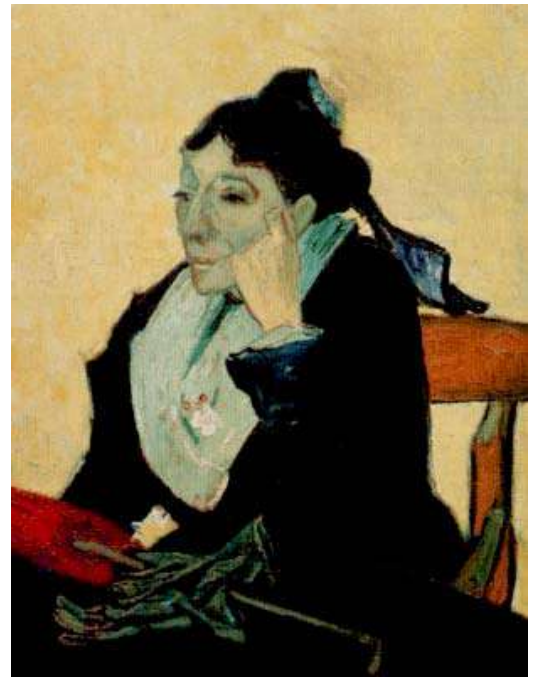
He was a man reborn. Responding to the brilliance and warmth of Provence, he threw himself into one of the most productive periods of his life, painting landscapes, flowering trees, haystacks, virtually anything that caught his eye. "I have a terrible lucidity at moments, when nature is so glorious that I am hardly conscious of myself and the picture comes to me as in a dream," he wrote Theo. Already he was leaving behind the delicate, evanescent Impressionist approach he had picked up in Paris, and starting to use strong, pure color to express himself more forcefully.

But yearning for the companionship that his difficult, stubborn character had long prevented him from finding with others, he envisaged a brotherhood of like-minded painters living and working together. Now, he felt, was the time to realize it. In May, with Theo's financial help, he rented a small house on Arles' place Lamartine, near the train station. The color of fresh butter, it had two rooms on the ground floor and two above, with lavatory privileges at the hotel behind it. He furnished the house sparsely with two beds, a dozen rush-bottomed chairs and a few other necessities. The Yellow House, as he called it, would do nicely for his planned Studio of the South. At its head, in his idealized view, would be his much-admired new friend, Paul Gauguin, and he bombarded Theo and Gauguin with letters urging Theo to subsidize the painter's role in the enterprise in return for paintings. On June 5, two days before Gauguin's 40th birthday, a formal invitation was extended to the near-



Gauguin's first work after joining van Gogh, *Farmhouse in Arles*, reflects the younger man's influence in subject but not in style.

penniless artist; 50 francs were enclosed. Although still hesitant, Gauguin accepted in late June, but kept putting off his departure.



"Art is an abstraction," wrote Gauguin, whose portrait of café owner Marie Ginoux (left) is more stylized and studied than van Gogh's (right). Done at the same time, van Gogh's portrait of Madame Ginoux (finished in just one hour) is more spontaneous than Gauguin's.

Meanwhile, van Gogh worked feverishly to produce a series of paintings—they would become his signature sunflowers—for the house. In early October, at van Gogh's request, the two exchanged self-portraits. Van Gogh's was a starkly austere work, the gauntness of his face emphasized by almost shaven hair and intense eyes vaguely staring into the distance—characteristics, he explained in a letter, of a Buddhist monk. Gauguin sent van Gogh a written description of his own portrait ahead of the work itself. It was, he said with typical swagger, "the face of an outlaw, ill-clad and powerful like Jean Valjean—with an inner nobility and gentleness... The eyes suggest the volcanic flames that animate the soul of the artist." But when van Gogh looked at the painting, he saw an overriding pessimism and desperation. "What Gauguin's portrait tells me above all is that he cannot go on like this," he concluded.

Finally, in mid-August, Gauguin made plans to leave for Arles. With Theo underwriting his living expenses and paying for the train ticket, it seemed a sweet, no-risk deal. As he wrote to his estranged wife, he simply planned to spend "six months with a painter who will provide me with food and lodging in exchange for drawings."

Now that his friend's arrival was imminent, van Gogh worked himself practically to exhaustion, often painting nonstop from dawn to dusk to have as much as possible to show him. Although casting himself in his own mind as something of a disciple of Gauguin's, van Gogh also wanted to assert his independence before being subjected to the older man's influence. "I am sufficiently proud to want to impress Gauguin to some extent with my work," he wrote Theo. The resulting series of paintings includes *The Yellow House*, *The Bedroom* and *The Poet's Garden*.

The work took its toll, and van Gogh was overwrought when Gauguin arrived on October 23. Still, the pair began sorting out living arrangements. Gauguin bought a chest of drawers and various household utensils, but confronted with his partner's untidy living habits, the old bohemian began to act positively bourgeois. "Everywhere and in everything I found a disorder that shocked me," he later related. "His paint box could hardly contain all those tubes, crowded together and never closed." And money! "From the very first month, I saw that our common finances were taking on the same appearance of disorder... I was obliged to speak, at the risk of wounding that very great touchiness of his."

Gauguin set up a strict budget, with fixed sums for rent, food, incidentals and tobacco. A certain amount was also set aside for "hygienic," as they termed them, brothel visits, which, the two reasoned, would promote productivity by discouraging entangling amorous relationships. All the while, Gauguin was regaling van Gogh with tales of his adventurous life, presenting a macho persona that only increased van Gogh's hero-worship. "This gives me an enormous respect for him," he wrote Theo. For his part, Gauguin later claimed he had a premonition of trouble. "Between two such beings as he and I," he reflected, "the one a perfect volcano, the other boiling too, inwardly, a sort of struggle was brewing."

Gauguin liked to settle into a new place before painting, but the day after his arrival, the eager van Gogh pushed him out of the Yellow House to do landscapes. Technical research reveals that they both painted, that first workday, on the same kind of pre-primed linen canvas that van Gogh was using at the time; apparently van Gogh was so impatient that he gave canvases to his friend rather than wait for him to buy and prepare his own. In any case, van Gogh's *Old Yew Tree* is done with his usual impetuous, pell-mell brush strokes. Gauguin, however, took an almost Cézannesque approach, carefully executing his *Farmhouse in Arles* with studied composition and deft, discreet strokes.



"Gauguin gives me the courage to imagine things," said van Gogh, whose *The Sower* reveals the influence of his friend's visionary approach.

The pair tried to experiment, buying 20 yards of coarse jute cloth to use instead of canvas. The hairy, absorbent fabric, similar to burlap, forced Gauguin to try a rougher application and abandon his usual technique of building up thin layers of color. As for van Gogh, his gestural strokes and characteristic impasto, difficult to achieve on the jute, became subordinate to his use of color. Another landscape foray took the duo to Arles' Alyscamps area. Gauguin's deliberate technique captured a more decorative, imaginative view of the locale. Van Gogh's paintings, rendered in a quick, agitated style, were based more on the actual scene. In a new departure for van Gogh, however, he showed a willingness to adapt to Gauguin's habit of doing studies outdoors and the finished work in the studio—an important concession, since van Gogh had consistently maintained his need to work from direct observation of his subject.

Gauguin, too, reflected his partner's influence, appropriating van Gogh's concern for human suffering in his somber, melancholy study of grape pickers, *Human Miseries*. He also began troweling paint on thickly with a palette knife in a style resembling van Gogh's. But the stylistic influence in both cases was temporary. "Their ideas on art differed greatly," says Andreas Bluhm, head of exhibits at the Van Gogh Museum. "They influenced each other to a degree, and then went back to their original styles." The Art Institute's Douglas Druick agrees. "The influence on each other was formative and motivational rather than in technique as such," he says. "For example, Gauguin picked up the idea of the painter as pilgrim and missionary from van Gogh."

Their differences in approach and style are immediately evident in their respective portraits of Madame Ginoux, owner of the Card de la Gare near the Yellow House. Van Gogh dashed off his version (p. 3) in the single hour she sat for them in early November. Gauguin, on the other hand, began with a chalk and charcoal study on paper, then, over the following days, transposed the portrait to the foreground of a bar scene he titled *Night Café* (p. 3), with Madame Ginoux giving the

viewer a sly look as she proffers a glass of absinthe. Although the two artists worked side by side at the same time with the same model, the results could hardly have been more distinct.

Van Gogh's view of the personality differences between himself and Gauguin was clearly rendered in the paintings he did of his and his friend's chairs in the little Yellow House. He chose to depict his own sturdy, rush-bottomed chair standing on a simple red-tile floor, with a pipe and tobacco lying on its seat. He pictured Gauguin's much more elaborate armchair, however, atop an exotic carpet, with a lighted candle and two books on its seat. As the show's detailed and scholarly catalog notes, the paintings "can be seen as displaced portraits, iconographic opposites."

When not painting, the two artists talked. Besides art, they discussed novels, history, the Bible, physiognomy. "Our arguments are terribly electric," Vincent told Theo. Van Gogh insisted that painting be from nature and that it offer a poetic dimension, while Gauguin called for art to have intellectual strength based on what took place in his "wild imagination." Ultimately, Gauguin ascribed van Gogh's views to "a disordered brain" and "absence of reasoned logic." Writing to his friend and fellow painter Emile Bernard, who van Gogh had hoped would join them in Arles, Gauguin said that, "In general, Vincent and I do not see eye to eye, especially as regards painting ...He is a romantic and I am rather inclined to a primitive state."



Van Gogh's portrait of Gauguin and Gauguin's image of van Gogh painting sunflowers both mirror the deteriorating relationship between the two artists.

By mid-November, Theo had started selling some of Gauguin's paintings in Paris, giving the artist more money than he had seen in years. He thus began thinking of leaving Arles for Martinique, where he would start a Studio of the Tropics. Van Gogh's anxiety grew as he realized that his dream of a community of painters working in Arles was not to be. The tension between the two artists can be sensed in the odd portraits they did of each other in early December. Van Gogh painted Gauguin from the strange perspective of right-rear, in an awkward, roughly finished work, *Man in a Red Beret* (above, left), that suggests van Gogh was watching his friend cautiously. Gauguin produced a similarly disturbing image of van Gogh in *The Painter of Sunflowers* (above, right), in which van Gogh's head is distorted, the eyes lost in a trance-like gaze. Gauguin's depiction, the show's organizers write, is "loaded with defensive and aggressive implications."

Shortly after van Gogh's bizarre behavior of December 23, Gauguin boarded the night train for Paris. They never met again. In the asylum in nearby Saint-Rémy, which he entered voluntarily in April 1889, van Gogh went on to produce such brilliant works as *The Reaper*, *Cypresses* and his famed *Starry Night*. In May 1890, he left Saint-Rémy for the town of Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris, to consult physician Paul Gachet, an amateur artist and collector who bore a marked physical resemblance to van Gogh and apparently suffered from a similar nervous disorder. Although van Gogh wrote to his brother that "I feel a failure," he produced dozens of paintings and drawings during his two months in Auvers, including his renowned portrait of Doctor Gachet. (The work brought \$82.5 million in 1990, making it the most expensive painting ever sold at auction.)

Despondent over his sense of failure and the debilitating effects of what was likely epilepsy and, perhaps, manic-depression, on July 27, 1890, Van Gogh shot himself in the stomach. (About the gun, nothing is known. "It's one of the great mysteries in art history," says Andreas Bluhm.) He died two days later, with Theo at his side. He was 37. Of his entire production of some 870 paintings (and 1,050 drawings), van Gogh sold just one—*The Red Vineyard* (now at Moscow's Pushkin Museum)—during his lifetime.

Paul Gauguin went on to paint for another 13 years in Brittany and the South Pacific. Wary that van Gogh's reputation was growing faster than his own, he often used the word *fou* (crazy) to describe him, and claimed not to remember how long they had spent together. "When I arrived at Arles, Vincent was trying to find himself," he wrote in 1903. "I undertook the task of enlightening him From that day on, my van Gogh made astonishing progress." In what the exhibition organizers call a "grotesque distortion," Gauguin went so far as to alter the chronology of the sunflower paintings to date them after his arrival. Still, Gauguin's memories of Arles stayed with him, rather poignantly. In Tahiti, ill and broke in 1898 at age 50, he asked a friend in Paris to send him sunflower seeds to plant in his garden. He did a series of still lifes featuring them, including *Sunflowers and Mangoes* (p. 2)—a fitting homage to his friend and their time together in the Studio of the South.

"A cypress with a star... a last attempt," van Gogh wrote to Gauguin in June 1890. The two figures represent the artists themselves.

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By Joseph Harriss

A regular contributor to these pages, Joseph Harriss has written most recently on Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi.