

## The Yellow House

September 1888

Oil on canvas, 72 x 91. 5 cm  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

The artist Paul Signac remained loyal to Van Gogh throughout the latter's short life. He wrote about a visit to Arles: "I went into his living quarters at the Place Lamartine, and saw wonderful paintings there, all of them masterpieces: *Les Alyscamps*, *The Night Café*, *La Berceuse*, *The Lock*, *View of Saintes-Maries*, *Starry Night* and others. Just imagine the spectacle of the whitewashed walls from which his colors shone in all their freshness." The living quarters mentioned were in the famous Yellow House. The painter had always dreamed of a house such as this, in which he could work in peace and provide accommodation for friends who came to visit.

The little house, shown in the glaring sun, seems to glow from within. Van Gogh had rented it in early May, and described it in a letter to his brother Theo. Here he wanted to realize his long-standing ambition to establish a community of artists. He had always believed in working in groups, which he felt provided stimulation and support, and he imagined a community modeled on the fraternities of Dutch painters of the eighteenth century. He soon came up with a suitable name: *Atelier du Midi*. To whom should he turn? Paul Gauguin, one of the spiritual fathers of Synthetism, was the first name that came to mind. He had met Gauguin in Paris and considered him to be "brave and authentic."





The Yellow House  
(details)



# Portrait of Eugène Boch

September 1888

*Oil on canvas, 60 x 45 cm*  
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

Eugène Boch, the son of a Belgian industrial magnate, moved to Paris from the coal-mining region of Borinage in 1879. "This Boch has a head that is slightly reminiscent of that of a Flemish aristocrat from the time of William I. I would not be surprised if it turned out well." The portrait is characterized by a close likeness, as becomes clear when it is juxtaposed with a photograph of the sitter. But Van Gogh simultaneously gave him a symbolic dimension. A starry night sky serves as the background, and the top of the young man's head is framed by an ocher-colored outline that suggests a halo. Vincent explained his artistic intentions to his brother Theo, writing that "I'd like to paint men or women with that something of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we try to achieve through the radiance itself, through the vibrancy of our colors."

The spectrum of tones used here is considerably reduced and harmonious: ocher, light green, blue. In 1950 the French critic Jean Leymarie wrote of Van Gogh's great portraits: "The Impressionist view questioned the continuation of the genre of the portrait; the human face, like the sky and the sea, was subordinated to an obscuring play of colors; to the Impressionist eye, it increasingly became a purely superficial phenomenon that had little, or even no, life left in it at all ... Van Gogh's portraits were in this context an unexpected revelation. And this is all the more astounding when one considers that they were created at a time when his drawing and his colors became increasingly free and abstract and independent of nature."



# The Night Café

September 1888

Oil on canvas, 72.4 x 92.1 cm  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven

This painting, to which the artist accorded equal status with *The Potato Eaters* (see page 39) was created in the course of three long nights. Every object, big and small, is shown heavily distorted, as though dissolved by the harsh light. To Van Gogh's great delight, the painting proved to be a sort of illusion, a dream picture dominated by a feeling of fear and emptiness. The big wall clock arrests time for the last drunkards who have fallen asleep, the silent, tired denizens of a night that has been captured with brilliant originality. He wrote to Theo: "In my painting of the night café I've tried to express the idea that the café is a place where you can ruin yourself, go mad, commit crimes. Anyway, I tried with contrasts of delicate pink and blood-red and wine-red. Soft Louis XV and Veronese green contrasting with yellow greens and hard blue greens. All of that in an ambience of a hellish furnace, in pale sulfur. To express something of the power of the dark corners of a tavern."





## Café Terrace at Night

September 1888

*Oil on canvas, 81 x 65.5 cm*  
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

"Small figures sit on the terrace ... An enormous yellow lantern lights up the terrace, the front of the building, the pavement, and even projects its light onto the cobblestones, which are bathed in pink-violet tones. The façades of the buildings on the street that extends beneath the starry sky are dark blue or violet, a green tree in front of them." The motif here is less dramatic than in *The Night Café* and is more reminiscent of the cheerful depictions of Montmartre or the ramparts on the outskirts of Paris. The construction of the painting is perspectively correct, with the vanishing point at the center, near the waiter in white. The passers-by on the square, caught in the warm and cheerful ambiance of the café, observe each other attentively. The paths of the woman with the bonnet and shawl and of the man whose hands are in his pockets cross, and their eyes, too, will surely meet. The little café tables gleam as brightly, enticing those who walk past, regulars and strangers alike. They look like little summer moons, one next to the other, reflecting the nocturnal lights. This time, the stars appear like small flowers in the sky; Henri Matisse would later say that flowers were like stars on earth. Color sings; here it is a medium used to achieve the absolute. The seeds of the most daring coloristic adventures of modern art, from the Fauves to the Expressionists and beyond, are to be found in this groundbreaking colorism.



## The Bedroom

October 1888

*Oil on canvas, 72 x 90.5 cm*  
*Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam*

Van Gogh wrote to Paul Gauguin that he had made a painting of his “bedroom, with furniture of untreated wood, as you know. Well, it gave me a lot of pleasure to paint this interior with nothing in it, with a simplicity à la Seurat: flat colors, but applied crudely, very thick ... You see, I wanted to express a complete calm in these very different tones, there is no white in it, except for a small accent in the mirror in the black frame.” In this case, too, Van Gogh was entirely aware of the fact that he had created a masterpiece. It is a depiction of his own life, a mirror of his inner world, but simultaneously a painting that is subtly balanced in terms of composition and coloring.

He understood this subject as a metaphor for his personal life; in the early stage of its development, he even considered adding a naked woman on the bed or a cradle. He also thought about surrounding the liveliness of the coloristic whole with a white frame. Later, while he was in the psychiatric clinic of Saint Rémy, he painted two copies of this work, which had become for him a symbol of a life irretrievably lost. He has placed everyday objects on the table; they are humble, but they are his own, and that is enough; for him all the objects in the room had a soul of their own. This painting was not an exercise in perspective, but the—successful—attempt to create an intense image of a life, an image in which each element is imbued with emotional significance. The room is small and bare. The white furniture has been painted yellow, and on the walls there are a few of his own paintings, including a self-portrait.



## Falling Autumn Leaves (Les Alyscamps)

October–November 1888

*Oil on canvas, 72 x 91 cm*  
*Private collection*

In the enchanting little town of Arles in Provence there is a place that has a very particular charm: a pagan necropolis in which Jesus is said to have appeared on the day that the first bishop of Arles consecrated the burial ground in the name of the new religion. For centuries the inhabitants of the region—first the Celts and later the Romans—had interred their dead in this place because they believed that an easier journey led from there to the Elysian Fields. For this reason, the graveyard is called Les Alyscamps (Provençal for Champs-Élysées, or Elysian Fields). It continued to be in use throughout the entire Middle Ages. Van Gogh painted here with Paul Gauguin.

In this painting, too, he took inspiration from Eastern art: the unusual perspective of an elevated, diagonal point of view is derived from Japanese prints. Similarly, line is also of particular importance, though it interested him not so much as an independent form of expression but rather as a medium for bounding areas of color, thus giving them greater intensity. Thus the outlines of the trees, which create a strong vertical rhythm, immediately draw our attention. In this picture we perceive an unreal, metaphysical pictorial space, as though Van Gogh had wanted to emphasize the value of the other-worldly.



## The Sower

November 1888

Oil on canvas, 32 x 40 cm  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

This painting is the last of a series dedicated to people working in the fields. When compared to the works executed in the summer, the differences in content and painting style are striking. The sun depicted here does not emit warmth, and though it is positioned just above the horizon it looks like a hallucination, or the symbol of an energy that is being extinguished (the inverse of the “sun myth” the critic Albert Aurier mentions in his article of 1890, *Les Isolés: Vincent van Gogh*).

The painting is a highly successful combination of bold composition and strong color harmonies. It shows that Van Gogh’s interest in Impressionism led not to a purely mechanical imitation of the painting technique, but to a very personal interpretation in which he simultaneously made reference once again to the graphic stylization of Japanese art and also anticipated the pictorial language of Symbolism. He had reached a point at which he was essentially giving an account of himself. Paul Gauguin’s presence did not lead to the stimulation he had hoped for, but instead to an almost destructive clash of personalities. Van Gogh had gone to Provence to find himself, but without success. The “illness,” as he called it, progressed rapidly and his hallucinations, followed by periods of total exhaustion, became increasingly frequent. He was sometimes angry because he was not able to make himself “understood by Gauguin,” causing a state of almost unbearable tension. Even before his artist-friend arrived, he wrote: “I feel compelled to work until I am spiritually crushed and physically exhausted, simply because I have no other way of covering the expenses.” A little later: “My paintings are worthless, but they exact a great price from me, sometimes costing me my blood and my brain.” This was not a sustainable situation. After the tragic episode in December, when he attacked Gauguin, then cut off part of his left ear and gave it to a prostitute as a “gift,” the women in the brothel alerted the police and called neighbors to help. The “virtuous locals” surrounded his house: they wanted peace and quiet to return, and so Van Gogh was sent to the asylum.





## Gauguin's Chair

December 1888

Oil on canvas, 90.5 x 72.5 cm  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

"A few days before we parted, when illness forced me to enter an asylum, I tried to paint 'his [Gauguin's] empty place.' It is a study of his armchair of dark, red-brown wood, the seat of greenish straw, and in the absent person's place a lighted candlestick and some modern novels." This description of the painting illustrated here is to be found in a letter to the art critic Albert Aurier, written on 9/10 February 1890. Here, Van Gogh summarizes in a few simple words the sad events that took place on 23 December of the previous year, and tells of his psychological and physical state of health. Van Gogh had always been interested in the chair as a motif, and chairs are among the subjects he sketched repeatedly in 1881 and 1882. In *The Graphic*, an English journal, he had come across an engraving by Luke Fildes depicting the empty chair of Charles Dickens, an image created in 1870 to mark the death of the writer. Van Gogh was never to forget the image. In this painting, Van Gogh tried to create a "night effect." It is to be understood as a pendant to *Van Gogh's Chair* (1888), a slightly larger oil painting that is also in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. There are visible differences despite the similar subject matter: the representation of his fellow artist's chair is dominated by dark, cold tones, whereas his own features a preponderance of light, bright, warm colors. Gauguin had fled the Yellow House in horror after Van Gogh, in a state of great agitation, had attacked him with a razor. He left Arles the following day.



# Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear

January 1889

*Oil on canvas, 51 x 45 cm*  
*Private collection*

This painting is the sad document of the heartbreaking story of Vincent van Gogh's friendship with Paul Gauguin. It is a story characterized by affection, hope and exuberance, anger and disappointment ... a story that inevitably came to a tragic end. There is another, slightly different version of the painting, in which Van Gogh appears without a pipe, in front of an olive-green background showing a Japanese print. This second self-portrait expresses a different emotional tenor: Van Gogh actually appears less unhappy.

His gaze in the self-portrait illustrated here is unforgettable: the red background appears to be reflected in the bloodshot eyes, a reference to the blood that is not shown here but is instead indirectly evoked. The composition is quite conventional: a triangle rising from the two lower corners. And yet the application of paint shows a dynamic energy that is only just contained by the black outlines. The muted green of the coat with the threadbare lapel and the asymmetry of the slumped, slightly hunched shoulders underline the vacant expression of the subject. He appears to be completely shut off from the outside world because he is wounded—and not just physically—and he presents himself without a hint of self-justification or romantic self-stylization. Gauguin had, however, described him as a romantic in a letter to Émile Bernard, for Van Gogh loved “Daumier, Daubigny, Ziem and the great Rousseau, none of whom I can stand.”



# Starry Night with Cypresses

January 1889

*Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 92.1 cm*  
Museum of Modern Art, New York

In this painting, which is certainly among Van Gogh's most famous works, the star-studded sky becomes a dizzying swirl and the landscape, painted from nature, a vivid demonstration of the painter's compositional and expressive brilliance. One could view this painting as an extreme attempt to go beyond the simple pictorial representation of nature towards a creation based on inner realities that is at once monumental and concrete. Both the verticality of the imposing cypress tree and church tower in the background, and the diagonals of the rolling hills and surreal swirls in the starry sky, characterize the basic structure of the complex composition. Here Van Gogh has designed an imaginary journey in which the landscape becomes a fantastical perception, a transcendental experience, a joyful distortion of the senses, a poetic adventure. His thought, and consequently his work as a painter, never developed into the explicit Symbolism of his friends Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard. He always remained dedicated to visible nature, even if he distorted it. In this painting, the viewer has no choice but to be drawn into the painter's mental nocturnal maelstrom, into the cosmic energy that appears to radiate from the night sky over Arles. The circling brushstrokes are certainly among the most powerful and most famous creations of modern painting.

