

Vincent Van Gogh

1853-1890

A Letter to the Future



Van Gogh in 1866 at the age of 13

It was always difficult, even when I was a little kid. Dad was a powerful, a stern and solemn preacher. I was small and unimportant. It was the Book of God that mattered. I thought maybe I should try grow up to be like Dad, but then... anyway, when I was old enough, instead I went to England to teach in a boarding school—that didn't work out—and then I went to work in an art gallery that was the London branch of a famous gallery that belonged to another part of our family. That didn't work out either and so I decided to try what I had thought of in the beginning, to be like Dad, to preach the word of God.





Miners on the Way to Work, the Borinage, 1881.

But I would preach directly to those who suffered, and like Christ would live with them, share their lives. I went to the Borinage, a mining district in Belgium. They were poor miners—I began to draw them—as a matter of fact, it was in the Borinage that I first started to work from nature. I shared the lives of the miners and gave them some of my clothes.

The elders of the church felt that I was lowering the social class of the preachers and sent me home.

An Old Man, the Hague, 1882

My brother Theo had gone to work in the Paris branch of the gallery that belonged to the other part of the family, and, having failed at everything else, I decided to become an artist... with my bother Theo's moral and financial support. I took art lessons at the local academy, and sought out models among the poor. Poor like I was, and, in depicting them I—as I wrote once to Theo—“as in every work of art, a self-portrait.”





Sein, the Hague, 1882

Jesus saved souls, and although I had been sent away from the church among the miners, I sought still to save souls... One was a pregnant prostitute, Sein, and although I only got barely enough to live on from Theo, I took Sein and her daughter and her mother in to live with me.



Sein with daughter, the Hague, 1882



Sein's daughter rocks the cradle of the infant Vincent Willem, the Hague, 1883

Sein named the baby after me although I was not the father. But Theo could not send enough money to support me and Sein and her daughter and mother and now the infant... and Sein's mother said Sein had to get back out on the streets and start to make some money again.



Sein, the Hague, 1883



“Sorrow,” the Hague, 1882

We artists try to express our emotions. In my day, that was often done by “symbolic” compositions with figures and texts. I tried it with Sein as a model while she was still carrying the unborn child in 1882, and it was surely very sorrowful then with a pregnancy, no father and no money.

But I drew it again in 1883, when Sein had to hit the streets and I had to hit the road...



1882

What is our journey? Mine would be long and alone. I made this at the beginning of my relationship with Sein, but it expresses as well the end of it. [Note: watch for the birds.]



Drenthe, Summer, 1883

I left Sein and her daughter and mother and the infant named after me, I left the Hague and everyone and everything I knew. I took my drawings and materials, and walked... drawing as always on the way. In those days we thought "Work is the answer to Life."



Drenthe, autumn, 1883

Autumn came and I walked day after day in cold swampy places, land barely reclaimed from the sea.



Drenthe, autumn, 1883



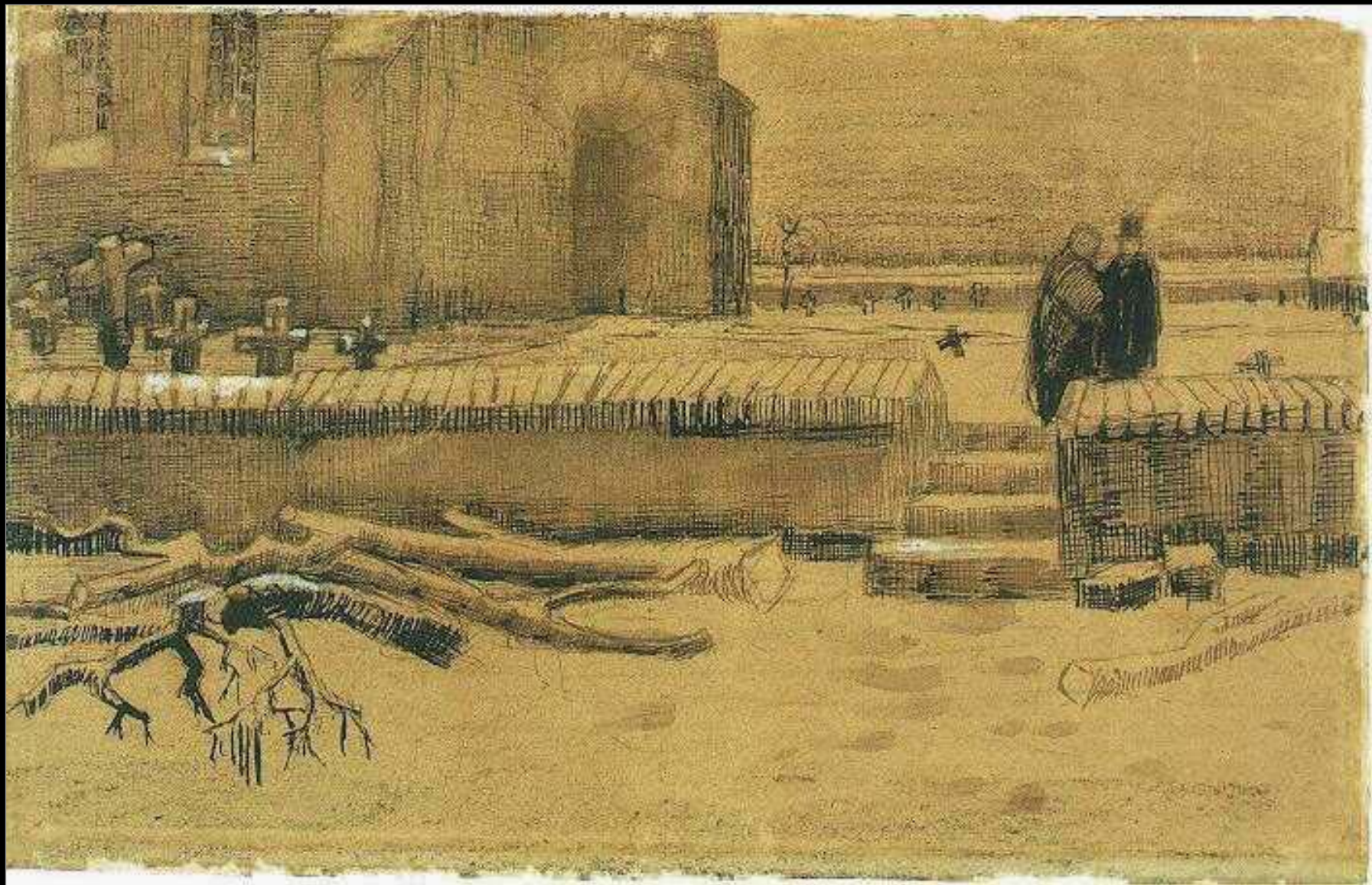
Neunen, 1885

I finally went back to living with my parents.
My studio was in the garden shed at the side of the house.



Neumen, 1885

Turning around the other way, this is my parents' back yard and the view beyond the wall to the distant tower of the abandoned church of the People's Cemetery.



Neunen, 1883
The People's Cemetery



Neunen, 1884
The Church Tower of the
People's Cemetery



Neunen, 1884
The Tower, the Church Yard, nearby fields with peasants.



Neunen, 1885

The Tower—the birds and auctioning off the remains
of the church tower of the People's Cemetery



Neumen, 1885
The ruined tower—the abandoned People's
Cemetery and the birds



Neunen, 1885

Dad died. The candle was out, the bible with its gray
text closing, and the future...a yellow paper back,
Zola's The Joy of Life.





Van Gogh's friend
Emil Bernard

Toulouse Lautrec

And I took off for Paris, the city of light and life—to live with Theo and to meet all the new young artists who were making new art. I learned their new ways of painting; but, like so many people always have thought of me, they thought I was odd, shut me out from their camaraderie and seldom spoke to me.



I found a woman friend who owned a café—*The Tambourine* (that's why the table)--but our relationship did not last long.

Bastille Day, July 14, 1887

Bastille Day came, and I painted this...
And underneath the explosion in the
cosmos, I painted a father, a mother, and a
little boy with red hair... my hair is red.
Artists had for centuries and almost
always used their paint to depict things in
such a way as to make the paint disappear
into the thing depicted. I could not hold
my hands that way, the pressure, the rage,
the passion and desire were too strong in
me, the paint was my body... “as in every
work of art, a self portrait.”

“A self portrait...” I painted the world I
wanted. The old alchemists said, “As
above, so below,” and in the search and
discovery of the philosopher’s stone—the
above—they searched for and discovered
the healing of their own souls (the *aurum
nostrum*, our gold)—the below. I wanted
a family, I wanted my parents’ love. But
the sky was an apocalypse.





1887—Paris



Theo

And living with Theo was hard... he was a rising young art dealer with a nice apartment where he could bring clients... but I was always there making a mess. (Years later, someone showed me a letter he had written...)

1887—Paris

“I dare say as certain,
anyone who has a solid
position elsewhere, let
him stay where he is.
But for adventurers like
myself,
I think we lose nothing
by risking more.
Especially in my case, I
am not an adventurer by
choice but by fate, who
feels nowhere so much
a stranger as in my
family and country.”

“One must be strong to
stand life in Paris... it is
my intention as soon as
possible to go
temporarily
to the south, where
there is even more
color, even more
sun...”



1888—Arles

The idea came for a way that us advanced artists could make a living—set up an artists' colony, a co-op, where we could live inexpensively and paint, and Theo as a knowledgeable and respected art dealer would travel Europe setting up special exhibitions and selling our work.

I left Theo's apartment—didn't tell him I was going, made it a surprise (I didn't know then how welcome a surprise)—and went south to Arles to start the colony. Rented the little yellow house on the corner for our headquarters.

I painted pictures of the house a couple of times (that's me standing in front in my painting clothes). I also painted and drew the café around the corner. I thought of the train more than once as the traveler... like me, forever on the way—this one the train to Tarascon.





1888—Arles

My bedroom. I painted it blue... I had come south for “more color, more sun,” and in the yellow house I wanted a blue room and a red blanket... to live in the primaries was my goal.



1888—Arles

It was spring and the time of sowing... and for me to begin again, the artist's colony and my own work. And so I painted the sower with his head touching the rising sun... and the blossoming tree, though the branches were like spears and the blossoms like blood.



1888—Arles

It was spring and the time of blossoming...

1888—Arles

I brought a twig into the house. Gave a red line to the back (the “horizon line” you need to mark the back of the still life space), and a red line to echo it under my name... the red line of life that marked the spring blossom and me.



Van Gogh's Chair with sprouting onions

I invited Paul Gauguin to come to live with me to be the first member of our artists' colony. He came and I painted my chair... the simple, strong handmade peasant's chair. I put a box of sprouting onions in a box beside the chair, and put my name on it. As above, so below. I painted out there what I wanted in here.



Paul Gauguin: Self-Portrait as Devil, 1889

People thought Paul was odd—no, evil. He'd left his stockbroker job and his bourgeois wife and children to take up art. And I guess to accept and revel in their condemnation, he painted this portrait of himself.





You remember the café around the corner from my little yellow house... well, I drew and painted it and spent a lot of time there.

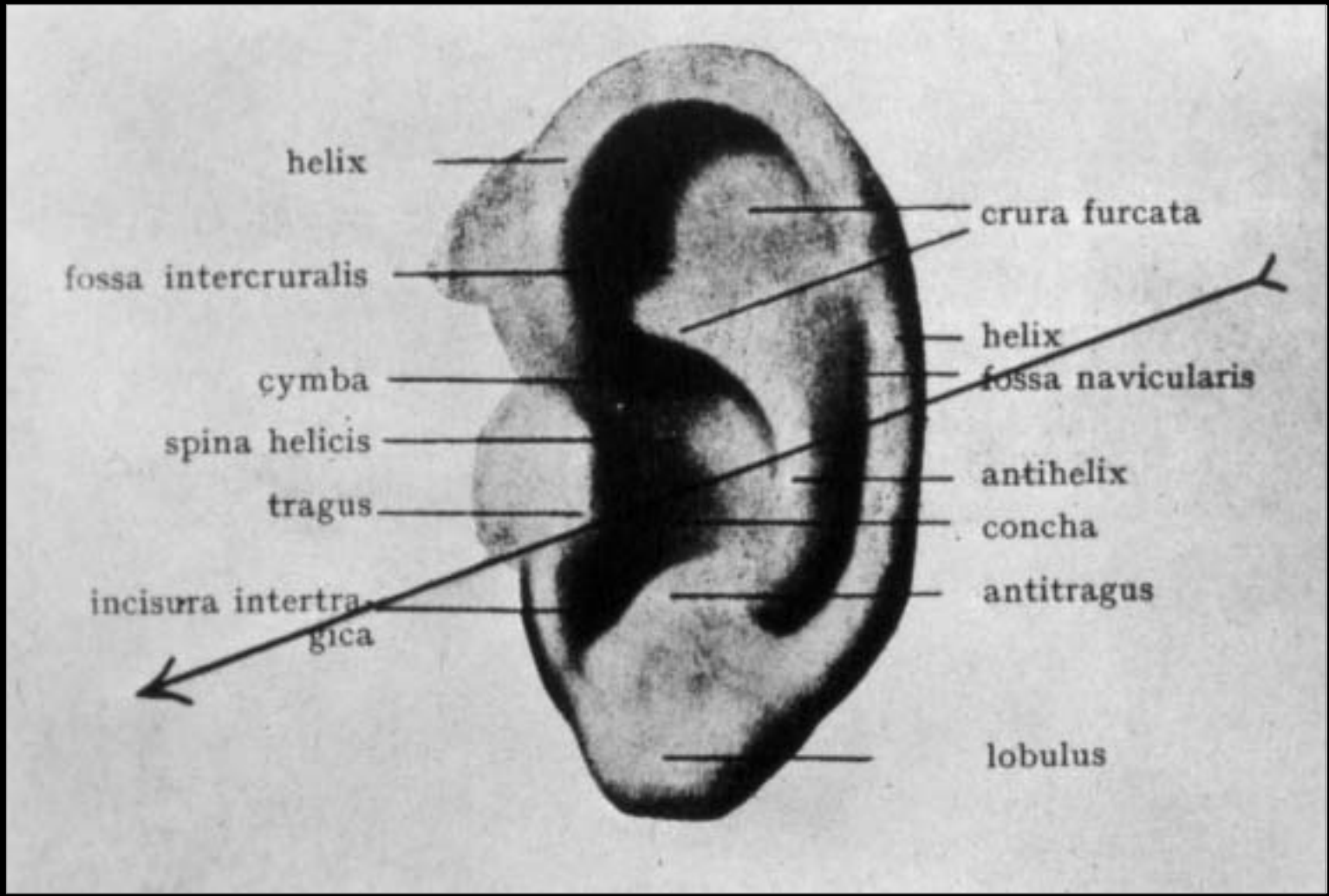


September 1888—Arles

Paul and I went often to a local bar...

“With red and green, I have tried to depict those terrible things, men’s passions.”

“I have tried to convey that a café is a place where a man can ruin himself, go crazy, commit a crime.”



Ours was an army town with plenty of bordellos. Paul said we had to go to one each night “for reasons of health.” Paul was very popular with the ladies... I was not. Complaining to him once a few nights before Christmas about a woman who had rejected me, Paul said “Hell, give her a present, give her your ear.”

That was in 1888. In the years long later, someone in a book gave the anatomy of my ear...

MAISON DE SANTÉ DE SAINT-REMY DE PROVENCE

(BOUCHES-DU-RHÔNE.)



— CETTE MAISON
— FONDÉE EN 1806,
— SE TROUVE SITUÉE DANS
— UN PAYS SÉPAREMENT
— ET OFFRE TOUTES LES
— CONDITIONS DU BIEN-ÊTRE
— PARCS SPACIEUX
— ET BIEN OMBRAGÉS,
— CLIMAT TEMPÉRÉ
— A L'ÉGAL DE CELUI
— DE NICE ET DE CANNES

— MOYEN D'Y ARRIVER:
— CHEMIN DE FER
— PARIS-LYON-MÉDITERRANÉE,
— GARE DE TARASCON
— ON SE TROUVE UN
— ENBRANCHEMENT
— QUI CONDUIT A
— SAINT-REMY
— EN 20 MINUTES.
— POUR TOUTS RENSEIGNEMENTS
— S'ADRESSER AU DIRECTEUR.

ÉTABLISSEMENT PRIVÉ

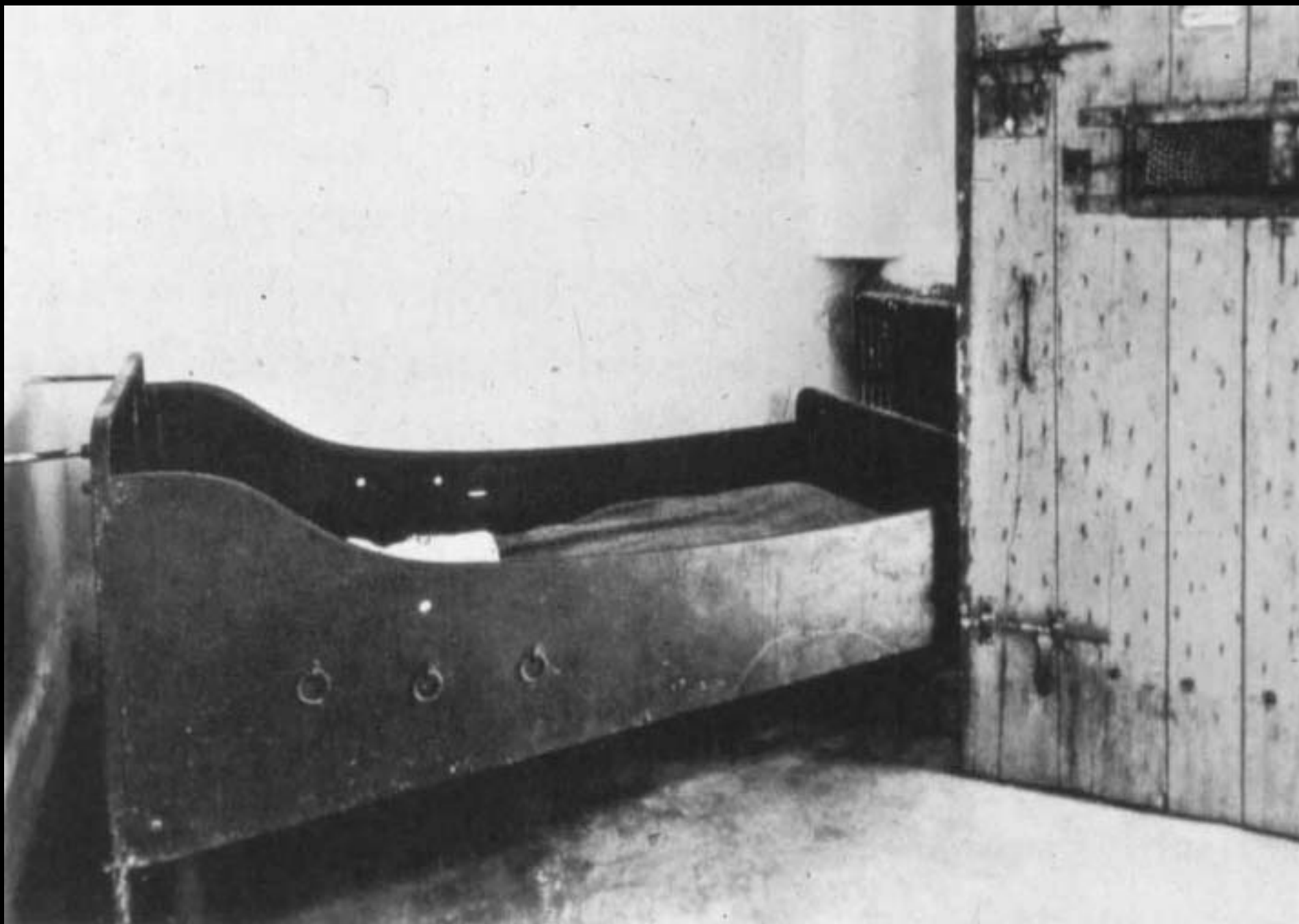
— CONSACRÉ AU TRAITEMENT DES ALIÉNÉS DES DEUX SEXES.

I went into the asylum of Saint Remy where I was treated with a
“bathing therapy.”



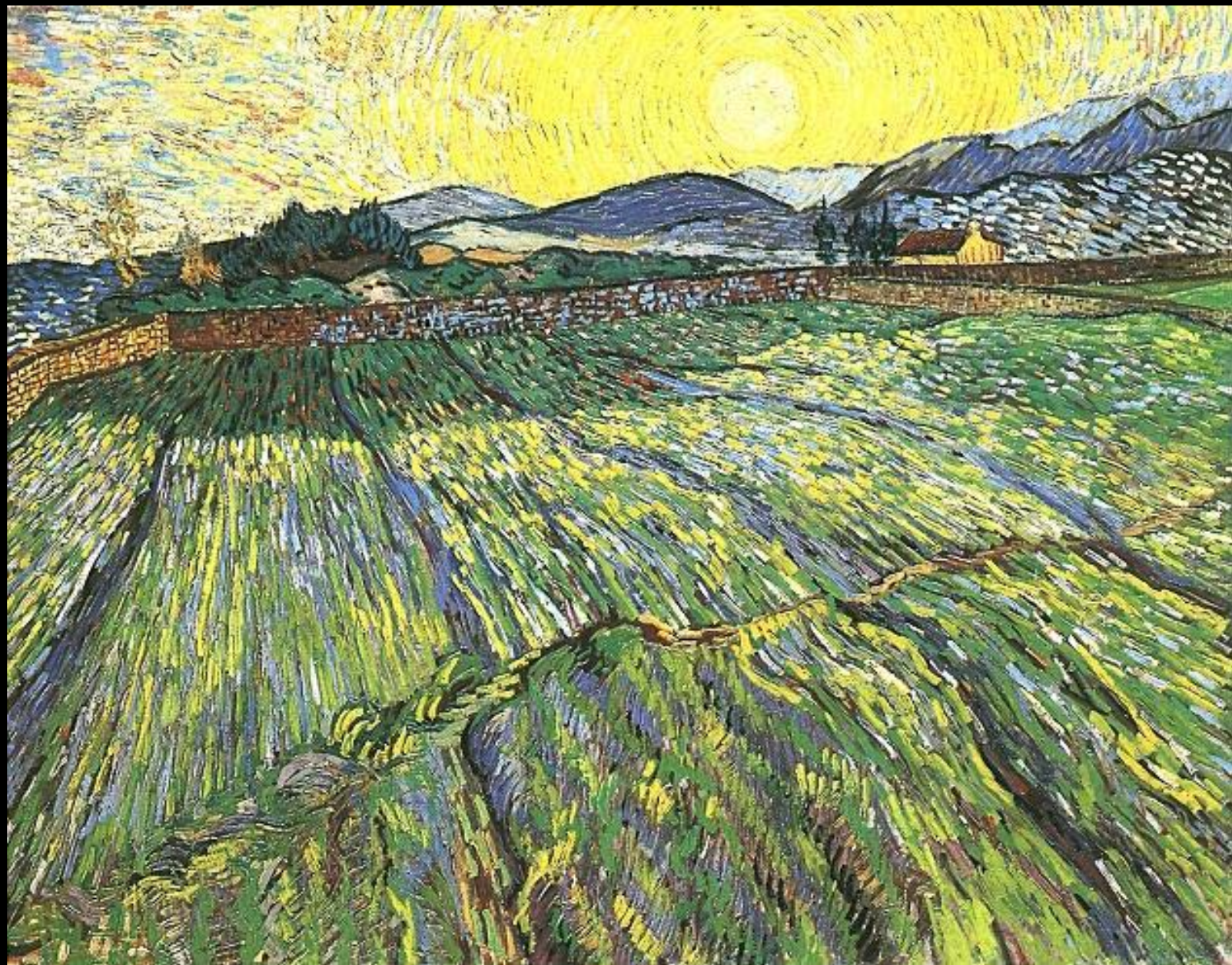


I made paintings by copying prints. This one from Gustave Dore's view of inmates exercising in a London prison.

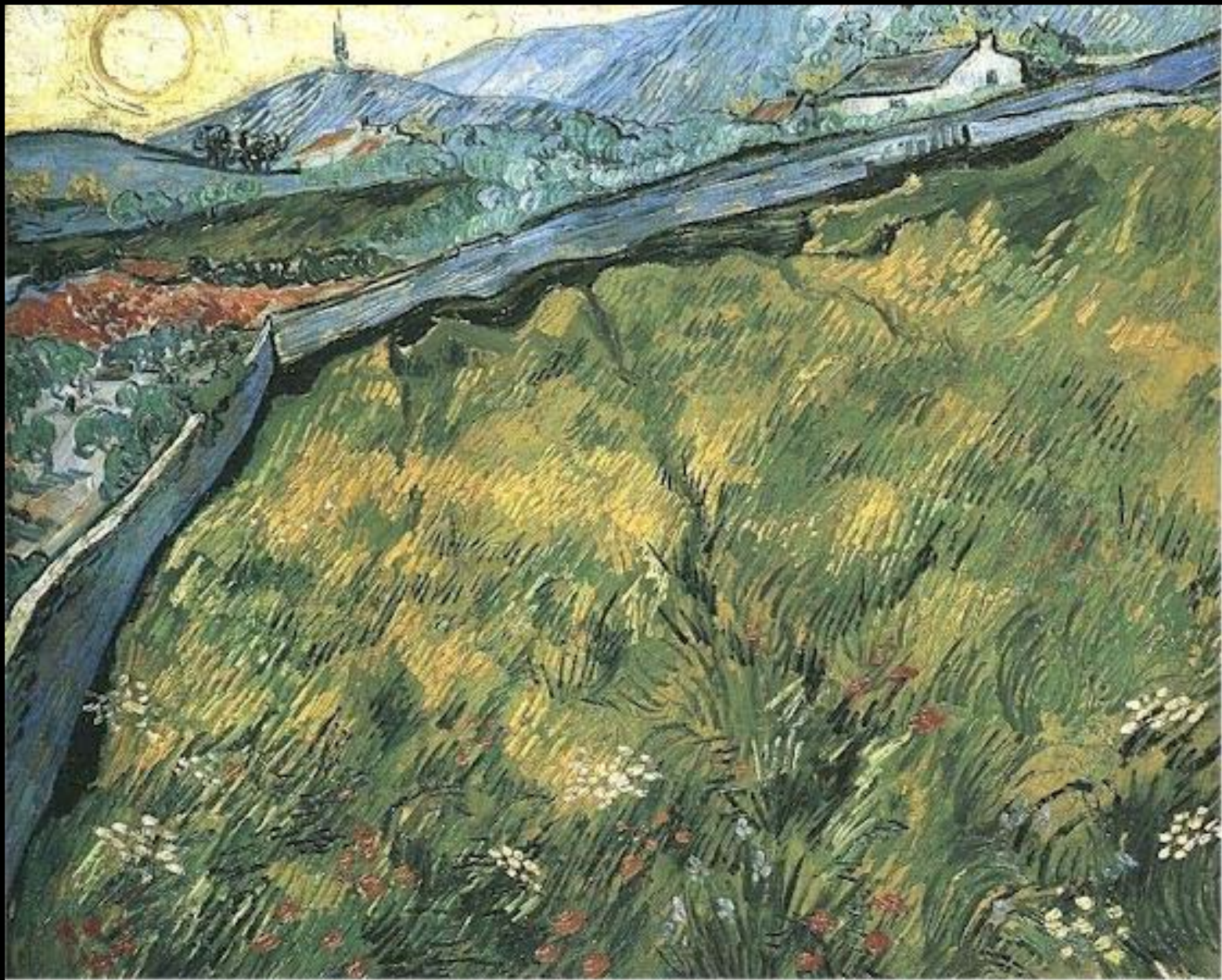




Early spring 1889—St. Remy



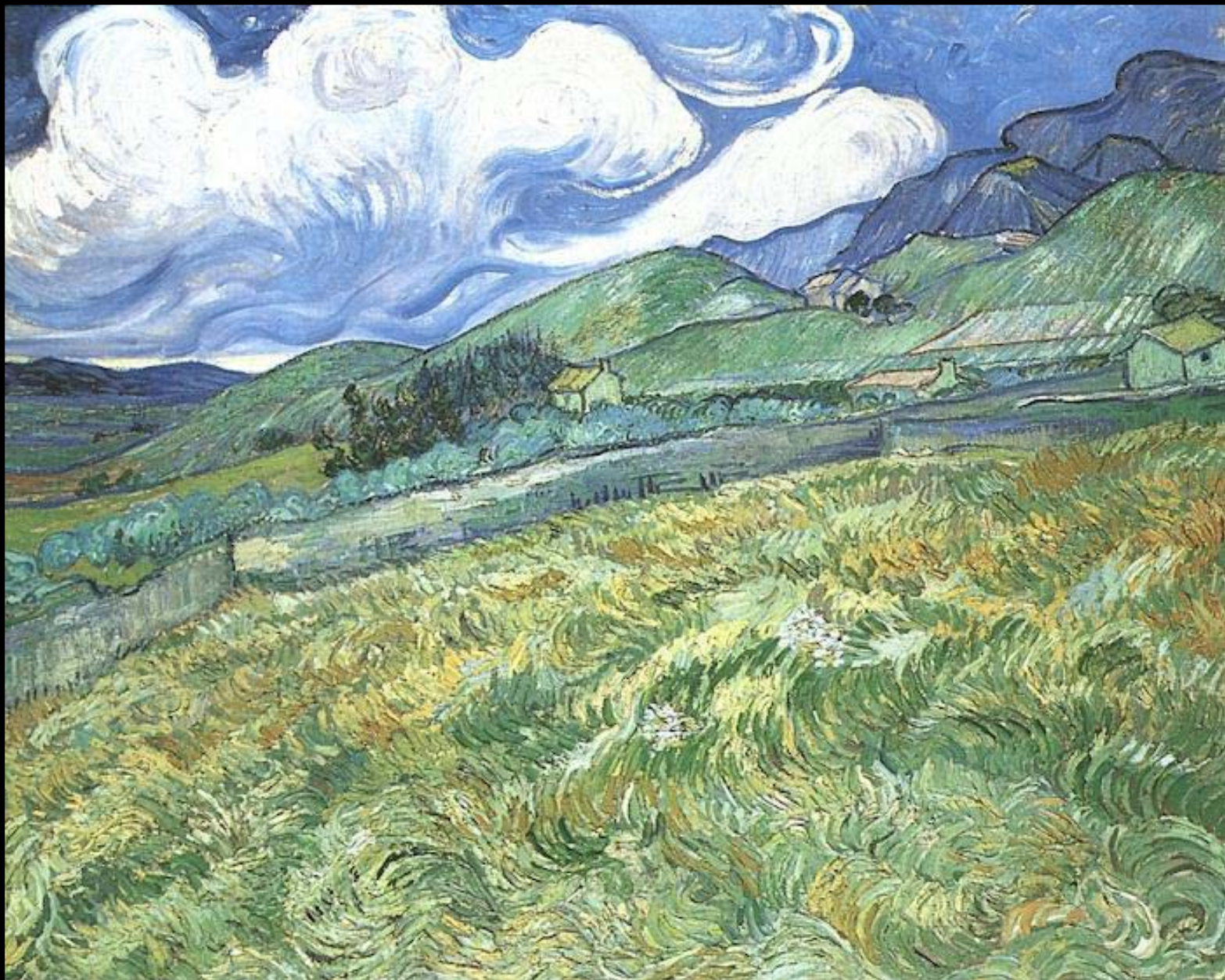
Spring 1889—St. Remy



May-June 1889—St. Remy



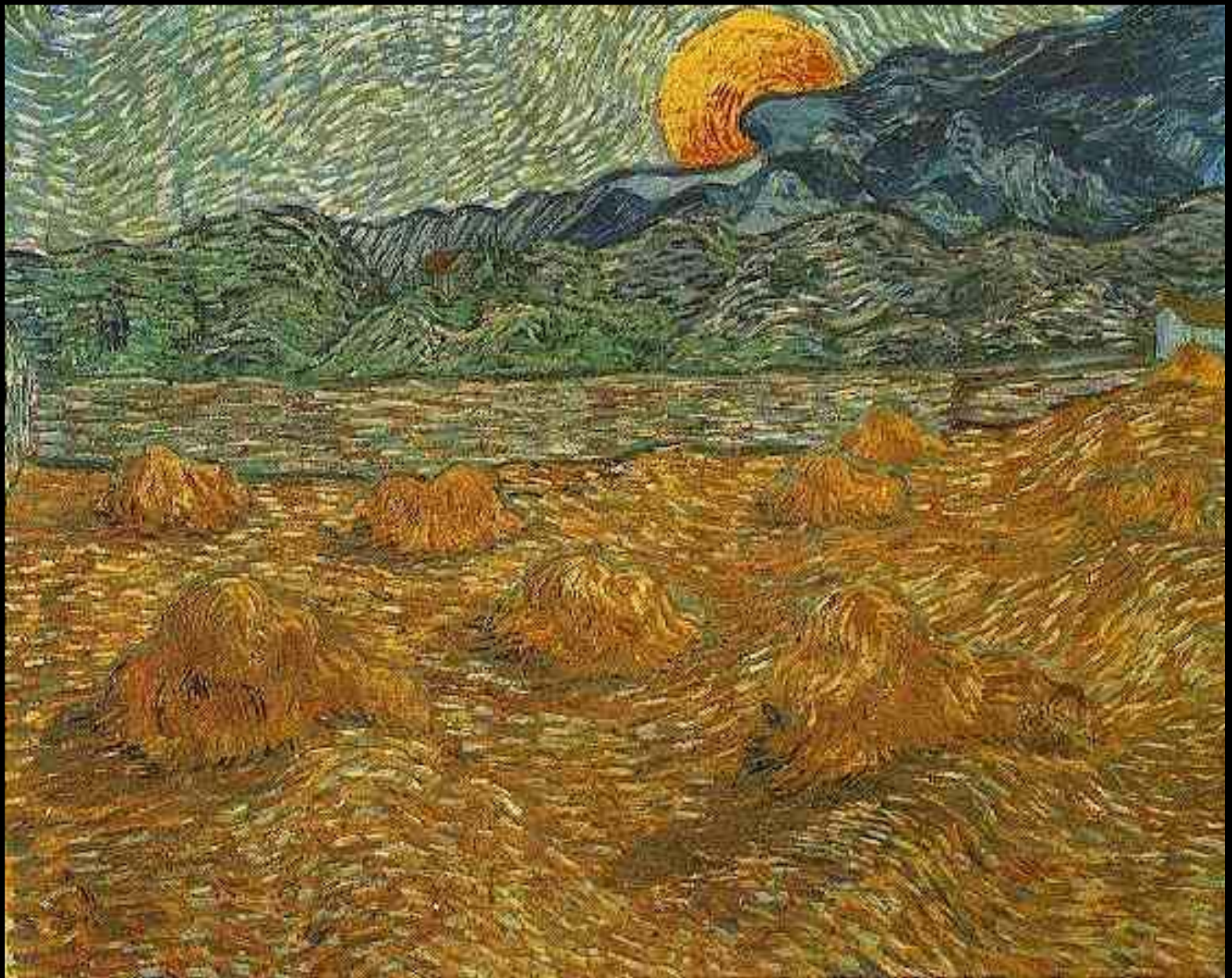
May-June 1889—St. Remy



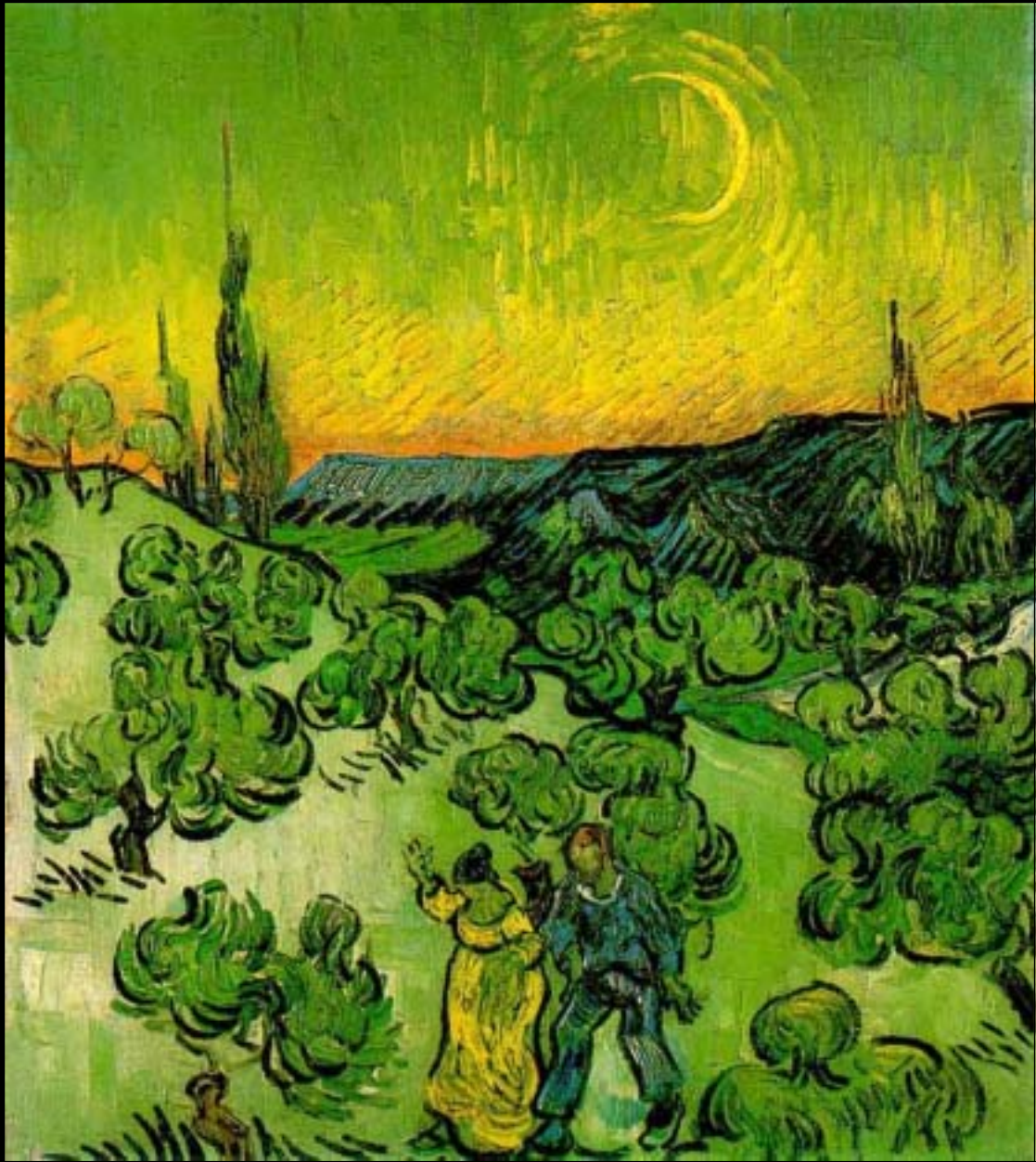
Summer 1889—St. Remy



Autumn 1889—St. Remy



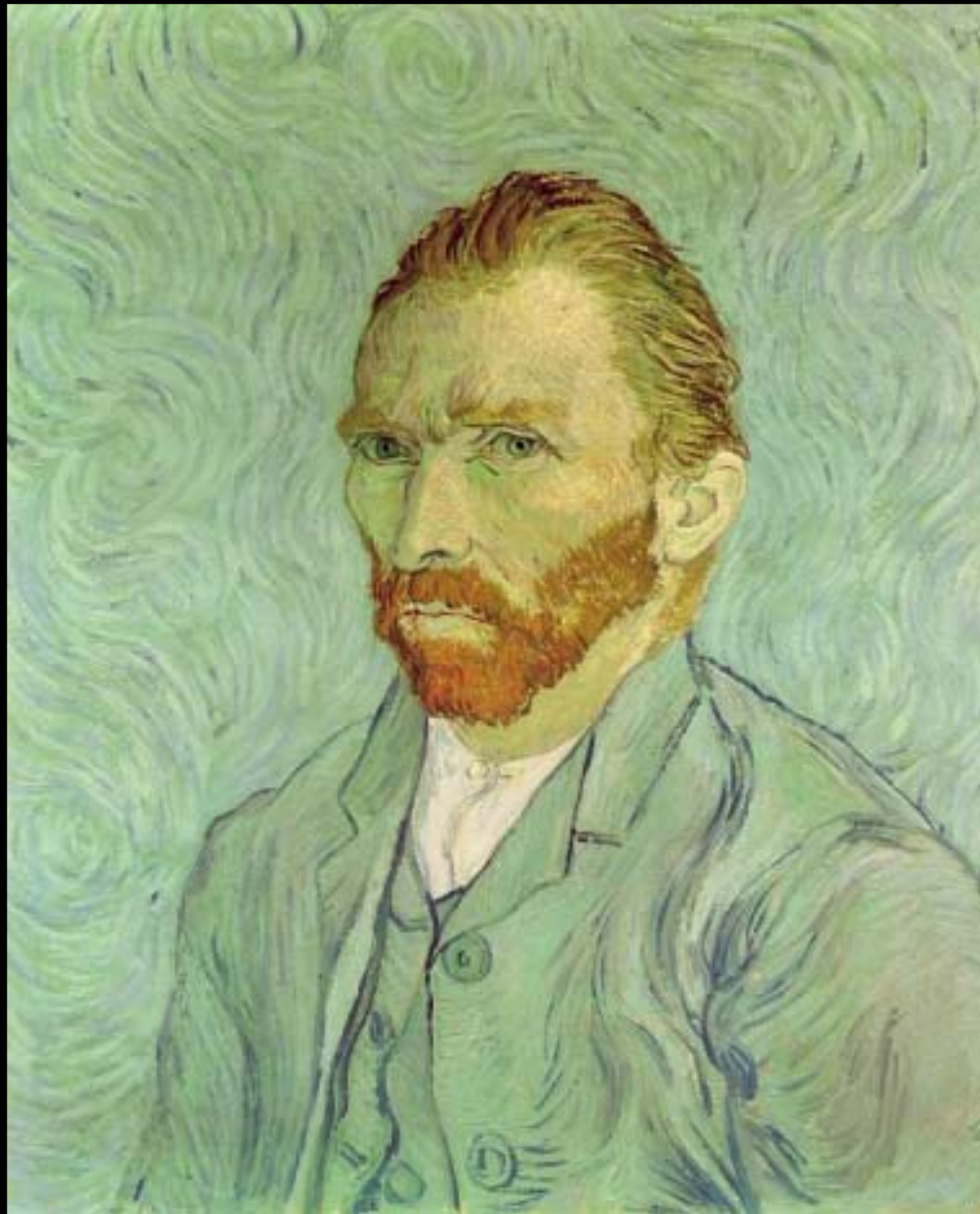
Autumn 1889—St. Remy



1889—Arles



1888—Arles



1890—Auvers



1890—Auvers



July 1890—Auvers

N° 52 — 7^e ANNÉE.

LE NUMÉRO : 15 CENTIMES

JEUDI 7 AOUT 1890

L'ÉCHO PONTOISIEN

Journal de l'arrondissement de Pontoise

PUBLIANT LE JEUDI

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occupent.

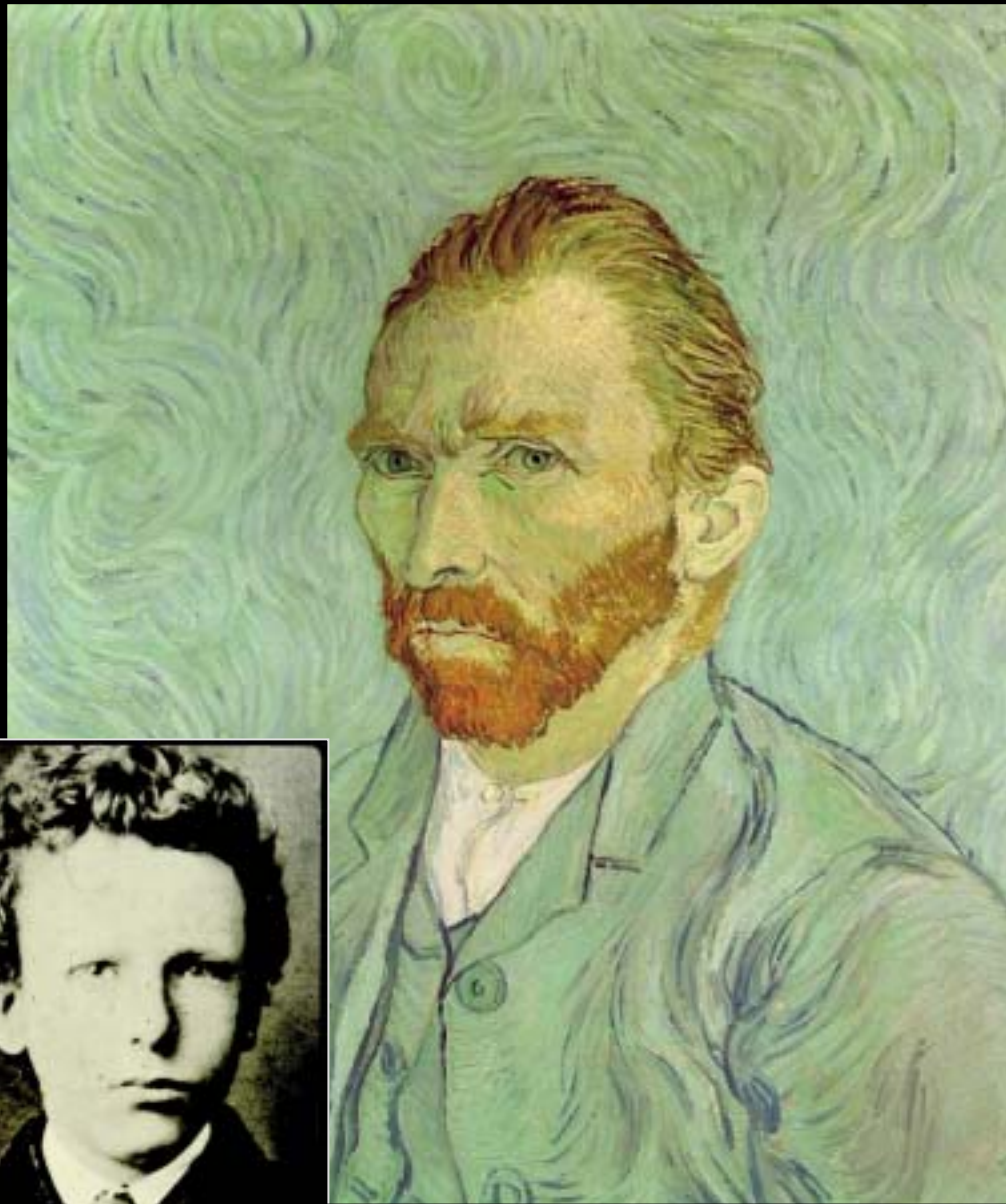
Les insertions à répétition obtiennent des réductions
de prix à peu.

Les annonces à longue durée sont adressées
à l'adresse ci-dessus, au plus tard

les 15 jours avant le jour de leur insertion

— **AUVERS-SUR-OISE.** — Dimanche 27 juillet, un nommé Van Gogh, âgé de 37 ans, sujet hollandais, artiste peintre, de passage à Auvers, s'est tiré un coup de revolver dans les champs et, n'étant que blessé, il est rentré à sa chambre où il est mort le surlendemain.

Sunday, 27th July, one named Van Gogh, age 37 years, Dutch subject, artist painter, visiting Auvers, shot himself with a revolver in the fields, and wounded returned to his room where he died.



“What does it matter to us if there is a resurrection or not, when we see a living man rise up immediately in the place of a dead one, taking up the same cause, living the same life, dying the same death.”

