

ONE

Three Nights in the Devil's Furnace

TUESDAY EVENING, September 4, 1888, Van Gogh set up his easel on the rough plank floor among the scattered tables and chairs at one end of the Night Café, the Café de la Gare near the railway station at the north edge of the city of Arles in southern France. The café was on the ground floor of Joseph and Marie Ginoux's lodging house, just outside the old city walls of Arles. For three nights Vincent would paint the scene before him. He would exaggerate the clash of colors: red walls, green billiard table and ceiling. He would emphasize the dizzying glare of four hanging gaslights and their reflections in the room. He would paint each chair and table, the remaining bottles and glasses, the silent billiard table with a cue and three billiard balls resting on the green felt. He would paint the five "night-prowlers," as he called them, sitting or sleeping at their tables at the edges of the room. He would paint the clock that tells us it is after midnight. He would paint the proprietor, Joseph Ginoux, standing behind the billiard table, facing the artist, and so facing us the viewers. After each of his three nights painting in this room he called "a devil's furnace," Vincent (as he preferred to be called) would climb the stairs to his rented room above to get a few hours of sleep.

The artist was painting "The Night Café," one of his strangest, most mysterious paintings, just seven months after his arrival in Arles. He had left his brother Theo's apartment in Paris, suffering from the cold of northern France, frustrated with the arguments and petty jealousies of many painters in Paris, and weakened by his own heavy drinking of absinthe, wine, and brandy. The train from Paris followed the "route of the sun" southward, and delivered him after some sixteen hours in Arles, the old Roman city on the Rhone River, not far from the Mediterranean Sea. Here was his hope for a healthy new start in the fabled sunshine of Provence. He and Theo had been collecting bright

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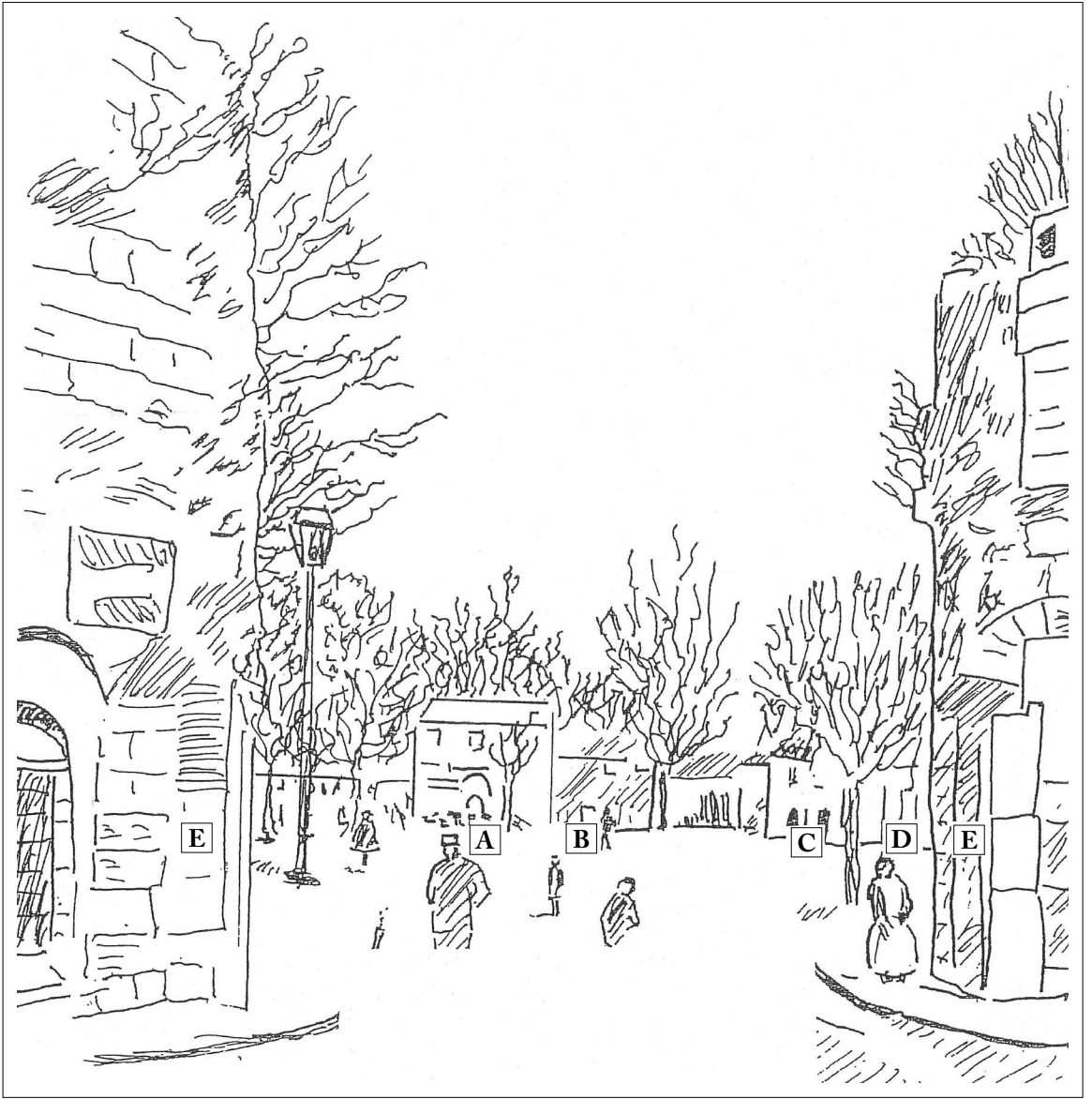
Japanese prints in Paris, and Vincent now wrote his brother that Arles was to become his own sun-drenched “Japan.” The Café de la Gare, his “Night Café,” was at the center of his new neighborhood just outside the old northern portal of the city. Beside this café was the Restaurant Venissac where he hoped to get country food that would give him back his strength. Just to the east of the café and the restaurant was “The Yellow House,” one half of a building he had rented four months earlier. It was just the shell of an empty and long-vacant structure with two rooms downstairs and two up, attached to a grocery store. His section of the building was without light, heat, or a toilet. Vincent hoped to move out of the Ginoux lodging house with its café as soon as he could afford a few pieces of furniture to make the Yellow House habitable. Not only would it provide a home and a studio for himself, but he hoped it would become a refuge for other artists who were struggling and homeless.

The Ginoux inn with its café, the restaurant, the grocery, and the Yellow House all faced south on the Place Lamartine and its series of garden-parks that led into the city of Arles from the railroad station. Vincent would paint not only the Night Café, but also the gardens on the Place Lamartine, the Yellow House, and his bedroom in the Yellow House. He would also paint every member of the family of the postal official, Joseph Roulin, whose home was near the railroad overpass behind the Night Café and the Yellow House. Later, Marie Ginoux, wife of the Night Café’s proprietor, would come to the ground floor studio of the Yellow House and pose for portraits by Vincent and his guest, the painter Paul Gauguin.

Vincent had intended to paint the Night Café as early as Monday, August 6, and mentioned the plan in a letter he wrote to brother Theo. That letter is rich in philosophic musings about family, death, literature, other artists, and his own recent painting and drawing. In the midst of these musings he wrote:

Today I am probably going to start on the interior of the café where I eat, by gaslight, in the evening. It is what they call here a “café de nuit” (they are common here) staying open all night. Night prowlers can take refuge there when they have no money to pay for a lodging or are too tight to be taken in. (Letter 518)

This thought encouraged him to share with Theo his views on “native land and family,” and his own sense of being a “traveler, going somewhere and to some destination.” He also commented on the recent death of an uncle whose funeral brother Theo had attended. Vincent mentioned the peaceful look he believed one often found on the face of the dead, and his own interest in the possibility of a “life beyond the grave.” These musings, perhaps



Contemporary sketch after an old photograph: Looking out of the city of Arles through its northern gate, the “porte de la Cavalerie.” Vincent van Gogh’s neighborhood at the northern edge of Arles, from the left, shows the Ginoux lodging house with its “Night Café” (A), the Restaurant Venissac (B), the connected Grocery Shop (C) and “Yellow House” (D). The two sides of the old city gate (E) frame the scene. Behind these buildings are the Railroad Station, the Postal Station, and the home of the postal official, Joseph Roulin, and his family. The buildings in this neighborhood were badly damaged or destroyed during an air raid on the Railroad on June 25, 1944.

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accompanied by the sound and vibration of trains arriving and leaving the station just a block away, led him to share his uncertainties regarding life's great mysteries:

In short, I know nothing about it, but it is just this feeling of not knowing that makes the real life we are actually living now like a one-way journey on a train. You go fast, but cannot distinguish any object very clearly, and above all you do not see the engine.

But Vincent was not to begin his Night Café painting that day or for another twenty-nine days. He was in one of the fullest and most exciting periods in his painting career, and opportunities to paint and draw subjects he had long dreamed of filled his days. He worked on the portrait of a Zouave soldier stationed in Arles, painted a peasant named Patience Escalier, did several landscapes, and gave drawing lessons to a friend. But most exciting of all, a letter from Theo announced that their uncle who died had left Theo a small legacy, and Theo wished to share it with Vincent, making possible the furnishing of the rented Yellow House and perhaps the completion of a plan to bring Gauguin to share the space. This motivated Vincent to begin a whole series of paintings to decorate the house, the famous panels of sunflowers. Not only that, but he had met a friendly young Belgian painter who was willing to pose for a portrait Vincent had long hoped for, a painting of someone who had the look of a poet. So Eugene Boch became Vincent's "Poet," and that painting along with the one of peasant Patience Escalier would add to the decorations for his bedroom in the Yellow House.

On September 4, Vincent finally returned to his plan for painting the Night Café, and began the three days of sleeping by day and painting by night. In his letter to Theo on September 8 he announced that the painting was done. Comments on the painting's nature and meaning were now crowded into a letter that is of special importance in both posing the mystery of "The Night Café" and providing clues that will help us to solve it. Vincent wrote:

Thank you a thousand times for your kind letter and the 300 francs it contained; after some worrying weeks I have just had one of the very best. And just as the worries do not come singly, neither do the joys. For just as I am always bowed under the difficulty of paying my landlord, I made up my mind to take it gaily. I swore at the said landlord, who after all isn't a bad fellow, and told him that to revenge myself for paying him so much for nothing, I would paint the whole of his rotten joint so as to repay myself. Then to the great joy of the landlord, of the postman who I had already painted, of the visiting night prowlers and of myself, for three nights running I sat up to paint and went to bed during the day.

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Now, as for getting back the money I have paid to the landlord by means of my painting, I do not dwell on that, for the picture is one of the ugliest I have done. It is the equivalent, though different, of the "Potato Eaters."

I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green.

The room is blood red and dark yellow with a green billiard table in the middle; there are four citron-yellow lamps with a glow of orange and green. Everywhere there is a clash and contrast of the most disparate reds and greens in the figures of little sleeping hooligans, in the empty dreary room, in violet and blue. The blood-red and the yellow-green of the billiard table, for instance, contrast with the soft tender Louis XV green of the counter on which there is a pink nosegay. The white coat of the landlord, awake in a corner of that furnace, turns citron-yellow, or pale luminous green.

I am making a drawing of it with the tones in water color to send to you tomorrow to give you some idea. (Letter 533)

The very next day Vincent wrote Theo again, letting him know that the water color copy of "The Night Café" was already sent off, and that he was now engaged in the happy task of furnishing the Yellow House and planning its decorations with the panels of "great yellow sunflowers." But even in the midst of this exciting news, he returned to the theme of his painting of "The Night Café" for a further explanation of its intent. He wrote:

In my picture of the "Night Café" I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime. So I have tried to express, as it were, the power of darkness in a low public house by soft greens, and all this in an atmosphere like a devil's furnace, of pale sulphur.

And all with an appearance of Japanese gaiety, and the good nature of Tartarin.

As he concluded the letter, he noted that he was writing it in that very Night Café, and had noticed that the peasant he had painted earlier, Patience Escalier, had just "come into the café" (Letter 534).

The clues we can draw from these descriptions provided by Vincent appear to deepen the mystery of the painting itself as he joins references to "night prowlers," "terrible passions of humanity," "power of darkness," "madness," "crime," and "devil's furnace" with the puzzling contrast of an "appearance of Japanese gaiety" and "the good nature of Tartarin." But let us view the painting itself more carefully as we turn to unraveling those puzzles.