

Van Gogh and Montmartre





VAN GOGH
and Montmartre

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VAN GOGH MUSEUM



IT WAS AT THE END OF FEBRUARY 1886 that Vincent van Gogh went to live with his brother Theo in Montmartre, the artists' quarter of Paris. The French capital was the centre of the art world in those days, and Montmartre was its vibrant heart of artistic innovation. Since its annexation in 1860 the village on the hill ('la Butte') north of the city had become a refuge for a colourful assortment of workmen, artists, entertainers and pleasure-seekers. Artists had traditionally been drawn to the area by its rural setting, but by now its entertainment district had also become a rich source of inspiration.

For the first few months Vincent lived with Theo in the latter's apartment at the foot of Montmartre, but in the summer of 1886 they moved to a larger one on the Butte itself. The subjects for his paintings and drawings were all around him: the windmills on the hill, the quarry (1) and the garden allotments, the narrow streets with pedestrians, and the view of the city from his window and from the top of the hill (2).

The two years that Van Gogh spent in Paris were of crucial importance for his development from painter in the Dutch Realist tradition to modern artist. His encounter with the latest movements there had a profound impact on his work, although it was a gradual process rather than an abrupt break with what had gone before. He began experimenting with new styles like Impressionism, Pointillism and Japonism. As he gradually abandoned what he later called his 'Dutch palette of grey tones' his paintings became increasingly luminous and colourful (3). When he left Paris for Arles in February 1888 he had carved out a modest niche for himself among the French avant-garde.

1
Vincent van Gogh,
*Outskirts of
Montmartre*,
(detail of fig. 47)
1887
Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam



2

Vincent van Gogh,
View of Paris, 1886
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

FIRST STEPS IN MONTMARTRE

Van Gogh found himself back on familiar territory when he came to Montmartre in 1886. He had lived there for a while more than ten years previously as an employee of Goupil & Cie (which became Boussod, Valadon & Cie in 1884), French art dealers with branches in Paris, London, Brussels and The Hague. He had joined the firm at the age of 16 and was followed a few years later by Theo, who was four years his junior. In October 1874 Vincent was temporarily transferred from London to the Paris branch in

rue Chaptal, on the edge of Montmartre. He was moved there again in May 1875, and this time stayed for almost a year. He had a small room in Montmartre (address unknown), the walls of which he decorated with prints. 'It's small, but overlooks a little garden full of ivy and Virginia creeper', he told Theo. He says little about his work in his letters, but does write about visits to museums and the works of art that he liked. On Sundays he often went out strolling in the city and visited the Louvre and the Luxembourg (the national collection of contemporary art), where he was later to spend many hours as an artist. He was lonely, and no longer felt at ease with the fashionable Parisian public that came to the gallery where he worked. He sought solace in religion, which soon absorbed him to such an extent that going to church and reading the Bible became his main leisure activities.

He had no interest in the entertainments offered by Montmartre, and after work preferred to stay in his 'cabin', as he called his room. In October 1875 he gave Theo an account of how he spent his day. 'As you know, I live in Montmartre. Also living here is a young Englishman, an employee of the firm, 18 years old [...]. This young person was ridiculed a lot in the beginning, even by me. But I nonetheless warmed to him gradually and now, I assure you, I'm very glad of his company in the evenings. [...] Every evening we go home together, eat something or other in my room, and the rest of the evening I read aloud, usually from the Bible. We intend to read it all the way through. In the morning, he's already there to wake me up, usually between 5 and 6 o'clock; we then have breakfast in my room and go to the gallery around 8 o'clock.'

By now it had become clear that Van Gogh's heart was no longer in his work at the gallery, and at the beginning of April 1876 he left Paris and went to work as an assistant teacher in England. Ten years later, and with a dozen false starts behind him, he returned to Montmartre, but this time as an artist himself. He now became a familiar figure in cafés and brothels, as if making up for lost time. He confided to his sister in October 1887 that 'for my part, I still continually have the most impossible and highly unsuitable love affairs from which, as a rule, I emerge only with shame and

>>3

Vincent van Gogh,
Allotments in Mont-
martre, 1887
Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam





disgrace. And in this I'm absolutely right, in my own view, because I tell myself that in earlier years, when I should have been in love, I immersed myself in religious and socialist affairs and considered art more sacred, more than now.'

Van Gogh could not have found himself in more congenial surroundings, because Montmartre was the place for an artist to be in the last quarter of the 19th century. The successful, prosperous ones had their studios at the foot of the Butte Montmartre, around boulevard de Clichy and boulevard de Rochechouart (*le bas Montmartre*). Their less well-off colleagues looked for cheap lodgings among the working classes on the Butte (*le haut Montmartre*). There were plenty of shops selling artists' supplies, some of which also dealt in art. South of Montmartre, in the fashionable district around the Opéra and the *grands boulevards*, were the art dealers Durand-Ruel, Georges Petit, and Boussod, Valadon & Cie, where the public came to gaze at the work of established artists.

