



VAN GOGH
and Montmartre

Nienke Bakker

Van Gogh Museum

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Montmartre

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VINCENT VAN GOGH GING EIND FEBRUARI 1886 in Parijs bij zijn broer Theo wonen, in de kunstenaarswijk Montmartre. Parijs was in die tijd het centrum van de kunstwereld, met Montmartre als kloppend hart van artistieke vernieuwing. Het dorp op de heuvel ('la Butte') ten noorden van de stad was sinds zijn annexatie in 1860 uitgegroeid tot een vrijplaats, bevolkt door een bonte mengeling van arbeiders, kunstenaars, artiesten en vertierzoekers. Kunstenaars werden al van oudsher aangetrokken door de landelijke omgeving en inmiddels vormde ook het uitgaansleven van Montmartre een rijke inspiratiebron.

Vincent woonde de eerste maanden met Theo in diens kleine appartement aan de voet van Montmartre. In de zomer van 1886 verhuisden ze naar een ruimere woning op de Butte. De onderwerpen voor zijn schilderijen en tekeningen lagen er voor het oprapen: de molens op de heuvel, de steengroeve (1) en de moestuinen, de straatjes met wandelaars, het uitzicht op de stad vanuit zijn raam en vanaf de heuvel (2).

De twee jaar die Van Gogh in Parijs doorbracht, waren beslissend voor zijn ontwikkeling van realist in de Hollandse traditie tot modern kunstenaar. Zijn kennismaking met de moderne kunst in de Franse hoofdstad had een groot effect op zijn werk, hoewel het een geleidelijk proces was en geen abrupte breuk met wat eraan voorafging. Hij begon te experimenteren met nieuwe stijlen als impressionisme, pointillisme en japonisme. Zich gaandeweg losmakend van wat hij later zijn 'Hollandse palet met de grauwe tonen' noemde, bracht hij steeds meer licht en kleur in zijn schilderijen (3). Toen hij in februari 1888 Parijs verliet om zich in Arles te vestigen, had hij een bescheiden plek verworven in de Franse avant-garde.

1
Vincent van Gogh,
Een buitenuijk van
Parijs, gezicht vanaf
Montmartre, 1887
(detailafb. 47)
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.

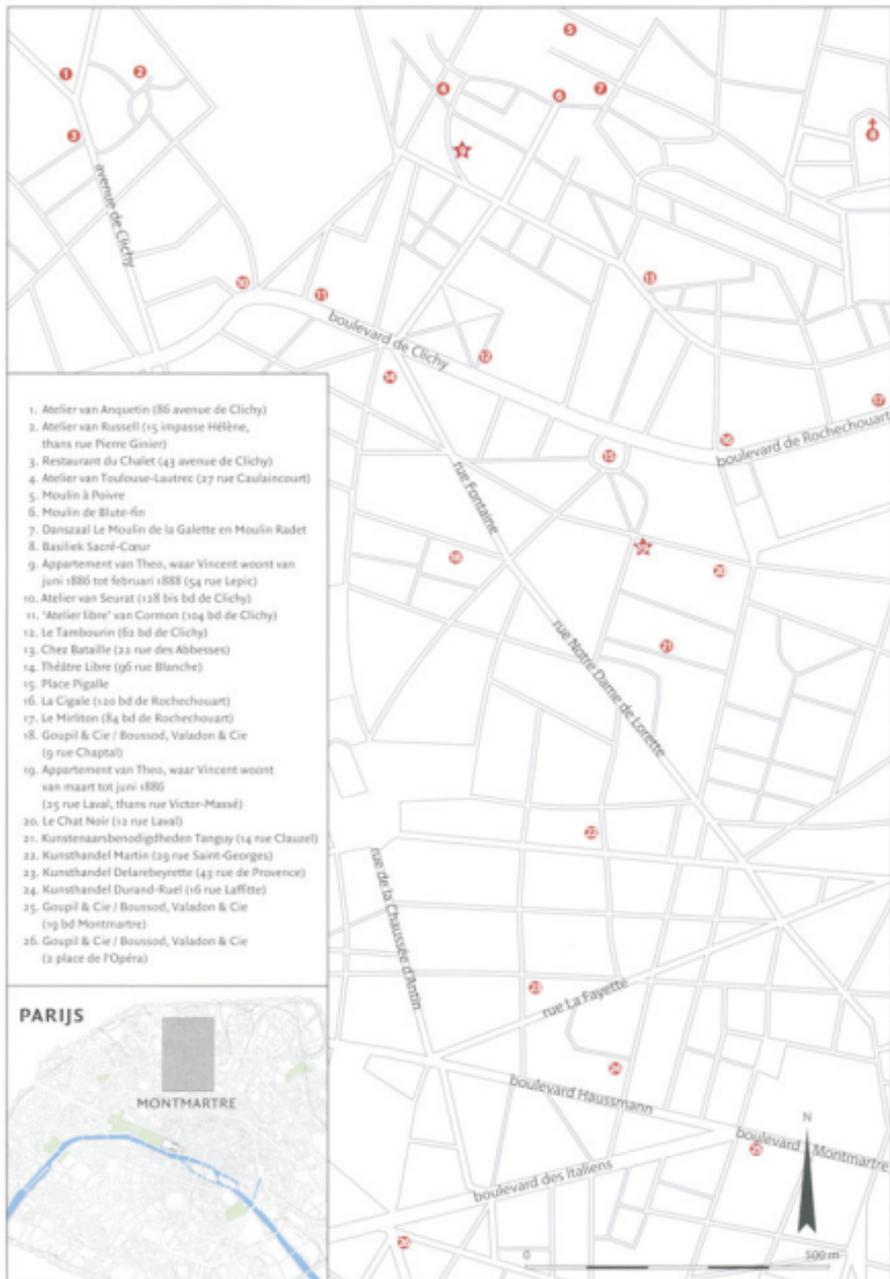


The Paris that Van Gogh returned to in 1886 was much the same as the one he had left a decade before, for the most far-reaching changes to its fabric, the building of the magnificent boulevards under the direction of Baron Haussmann, had been completed back in 1870 (4). Since then, though, the city had expanded, and bridges and railway lines had been built to link the north of Paris with the villages on the other side of the Seine. It was now easy to walk from Montmartre to Asnières, Courbevoie and islands in the Seine like La Grande Jatte, which was a popular spot with day trippers and landscape painters. Van Gogh, too, made a series of landscapes and river views there in the spring and early summer of 1887, but until then his painter's gaze was fixed firmly on Montmartre. For the first six months he only devoted the odd drawing or painting to other spots in the city, such as the Jardin du Luxembourg.

THE 'MAN FROM THE NORTH' IN PARIS

Although a period of study in Paris was a standard part of a Dutch artist's training in the 19th century, that was not the main reason for Van Gogh's move to the French capital, which was prompted more by practical considerations. Back in Holland he had spent the first five years of his career as an artist painting landscapes and peasants in drab colours. At the end of 1883 he settled in the southern village of Nuenen and proclaimed himself to be a 'painter of peasant life' following the examples of Jean-François Millet and Jules Breton. In 1885 he wanted to make his grand entrance into the art world with what he considered to be his most important work from that period, *The potato eaters* (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), with the assistance of Theo, who was now working in Paris for Boussod, Valadon & Cie as the manager of the firm's branch on boulevard Montmartre. Vincent urged him to promote his art, but at a time when Impressionism was all the rage, no one wanted Van Gogh's dark canvases.

He had formerly sung the praises of rural life and a sheltered existence, but now he realised that he had to move to a city and see the latest developments for himself if he wanted to progress any further and meet fellow



1. Atelier van Anquetin (86 avenue de Clichy)
2. Atelier van Russell (15 impasse Hélène, thans rue Pierre Ginier)
3. Restaurant du Châlet (43 avenue de Clichy)
4. Atelier van Toulouse-Lautrec (27 rue Caslaincourt)
5. Moulin à Poivre
6. Moulin de Blute-fin
7. Danszaal Le Moulin de la Galette en Moulin Radet
8. Basiliek Sacré-Coeur
9. Appartement van Theo, waar Vincent woont van juni 1886 tot februari 1888 (54 rue Lepic)
10. Atelier van Seurat (128 bis bd de Clichy)
11. 'Atelier libre' van Corson (104 bd de Clichy)
12. Le Tambourin (62 bd de Clichy)
13. Cher Bataille (21 rue des Abbesses)
14. Théâtre Libre (96 rue Blanche)
15. Place Pigalle
16. La Cigale (120 bd de Rochechouart)
17. Le Mirilton (84 bd de Rochechouart)
18. Goupil & Cie / Boussod, Valadon & Cie (19 rue Chaptal)
19. Appartement van Theo, waar Vincent woont van maart tot juni 1886 (25 rue Laval, thans rue Victor-Massé)
20. Le Chat Noir (12 rue Laval)
21. Kunstenaarsbenodigdheden Tangay (14 rue Clauzel)
22. Kunsthandel Martin (29 rue Saint-Georges)
23. Kunsthandel Delarebeyette (43 rue de Provence)
24. Kunsthandel Durand-Ruel (16 rue Laffitte)
25. Goupil & Cie / Boussod, Valadon & Cie (19 bd Montmartre)
26. Goupil & Cie / Boussod, Valadon & Cie (1 place de l'Opéra)

PARIS



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artists, but above all to find buyers for his work. For years he had been financially dependent on Theo, and although they had an agreement whereby Vincent received his allowance as payment for the works of art he produced, he found the situation far from ideal. He decided to leave Holland at the end of November 1885 when it got too cold to work out of doors and he discovered that none of the peasants in Nuenen would continue posing for him. The Catholic parish priest had forbidden them to do so because he had supposedly got one of the local women pregnant. His eye fell on Antwerp, and he enrolled for drawing lessons at the art academy there. He soon began sounding Theo out as to the possibility of moving to Paris and studying with the painter Fernand Cormon. Theo asked him to wait till the summer to give him time to rent a larger apartment for the pair of them, but when the Antwerp drawing course finished in February and Vincent could no longer pay his rent he decided to go to Paris without further delay. He arrived there unannounced, putting Theo on the spot, who had little choice but to take him in.

Theo lived in a small apartment at 25 rue Laval (now rue Victor Massé) at the foot of the Butte Montmartre (5). Cormon's 'atelier libre' was nearby, on boulevard de Clichy, and Vincent worked there for the first few months after his arrival until he and Theo moved to 54 rue Lepic on the Butte in June 1886, where Vincent fitted up a small room as a studio. Cormon had the reputation of being more broad-minded than most academic artists, and since Van Gogh had come to the conclusion in Antwerp that an official academy was not for him it is not surprising that he chose Cormon's studio (6). The students worked there from the nude and the draped model, and Cormon, who had his own studio elsewhere, used to come once a week to give advice and instruction. Van Gogh mainly made drawings of nude models and plaster casts in order to master the depiction of the human figure. He later wrote to Horace Mann Livens, a friend from the Antwerp Academy, that he remained with Cormon 'for three or four months but did not find that so useful as I had expected it to be'. However, he did make friends with other painters there: the Australian John Peter Russell and the Frenchmen Emile Bernard and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (8, 9, 10).

Photograph of
Cormon's studio,
1885-86

Musée Toulouse-
Lautrec, Albi

Top right: Bernard (?);

bottom left:

Toulouse-Lautrec;

to the right of the
easel: Cormon.



Van Gogh's letters, which are usually such a rich source of information, dried up to a trickle during his stay in Paris, for now he was living with Theo, his chief correspondent, and had no need to write to him. What we know about his contacts with other artists in the French capital comes mainly from his later letters and from the reminiscences of contemporaries. They give the impression that he worked away dourly on his own, paying little heed to Cormon's other students. One of them, François Gauzi, recalled that 'he was an excellent companion who had to be left in peace. A man of the north, he didn't appreciate the Parisian spirit; for that reason, the mischievous members of the atelier avoided kidding him. They were a bit afraid of doing so. When discussing "art," if one disagreed with him and pushed him to the limit, he would flare up in a disturbing way.'

MEETING THE AVANT-GARDE

At first Van Gogh mainly associated with foreign artists like himself, such as Russell and the American Frank Myers Boggs. The English painter Archibald Standish Hartrick, to whom Russell introduced him at the end of 1886, said: 'To tell the truth, I fancy the French were civil to him largely because his brother Theodore was employed by Goupil and Company and so bought pictures'. Although Van Gogh may initially have been of interest because of his brother, the artists who got to know him better were all deeply impressed by his ideas and his unremitting passion for work, even if they did find him rather odd.

In the summer of 1886 Theo wrote to his mother to tell her that Vincent was 'making tremendous progress with his work, and proof of that is that he is starting to make a success of it. He hasn't yet sold any paintings for money, but exchanges his work for other paintings. [...] He is also much more cheerful than before, and he goes down well with the people here. To give you an example, hardly a day passes without him being invited to visit the studios of painters of repute, or people come to him.' Although Theo would have painted a rosier picture of the situation in order to put his mother's mind at rest, Vincent was indeed making good use of his new artistic surroundings.

He got to know many of his new friends at the shop of the colourman Julien 'Père' Tanguy, who had works by avant-garde artists on commission and exhibited them (7). For a long time that small shop in rue Clauzel was the only place in Paris where work by Paul Cézanne could be seen, and Van Gogh also entrusted paintings to Tanguy. It was there that he struck up a friendship in the autumn of 1886 with Emile Bernard, who was 15 years his junior and whom he had first met at Cormon's studio (9). Bernard, who despite his youth (he was only 18 at the time) had an intelligent, inquiring mind and a finely honed sensitivity to artistic developments, recalled their meeting at Tanguy's as follows. 'When he emerged from the back shop, with his high, broad forehead, he was so striking I was almost frightened; but we soon made friends.' After Van Gogh's death in 1890, Bernard

>>7

Vincent van Gogh,
Portrait of Julien
Tanguy, 1887
Ny Carlsberg
Glyptotek,
Copenhagen

>>8

John Peter Russell,
Portrait of Vincent
van Gogh, 1886
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam





recorded many memories of him, including this striking description. 'Red-haired (goatee beard, ragged moustache, cap of close-cropped hair), with a piercing gaze and an incisive mouth, so to speak; of medium height, stocky without being overweight, his gestures lively, his gait jerky, that was Van Gogh with, always, his pipe, a canvas or an engraving, or a folder. Vehement in his discourse, given to interminable explanations and a great developer of ideas, not much given to controversy – all that is him, too; and dreams, ah! what dreams! Huge exhibitions, philanthropic phalansteries of artists, the foundation of colonies in the south.'

It was through Bernard that Van Gogh struck up a closer friendship with Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (10) and Louis Anquetin, whom he had also first met at Cormon's. He is known to have paid regular visits to Toulouse-Lautrec's studio in rue Caulaincourt, just around the corner from the brothers' apartment, to show his work. Suzanne Valadon, who worked as a model for Toulouse-Lautrec, recalled: 'I remember Van Gogh coming to our weekly gatherings at Lautrec's. He arrived carrying a heavy canvas under his arm, put it down in the corner but well in the light, and waited for us to pay some attention to it. No one took notice. He sat across from it, surveying the glances, seldom joining in the conversation. Then, tired, he would leave, carrying back his latest work. But the next week he would come back, commencing and recommencing with the same stratagem.' Not much more is known about the friendship with Toulouse-Lautrec, although the latter did write a letter of condolence to Theo after Vincent's death in which he said 'You know what a friend he was to me and how eager he was to demonstrate his affection'. Theo was the first art dealer who regularly exhibited Toulouse-Lautrec's work, and in January 1888 he bought his *Young woman at a table*, 'Poudre de riz', probably on the recommendation of Vincent, who was always ready to help his friends (11).

He would not have been as close to Anquetin, who was later very critical of him. That was due chiefly to Anquetin's reversion to classical painting, which led him to dismiss his early experiments as the errors of youth, and that included Pointillism, which according to him Van Gogh propagated



as 'the discovery of the little dot, as fateful and as inevitable as that of the microbe'. It emerges from Van Gogh's later correspondence that he admired Anquetin's work but considered it unjust that he rather than Bernard was described as one of the leaders of the avant-garde.

Another avant-garde artist whom Van Gogh met in the colourman's shop was Paul Signac, who later told Gustave Coquiot: 'Yes, I knew Van Gogh from the shop of Père Tanguy. I would meet him other times at Asnières and at Saint-Ouen; we painted on the riverbanks; we lunched at an open-air roadhouse, and we returned by foot to Paris, by the avenues of Saint-Ouen and Clichy. Van Gogh, dressed in a blue jacket of a zinc worker, had small dots of colour painted on his sleeves. Sticking quite close to me, he shouted and gesticulated, brandishing his large, freshly painted size 30 canvas [72 x 93 cm] in such a way that he polychromed himself and the passersby.'

9
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec,
Portrait of Emile Bernard, 1885
Tate, London

10
Louis Anquetin,
Portrait of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, c. 1886
Private collection



In the second half of 1887 Van Gogh also got to know painters from the first generation of the Impressionists like Armand Guillaumin and Camille Pissarro, acquaintances of Theo, who dealt in their work for Boussod, Valadon & Cie. Vincent struck up a friendship with Camille's son Lucien, with whom he exchanged works and who made a revealing sketch of him (12). Lucien recalled that 'one day my father and I met him on rue Lepic. He was on his way back from Asnières with canvases, returning from his subjects. He was dressed in a blue canvas smock, like a zinc worker, and he insisted on showing his studies to my father: to do so he lined them up against the wall in the street, to the great amazement of the passersby.'

Vincent would not have known Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir and Edgar Degas personally, with whom Theo also did business, but according to Bernard he did once meet Cézanne at Tanguy's, who replied, when asked what he thought of his canvases: 'Honestly, your painting is that of a madman'. It is not known when this conversation took place, and it is interesting that Van Gogh never mentions a meeting with Cézanne in his correspondence. However, there is a letter to the painter Charles Angrand in which he proposed an exchange of a view of windmills on Montmartre for a farmyard scene by the latter, who later gave an account of Van Gogh's visit. 'He came above all to make an exchange, an instance, I believe, of his mania. I had at Père Tanguy's then a thickly painted canvas of a woman followed by chickens. Had he been seduced by the impasto? He was to leave Paris a little later. Anyway, we didn't stay in contact. I knew his brother better than him.'

DAILY LIFE WITH THEO

So Van Gogh managed to make friends among the young avant-garde, and after a while could count some of the more established French painters among his circle of acquaintances. However, many of his friendships foundered on the rocks of his difficult personality. For example, he was very close for a while to the Scottish art dealer Alexander Reid, who looked like his twin brother, according to Hartrick, but they then fell out. As Theo later

Lucien Pissarro,
 Van Gogh in conversation
 with an unknown
 man, 1887-88?
 Ashmolean Museum,
 Oxford



wrote to his fiancée Jo Bonger: 'He is always surrounded by people who are attracted to him, but also by lots of enemies. He cannot be detached in his dealings with people. It is either one thing or the other. Even those with whom he is the best of friends find him difficult to get along with, as he spares nothing and no one. The year we spent living together was extremely difficult, even though we often agreed with one another, particularly towards the end.'

What is unusual about this is that Theo speaks of one year, whereas Vincent spent two years in Paris. This might indicate that they lived apart for a while, which is backed up by a remark made by Arnold Koning, a Dutch painter who arrived in Paris in September 1887 and described 25 years later how he moved in with Vincent in rue Lepic because Theo 'went to live closer to his business'. Nothing is known about such a move, but it may have been a temporary expedient to ease the tension between the brothers. In March 1887 Theo was already confiding in their sister Willemien that living with Vincent was unbearable. 'No one wants to come by any more because it

always leads to rows, and he's so filthy and slovenly that the household looks anything but inviting. [...] It's as if there are two people in him, the one marvellously gifted, sensitive and gentle, and the other self-loving and unfeeling.' A few weeks later he wrote telling her that they had made peace again. However, if Koning was right, Theo moved out temporarily that autumn.

In any event, Koning's letter of 1912 gives us a good idea of their daily lives. 'Montmartre was still an El Dorado then, and Vincent was always sitting out there somewhere in the sun, with his work and his pipe, at the brickyard, or painting a woman in a vegetable stall, with all the reflections in purple, blue and orange which the sunny environment conjured up in it. I had promised Theo to keep an eye on the material side, and when I had finally persuaded him to come out for a meal, I saw another side of him, because then he did drop everything right away. We then had to walk for 20 minutes to an eating-house, a kind of hall with a big glass roof like the central station, where it was good and cheap, and the walls were extremely suitable for exhibiting.' That was the Grand Bouillon-Restaurant du Chalet on avenue de Clichy, to the west of Montmartre. The nearby boulevard de Clichy and boulevard de Rochechouart at the foot of the Butte contained many places of entertainment, among them the *café-cabaret* venue Le Mirliton, Café Le Tambourin (Van Gogh's favourite haunt), the L'Elysée-Montmartre dance hall, the Circus Fernando and the Perroquet Gris brothel, which Van Gogh frequented, according to the writer Gustave Coquiou.

BOHEMIAN MONTMARTRE

The entertainment offered by Montmartre's bars, the music-hall cafés, theatres, dance halls and brothels provided a wealth of subjects for artists and writers who wanted to record modern life in the city. The cafés on place Pigalle in *le bas Montmartre* – Le Rat Mort, Guerbois and La Nouvelle Athènes – were the meeting places of the Impressionists (among them Manet, Degas, Cézanne and Renoir) and the intellectuals of their generation (such as the authors Emile Zola and Joris-Karl Huysmans, and the critic Louis

Edmond Duranty). In Van Gogh's day the bohemians were to be found in the dance hall of the Moulin de la Galette and the cabarets Le Lapin Agile, Le Chat Noir and Le Mirliton.

Nowadays Montmartre is mainly associated with the famous Moulin Rouge on boulevard de Clichy, but that only opened in 1889, when Van Gogh had already left Paris. The performances there by stars like Yvette Guilbert, La Goulue, Jane Avril and Valentin le désossé, and above all the paintings, prints and posters that Toulouse-Lautrec produced for it, made Montmartre a legend in the last decade of the 19th century (13). Its days of glory as an artists' quarter lasted till the First World War, when the avant-garde decamped en masse to the cafés and studios of Montparnasse.

The windmills on top of the Butte featured in countless paintings, prints and advertising posters at the end of the 19th century, becoming the architectonic symbol of Montmartre (16). Another famous landmark was the black cat adorning the signboard of Rodolphe Salis's *cabaret artistique* Le Chat Noir, which also played the leading role in numerous drawings and posters by Henri Pille and Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen for the magazine of the same name (14, 17). Van Gogh had heard about this satirical weekly back in Holland, for in 1885 he asked Theo to try and place a drawing of his in its pages (it was of *The potato eaters*, and was refused by the editors). Le Chat Noir had been the best-known cabaret on Montmartre since its opening in 1881, and was a showcase for singers, poets, mime artists and other creative spirits. In its large premises on rue Laval, to which it moved in 1885, Salis introduced the *théâtre d'ombres*, shadow plays in which poems were recited to a musical accompaniment. The artists Henry Somm, Henri Rivière and Caran d'Ache made tableaux with ingenious silhouettes which owed an obvious debt to Japanese prints (15). The performances were the talk of the town and greatly appealed to the avant-garde. Van Gogh was not much of a theatre-goer, as far as we know, but he very probably attended some of these shows.

Another place where artists, writers and musicians gathered was Le Mirliton on boulevard de Rochechouart, the *café-cabaret* belonging to singer-

MOULIN ROUGE
MOULIN ROUGE
MOULIN ROUGE
CONCERT
BAL
TOUS LES SOIRS
LA GOULUE



14
Henri Pille,
illustration for the
Le Chat Noir magazine,
1887



15
Henri Rivière, Le Ciel,
illustration for the
album *La tentation de
Saint-Antoine*, 1888
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam
This shadow play
had its première in
Le Chat Noir on 28
December 1887.



16
Auguste Roedel,
The Moulin de la
Galette, 1897
Musée de Mont-
martre, Paris



17
Théophile-Alexandre
Steinlen, *Tourmée du
Chat Noir*, 1896
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

songwriter Aristide Bruant (18). Bruant was a true phenomenon, with his acid tongue and songs in the language of the streets about the hard life of the working class. Van Gogh undoubtedly visited Le Mirliton and knew Bruant's songs, possibly from Toulouse-Lautrec, who had the entire repertoire by heart. François Gauzi related that 'while he was working, he [Toulouse-Lautrec] enlivened the studio [Cormon's] with his jokes and his songs. He would run through Bruant's entire series of songs about the various quarters of Paris.' Van Gogh rang his own changes on two lines from one of those songs, *À la Villette*, in the inscription on a drawing from his sketchbook. 'De son métier elle n'aurait rien. Le soir elle balladait son chien, à la Villette' (A job? She didn't have one. She walked her dog each evening to La Villette) (19). The fat woman in the drawing is walking with her little dog on boulevard de Rochechouart, where in addition to the La Cigale dance hall (seen in the left background) there was Le Mirliton. The caricature style of Van Gogh's drawing recalls Steinlen's illustrations to Bruant's songs (20).

Toulouse-Lautrec also illustrated them (21). He had been a regular visitor

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to Le Mirliton since its opening in 1885, and in December 1886 he exhibited two paintings there, one of which, *The quadrille of the Louis XIII chair at the Elysée-Montmartre*, adorned the cover of Bruant's magazine that month (22). In this humorous scene La Goulue and Grille d'égout are dancing a quadrille (or *chôhut*, a sort of can-can), a wild dance that involved kicking the legs as high up into the air as possible, revealing underskirts and underwear, while Bruant in his distinctive black hat looks on in amusement. On the right are two of Toulouse-Lautrec's friends: the painter Louis Anquetin and the critic Edouard Dujardin. Three copies of this issue of the magazine have been preserved in the collection of Vincent and Theo van Gogh, which has led to the suggestion that Vincent attended the unveiling of Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings in Le Mirliton. There is no evidence that he did, but he would certainly have gone with his friend to see them at some stage.

THE MILLS ON THE BUTTE

The amusements offered by Montmartre were Toulouse-Lautrec's main subject, but they did not interest Van Gogh at first. Instead he painted street scenes and landscapes, seeking out the picturesque tourist attractions, undoubtedly in the hope of selling his works, which was one of the reasons he had come to Paris in the first place. One appealing and obvious subject was the windmills on the Butte Montmartre. There had been fourteen originally, but only three were left: the Moulin de Blute-fin, Moulin Radet and Moulin à Poivre (the first two still stand there today). They were on a site known as the Moulin de la Galette, which was only a stone's throw away from the apartment on rue Lepic, and Van Gogh depicted them in some 20 paintings and drawings.

The Moulin de la Galette was the collective name of this site with its cheap cafés (*guinguettes* or *buvettes*), gardens and a dance hall, and was surrounded by the three mills on the very top of the Butte. Very little milling had been done there since 1830 so the owners, the Debray family, had transformed the area into an entertainment centre where people could



18
Cabaret Brisant
(Le Mirliton) on
boulevard de
Rochechouart, c. 1900
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

dance on Sunday afternoons and buy the *galettes* (flat, round cakes) that gave the site its name. From the top of the hill the whole of Paris lay at one's feet, and beside the Blute-fin, the largest mill, was a belvedere where people could enjoy the view (23), as well as an observation platform on top of the mill itself. Auguste Renoir immortalised the gaiety of people dancing and drinking on a sunny afternoon in the garden of the Moulin de la Galette in his famous painting of 1876, which he supposedly took back and forth between the dance hall and his studio in nearby rue Cortot to work on it (24).

On Sunday afternoons the Moulin de la Galette attracted a varied crowd of workmen, washerwomen, seamstresses and painters with their models. 'It was an honest *bal musette* where young women wanted above all to dance', according to Gauzi, who often went there around 1885 with Toulouse-Lautrec and other friends from Cormon's studio. In the evenings, though, it had a bad reputation as a haunt of prostitutes, pimps and thieves. 'In the evening, there was nothing attractive about the climb through the narrow and poorly lit streets; besides, the dance hall was known to be dangerous. The police were watching the door, but one could find oneself caught up in a brawl between underworld types all the same.'

19

Vincent van Gogh,
Womas working her dog
('A La Vilette'), 1886
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

>20

Le Chat Noir, ballad,
1884
Words and music
by Aristide Bruant;
drawing by Théophile-
Alexandre Steinles
Kattenkabinet,
Amsterdam

>21

Théophile-Alexandre
Steinles, A Saint-
Lazare, 1887
Illustration to the
song by Bruant, with
a copy of Toulouse-
Lautrec's drawing
Bibliothèque
Nationale de France,
Paris

>22

Henri de Toulouse-
Lautrec, The quadrille
of the Louis XIII chair
at the Elisée-
Mastmartre, in
Le Mirlou, in
December 1886
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam









<23
Vincent van Gogh,
Terrace and observation
deck at the Blute-fin
mill, Montmartre, 1887
Art Institute of
Chicago

24
Auguste Renoir,
Dance at Le Moulin
de la Galette, 1876
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

>>25
Vincent van Gogh,
Guinguette, 1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

It is not known whether Van Gogh ever went to the dance hall but he often visited the site around it in the daytime, as we know from the many drawings and paintings he made of the mills and their surroundings. He also depicted a *guinguette* where people could sit outside, with couples arm-in-arm gazing at the view (25, 56). This was probably in the Debrays' garden, which Rodolphe Darzens described in 1889 as 'the public area', where couples exhausted by dancing came to recover by 'going round and round on the wooden horses among the "Jeux divers" and the copses that sheltered the outdoor cafés, where money was spent on the *galette*, "nice and hot", and the muscatel. The whispering was punctuated with kisses and laughter. Here, as ever, as everywhere, it is love that triumphs.'

One of Van Gogh's first landscapes from Montmartre shows the hill from the undeveloped north side, where there were garden allotments and chalk quarries (26). Many painters had already captured this superb view of the windmills, among them two whom Van Gogh particularly admired: Camille Corot and Matthijs Maris (27, 28). He followed in their footsteps by making a few rapid sketches with the pen and coloured chalk from a distant vantage point (29), as well as three paintings, the bright but restrained colours of which are related to the Barbizon School and the Hague School.







The bustle of the city seems a million miles away from this rustic setting, but in fact it was just over the brow of the hill, and Van Gogh also painted that side at around the same time in a panoramic view looking out over the roofs of Paris from the top of the Butte, with the Opéra and Notre-Dame in the distance (30). On the left is the Moulin Radet, which stood (and still stands) on the corner of rue Lepic and rue Girardon (33). However, it was invisible from Van Gogh's vantage point, being further off to the left, and nor did it tower so high over its surroundings. Van Gogh included it in the scene to make the view more interesting and give it an added sense of depth.

Vincent and Theo owned the painting *Montmartre in the snow* by Auguste Lepère, a local artist known for his prints of idyllic spots on Montmartre (31). This painting shows the Radet and the dance hall from the other side, lower down in rue Lepic. Scenes of this kind were popular, and Van Gogh



27
Camille Corot,
*A windmill in Meent-
mire*, c. 1845
Musée d'Art et
d'Histoire, Geneva

28
Matthijs Maris,
*Quarry near Meent-
mire*, c. 1871-73
Gemeentemuseum,
The Hague

29
Vincent van Gogh,
View of Meentmire,
1886
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

>>30
Vincent van Gogh,
View of Paris, 1886
Kunstmuseum Basel

deliberately followed this example. His *Blute-fin* mill from the autumn of 1886 can be seen as an attempt to produce saleable work (32). The fashionably dressed women on the steps leading up to the mill were added at a later stage to make the picture more attractive, but since figure painting was not his strongest suit the result is unconvincing.

The Radet can also be seen in several other paintings by Van Gogh from 1886. In the autumn he made two versions of a street scene with the mill viewed from the corner of rue Girardon and rue Norvins (34). The red gate-



Vincent



31

Auguste Lepère,
Maremarre in the
snow, c. 1875

Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

>32

Vincent van Gogh,
The Blue-fis mill, 1886
Museum de Fundatie,
Zwolle



way with the lights above, to the right of the building with the inscriptions 'Commerce de vins', 'Buvette Moulin de la Galette' and 'Vins-liqueurs', was the entrance to the Moulin de la Galette. Van Gogh omitted the roof of the dance hall, which actually reached halfway up the mill (33), and showed just the tip of it rising above the building in the centre.

NEW STIMULI

Van Gogh had come to Paris not only to sell his work (which he almost totally failed to do) but also to see as much old master and contemporary art as possible. He went to the Louvre the moment he arrived in the city (35) in order to admire the paintings by his great role model Eugène Delacroix and the Dutch masters. He would also have gone to the Musée du Luxembourg soon after his arrival. However, it was the commercial art galleries that had the really modern art – Impressionism. He had heard something about the Impressionists from Theo while he was still in Holland, but it was only in Paris that he got to know their work properly. For someone who had stayed true to the prevailing Dutch tradition of sombre colours, that first encounter with the bright paintings of Monet, Renoir and their colleagues must



33

The Radet mill, on the
corner of rue Lepic
and rue Girardon,
c. 1900

Collection J. Witten-
berg, Hamburg

>34

Vincent van Gogh,
The Radet mill, 1885
Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo





Letter from Vincent to Theo, Paris, c. 28 February 1886
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
 'My dear Theo,
 Don't be cross with me that I've come all of a sudden. I've thought about it so much and I think we'll save time this way. Will be at the Louvre from midday, or earlier if you like. A reply, please, to let me know when you could come to the Salle Carrée.'

have been a revelation. They were barely controversial any more in France, and were exhibited by respected art dealers like Georges Petit and Durand-Ruel. From 1887 Theo also dealt occasionally in work by Monet, Degas, Pissarro and Sisley for Boussod, Valadon & Cie, but his employers were not yet convinced about the importance of the new movement.

In addition to art galleries Van Gogh undoubtedly visited the latest Impressionist group exhibition, which was held from mid-May to mid-June 1886 in a gallery in rue Laffitte. It included work not only by old hands like Degas and Pissarro but also by such young, radical painters as Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, who painted in a sensational new style that they called Neo-Impressionism (also known as Pointillism or Divisionism), which was based on scientific theories of colour. Instead of following the usual practice of mixing colours on their palettes they placed dots and dabs of pure colour beside each other on the canvas, with the mixing taking place on the observer's retina (36, 37).

Although Van Gogh was thus confronted with both Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism in one fell swoop, they did not have an immediate effect on his work. As he wrote to his sister Willemien two years later: 'it's always the same, people have heard of the Impressionists, they have great expectations of them [...] and when they see them for the first time they're

58
 Mon cher Theo, ne m'en veux pas d'être venu tout d'un coup.
 J'y ai tant réfléchi & je crois que de cette manière nous
 gagnons du temps. Serai au Louvre à partir de midi
 & épouse s.v.p pour savoir à quelle heure tu pourrais
 venir dans la Salle Carrée. Quant aux frais, je te
 réplique cela revient au même. J'en suis sûr de reste cela
 va sans dire et nous ne ferons aucune dépense je salue
 ta parole - Nous arrangerons la chose tu verras -
 Ainsi viens y le plus tôt possible je te salue
 b. i. t
 Vincent



bitterly, bitterly disappointed and find them careless, ugly, badly painted, badly drawn, bad in colour, everything that's miserable. That was my first impression, too, when I came to Paris with the ideas of Mauve and Israëls and other clever painters.' His bright, loosely painted landscape, *The Blute-fin mill* of the late summer of 1886 (38) may be an example of tentative Impressionism, but it was not until his second year in Paris that he really began embracing modern art. One reason for this delayed response was his discovery at the Delarebeyrette gallery of the art of the relatively unknown Adolphe Monticelli, whose thickly impasted brushwork and garish use of colour inspired him to produce a series of flower still lifes in which he made use of complementary colour contrasts. In doing so he was pursuing the course he had taken back in Holland under the influence of what he had read about the colour theories of Eugène Delacroix. As Gauzi recalled of their time together in Cormon's studio: 'Colour drove him mad. Delacroix was his god, and when he spoke of this painter, his lips would quiver with emotion'. Van Gogh himself said of his colour studies in a letter he wrote in English to his friend Horace Mann Livens: 'I have lacked money for paying models, else I had entirely given myself to figurepainting [sic] but I have made a series of colour studies in painting simply flowers, red poppies, blue corn flowers and myosotys. White and rose roses, yellow

36
Georges Seurat,
*The bridge at
Courbevoie*, 1886-87
The Courtauld
Gallery, London

37
Paul Signac, *Sneeu,
boulevard de Clichy*,
Paris, 1886
The Minneapolis
Institute of Arts



chrysanthemums [sic] – seeking oppositions of blue with orange, red and green, yellow and violet, seeking THE BROKEN AND NEUTRAL TONES to harmonise brutal extremes. Trying to render intense COLOUR and not a GREY harmony.’

In the early spring of 1887 he sallied outdoors again to record the landscape of Montmartre. By now he was spending a lot of time with Bernard and Toulouse-Lautrec, who were experimenting with different styles and techniques, such as the *pointillé* of the Neo-Impressionists and *peinture à l'essence*, a technique employing highly thinned oil paint. Van Gogh, who was used to working with a thick impasto, also tried out these techniques. He combined them in *Montmartre: windmills and allotments* to produce a wide variety of brushstrokes (39). The windmill on the right is the Blute-fin, the one on the left the Moulin à Poivre, the smallest of three mills on the hill, and like the others Van Gogh depicted it on several occasions, sometimes as the main subject and sometimes in the background of a street scene like *Impasse des Deux Frères* (40). The mobile windmill in this painting was probably an advertising gimmick. The gateway in the left background inscribed ‘point de vue’ led to the garden and belvedere by the Blute-fin mill. Van Gogh depicted that gateway in a colourful watercolour in the summer of 1887 (41). Behind the fence on the right is the path that can be seen in *Montmartre: windmills and allotments* and a photograph taken around 1900 (39, 42). In 1911 the Moulin à Poivre and the garden allotments around it were demolished to make way for the construction of avenue Junot, so the area is now altered out of all recognition.

Van Gogh made two ambitious paintings in the summer of 1887 that marked the culmination of his campaign to record the rural side of the hill of Montmartre and bring sunlight into his work with the aid of the Pointillist method. He later entered these two striking canvases, which are among the largest in his oeuvre at 81 x 100 cm and 96 x 120 cm, for the first official exhibition in which he participated – that of Les Indépendants artists’ society in the spring of 1888 in Paris. The subject of both is the allotments on the north side of the Butte, seen from the hill in one (43) and looking towards

38

Vincent van Gogh,
The Blute-fin mill, 1886
Kelvingrove Art
Gallery and Museum,
Glasgow

>>39

Vincent van Gogh,
*Montmartre: windmills
and allotments*, 1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

>>40

Vincent van Gogh,
Impasse des Deux Frères,
1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam













41
 Vincent van Gogh,
 Entrance to the Moulin
 de la Galette, 1887
 Van Gogh Museum,
 Amsterdam

42
 Impasse des Deux
 Frères and the
 Blate-fin mill, c. 1900
 Van Gogh Museum,
 Amsterdam

it in the other (3). He was very satisfied with his sun-drenched landscapes, which epitomised 'open air and good cheer'. He placed loose strokes of bright colours alongside each other and intermingled in a graphic pattern that was a free variant of Pointillism, and made skilful use of the white of the ground on the canvas to create a luminous effect, as Monet often did in his paintings. It was in this way that Van Gogh applied the new techniques as he himself saw fit in order to arrive at a powerful, personal manner.

THE CITY IN THE MODERN MANNER

The Impressionists wanted to record life in the modern city in all its facets: the boulevards, the Seine, the railway stations, the parks and the cafés. With their detailed descriptions of café interiors, life out on the streets and views over Paris, the novels of the naturalist Emile Zola were the literary parallel to these paintings. Although Van Gogh was a great admirer of Zola's accounts of the modern city and its inhabitants, street scenes and views of the city are in the minority in his Paris oeuvre. In the spring of 1887, though, he did paint a few views of Paris from the window of Theo's fourth-floor apartment in rue Lepic, because it was a practical and attractive subject (44). Theo wrote of this view: 'The remarkable thing about our





43
Vincent van Gogh,
Montmartre: behind
the Moulin de la
Galette, 1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

flat is that from the windows we have a magnificent view across the city with the hills of Meudon, St Cloud etc. on the horizon, and a piece of sky above it that is almost as big as when one stands on the dunes. With the different effects created by the variations in the sky it is a subject for I don't know how many paintings.' Van Gogh idiosyncratically combined the *à l'essence* technique with small dots and dabs in pure, unmixed colours. The systematic way he set about this suggests that the Pointillist paintings by Signac, Seurat and Pissarro at the exhibition of the avant-garde Société des Artistes Indépendants were still fresh in his memory.

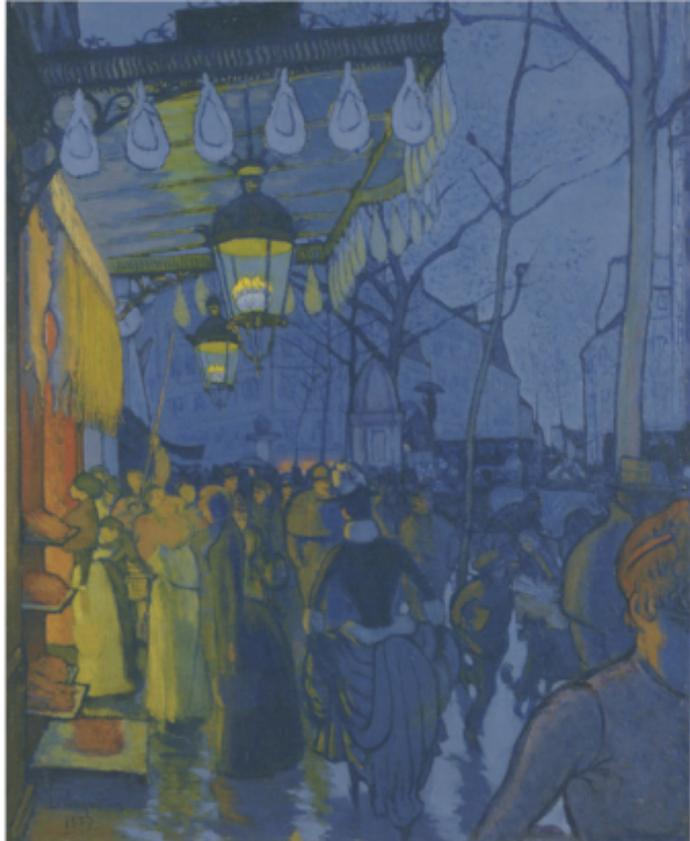
One of his few street scenes in Paris is a drawing of boulevard de Clichy that he made in February or March 1887 (45), together with a painting of the same spot. A little further along the boulevard was the Tambourin café, where he was a regular customer at the time. In 1889 the Moulin Rouge would be built on the empty site with the tree on the right. The large size of the drawing (40 x 54.5 cm), mass of detail and careful finish of the pencil drawing with ink, coloured chalk and white watercolour shows that Van Gogh regarded the sheet as a work of art in its own right. Signac had recorded the same boulevard from the other side of the street in one of his first Pointillist paintings (37).

The busy boulevards were a popular subject among the avant-garde. In the winter of 1887 Louis Anquetin painted the front of an illuminated butcher's shop in the evening, with people out shopping on avenue de Clichy (46). It was his most innovative work to date, and was executed in accordance with the principles of the new style which he had developed with Emile Bernard. In a reaction to Pointillism, they started working in the spring of 1887 with simplified, solid forms and flat patches of bright colour surrounded by heavy contours in a style that became known as Cloisonnism, which was influenced by Japanese prints and stained glass (*cloisonné*). Manet, Monet and Degas had already been inspired by Japanese woodcuts, but the painters of the younger generation took that far further, as can be seen from Anquetin's painting. Van Gogh, who followed his friends' experiments closely, was undoubtedly thinking of the Anquetin









when he painted his famous *Terrace of a café at night* (*Place du Forum*) in Arles nine months later (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo).

Van Gogh, who had already bought a few Japanese woodcuts in Antwerp, became a great fan in Paris of these prints with their compositions and large areas of colour that were so novel to western eyes. They were fairly cheap and available in abundance, so he started forming a collection of them, with which he organised an exhibition in the *Tambourin* in the early spring of 1887. He later wrote, not without pride, that the show made a great impression on Anquetin and Bernard, and that he was the one who had brought this new source of inspiration to his friends' attention.

The Japanese influence is also unmistakable in his own work, such as the watercolour *Outskirts of Montmartre* (47). That view of the factories of Clichy with the Montmartre quarry in the foreground is presented as a Japanese print in a bird's-eye view with numerous details and areas of bright colour.

It is the largest of seven watercolours that Van Gogh made of views of Montmartre and the ramparts north of it in the summer of 1887. It was a series in which he recorded both the rural and the urban features of the area. The contrast between rustic Montmartre and the encroaching modern city was also painted that year by the Neo-Impressionist Maximilien Luce (48). Like Van Gogh, he turned his gaze northward, with a factory in the background and the garden allotments of Montmartre in the foreground (near rue Championnet, quite a bit further north than Van Gogh's vantage point).

Van Gogh was a countryman, not a city-dweller, and that was his preference in art too. In addition, it was not easy for him to work in the city, as Theo later told his fiancée Jo Bonger: 'In Paris he saw masses of things he wanted to paint, but time and again he was prevented from doing so. Models didn't want to pose for him, he was forbidden to sit and work in the street and because of his volatile disposition this repeatedly led to scenes, which upset him so much that he became completely unapproachable and by the end of it all he'd had more than enough of Paris.'

In May 1887 Van Gogh accordingly shifted his focus from Montmartre to rural Asnières on the other side of the Seine, where he produced more than 30 river views and landscapes. Just before doing so, though, he made three paintings of a park, the largest of which he called 'the garden with lovers' (49). For a long time it was thought that this was a park in Asnières, but it is far more likely that he stayed close to his studio to work on such a large and complex canvas, and sought out one of the many small parks and gardens in Montmartre. It was probably the Square Saint-Pierre park (now Square Willette) at the foot of the Sacré-Cœur, which was being built at the time (50). *Garden with courting couples* was his most ambitious imitation of the Neo-Impressionists, although its brushwork is far freer than those artists advocated. We know that he was proud of it from the fact that he





47

Vincent van Gogh,
Outskirts of Mont-
martre, 1887
Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam

48

Maximilien Luce,
Outskirts of Montmartre
(rue Championnet),
1887
Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo





exhibited the painting from the end of 1887 to the beginning of 1888 in the Théâtre Libre in Montmartre. This avant-garde theatre company had invited artists to hang works in the rehearsal room and adjoining foyer, and both Signac and Seurat responded as well. Van Gogh's choice of one of his most Pointillist paintings reflects his ambition to be seen in the company of these modern artists.

THE DELIGHTS OF MONTMARTRE

The café scenes that started appearing in Van Gogh's oeuvre in the early spring of 1887 are often associated with Toulouse-Lautrec, who raised the night life of Montmartre to the status of art. His addiction to alcohol, frequent visits to brothels, and early death in 1901 at the age of 36, made Toulouse-Lautrec the supreme embodiment of the bohemian. He was 22 when he got to know Van Gogh, and was at the beginning of a short but highly successful career. He and Anquetin had already introduced the 17-year-old Emile Bernard to the café life of Montmartre in 1885, and Van Gogh undoubtedly often joined them after his arrival in the city.

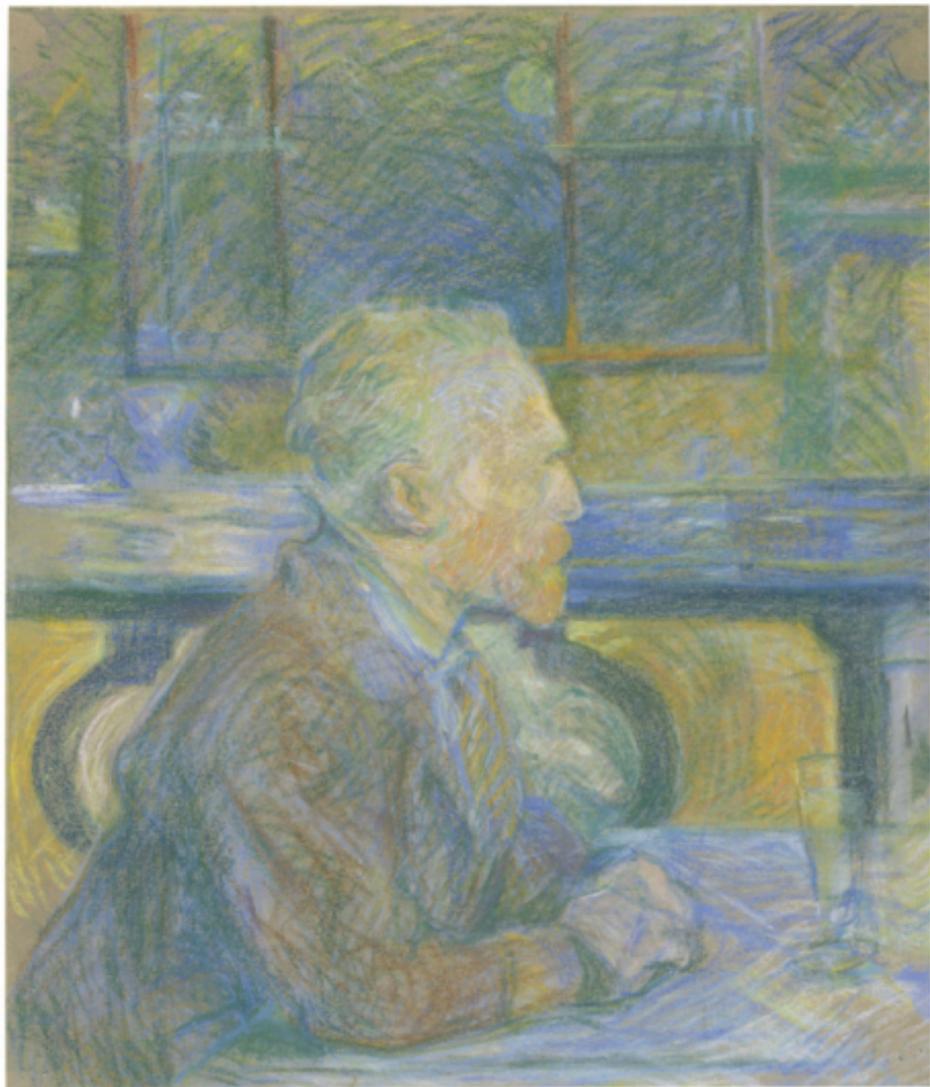
Legend has it that Toulouse-Lautrec was addicted to absinthe. This



50
Louis-Emile Durandelle, Square Saint-Sierre, c. 1877-85
Bibliothèque
Nationale de France,
Paris

very alcoholic green-yellow drink was the favourite tippie of 19th-century artists, who called it 'the green fairy'. Van Gogh was also fond of it, and according to Signac he always hurried off to a café at the end of the day, where 'the absinthes and brandies would follow each other in quick succession'. Van Gogh later said that when he finally left Paris he was 'almost ill and almost an alcoholic'. He does not mention absinthe in his letters, but blamed 'that bloody filthy Paris wine and the filthy fat of the steaks' for his poor health. He has a glass of absinthe on the table in front of him in the portrait that Toulouse-Lautrec drew of him (51), and we know from Bernard that the drawing was made in the Tambourin, the café where Van Gogh was a regular customer.

The Tambourin café, cabaret and restaurant in boulevard de Clichy was run by the Italian Agostina Segatori. She was a former artists' model, and her café was very popular with artists and writers. The tables and stools were in the shape of tambourines, and the walls were hung full of tambourines decorated by painters and inscribed by writers. Van Gogh and Segatori were lovers for a while, but it is not known how serious their affair was or how long it lasted. All we learn from his letters is that they had a row at



some point in the summer of 1887, but as he told Theo: 'I still feel affection for her and I hope she still feels some for me.' Gauguin said that Van Gogh was very much in love with 'La Segatori' and Bernard recalled that 'he paid court to the beautiful woman of Rome, offering her painted flowers, which last for eternity, instead of real flowers, which wither', but elsewhere he wrote that Van Gogh gave her paintings in exchange for meals. Whatever the truth of the matter, many flower still lifes by Van Gogh remained behind in the Tambourin and were dispersed when it went bankrupt.

The portrait that Van Gogh painted of Agostina in the period January-March 1887 shows her seated at a tambourine-shaped table with a tankard of beer in front of her and a cigarette smouldering between her fingers (52). There is some kind of decoration on the wall behind her, with a Japanese scene on the right. These were probably prints from Van Gogh's collection which he put on show in the Tambourin. Drinking and smoking in public were just not done by middle-class women, but they were common among the lower classes and those of an artistic disposition. Van Gogh was here following the modern trend of showing women as solitary drinkers. Degas had set the tone with his *In a café (L'Absinthe)* of 1875-76 (53), and Toulouse-Lautrec began producing various pictures of solitary women in cafés in 1886 which Van Gogh had undoubtedly seen (11).

Van Gogh depicted the subject of a drinker in a café on another occasion in the period when he painted his lover's portrait, but this time as a still life (54). It is a typical example of *peinture à l'essence*. The composition with pronounced diagonals and the combination of a view into the distance with large objects in the foreground are indebted to Japanese prints. One amusing effect is that the viewer of the picture (like the artist) is cast in the role of the café-goer seated at a table looking out onto the street with his glass in front of him.

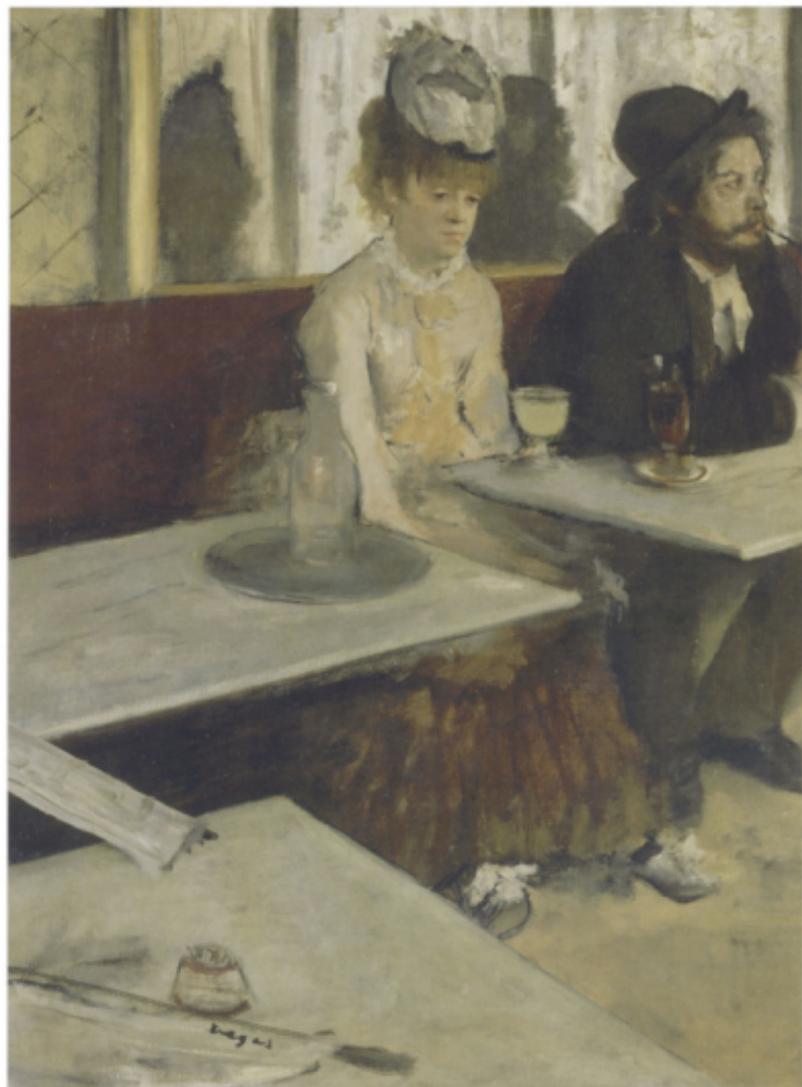
Van Gogh employed a similar perspective in the drawing *Window in the Chez Bataille restaurant*, which like *Café table with absinthe* dates from February-March 1887 (55). It is the only Paris drawing to which he added a title, his signature and the date: 'la fenêtre chez Bataille / Vincent 87'. The crude

51
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Portrait of Vincent van Gogh*, 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

>>52
Vincent van Gogh, *In the café*
Agostina Segatori in Le Tambourin, 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

>>53
Edgar Degas, *In a café (L'Absinthe)*, 1875-76
Musée d'Orsay, Paris





scene in the background of a man urinating against a wall while another does up his flies suggests that the drawing was probably not made for sale but as a gift for Theo, which could also explain the annotation, for the two brothers often used to eat supper together in the Chez Bataille – a busy, cheap restaurant in rue des Abbesses.

Unlike his friends Bernard and Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh rarely depicted the night life and entertainments of Montmartre. There is not a trace in the Paris oeuvre of the dance halls that very occasionally feature in works from Antwerp and Arles, and nor did the circus or the theatre inspire him to produce a painting or drawing. He did make one of each of a *guinguette* café (25, 56), as well as a series of sketches of musicians in a music-hall café (57, 58). For these he used the coloured chalk that Hartrick spoke of: ‘Vincent had a habit of carrying a thick stick of red and one of blue chalk in each pocket of his coat. With these he used to illustrate his latest impressions or theories of art. As he would start work on the wall or anything that was handy, I immediately placed a newspaper or two on the table, where he would at once begin to set out his latest “motif” in lines a quarter to half an inch thick.’

Brothels and prostitutes, popular subjects for the literary and artistic avant-garde, are equally rare in Van Gogh’s Paris oeuvre. There are undoubtedly practical reasons for that, such as lack of money or the women’s refusal to pose for him. Later, in Arles, he explained that he did not paint a brothel because it would cost him a lot of money to do it ‘reasonably well and seriously’. The same was undoubtedly true in Paris. Three painted studies of nudes and a few drawings have survived from that period, one of them on the back of a menu from the Restaurant du Chalet (59, 60). According to Bernard, who later owned all three painted studies, the model was a “tuppenny tart” picked up by Vincent, and who was very willing to agree to pose for him’ (61). Bernard had himself made a large drawing in coloured chalk to which he gave the telling title of *The hour of the flesh* (*L’heure de la viande*) (62). Van Gogh would have discussed the subject a lot with Bernard in Paris, partly in connection with their ideas for paintings.





Not long after arriving in Arles he wrote to his friend to tell him about the local brothel, which presented a rich palette of colours: '[...] everything that's of the purest and gaudiest. [...] Far less gloomy than the establishments of the same kind in Paris. Spleen isn't in the air down here.'

55

Vincent van Gogh,
*Window in the Chez
Batolle restaurant,*
1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

EXHIBITING AND SELLING

Van Gogh actively sought to align himself with the avant-garde while he was in Paris, and one of the main reasons was to promote his own work. The exchanges he made with other artists, the paintings he showed at the gatherings organised by Toulouse-Lautrec, the pictures he left with Tanguy were all attempts to arouse interest in his work. It was not just Agostina Segatori's café that he filled with his paintings; he also exhibited them with art dealers. We know from a later letter that he had work with four dealers: Tanguy (who had many Van Goghs on deposit and hung a large landscape in his shop window), Pierre-Firmin Martin (whose daughter he painted), Alphonse Portier (the brothers' downstairs neighbour in rue Lepic) and Georges Thomas (whom he later vainly tried to interest in his work from Arles). He occasionally exchanged a painting with Tanguy for paint or canvas, and he also sold a few portraits through him. He did not earn much money from them, and his first serious sale was when the artist Anna Boch bought his *Red vineyard* (Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow) for 400 francs in 1890.

In November 1887 Van Gogh succeeded in mounting an exhibition of work by himself, Bernard, Toulouse-Lautrec, Anquetin and Koning in the Grand Bouillon-Restaurant du Chalet in avenue de Clichy, an inexpensive eating place in a former dance hall. This was the 'hall with a big glass roof like the central station' that Koning wrote about, where people ate all together at long tables (63). It was here that Anquetin and Bernard showed their first Cloisonnist canvases. In fact, it was the first public exhibition for both of them. It is not known precisely what art hung there, but there must have been a lot of it. In 1889 Bernard recalled 'Vincent's portrait of Père Tanguy, his factories at Clichy, his sunlit Asnières land-

>56

Vincent van Gogh, *Coff
terrace in Montmartre
(La guinguette)*, 1886
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

>57

Vincent van Gogh,
*Clarinetist and piccolo
player*, 1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

>58

Vincent van Gogh,
*Violist seen from the
back*, 1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

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Vincent van Gogh,
*Nude woman squatting
over a basin*, 1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

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Back of *Nude woman
squatting over a basin*



scapes'. He later mentioned 'Anquetin's Japanese abstractions, Lautrec's prostitutes, Vincent's brutal still lifes and fiery faces (64), my geometrical syntheses, Koning's chrome yellow and vermilion apples with their excessive impasto'.

Although the press paid not the slightest attention to the show, which probably did not last very long anyway (Van Gogh dismantled it and loaded all the exhibits onto a handcart after criticism from the manager and his customers), it did have an effect, first and foremost because it was visited by artists like Gauguin, Seurat, Guillaumin and Camille Pissarro. And because, as Vincent later wrote to Theo: 'Bernard having sold his first painting there, Anquetin having sold a study there, and I having made the exchange with Gauguin, we all got something.' Gauguin had just returned from Martinique, and they may have met for the first time at the exhibition. Another possibility is that Theo put them in touch with each other, for work by Gauguin went on display at Boussod, Valadon & Cie the following month.

Vincent van Gogh,
Reclining female nude,
 1887
 The Barnes Founda-
 tion, Merion



Van Gogh had also wanted to involve Seurat and Signac in the show but encountered fierce resistance from Bernard, who dug his heels in at the prospect of collaborating with the 'Neos'. Although none of their works hung there in the end, Seurat did visit the exhibition, where he first met Van Gogh. 'In 1887, I spoke with him for the first time in a working-class restaurant located near *la Fourche*, avenue de Clichy (closed). An immense skylighted hall was decorated with his canvases.' On 19 February 1888, just before his departure for Arles, Van Gogh and his brother visited Seurat in his studio, where the large canvases of *La Grande Jatte* and *Les poseuses* made a deep impression on him.

THE DREAM OF COLLABORATION

Van Gogh had great plans for a collaboration between the successful painters of the first generation of Impressionists – Degas, Monet, Renoir, Sisley and Camille Pissarro, whom he called 'the painters of the Grand Boulevard' – and the new generation of Guillaumin, Seurat, Gauguin, Bernard, Anquetin, Angrand, Toulouse-Lautrec, Signac, Lucien Pissarro and himself. These



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Emile Bernard,
The hour of the flesh
(*L'Heure de la viande*),
1885-86
Private collection

'painters of the Petit Boulevard' had little in common stylistically, but were all striving for public recognition and, more importantly, loved to experiment. Van Gogh took it upon himself to improve their financial situation with Theo's aid. In the winter of 1887-88 the brothers had talked a lot with Pissarro and the others about an artists' association, an idea which Van Gogh developed in later letters. All the painters mentioned, including the successful ones, would have to donate paintings of the same value to the association, so that all of them were assured of a fixed income.

Although Van Gogh later said that the lack of unity between artists was one of the reasons for him turning his back on the city, he did continue developing his idealistic views of collaboration. Almost immediately after arriving in Arles in February 1888 he began laying plans for a joint Impressionist exhibition in Marseille, and wrote to Bernard telling him about the advantages and drawbacks of the south of France, so they had evidently discussed a joint venture back in Paris. He also wrote to Toulouse-Lautrec, who as far as we know did not reply, so the two did not strike up a correspondence.

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Vincent van Gogh,
Interior of the Restaurant
du Chalet, 1887
Private collection

>64

Vincent van Gogh,
Self-portrait, 1887
Musée d'Orsay, Paris



It was not long afterwards that Van Gogh rented the Yellow House with the intention of turning it into a studio for himself and another artist, preferably Gauguin. He hung it from top to bottom with his paintings, creating his own exhibition space, as he had done in Café Le Tambourin and Restaurant du Chalet. Gauguin eventually arrived, but their collaboration ended in disaster when Van Gogh's mental illness manifested itself. It also marked the end of his intensive exchanges with other artists, which had begun in Paris. His failing health forced him to withdraw from the artistic debate, and he no longer saw a role for himself in modern painting. As he lamented to Theo in May 1889, shortly before admitting himself to the asylum in Saint-Rémy: 'Now, myself as a painter, I'll never signify anything important, I sense it absolutely. Supposing everything were changed, character, upbringing, circumstances, then this or that could have existed. [...] I sometimes regret not having simply kept the Dutch palette of grey tones, and brushed landscapes in Montmartre without pressing the point.'



QUOTATIONS

The quotations from Van Gogh's correspondence are from Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh – The Letters. The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*, 6 vols., London & New York 2009. That edition is based on the English web edition which is freely available at www.vangoghletters.org.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is especially grateful to Louis van Tilborgh, Teio Meedendorp, Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Marije Vellekoop for their assistance with this book.

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Front cover: Vincent van Gogh, *In the café*: Agostino Segatori in Le Tambourin, 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Title page: Vincent van Gogh, *The hill of Montmartre with quarry*, 1886, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Back cover: Vincent van Gogh, *Impasse des Deux Frères*, 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Van Gogh in focus is published under the auspices of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Author

Nienke Bakker

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Griet van Haute, Ghent

Colour separation and printing

Die Keure, Bruges

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www.vangoghmuseum.com

ISBN 978-90-79310-25-8

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From 1886 to 1888, Vincent van Gogh lived with his brother Theo in Montmartre, the vibrant artistic quarter of Paris. During this crucial period he developed from a realistic painter of peasant life into a modern artist following in the footsteps of the Impressionists. This book describes Van Gogh's relationship with Montmartre. Its distinctive windmills and vegetable gardens, the view over the city, the old narrow streets and the people out for a stroll – he captured everything with great enthusiasm and a fine eye for detail. Van Gogh also became friendly with other artists during this period and made his first serious attempts to sell and exhibit his work. By the time he left for Arles in the south of France in 1888 he had succeeded in gaining a modest place for himself in the Parisian avant-garde.

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Van Gogh in focus

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ISBN 978-90-79310-25-6

