



Vincent van Gogh, *Road on the Outskirts of Paris with a Male Figure with a Spade*, 1887

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Reflections on Provence

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IF I HADN'T STOPPED TO RETIE MY boot, I never would have noticed the tiny white snails clustered on the stubble of the wheat field along the Grande Randonnée Trail in Provence. From a few feet away, they looked like a string of bubbles on the stems of the recently harvested grain. Leaning closer, I realized they had whorled shells the size of a fingernail, and, looking more closely still, I saw minuscule eyes mounted on hair-thin tentacles growing from the tops of their heads.

Questions arose the longer I looked. What did they eat? The farmer's wheat? The grapes in the vineyard on the other side of the road? I should look for them on the vines, I thought. Could they be eaten themselves, perhaps steamed and picked from their shells and served with garlic butter on a crust of bread made from the farmer's wheat? They were small creatures with the power to halt, for me, the passage of time.

Art can do the same thing. An Auguste Chabaud landscape or one of Van Gogh's wheatfield paintings gives me pause. I stop to think about not just what they depict but to consider what the artist intended to portray. The hurly-burly lives we lead seldom leave much

time for such reflection, which is a shame because pausing to quietly examine the experiences we've had, the world we've seen, the things we've learned along the way is very much how we make our lives worthwhile. Life rewards us not only when we live it, but even more richly when we hold it still and look at it closely, when we ask it questions and listen carefully to its answers, when we reflect—as I did the snails.

I did a great deal of reflecting while in Provence and even more when I returned and I began to collect verbal and visual thoughts inspired by my brief vacation. Art and artists occupied much of my mind because many, many artists came to Provence—Matisse, Monet, Renoir, Chagall, Gauguin, and, of course, Van Gogh. Picasso visited often, and one of his long-suffering lovers, Dora Maar, an artist herself, lived there much of her life. Cézanne was born in Provence and returned again and again.

The question I kept asking is: why? They didn't come for the galleries or the urban nightlife, for salons and socialization. Did they come for the food? Perhaps, although not for the wine, which is typically rather mediocre. Was it the air, fresh and briskly breezed? Or the famous sunlight, remarkably



Vincent van Gogh, *Avenue of Poplars in Autumn*, 1884

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intense and pure? That's a widely-held belief, one hard to deny since such pure light inspires brilliant colors, crisp shadows, and clarity of vision.

I think they came to simplify their lives in a place without the hustle and traffic of Paris. Where the urban circus didn't suck them into its three rings of competition, comparison, and professional jealousy. Provence was—and still is, despite the tourists—a place with few distractions other than quaint restaurants on winding, picturesque streets. The artists then, as now, can be one with their work and not be looking over their shoulders in dread of a judgmental eye. They have time to reflect, as did I, on art, history, and the places I visited in Provence.

BONNIEUX

We know very little about our Neanderthal cousins. They were like us in some ways, different in others. We know them physically from their fossil remains and can speculate about their lifestyle from other clues they left behind. We even know, from the traces of their DNA in our genes, that we had intimate relations with them that were, hopefully, enjoyable for both of us. What we don't know much about is their aesthetics. We have found bones and stones believed to have been decorated by them

and abstract cave paintings that we attribute to them, but did they have a craving for beauty that could influence their selection of homesites? We can only speculate, but such a desire could explain their presence 60,000 years ago near Bonnieux.

Visitors today climb the eighty-six stone steps to the Old Church and behold a panorama of plains patchworked with lush vineyards, stands of fruit trees, and fields of lavender and grain. When Neanderthals roamed the hilltop, they may not have seen fields and vineyards, but they would have beheld Mont Ventoux in the Vaucluse Mountains. Did our ancient cousins stop to stare in wonder at the vista, as we do?

The monks who built the monastery in the sixth century almost certainly did, and eventually a community grew around them until a walled village arose on the hillside, to be followed in the thirteenth century by the Castellans, a seigneurial castle built by the powerful Agout family, and by the Chapel St. Sauveur, built by the Templars. In the fourteenth century, the town became pontifical land and soon the residence of many bishops and other ecclesiastical dignitaries, men who appreciated the good things in life and congregated in places where they could be enjoyed.

By the 1700s, the village was a bustling, bodacious city with 3,500 inhabitants and views of the sister

towns of Gordes and Roussillon across the valley. If they had still been around at the end of the nineteenth century, our Neanderthal brethren would have been astounded by their neighborhood. The village was home to eighteen bistros, six gambling rooms, and two brothels. Panoramic views were not the only indulgent pleasures of Bonnieux.

LACOSTE

Artists can be inspired by horror as well as beauty. The art engendered by those muses reminds us that both have always existed—and always will.

The infamous Marquis de Sade is unfailingly cited as the reprehensible figurehead of Lacoste, but the village was the scene of bloody events long before his family built a castle on the hill. During the fourteenth century, the village suffered so greatly from plague, wars, and banditry that it came close to disappearing, and the few remaining residents recruited the Waldensians to move in, which they did. Unfortunately, these Christian reformers were considered heretics by the Catholic Church.

In 1545 the Maynier d'Oppede mounted a campaign under orders of the Parliament of Aix to destroy this affront to papal authority. When he was stopped by the defenders at the gates of Lacoste, he persuaded them

he would spare their lives if they let him in. He lied. Once admitted, his men pillaged the village, raped the women, and massacred every inhabitant.

By the time de Sade arrived on the scene years later, the tiny village was once again inhabited, although not by a sedate, placid populace. His home, the Chateau de Lacoste, was set afire and largely destroyed during the French Revolution by villagers who detested de Sade for his aristocratic demeanor, not to mention the ignominy he brought to their town. Also because they wanted to use the limestone from which the chateau was made to build nice homes for themselves. Since the chateau stood on top of the mountain, it was easy to knock down a fire-blackened wall or two and roll the stones downhill to use for their own purposes. *Liberte, egalite, fraternite*, and all that.

Lacoste today has left its bloody past behind to become a center of the arts. The Lacoste School of the Arts was founded in 1970 by American painter Bernard Pfriem. Notable artists such as photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and poet Gustaf Sobin came to Lacoste to work and teach. Fashion mogul Pierre Cardin purchased de Sade's dilapidated castle in the early 1990s and turned the attached quarry into a massive outdoor performance venue that today hosts an annual summer festival of world-class opera, theater, and music.



Paul Gauguin, Rue Jouvenet in Rouen, 1884



Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Viaduct of the Arc River Valley*, 1882–85

GORDES

Gordes is where artists live, create, and show their work. Its brilliant buildings shining in tiers from the valley to the mountain top have drawn them since World War II when Marc Chagall fled to the village to escape the Germans in Paris. He moved his family and studio into an old mill in the Fontaine Basse area of the village, a district in the hollow of the valley on an esplanade where water from springs that pass under the cliff powered mills as early as the fifteenth century.

“There, in the south of France, for the first time in my life,” Chagall said, “I saw rich greenness the like of which I had never seen in my own country.” It was in Gordes that Chagall worked on *The Madonna of the Village* and many other paintings. When the Vichy government began to intern Jews, he and his wife fled to America, where they stayed until after the war.

Many other artists found Gordes a welcoming, inspiring location for their studios, especially in the summer months. Among them were Victor Vasarely, considered the father of Op Art, who taught there and whose works were showcased in the Chateau de Gordes, a rectangular castle built in 1525 by Bertrand Rambaud de

Simiane, the Baron de Gordes. In addition to Vasarely, the Chateau once housed a museum dedicated to Flemish painter Pol Mara and today offers a variety of annual exhibitions. Other artists associated with Gordes include Jean Deyrolle, a leader of the second generation of abstract artists; cubist Andre Lhote; Victor Spahn, contemporary painter of sports; and photographer Willy Ronis.

MENERBES

Everybody loves Menerbes. In fact, many have loved it so much that they were willing to die to occupy it and control the land in the valley below. That probably includes the first known inhabitants, who lived in rock shelters near the present village some 35,000 years ago. Many centuries later, the area was invaded by the Vulgientes and Vordenses from Central Europe, then the Ligures, and eventually the Greeks and Romans. During the Middle Ages, they were replaced by the Germans, the Alans, the Vandals, and the Ostrogoths. With such a history of invasion and occupation, it’s not surprising that a fortified village was eventually constructed. One of the principal structures was Le Castellet, literally a small castle that still exists today,

probably built some hundred years or so after the black plague decimated the region's population in 1348.

Fortifications like Le Castellet are all about control. When you occupy the high ground, you command the surrounding countryside. Your high vantage point gives you a better view of your enemies and their activities, allowing you to swoop down and attack them, then retire to the safety of the high ground you own. Your arrows and cannon balls fly farther because they're spinning downward with the assistance of gravity, whereas your attackers' projectiles are weakened by traveling in the opposite direction. Once established on the highest point, you are very difficult to dislodge. This is especially true if you build yourself a stone fort on top of the hill.

Or if you construct a church there. Because religion, too, is all about control. Men (almost never women) claim they are appointed by God to tell you how to live, what to do, what not to do, and when to do or not do it. If you believe them, or even if you don't believe them but fear them, you will give them a significant portion of your assets, your labor, and perhaps your life. You will build forts and/or churches for them. You will fight and die for them. They tell you that you will be rewarded for your loyalty in the afterlife. Know, though, that you will be punished, often quite severely, for disloyalty or disobedience while you are still alive.

Power, pure and simple.

You can substitute "politics" for "religion" in the preceding paragraph, although few modern politicians claim to rule by virtue of divine appointment, at least in the United States (with some notable exceptions). Throughout human history, politics and religion have been allies and/or enemies in their pursuit of control. It would be difficult to find a better example of their intermarriage than the events that led to the infamous siege of Menerbes.

In the early sixteenth century, the region became a hotbed of Protestantism, prompting the Vatican and French authorities to team up to persecute and massacre the "heretics" who lived there during the wars of religion that decimated the entire country. The 1572 St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in Paris sparked Protestant leaders to seize Le Castellet with 150 armed men. Within days, Catholic armies from as far away as Corsica surrounded Menerbes with an army that eventually grew to 15,000 men and laid a siege that lasted five years. During countless assaults, Le Castellet received over 900 cannon shots causing numerous fires and much destruction. Eventually, the 120 survivors surrendered and were allowed to return to their homes. The Catholics retained their political control of the region and the country.

Some portions of the original Castellet remain, although large-

scale renovations done in the nineteenth century concealed much of its design. It is today a private home. One modern-era owner of Le Castellet was Nicolas de Stael, a Russian-born painter, who bought it in 1953, produced 254 paintings in the next fifteen months, but died by his own hand in Antibes in 1955.

ST. REMY

Vincent van Gogh lived for just one year in the Asylum of St. Paul near St. Remy, but what a year it was. During those twelve months, despite being confined to his rooms when he first arrived and being too ill to work for several long spells later, he completed some 150 paintings and hundreds of drawings and sketches. A month after he was admitted, he painted his magnum opus, *Starry Night*. The painting was done from memory in his room and features the sky as seen from his east-facing window over an imaginary village.

Painting was his solace, especially scenes from nature. The budding flowers that promised rebirth, the wheat fields and olive groves that marked the changing of the seasons, the stalwart trees on the asylum grounds offered him protection. He wrote to his mother, "But for one's health, as you say, it is very necessary to work in the garden and see the flowers growing."

While initially confined to his rooms, he painted his furnishings as well as what he could see from his windows—the asylum gardens, wheat fields, and olive groves beyond them. When allowed to go outside to roam the grounds of the hospital, he studied the buildings and trees, often adding enigmatic figures to many of the scenes. From both his room and the grounds, he could see Mont Gaussier, the mountain that found its way into many of his paintings of olive groves and other landscapes.

Near the end of his stay, he expressed his optimism by devoting hours to creating some of his best-known still lifes including *Irises* and *Vase with Irises Against a Yellow Background*. He wrote to his sister, Wil, "The last days in Saint-Rémy I worked like a madman. Great bouquets of flowers, violet-colored irises, great bouquets of roses."

It could be said that the work van Gogh completed during his stay in Provence finally earned him the recognition he had long been denied. His devoted brother, Theo, was able to place several of his works in major exhibitions in Brussels. A scene painted near Arles just before he fled the town for the asylum, *The Red Vineyard*, was purchased by artist Anna Boch at the seventh exhibition of Les XX in January, 1890, a few months before van Gogh left the asylum at St. Remy. It was the only sale of a painting made during his lifetime. *