



## 1. [News](#)

# Snobs stop Van Gogh coming home

French officialdom has stymied a plan to exhibit in the inn where he died, writes John Lichfield in Auvers-sur-Oise

- [John Lichfield](#)
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IN JUNE 1890, Vincent Van Gogh wrote to his brother, Theo: "Some day or other, I believe I will find a way of having an exhibition in a cafe."

Six weeks later - the six most frenetically productive weeks of his life - Van Gogh shot himself and staggered home to die in the cafe, or inn, where he was staying just north of Paris.

"Some day or other" before the end of this year, Vincent Van Gogh's modest ambition may finally be realised. One of the artist's finest but least-known paintings, one not seen in the West for 89 years, is to be displayed in the tiny attic room of a small inn near Paris - the very room in which Vincent died.

The Pushkin Museum in Moscow has agreed to lend the painting, *Paysage d'Auvers apres la pluie*, to the Auberge Ravoux in the small town of Auvers-sur-Oise. The French government has approved the loan. The auberge, part of a shrine to Van Gogh brilliantly restored to its 1890s condition over the past 10 years, has installed a hi-tech, armoured-glass safe, covering an entire wall of Van Gogh's bedroom to guarantee the painting's security. (It is estimated to be worth pounds 35m.)

There is only one problem: no painting has arrived. The trouble is not at the Russian end; it is at the French end. The French government may have approved the idea but the French state's powerful cultural bureaucracy - outraged by the

thought of a Van Gogh being displayed in an auberge - has not. It is whispered that the French directorate of museums has warned the Pushkin Museum that it can borrow no further works from the French national collection if it goes ahead with the private loan to the Auberge Ravoux.

Dominic-Charles Janssens, the 50-year-old Belgian businessman who conceived and carried through the pounds 7m restoration of Van Gogh's last home, is reluctant to discuss his problem in detail. He says, simply: "In France, culture is a public affair. The senior officials who run public culture in France have difficulty in dealing with a private initiative, like our own. But we are making progress all the time. We will have our picture. Van Gogh will have his exhibition in a cafe, as he wrote, 'some day or other'."

No one should doubt Mr Janssens' determination or ability to get things done. He was mocked as a crazy, profiteering Belgian when he began his project 10 years ago. "Van Gogh and chips," was the Belgophobic headline in one French magazine.

The Auberge Ravoux and its sister body, the Institut Van Gogh, are now a model of intelligent, accessible cultural tourism. The aim is to be both "popular and elitist", says Mr Janssens: not to create a museum but a living monument to the artists' cafes of the last fin de siecle. The inn itself has been restored, with delicate precision, to its 1890 condition: it has replicas of the original lace curtains, an old-fashioned zinc bar and a fly paper hanging from the ceiling. It serves once again typical, rural French dishes of the late 19th century. The restaurant has become a thriving concern in its own right.

If you have never heard of the Institut Van Gogh, do not despair. Mr Janssens does not go out of his way to advertise. He turns away tour parties but encourages free school visits. So much for profiteering. Van Gogh's room, classified as a French National Monument, has survived unchanged. It was never let to another guest after the artist's death because there was a taboo against staying in the room of a suicide. It is now kept empty, save one typically Vangoghian straw chair and the vacant security screen. "The room has nothing in it because that is the best way to fill it with emotion," says Mr Janssens.

Auvers-sur-Oise is now a pretty oasis of rural France within the concrete- and-neon deserts of the Parisian banlieue. Van Gogh and his brother, Theo, are buried side by side in the village cemetery. It was here that Vincent painted some of his darkest and most depressive canvasses, including the celebrated picture of crows over a cornfield which hangs in the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam. (The same field can still be seen today, a few steps from where Van Gogh is buried.)

But many of the other canvasses which Van Gogh painted here - 70 in all in 10 weeks - are colourful and joyous works: the famous portrait of Adeline Ravoux, the innkeeper's daughter, the painting of the Eglise d'Auvers and the portrait of his friend, the village GP, Dr Gachet.

The picture promised on loan by the Pushkin Museum is one of these joyous canvases. (It is also the only Van Gogh painting to show a train.) "Almost always, Van Gogh is presented as a tortured, doomed soul," says Mr Janssens. "The severed ear. The suicide. Here we aim to present Van Gogh as an ordinary man and at the same time as a great artistic visionary."

The arrival - "some day or other", bureaucrats permitting - of the masterpiece from the Pushkin will be the last stroke of the canvas.