

# VAN GOGH'S HOLLAND

Most of what we think we know about the artist has to do with his tumultuous years in France, but, increasingly, the Dutch are reclaiming Van Gogh as their own

BY RAPHAEL KADUSHIN

"Drenthe is so beautiful," Van Gogh wrote of the Dutch province. "it absorbs and fulfills me so utterly that, if I couldn't stay here forever, I would rather not have seen it at all. It's inexpressibly beautiful."

Some deaths are such cultural touchstones that they become imprinted on our own memories too, like a personal tragedy. That, at least, is the case with Vincent van Gogh. Our collective image of the artist's last morning, slashing away at a canvas in that Provençal wheat field, the angry crows wheeling above like a beaky Greek chorus, the brooding sky watching as he puts the gun to his stomach, makes for an almost operatic vision. Few endings are as poetic or fitting; we remember Van Gogh's masterworks but it's his apotheosis as the artist-turned-ultimate outsider, and sacrificial lamb, that shapes his legend.

The irony of course is that the man famous for his lyrical death adamantly refuses to die. In fact he keeps popping up again and again, and the resurrections seem to be escalating. In the last several years Van Gogh has resurfaced almost monthly in the news. First there was the 2011 biography, *Van Gogh: The Life* by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, that claimed his death wasn't suicide but murder, committed by a bullying, gun-happy teenager. Then there was the report that his famously blue *The Bedroom* was never meant to be blue at all; the original palette, researchers discovered, was a violet that changed color because the artist was using cheap, unstable pigment. And then there was the news, in 2013, that the painting *Sunset at Montmajour*, once rejected as an obviously kitsch, phony forgery, had been reclaimed. Curators at the Van Gogh Museum, giving it a closer look, called it an authentic canvas by the master, suggesting that maybe more Van Goghs are waiting to come tumbling out of some attic, adding to a legacy that keeps growing, changing shape, and just won't sit still.

All of these new takes on Van Gogh and his art, though, may be eclipsed by a bigger revelation, a reinvention of sorts. The artist, it turns out, was a Dutchman. This of course seems like an obvious epiphany. But most of what we think we know about Van Gogh relates to his French years in Provence, and in the popular imagination the artist – despite that classically guttural Dutch name – has become so Gallic, he has morphed into a flâneur wearing a beret, chomping on a baguette. When people talk about following in Van Gogh's footsteps they typically mean the paint-splattered circuits around Arles, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, and Auvers-sur-Oise, a route that the French, absconding with the Dutchman, have wisely turned into a tourist attraction.

But the Dutch are reasserting their own claim. They see Van Gogh not as some Frenchified savant, but as an emphatically homegrown master painter firmly grounded in their spongy, lowland soil. It's a chauvinistic reclamation that I embrace like any true Dutchophile. Blame it on a personal kind of patriotism. My family moved to Holland when I was 4 years old, and the dreamscape of humpbacked bridges and tilting gabled houses looked like the antidote to the anodyne American suburb we left behind.

And although we came back to that suburb a few years

later, my Dutch ardor has only grown over the years on frequent return visits to Holland. So it's heartening to see my own swelling Dutch pride echoed by the country itself. Tired of being cast as a pit stop on every stoners' year abroad, the Netherlands is focusing on its richer, truer cultural history.

The zealous renovation of Amsterdam's trifecta of art museums that frame the city's Museumplein underscores that rediscovery. The contemporary Stedelijk Museum, the Van Gogh Museum, and the Rijksmuseum all reopened, after the city invested millions of dollars in their refurbishment. It is the Rijksmuseum that is winning the most attention for its sleekly reformatted powerhouse galleries that make the case for rediscovering the Dutch masters, those peerless Vermeers and Rembrandts lining the Gallery of Honor. It's an easy case to make. Those 17th-century works, the very definitions of masterpieces, remind us that while their European counterparts were still painting fussy royal portraits and martyred saints, Dutch artists, commissioned by more pragmatic burghers, were capturing the beauty of our sensual, earthly world. As the first true modernists, they saw the physical radiance of our everyday, purely human landscape: the parrot tulip and string of pearls; a canal lit by golden lowland sun; and the quietude of a cobbled courtyard.

But it is the Van Gogh Museum that may, in the end, make just as radical a point, arguing for the pioneering force of Dutch art, by refocusing our distracted gaze on a more fully realized Van Gogh. He isn't just the maestro of Arles in this gallery, but the man who came of age and discovered his artistic, outlier's voice as a Dutchman.

That reconfigured Van Gogh was clearly articulated at the debut exhibit I saw when I returned to Amsterdam for the museum's reopening. Entitled Van Gogh at Work, the exhibit showcased the artist's roots and evolution and charted how the uncouth country boy, within the short span of 10 years, developed into a timeless visionary. "Half of Van Gogh's working years as an artist were in the Netherlands, not France," the curator of exhibitions Nienke Bakker told me, as she walked me through the gallery. "His personality was made in Holland; in essence he is a Dutchman. And from the beginning he wanted to convey the almost religious feeling he felt here, in nature."

In fact, Van Gogh's most radical leap as an artist was his decision, in 1880, to paint outdoors and facedown in the regional landscape. These Dutch canvases, in some ways more revolutionary than his French landscapes, were painted so low to the lowland ground that grains of sand, blades of grass, and bits of leaves have been found



**DUTCH CANVASES**  
(Clockwise)  
*Two Women on the Heath* (1883)  
*Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen* (1884-1885)  
*The Potato Eaters* (1885)  
*Cottages* (1883)

mashed into the canvases, a case of nature and art fusing into one organic collage. If those early paintings are literally imprinted with Dutch soil – the landscapes smeared with the land – Van Gogh's successive breakthroughs, hanging in the first galleries of the Van Gogh Museum, read like both a mapping of Holland itself and a preview of the artist's recurrent themes.

Take his painting *Old Church Tower at Nuenen*, depicting a Dutch church melting back into the raw ground, whitened by wind and rain, black crows circling overhead like a familiar sign of doom. Its steeple toppled and its foundation bleeding into stony soil, the desiccated church is the very image of religion subsumed by a more organic spirituality.

*Two Women on the Heath*, a canvas painted in the pastures of eastern Holland and hanging nearby, is anchored by the bent silhouettes of the harvesters looking puny and abandoned under the immensity of the low Dutch sky; the artist's evocation of crushing solitude is clearly etched.

In the *Avenue of Poplars*, an elegiac duet of light and

dark, the rows of trees assume a mournful stand against the coming dusk, and in his *The Potato Eaters*, a kind of rustic last supper, Van Gogh captures a sad-eyed family radiating both earthy dignity and a bleak kind of fatalism too; their Dutch caps droop around their long faces, deflated.

If that all becomes overpowering – and too many Van Goghs in one afternoon can bring on an almost tangible sense of gloom – the museum's gift shop offers needed comic relief. Picking my way through *The Starry Night* fridge magnets, T-shirts, coaster sets, memo pads, and pillboxes, I finally settled for a *Sunflowers* key ring.

Inspired by the museum, I decided to dive into Van Gogh country and see his original muse myself. The prevailing question: Where to head in Holland? I could have gone south to the village of Zundert, near Breda, where Van Gogh was born in 1853, the son of a Protestant minister. I could have made a pilgrimage to The Hague, the city where he worked as an apprentice to art dealers and took early painting lessons. I could have stayed put in Amsterdam, where

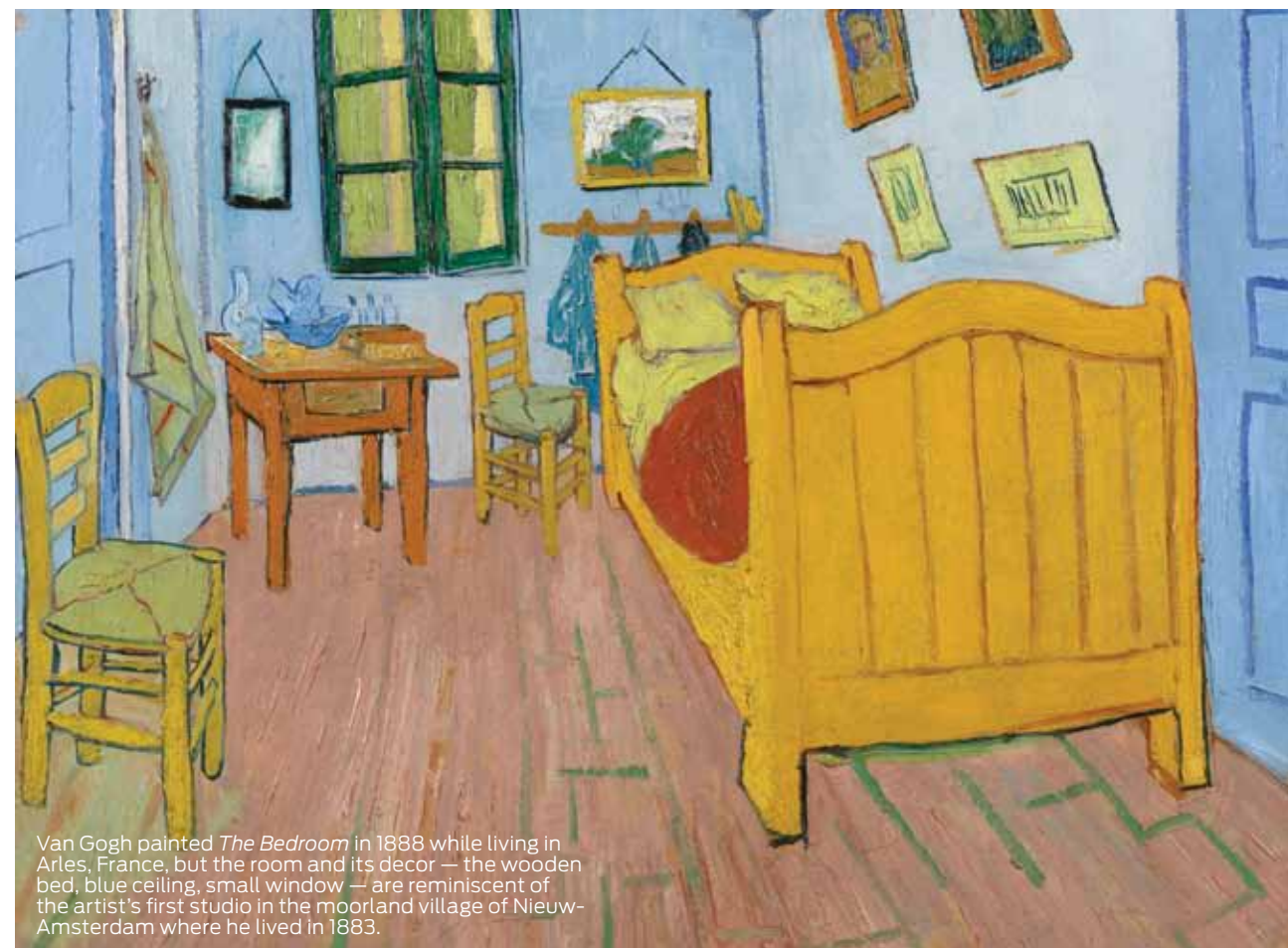
he attempted to enroll in theology school in 1877, or gone to Nuenen, a town surrounded by woodland and meadows, where he lived and worked from 1883 to 1885 and where a Van Gogh Centre offers an overview of his life. Or I could have driven southeast to the Kröller-Müller Museum, a gallery containing one of the largest Van Gogh collections in the world, hidden in a leafy Dutch national park, popular among Europeans but often missed by Americans.

But after reading Van Gogh's collected letters to his brother Theo, really the truest love of his life, I went with a hunch. I headed to Drenthe – an eastern province of Holland, so backwater it can feel as rough-hewn and raw as a burnished wooden shoe. Van Gogh saw it as a place where he could escape into a purely naturalist world and define his true voice, when he traveled there in September 1883, drawn by the region's sense of bleak, rustic quietude, the primal grandeur of its marshes, moors, sod houses, bogs, and shepherds. It was this raw beauty that lured him; its unfussy, elemental power seemed like the perfect embrace for his developing work, far from the art academies, rivalries, and stylish obsessions of urban Holland. His canvases here would be lit only by natural light. So he came stripped down to nothing, like a supplicant, carrying only a paint

box and brushes, as if he were riding out to greet himself, a very young 30-year-old, determined to come into his own in the silence and authenticity of deepest Dutch country.

It's easy to understand the region's allure, because Drenthe hasn't changed much. In fact, as I left the busy highways and clogged cities of western Holland – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht – the freeways shrank down into country roads. The wavering sheets of tulip fields, strips of candy colors, gave way to fields of heather, peat moors, clots of forests. Its low-slung farmhouses were capped with steeply slanting, shaggy thatched roofs, and they seemed to bulge out with good reason; originally these massive farmsteads didn't just house the farmers but their woolly livestock too, a steaming, baying barnyard of cows and sheep. The whole landscape looked like something out of a Brueghel painting, and the villages dotting the route east seemed just as time-warped, like Dutch Brigadoons, particularly in the south along the border of Drenthe and Overijssel province. In Giethoorn, maybe the most waterlogged Dutch burg, there were no streets at all. Each thatched cottage fronted on the winding

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Van Gogh painted *The Bedroom* in 1888 while living in Arles, France, but the room and its decor – the wooden bed, blue ceiling, small window – are reminiscent of the artist's first studio in the moorland village of Nieuw-Amsterdam where he lived in 1883.

VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION)

## “VAN GOGH'S PERSONALITY WAS MADE IN HOLLAND. AND FROM THE BEGINNING HE WANTED TO CONVEY THE ALMOST RELIGIOUS FEELING HE FELT HERE, IN NATURE.”

— NENKE BAKKER, VAN GOGH MUSEUM

network of canals, crisscrossed with bowed bridges.

But I kept driving deeper into the deep-green pastorage, passing the guttural poetry of village names, heading to the little moorland village of Nieuw-Amsterdam, where Van Gogh nested during his short Drenthe retreat. The white manor where he rented a room is still an imposing building, and the signage to Van Gogh's House is hard to miss. The ground floor of the house was taken over by a haphazard gift shop. There was a homely café, converted from the original dining room where the artist took his breakfast, and some photos of Van Gogh's landlord, Hendrik Scholte, and Mrs. Scholte (“not a pretty woman,” my guide mused, as we both stared at a picture of the moon-faced matron wearing a muffin-like Dutch bonnet). I was starting to think I should have headed to Nuenen or The Hague instead.

But my guide, who knew how to build to a surprise, wasn't finished. “Come,” she said guiding me up a creaky back staircase to the second floor, where we stood face to face with one closed door. “Ready?” she asked, slowly pushing the door open with a dramatic flourish, and everything else slipped away, mere backdrops to this glowing room – Van Gogh's rented studio – that suddenly appeared whole, radiating an almost visceral kind of power.

My first impression was an overwhelming sense of déjà vu because the room was something I'd seen before; the narrow, monastic carved wooden bed, the puny painting table sitting by the window's light, the homely ladder-back chair, and the deep blue of the painted beamed ceiling all seemed like an echo, an almost perfect duplicate, of Van Gogh's famous *The Bedroom*, the painting of his blue Provençal bedroom-cum-studio in Arles. Even the placement of the furniture, huddled against the walls, mirrored the familiar canvas. Had the room been dressed up to resemble his future iconic retreat? And had the blue ceiling been added by curators hoping to dramatize the match, not realizing as no one had until recently, that the original Provençal palette was violet? My guide laughed. “No; some of the furniture is original, and we used Van Gogh's letter as a guide in furnishing the rest of the room. But the blue is the blue you find all over Drenthe. We all paint our ceilings blue to keep the mosquitoes away.”

If anything then this was the original of the bedroom in Provence we know so well, aside, ironically, for the touch of blue. If Drenthe is where Van Gogh came into his own as an artist, if this was his first authentic studio, then it was fitting it should be the template of his best-known retreat, a foreshadowing of his second act as a Provençal artist. The painter had already walked into his first real artistic home; he would only need to recreate it in the future. And Van Gogh would make the point, almost

compulsively, in manic messages to Theo from Drenthe.

Veering between abject despair and an almost hallucinogenic euphoria, these early letters evoke a rite of passage firmly grounded in a visionary sense of place, in the surrounding moors and bogs. “The sky,” Van Gogh wrote, “was an inexpressibly delicate lilac white ... on the horizon a sparkling red streak – beneath it the surprisingly dark expanse of brown heath.”

“The heath speaks to you ... the still voice of nature ... beautiful and calm,” he almost sings in another letter. “I think I have found my own little country you know.”

Van Gogh of course declaimed a lot; his hyperventilating letters almost always build to a feverish pitch. So it's hard to judge, from his overwrought writing, how true his big artistic epiphany in Drenthe really was. In the end, running short on supplies and unable to convince Theo to join him, he left Drenthe for good only three months later, in December, walking 16 miles to the nearest train station through driving rain, crying all the way. What we can judge though is the work itself and the impressive haul that came out of that first studio – drawings and paintings of peasants, peat cutters, thatched farmsteads, heath, moorland, country roads that record an authentic breakthrough, informed by the artist's lonely immersion in a lonelier countryside.

Consider one Drenthe canvas alone, *Cottages*, a painting of two squat farmhouses, their sloping roofs jutting up against a bruised, swollen, brooding sky. Only a delicate strip of receding light suggests a glimmer of hope, or maybe its last, dying glow. Blending Van Gogh's two abiding themes – the aching loneliness of the human condition and the indifferent grandeur of nature – the painting manages to infuse a landscape with pure, elegiac emotion, half hopeful, half despairing. The result is Van Gogh's own truest voice distilled, and it suggests the real power of his autumn in Drenthe. If he walked into that blue room an apprentice, he walked out a fledgling master, or at least something closer to the genius he became. And he couldn't have overlooked, for a second, exactly where he was.

“Is that a new landmark?” I asked the guide, noticing, just as I was about to leave the bedroom, a windmill jutting up outside the window.

“No,” she said, as we both watched the blades of the windmill sail, serene and implacable, through the air. “It dates back centuries. Van Gogh would have seen that every time he picked up a brush and sat down to paint.”

*Raphael Kadushin's work appears in Condé Nast Traveler, National Geographic Traveler, and Epicurious.*