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LE ROUGE ET LE NOIR

Vincent van Gogh painted three vineyards during his artistic career. Stuart George explores the literal and symbolic significance of *The Red Vineyard*, the only painting sold during the artist's lifetime and one that reflects both his inner turmoil and the difficulties that plagued the vignerons of Provence at the end of the 19th century

Although his *Portrait of Dr Gachet* sold at auction for \$82.5 million in 1990, in his lifetime Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) endured a spectacularly unsuccessful career. In 11 years of painting, he managed to sell only one picture – *The Red Vineyard*, a depiction of harvesters at work near Arles, in Provence, where he lived for 15 months. Wine was certainly an important part of van Gogh's life, fuelling his prodigious work rate. During his stay in Arles, he painted more than 200 canvases, as well as producing 100 drawings and writing 200 letters. He drank copiously, as suggested in a letter written in April 1889: 'Every day I take the remedy that the incomparable Dickens prescribes against suicide. It consists of a glass of wine, a piece of bread with cheese, and a pipe of tobacco.'

Having left Paris, van Gogh arrived in Arles, 700 miles from the French capital, by train on 20 February 1888. The weather was unexpectedly harsh and he was greeted not by the sunshine he sought but by snow. In April, he met the American painter Dodge MacKnight (1860–1950), who was living in the nearby village of Fontvieille. Two months later, MacKnight introduced van Gogh to the Belgian writer and painter Eugène Boch (1855–1941). It was Boch's sister Anne – also a painter – who bought *The Red Vineyard* in Brussels, for 400 francs, in February 1890, following a show of six van Gogh works at the 'Les XX' exhibition, which also included paintings by Cézanne, Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec. (The price, roughly £1,056/\$1,945/€1,582

in modern currencies, is no more than a fresh Royal College of Art graduate might ask for a painting today.)

Van Gogh's brother Theo worked in Paris for the art dealers Bousso and Valadon, where he organised exhibitions of up-and-coming artists like Paul Gauguin. Van Gogh suggested in a May 1888 letter to Gauguin that he should join him in Arles: '...Are you willing to share with me here? If we combine, there may be enough for both of us, I am sure of it, in fact.' He also wrote excitedly to Theo, saying that 'if Gauguin were willing to join me, I think it would be a step forward for us. It would establish us squarely as the explorers of the South, and nobody could complain of that.'

On 23 October 1888, Gauguin, after repeated requests, finally arrived in Arles to live with van Gogh in the famed Yellow House. Throughout November 1888, the two artists lived and worked together. When the weather was bad – Gauguin had seemingly brought the rain with him from the north – they painted from memory. After a stroll one evening, van Gogh painted *The Red Vineyard*.

Usually van Gogh painted only what was in front of him – 'I always do my work on the spot', he asserted – but *The Red Vineyard* was most likely painted from memory. Although Vincente Minnelli's 1956 biographical film *Lust for Life* depicts van Gogh painting on the spot, battling against the mistral (and Gauguin), with the vivid brush strokes on the canvas also implying



Red Vineyard at Arles, 1888, by Vincent van Gogh.
Pushkin Museum, Moscow / www.bredgenart.co.uk

that the painting was done *en plein air*, the evidence in the two painters' letters points towards this picture being completed indoors. Gauguin wrote a letter to Theo dated 16 November 1888, claiming that '...I have done a painting from memory of a really bewitched poor wretch in the middle of a red vineyard, and your brother, who is very generous, thinks it's good.' Van Gogh also wrote to Theo in November and referred to Gauguin having created a painting of women in a vineyard 'from memory'; at the same time, he mentioned that he himself was working on his own vineyard painting: 'a red vineyard, all red like red wine. In the distance it turned to yellow, and then a green sky with the sun, the earth after the rain violet, sparkling here and there where it caught the reflection of the setting sun.' The two painters were evidently working closely together, even sharing the same coarse sack-cloth canvas that Gauguin had brought with him. *The Red Vineyard* measures 75 x 93cm, a standard canvas size at the time ('size 30'), and many of van Gogh's other pictures are the same size.

The painting depicts very rustic viticultural practices: a flat, north-facing vineyard planted with sprawling *gobelet* vines trained up poles; horse-drawn carts; wooden baskets; hand harvesting; and women workers. The low sun, the yellow sky and the shadow cast by the male figure on the road suggest an evening view. Rain is hinted at on the shimmering road and muddy brown areas between the vines. The low horizon, cropped trees and exaggerated foreshortening of the vineyard create a sense of

claustrophobia and hard work. Judging from the painting and van Gogh's and Gauguin's letters, the 1888 Arles vintage was tainted by rain and harvested very late, in mid-November. Grenache and Carignan both ripen very late and are probably the varieties painted by van Gogh.

A sense of malaise

Van Gogh appears to have depicted with considerable accuracy a virus-infected vineyard. In September 1888 (two months before *The Red Vineyard*, suggesting a protracted harvest), he had painted his first vineyard canvas, *The Green Vineyard*, a daytime rather than evening representation of the same subject. Among the green sprawl of the vines are hints of red. The red leaves are indicative of the leafroll virus that reduces yield and delays ripening, as well as suggesting the presence of phylloxera. This was a colossal problem in France at the time, ravaging Provence's vineyards towards the end of the 19th century. Total French wine production peaked at 84.5 million hectolitres (hl) in 1875 but was reduced by phylloxera to 23.4 million hl in 1889, the year after Vincent painted *The Red Vineyard*. Gauguin may have been unaware of the phylloxera problem, in which case the subtitle of his vineyard painting – *Human Anguish* – was even more apposite than he realised.

Phylloxera was discovered in Hammersmith in 1863, 11 years before van Gogh lived at 87 Hackford Road, South Lambeth, in



Vineyard with a view of Auvers, 1890, by Vincent van Gogh. The Saint-Louis Art Museum

London. In that same year, phylloxera was first noticed in France – near Arles. Five years after this discovery, Gaston Bazille, a wealthy Montpellier stockbroker, convened with Professor Jules-Émile Planchon of Montpellier University in an attempt to find out what was causing the vines so much hardship. They met at Château de Lagoy outside Saint-Rémy – a small town 15 miles from Arles – where Van Gogh later spent several months in an asylum. Bazille was also the father of the Impressionist painter Frédéric – another link between Provençal art and wine.

Although viticulturally accurate, the vivid hues of *The Red Vineyard* are also in keeping with van Gogh's symbolic rather than literal use of colour in his work. 'All reality is at the same time symbolic', he believed, and the landscapes that he painted during his stay at Arles became increasingly psychological, his work forming a metaphor of his mental and spiritual state. As van Gogh came to associate particular colours with certain emotions, single colours dominated his canvases. Of his painting *The Night Café* he wrote: 'I have attempted to express terrible human passions in reds and greens.' These colours are also conspicuous in *The Red Vineyard*. In another letter he referred to one of his portraits thus: 'I exaggerate the fair colour of the hair, I take orange, chrome, lemon colour, and behind the head I do not paint the trivial wall but the Infinite. I make a simple background out of the most intense and richest blue the palette will yield. The blond luminous head stands out against this strong blue background mysteriously like a star in the azure. Alas, my dear friend, the public will see nothing but caricature in this exaggeration, but what does it matter to us?'

The chrome that van Gogh referred to was one of the new colours available to the 19th-century artist and is seen in *The Red Vineyard's* depiction of the brilliant sky and sun. In a letter to Theo in April 1889 he described how 'instead of eating enough and at regular times, I kept myself going on coffee and alcohol. I admit all that, but all the same it is true that to attain the high yellow note that I attained last summer, I really had to be pretty well keyed up.'

The vivid yellow sky is atypical of van Gogh's Arles landscapes – the sky is normally painted in a brilliant blue. Red and yellow are the dominant colours of *The Red Vineyard*, and they present a fine example of how van Gogh disregarded the established laws of contrasting colour theory. The influences of Impressionism's pure colour and the individual brush strokes of Seurat's pointillism are both felt in the painting. Van Gogh's renowned impasto technique is also apparent, with huge globs of still-wet paint smudged into each other. The absence of a signature on the canvas is a reflection of his uncertainty during this period.

The relationship between van Gogh and Gauguin was always volatile, and it declined badly after the grape harvest. On 23 December 1888, van Gogh came at Gauguin with a razor. Gauguin, fearing for his safety, left the house to spend the night in a hotel. That evening van Gogh cut off his own ear. The next day Gauguin departed hastily, leaving van Gogh's dream of a studio of the South, an *atelier du Midi*, in ruins. Nonetheless, they continued to correspond by letter. After van Gogh had sent some paintings – including *The Red Vineyard* – to Theo, Gauguin wrote to van Gogh from Paris on 9 January 1889 that 'the picture of the grape harvest has totally flaked because of the whitening which has separated. I've stuck it down again completely.'

After a rapid deterioration of his health and wellbeing, van Gogh, on the advice of his brother, went to Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris, where Dr Gachet (of *that* portrait) tended him. One of his final canvases was *Vineyard with a View of Auvers*, completed in June 1890. Curiously, it is the most joyful of his three vineyard paintings, showing a small vineyard overlooking whitewashed cottages.

Van Gogh shot himself on 29 July 1890, just 20 months after painting *The Red Vineyard* and only five months after it was sold. Theo van Gogh died the following year and Gauguin left France for Tahiti. For the vigneron of *The Red Vineyard*, unaware of the artistic turmoil in their midst, life probably went on much as normal. ■



The Green Vineyard, 1888, by Vincent van Gogh. The Hilder-Haber Museum

Viticulture was originally introduced to Provence by the Greeks and developed further by the Romans, who made Arles the capital of the Western Empire at the end of the 4th century. They also left their mark on the region's architecture, particularly the splendid Arènes in Arles, built in the 1st century AD and the subject of a van Gogh painting in December 1888. The very warm, dry climate of the region, which initially attracted van Gogh to Arles, is ideally suited to grape growing. Provence enjoys about 3,000 hours of sunshine per annum, with less than 700mm of rain on average, though the ferocious Provençal wind, the mistral, buffets vines as much as it plagued van Gogh's efforts to paint them outdoors. He complained in a letter that 'there is much wind here... a very ill-natured, whining wind - le mistral'. Although not ideal for painting *en plein air*, the wind is favourable for organic wine production, reducing the risk of rot.

No appellation for French wines existed in 1888, but today the vineyards of Arles form part of the Vin de Pays de Bouches du Rhône, created in 1973, and covering rustic red, sometimes rosé, and very rarely dry white wine styles. Arles is on the River Rhône, which now represents the boundary between the two Vins de Pays Bouches du Rhône and du Gard, and separates the town from the AC zones of Clairette de Bellegard and Costières de Nîmes to the west. The Tarascon road north of Arles was van Gogh's preferred route out of the town into the surrounding countryside and probably where he found his vineyard.

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