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A CRITIC AT LARGE | JANUARY 4, 2010 ISSUE

VAN GOGH'S EAR

The Christmas Eve that changed modern art.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

"Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe" (1889). Before the moment that van Gogh severed his ear, modernism in the popular imagination was a sophisticated recreation; afterward, it was a substitute religion.

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It is, in its strange way, at once the Nativity fable and the Passion story of modern art. On Christmas Eve, 1888, in the small Provençal town of Arles, the police found a young Dutch émigré painter in his bed, bleeding from the head, self-bandaged and semi-conscious, in a run-down residence called, for its peeling exterior, the Yellow House. A few hours before, the Dutchman had given his severed ear—or just its lower lobe; stories differed—to a whore named Rachel in a *maison de tolérance*, a semilegal bordello, as a kind of early Christmas gift. (She had passed out upon unwrapping it.) The painter, Vincent van Gogh, was known throughout the town as a crazy drunk who hung around the whorehouses too much for his own good, and who shared the squalid Yellow House with another so-called artist, even scarier than he was, though not usually as drunk and not so obviously crazy: That other artist, Paul Gauguin—after being interviewed by the police, and insisting that his friend must have sliced off his own ear in a fit—then sent a telegram to the Dutchman's brother, urging him to come at once. Then Gauguin left for Paris, as fast as the trains could carry him, never to return.

Gauguin wound up in the South Seas, where he became the first modern "primitive"; van Gogh was hospitalized, then gently urged by his loving younger brother Theo into an insane asylum in nearby Saint-Rémy, where he painted the sequence of pictures—including "The Starry Night" and "Cypresses"—that today, shown in any museum, attract crowds larger than the entire population of Arles on that night. When, after van Gogh's suicide, in

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ART REVIEW | VAN GOGH

Nocturnal van Gogh, Illuminating the Darkness

By ROBERTA SMITH

Published: September 18, 2008

Devoting an exhibition to Vincent van Gogh, among the world's most beloved artists, may not seem like much of a reach for the Museum of Modern Art. On paper, at least, "Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night" reads like an obvious play for big box office and increased membership.

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Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

But this exhibition largely dodges such charges. Small and quirky, it is an anti-blockbuster. Instead of the usual are-we-done-yet marathon followed with ordeal by gift shop, it quietly displays 23 paintings, 9 drawings and several letters by van Gogh in six intimate galleries. The final gallery features a dense display of books that he read, most open to poems about the night.

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Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). Irises, 1890. Oil on canvas, 20 x 36 1/8 in. (51.7 x 92.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Adèle R. Levy, 1958 (58.187)

The exhibition is made possible by the Janice H. Levin Fund.

Exhibition Objects >

Van Gogh: Irises and Roses

May 12–August 16, 2015

#MetVanGogh

Purchase advance tickets to avoid waiting in admission lines. Exhibitions are free with Museum admission.

Gallery 955

Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) brought his work in Provence to include a series of bouquets of spring flowers—two of irises and two of roses, in contrasting formats and color schemes—in which he sought to impart a "calm, unerring order" to his "last touch of the brush." Painted on the eve of his departure from the asylum at Saint-Rémy and conceived as a series or ensemble on a par with the Sunflower decoration painted earlier in Arles, the group includes the Metropolitan Museum's *Irises and Roses* and their counterparts: the upright *Irises* from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, and the horizontal *Roses* from the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

This exhibition will reunite the four paintings for the first time since the artist's death and is timed to coincide with the blooming of the flowers that captured his attention. It will open 125 years to the week that Van Gogh announced to his brother Theo, on May 11 and 13, 1890, that he was working on these "large bouquets," and will provide a singular opportunity to reconsider Van Gogh's artistic aims and the impact of dispersal and color fading on his intended results.

Accompanied by a special menu in the Members Dining Room

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