

IMPRESSIONIST VISIONS

Not far from Paris, two sleepy villages, Auvers-sur-Oise and Ornans, bring to mind the paintings of van Gogh, Daubigny and Courbet that they inspired

By Dana Micucci

While living in Paris some 10 years ago, I developed an obsession: visiting the homes and haunts of artists and writers, hoping, perhaps, to spark a little inspiration of my own. Soon, I happily discovered that my aesthetic indulgences need not be confined to the capital.

In the villages of Auvers-sur-Oise and Ornans, each a day's train excursion from Paris, are the homes and studios of several celebrated 19th-century artists, including Vincent van Gogh, Charles Francois Daubigny and Gustave Courbet. These residences, carefully preserved for more than a century and open to the public, offer an intimate glimpse into the artists' private worlds. I was delighted to find that both villages have continued their tradition as art colonies and remained relatively unchanged over the years.

Last summer, as I boarded the morning train from Gare St.-Lazare in Paris to Auvers-sur-Oise, a small village on the banks of the Oise River, some 20 miles north of Paris, I imagined van Gogh making the same journey in the spring of 1890, seeking



Photographs by Wendy Lamm/Contrasto, for The New York Times
Scenes in Auvers-sur-Oise. Notre Dame, made famous by van Gogh, whose grave is in a cemetery not far away

respite from the disruptive city. In Auvers he found a setting that was "profoundly beautiful ... among other things, many old thatched roofs, which are getting rare," he wrote to his brother Theo shortly after his arrival.

Today, the village of about 6,500 still brings to mind the paintings it inspired. Here are the narrow, twisting streets fringed with linden and poplar trees, the ivy draped stone walls and shuttered farmhouses, the courtyard gardens bathed in the green, yellow and mauve of van Gogh's, paintings and the

vast wheat and cornfields under the shifting clouds and swiftly changing light of the Ile-de-France sky.

In the mid-1900's, after the railroad put Auvers less than an hour from Paris, landscape painters like Daubigny and Corot, Pissarro and Cezanne also came to paint from nature.

Van Gogh spent the last weeks of his life here, producing scores of paintings, in a feverish burst of creativity. He had found cheap lodging across from the town hall at



Musée Gustave Courbet, above on the Loue



In Ornans Comté cheese



van Gogh's grave



A road lined poplars

the small inn and cafe owned by the Ravoux family. Painstakingly restored by the Belgian entrepreneur Dominique-Charles Janssens, the inn is now a historic monument known as the Ravoux Inn or House of van Gogh. It was the first stop on my self-styled tour. Passing through a succession of owners since van Gogh's time, the inn has a long tradition as a gathering place for artists.

After painting in the village and fields, van Gogh would return to the inn's cafe for lunch and dinner. Today, green- and crimson-painted walls, a zinc bar, straw-seated chairs and antique tables covered with linen tea towels, recreate the century-old ambience. Visitors can enjoy traditional, home-style French meals and local wines.

After a tasty lunch of beef fillet with vegetables, I climbed the stairs to a suffo-

catingly small space on the inn's third floor. This is the garret where van Gogh stayed. It was once furnished with a simple iron bed, a table and straw-seated chair, a water jug and a bowl for washing. A small green wall cupboard held his few belongings. In the cracks and nail holes along the barren walls where his paintings once hung to dry, his presence lingers.

The countryside depicted in paintings by van Gogh, Daubigny and Cezanne unfolds during a leisurely stroll through the village. Color reproductions of their canvases are posted at the many sites where they set up their easels. A convenient starting point is the old wooden staircase opposite the tourist office, which was the subject of van Gogh's "Stairway at Auvers."

There are other landmarks, including the Romanesque-Gothic Notre Dame church, perched on the hillside overlooking the village and the subject of van Gogh's "Church at Auvers." Just beyond lies the small cemetery where van Gogh and Theo are buried. It is surrounded by the wheat fields that appear frequently in the artist's Auvers paintings.

In the center of town is the restored 17th-century Chateau de Lery. It was in a farmyard behind the chateau, on July 27, 1890, that van Gogh shot himself in the chest. He died two days later at the age of 37. At the chateau I saw an interesting 90-minute audiovisual presentation of the Impressionist era, incorporating the latest special effects.

The chateau's restaurant, Les Canotiers, serves lunch in a lovely 17th-century stone-walled orangery and an adjacent, less formal cafe. Nearby, at 78, rue du Docteur Gachet, is the home of Paul Gachet, the Impressionist art collector and homeopathic physician who ministered to van Gogh during his stay. (Gachet's house has been restored and will soon be open to the public.)

Paintings, drawings and engravings by Daubigny, Cezanne, Dr. Gachet, Jean Francois Millet and others are on display at the Musée Daubigny, just a few steps away from



Musée Daubigny, near the artist's house and studio, in Auvers.

the Ravoux Inn and Daubigny's House and Studio, where he lived from 1862 to 1878. One of the first artists to work entirely out of doors, Daubigny is noted for his luminous landscapes of the French countryside and is often called a forefather of Impressionism. His house and studio are enlivened with murals by him and by his friends Corot and Daumier.

Galleries throughout Auvers show the work of the many contemporary painters and sculptors who still live and work here in the tradition of their famous precursors. Although the village is close enough to Paris, to make it a convenient day trip, there are several pleasant bed-and-breakfast options and the Hostellerie du Nord.

I left Auvers-sur-Oise feeling that I had discovered the quintessential French village, overflowing with authentic rural charm and richly layered with culture and history. Next on my itinerary was Ornans, the home of



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Gustave Courbet, southeast of Paris, in the Franche-Comte, near the Swiss border. The two-and-a-half-hour train ride from the Gare de Lyon to Besançon, which is about 16 miles from Ornans, took me through rolling hills and pastures and wheat and sunflower fields. At the Besançon station I hired a taxi

to Ornans and arrived within 20 minutes.

The French realist painter Gustave Courbet was born in Ornans in 1819, in an 18th-century stone town house that hugs the banks of the River Loue, its reflection shimmering in the water. Now known as the Musée Gustave Courbet, it is furnished from the period and houses more than 60 works by the artist, his friends and followers, as well as by 20th-century artists who have been inspired by the region.

Courbet lived and painted primarily in Paris, where he immersed himself in bohemian life and the radical socialist politics that ultimately led to his political imprisonment and subsequent self-imposed exile in Switzerland. But he returned to Ornans frequently throughout his lifetime, drawing comfort and inspiration from his family and the majestic landscape he had grown to love as a child.

A sleepy, picturesque village (population 4,128), Ornans was delightfully devoid, of tourists on the day that I visited. Its centuries-old houses overhanging the Loue; the 12th-century church, St.-Laurent, with its elegant belfry; the stone bridges; old mills; and the Roche du Mont—a rugged cliff that rises behind the village like a fortress—appear in many of Courbet's works.

"There are a lot of idiots who think that you can do a landscape just like that!" Courbet once proclaimed. "Well, that's just a joke! To paint a country, you have to know it. ... Go and see, and you'll recognize all my pictures."

As I wandered about, admiring vistas marked by easels bearing reproductions of Courbet's paintings, I recalled my college art history professor's passion for the self-proclaimed master painter and all the slides that I had memorized depicting these very sites.

At 24, place Gustave Courbet, in the center of town, is the attic studio where Courbet painted "A Burial at Ornans" (1849). The citizens of Ornans came here to pose for the



Path to Musée Daubigny

painting, which drew harsh criticism for its unidealized portrayal of rural townspeople, and for its stark, honest style. Following rue de Chantrans up the hill behind St.-Laurent church, I came upon the cemetery where Courbet is buried under a modest rock.

After a morning of sightseeing, I stopped at Le Dolmen/Le Ste.-Anne, a restaurant,

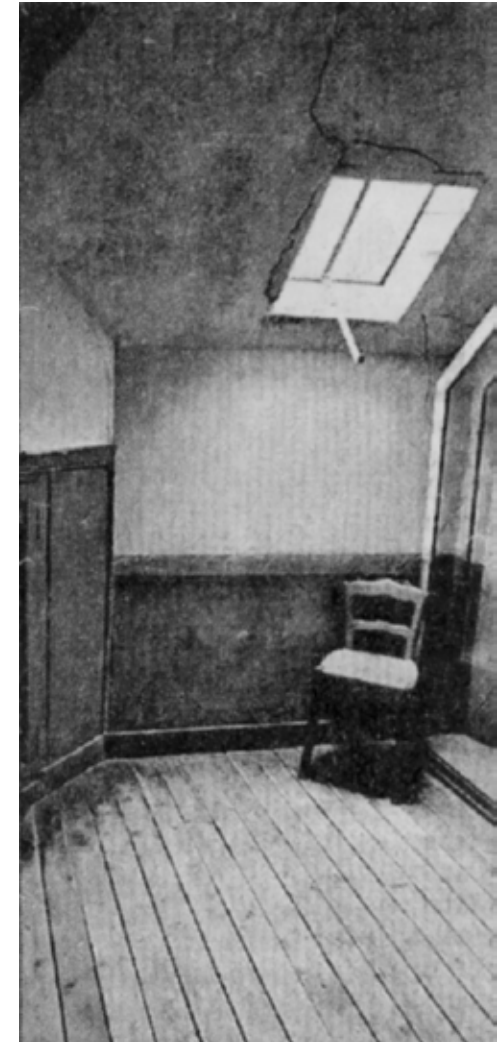
creperie and tea salon, which has a large, tree-shaded outdoor terrace overlooking the Loue River and Courbet's home. I enjoyed a Caesar salad and a glass of chilled Riesling followed by the region's signature Comte cheese.

Bordered on the east by the Jura Mountains, which, form a natural frontier with

Switzerland, the Franche-Comte region is noted for its rich farming tradition and lush natural beauty. Courbet traveled throughout the department of Doubs, in the heart of Franche-Comte, painting its rivers and lakes, hidden ravines and waterfalls, forests and cliffs. I was fortunate to meet a hospitable local family who drove me through the countryside to view some of these sites, again marked by easels bearing reproductions of Courbet's paintings.

The Doubs offers more than a total immersion course in Courbet, however. There are intimate museums devoted to angling in Ornans, wine and vineyards in Lods and regional costumes in Montgesoye. And there are, plenty of outdoor sports and diversions: fly-fishing, kayaking, canoeing, riverboat cruising and touring underground glaciers.

Although it is possible to tour Ornans and return to Paris on the same day, I spent the night at the Hotel de France, in a charming 16th-century building on the main street, once frequented by Courbet himself. My room, simply decorated with eclectic vintage furniture, overlooked a garden terrace. The hotel has a bar-brasserie and a fine dining room, where I feasted on roast pigeon and morel mushrooms, a regional specialty, and imagined Courbet at the next table, satisfied and smiling after a day in the countryside. ■



Wendy Lamm/Contrasto

Garret where van Gogh slept at the Ravoux Inn in Auvers