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Effects of the Sun in Provence

The imaginary *ligne Bordeaux-Genève*—much like the Mason-Dixon line in the United States—divides the Midi, the South, from the rest of France. Like Brittany, Provence probably seemed a world apart to many French people in the nineteenth century. The climate was hot and dry, and the cuisine based on oil, not butter. People had dark hair and eyes, and they spoke a language that sounded more Spanish than French. Policies of the central government in Paris tried to blunt regional distinctions, suppressing local traditions like Carnival and bullfighting and strictly enforcing the use of standard French.



Marseilles, connected with a rail link to Paris early in the century, became a major center, eventually France's second city, propelled in part by new trade via the Suez Canal. Industry, including mining, textiles, and ceramic manufacture, introduced new marks in a landscape of grain fields, lavender, and olive groves. By 1850 sun-seeking tourists descended on the stunning coastline at Cannes and, a bit later, Nice, though it was not yet part of France. Regionalist societies emerged to protect traditional crafts and dialects.

Provence retained its distinct cultural and visual character. Artists flocked there, but in this section we look at only two, both of whom produced their most important works in this fragrant, sun-drenched region. For Paul Cézanne, a native of Aix, this land was the deeply rooted source of his art and experience. For Vincent van Gogh, Provence was "the Japan of the South," a place naturally endowed with the vivid color and strong compositional outlines he felt in tune with his aesthetic goals.



Rustic stone farm building (*cabanon*)
in a field of lavender
Bryan F. Peterson/Corbis

Background : Provence

Setting

- Provence occupies a broad triangle defined by the Alps, the Rhône River, and the Mediterranean Sea.
- A mild Mediterranean climate gives some towns an average 300 days of sun a year.
- The terrain varies from mountains—the highest is Mont Ventoux at 1,909 m (6,263 ft.)—to broad plains.
- The Camargue, the Rhône's delta of salt marshes, wetlands, and grazing areas, is one of the most unusual landscapes in France, with pink flamingoes, wild horses, and cowboys.
- Provence has one of the world's richest dinosaur egg deposits, in the area of Roques-Hautes on the flanks of Montagne Sainte-Victoire near Aix.

History

- Traces of human habitation date back about 30,000 years; neolithic remains include cave paintings and stone dolmens.
- After about 600 BC, when a Greek colony was established in Massilia (modern Marseilles), Provence was oriented toward the Mediterranean world.
- Greek colonists introduced grapevines and olives.
- By the end of the 2nd century BC, the region was a part of the Roman province of Gallia Transalpina (later Gallia Narbonensis).
- In the mid-6th century AD, Provence came under Frankish rule but was not truly integrated with France; the 8th century saw frequent raids by Saracens.
- In the 12th century, Provençal cities flourished through trade with the Levant and set up independent governments.
- During these years Provençal culture produced troubadour poetry and the idea of courtly love.
- In 1246 Provence passed to the house of Anjou; in 1481, not long after the death of its most celebrated king, René, the region was willed to the French crown but still retained much autonomy until the Revolution.

Today

- Major cities include Marseilles, the largest Mediterranean port, Toulon, Cannes, Aix-en-Provence, and Nice, which only became a permanent part of France in 1860.
- Provence is a major tourist center; the Côte d'Azur has been a year-round resort of the rich and famous since about 1850, but millions are also drawn to hill towns like Gordes and to cities like Arles, Nîmes, and Orange, where monuments from Provence's Roman period are well preserved.
- Industries range from petrochemicals to perfume.
- The population in 2004 numbered about 4.5 million.

Vocabulaire

cabanon (m): small rural outbuilding

calanque (f): rocky inlet of the sea

garrigue (f): scrubby vegetation

lavande (f): lavender

mas (m): traditional farmhouse

méridional (adj): describing things from the Midi

midi (m): afternoon

Midi (m): the south of France

olivier (m): olive tree

tournesol (m): sunflower

Occitan and Languedoc

Provençal, the language of the troubadours, was the first true literary language in France. It was an old dialect of Occitan, a Romance language still spoken today by about 1.5 million people in southern France. Standard French only penetrated the Midi after the Revolution, and although affected by long

exposure to French, Occitan dialects today are relatively little changed since the Middle Ages. In grammar and pronunciation, they are more closely related to Latin and Spanish, and especially to Catalan, than to French.

Today, the name Languedoc is applied to a large part of the Midi, west of Provence. It comes from *langue d'oc*, that is, a language using *oc* (from Latin *hoc*) for yes. This distinguished it from French, the *langue d'oïl*, which used *oïl* (modern *oui*, from Latin *hoc ille*).

Pétanque

One of the most characteristic sights in Provençal towns is the gathering of pétanque players in town squares. Individuals or teams throw their *boules* (balls), trying to get closer than their opponents to the smaller *cochonnet* (piglet). The game is a version of the much older *jeu de Provence*. It is said that pétanque, in which players stand with their feet on the ground within a small circle, was devised in 1910 by an older *boule* player in the town of La Ciotat (near Spain) who felt disadvantaged by younger players' ability to take running and jumping starts. The name comes from *pièds tanqués* (feet rooted). The game today is played informally and in organized leagues.

The mistral

When Provençal regionalists established societies and journals, they gave them names uniquely associated with the province: *La Cigale* (the “cicada,” whose whiny drone propels the summer soundscape), *L'Aïoli* (the tangy garlic mayonnaise that accents bouillabaisse and other Provençal dishes), and *Le Mistral*. The mistral, a cold, dry wind from the northwest, is almost synonymous with Provence. It is formed when high-pressure air from the mountains in the north is funneled down the Rhône Valley toward lower pressure zones around the Mediterranean. Wind velocities can reach more than 160 km/hr (100 mph) and temperatures drop precipitously. Folk sayings claim the mistral is “enough to pull the tail off a donkey.” It blows for several days, most often and most strongly during the winter and spring, leaving crystalline air behind. The mistral has made its force evident in the landscape. Trees are sculpted by it, and rows of cypress or bamboo are planted as windbreaks for young crops. Traditional farmhouses sink into the terrain, low and massive. Windows are protected with heavy shutters—northern exposures are often blank—and heavy tile roofs are further weighted with rocks.

Gastronomie

Tapenade is a classic olive spread, from *tapeno*, the Provençal word for capers. It combines all the favorite flavors of the Midi: briny black olives, salty anchovies, the piquancy of capers and garlic, and the arid scent of Mediterranean herbs—all bound with the ubiquitous ingredient of southern cuisine: olive oil.

Tapenade

1 $\frac{2}{3}$ cups black olives in brine, drained and pitted
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup capers, rinsed and drained
 3 salted anchovy fillets, rinsed
 pinch of *herbes de Provence*
 pinch of coarse salt
 freshly ground pepper
 2 cloves garlic
 4–5 tbs. olive oil

Combine the olives, capers, and anchovies in a food processor fitted with the metal blade and process until smooth. In a mortar pound together the herbs, salt, a generous grind of pepper, and the garlic to form a paste. Add the olive mixture and work together, adding olive oil, a little at a time, until the mixture is the consistency of a thin paste.

Serve at room temperature on bread or as a stuffing for zucchini or seeded tomatoes.

Herbes de Provence

Each cook in Provence has his or her own herb blend, but the ingredients and proportions below are fairly typical. Use dried herbs. Store the mixture in a tightly sealed container for up to three months. Use it to season soups and sauces, omelets, fish, meat, vegetable and tomato dishes—the possibilities are endless.

3 tbs. marjoram
 3 tbs. thyme
 3 tbs. summer savory
 1 bay leaf, crumbled
 1 tsp. basil
 1 tsp. rosemary
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. sage
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. fennel seeds
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. lavender

Learn more about Provençal traditional culture with an elementary school class in Provence:
<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/ecolebeaurecueil/index.htm#anciens%20eleves> (in French)

Tour the natural history museum in Aix:
<http://www.museum-aix-en-provence.org>

Learn more about olives in Provence:
<http://www.provenceweb.fr/e/mag/terroir/olives/olive.htm>

Explore neolithic paintings in a cave near Marseilles:
<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/archeosm/en/fr-cosqu1.htm> (in French and English)

Learn rules and techniques of pétanque, even start your own club:
www.usapetanque.org

Learn more about Occitan:
<http://occitanet.free.fr/en/index.html> (in French and English)

Take a cinematic tour of Provence: Jean de Florette (1986) and Manon des Sources (1986), both directed by Claude Berri, based on the novels by Marcel Pagnol.

The Works

reproduction
slide 35 | CD 69

Paul Cézanne
French, 1839–1906

Houses in Provence: The Riaux Valley near L'Estaque, c. 1883
Oil on canvas, 25 5/8 x 32 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon
1973.68.1



Many of the places Cézanne painted have been identified, including this spot close to the town of L'Estaque, on the coast near Marseilles. This one is unusual in having a specific historical and a specifically Provençal association. It was regarded in Cézanne's day as the home of the baroque sculptor Pierre Puget (1620–1694), who, prior to Cézanne, was the most celebrated artist to have been born in Provence. Cézanne owned, and sometimes included in his still lifes, a plaster cast of a cupid believed at that time to have been made by Puget.

It was in L'Estaque, where he avoided service during the Franco-Prussian War, that Cézanne began to find his true artistic direction. In 1876 he wrote

of the sun-blanked landscape: “It’s like a playing card. Red roofs over the blue sea... The sun here is so vivid it seems to me that objects are always outlines, not only white or black, but blue, red, brown, violet. I may be wrong, but it seems to me that it is the opposite [*antipode*] of modeling.”¹ From now on Cézanne would create three-dimensional form, not by shading with light and dark, but with color contrasts. Here, blue shadows and pale ochres—the cool color receding, the warm advancing—carve the faces of rock and the volumes of buildings. The cubic blocks of the traditional Provençal *mas* (farmhouse) seem an organic part, another expression of the architectonic form of the hillside itself.

Consider this

How has the strong mistral wind shaped this environment?

- *windowless walls*
- *scrubby vegetation*

How does Cézanne capture a sense of the intense sunlight of Provence?

- *strong contrasts of light and shade, particularly on the farmhouse*

Describe the brushstrokes. How do they differ from those you have seen in impressionist paintings like Pissarro's *Orchard in Bloom, Louveciennes* (see p. 64)?

- *more uniform and precise, system of parallel hatching—“constructive” brushstroke*

Do they appear to have been applied rapidly or methodically? How do they correspond with the shapes or forms they represent? Compare them to the brushstrokes in Sisley's *Flood at Port-Marly* (see p. 66).

Name the three predominant colors and locate each of them in the composition. How does the color arrangement produce a harmonizing effect?

How does the painting suggest depth?

- *intersecting patches of contrasting color create contour*
- *smaller scale of forms in the background and slight predominance of cool colors there*
- *light-filled space; light seems to create and fill the space*

Cézanne and modern art

Cézanne is often seen as a fountainhead of modern art. Pablo Picasso regarded him as a “mother hovering over,” Henri Matisse as “father to us all.” Inevitably, our understanding of his painting is colored by the cubism and abstraction that came later. His reduction of the visible world into basic, underlying shapes, the faceted brushstrokes that seem to reconstruct nature through purely painterly forms, the fracture and flattening of space—all these can be pointed to as the beginnings of modern art. Though he transformed raw sensation with discipline and rigor—he said he wanted “to make of impressionism something solid and durable, like the art of the museums”—Cézanne’s paintings should not be reduced to their formal elements alone or his “modernity” overread. He identified himself as an impressionist to the end and stressed that he painted from nature and according to his sensations, seeking to realize a “harmony parallel to nature.” “I paint as I see,” he told a journalist in the 1870s, “and I have very strong sensations.”² His painting remained rooted in nature and his personal response to it.



Houses in Provence in the valley of Riaux near L'Estaque, Puget's birthplace, 1990

John Rewald Papers, National Gallery of Art, Washington Gallery Archives

CD 70

Paul Cézanne
French, 1839–1906

*Montagne Sainte-Victoire Seen beyond the Wall
of the Jas de Bouffan, c. 1885/1888*
Watercolor and black chalk, 18 x 12 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon
1985.64.82

Montagne Sainte-Victoire, reaching an altitude of 1,021 m (about 3,350 ft.) at Pic des Mouches (Peak of the Flies), is one of the most recognizable spots in Provence and the principal landmark of the Aixois region. This watercolor captures Cézanne's view of it from the Jas de Bouffan, the family home.

Montagne Sainte-Victoire became something like a personal symbol in Cézanne's art. It appears in at least twenty-five canvases (and many more drawings and watercolors), made from the early 1880s until his death. Oriented east-west, the mountain drops steeply to the Arc River basin on the south, while the north slopes gently in a series of plateaus. Bright red clay at the base—legend held it had been colored by the blood of local tribes slaughtered by Roman troops in the first century BC—contrasts brightly with the light limestone ridge.

Cézanne and his boyhood friend Anton Marion (who would become director of the natural history museum in Marseilles) explored the mountain as youths and adults, discussing geology and painting. Late in his life, Cézanne stressed his need to understand the mountain: "I need to know some geology—how Sainte-Victoire's roots work, the colors of the geological soils..." And:

In order to paint a landscape well, I first need to discover its geological structure... I come face to face with my motif; I lose myself in it... gradually the geological structures become clear to me, the strata, the main planes of my picture, establish themselves and I mentally draw their rocky skeleton.³



slide 36
CD 71

Paul Cézanne
French, 1839–1906

Château Noir, 1900/1904
Oil on canvas, 29 x 38 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Gift of Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer 1958.10.1



Cézanne's paintings after about 1895 are more somber and more mysterious than those of earlier years. His colors deepen, and his brushwork assumes greater expression. Spaces become more enclosed. Compare this landscape with *Houses in Provence*, made twenty years earlier. That painting is open, while this one is screened by a web of branches. This place is crabbed and remote, much more difficult and forbidding. The sky is no longer airy, but darkened with touches of purple and green. Even the pale buildings are now a deeper ochre.

Cézanne was attracted not only to the fundamental order of nature, but also to its chaos and restlessness. The moody loneliness of this place seems matched

to his own. He painted the Château Noir several times. The place was the subject of local legends and had earlier been called Château Diable (devil). With its Gothic windows and incomplete walls, it has the look of a ruin. Between 1887 and 1902, Cézanne rented a room in the rundown building. He tried to buy it after the 1899 sale of the Jas de Bouffan, but the owner rejected his offer.

The chateau was located at Le Tholonet, at the foot of Montagne Sainte-Victoire, a rugged, rocky site with prehistoric caves and the ruined arches of a Roman aqueduct. But it is also a place that is cool and shaded by fragrant pines, and even in Cézanne's day it was frequented by crowds of day-trippers. Cézanne

must have encountered many during his expeditions, but in his paintings they are nowhere in evidence.

Cézanne painted in the open air, directly in front of the motif, until the end of his life, but not to make a quick recording of visual effects. This is a long and intense meditation, an attempt to realize—to use Cézanne's words—his "*sensation*" of and in this place. The French word signifies more than its English cognate. Cézanne's notion of sensation involved his temperament, his vision, and his mind equally.

slide 37
CD 72Paul Cézanne
French, 1839–1906*The Bathers (Large Plate)*, 1897–1898
Colored lithograph, sheet: 19 x 24 ¾ in.National Gallery of Art, Washington
Gift of Karl Leubsdorf 1979.58.1

*Adieu, mon cher Émile:
Non, sur le flot mobile
Aussi gaiement je file
Que jadis autrefois,
Quand nos bras agiles
Commes des reptiles
Sur les flots dociles
Nageaient à la fois.*⁴

*Farewell, my dear Émile:
No, over the running flow
I do not speed as happily
as in times gone by,
when, arms agile
like snakes
through the gentle stream,
we swam side by side.*

The poem young Cézanne sent to his friend Émile Zola in 1858 hearkens back to the long, sun-filled days of their youth spent hunting and swimming in the country around Aix. They cast their experience in the mode of Virgil's idylls, whose Latin (to paraphrase Cézanne) had "tortured" them during nine long years in school. This lithograph—one of only two the artist ever made—copies a painting from some two decades earlier. The static atmosphere, the quiet, and the poses based on ancient sculpture (the figure on the right is derived from a Hellenistic Hermes in the Louvre), all contribute to a nostalgic feeling for a classical past. Cézanne presents these swimmers—a specter of himself among them—in a Provençal Arcadia, with Montagne Sainte-Victoire prominent in the background.

reproduction
slide 38 | CD 73

Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853–1890

Farmhouse in Provence, 1888
Oil on canvas, 18 ½ x 24 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.34



Vincent van Gogh arrived in Arles in February 1888 to a landscape covered with snow, the coldest winter in almost thirty years. But it was sun that Van Gogh sought in Provence, a brilliance and light that would wash out detail and simplify forms, reducing the world around him to the sort of pattern he admired in Japanese wood-blocks (see p. 132). Arles, he said, was “the Japan of the South.” Here, he felt, the flattening effect of the sun would strengthen the outlines of compositions and reduce nuances of color to a few vivid contrasts. Pairs of complements—the red and green of the plants, the woven highlights of oranges and blue in the fence, even the pink clouds that enliven the turquoise sky—almost vibrate against each other.

Van Gogh’s time in Arles was amazingly productive. In under fifteen months—just 444 days—he produced more than 200 paintings, about 100 drawings, and wrote more than 200 letters. He described a series of seven studies of wheat fields as, “...landscapes, yellow—old gold—done quickly, quickly, quickly, and in a hurry just like the harvester who is silent under the blazing sun, intent only on the reaping.” Yet he was also at pains to point out that these works should not be criticized as hasty since this “...quick succession of canvases [was] quickly executed but calculated long beforehand.”⁵

Consider this

Suggest one adjective to describe the mood of Van Gogh’s farm scene and three to describe its color scheme. Do you think this was a hot or cool place? Why?

Where do you see pairs of complementary colors?

Describe the various brushstrokes. How does their texture affect your impression of the painting?

Compare this to Van Gogh’s drawing of La Crau (see p. 134). Does that help you distinguish different brushstrokes in the painting? Why do you think Van Gogh drew a view of La Crau, a scene he had already painted?

The influence of Japanese art



Van Gogh was far from the first artist working in nineteenth-century France to be influenced by the strong graphic qualities of Japanese art. Woodblock prints—*ukiyo-e*, literally “mirror of the passing world”—had first arrived in France wrapped around imported ceramics and enjoyed a huge vogue from the middle of the century on. Among the earliest collectors were Rousseau and Millet; later Degas, Cassatt, Monet, and Lautrec were also strongly influenced by their bold design. The prints showed familiar scenes of daily life: interiors or street views, geishas and actors in traditional dramas, familiar landscapes blanketed by snow—but to Europeans these were exotic. In France what struck collectors, and particularly painters of the avant-garde, were the prints’ formal characteristics: bold areas of unmodulated, contrasting color; dramatic cropping; unusual perspectives, often taken from a high diagonal; and juxtaposed areas of pattern that flattened any sense of depth. The influence of Japanese prints was—along with photography—central to the evolution of impressionism.

Ando Hiroshige | Japanese, 1797–1858

Squall at the Large Bridge Ohashi, 1857
Woodblock print

Galerie Janette Ostier, Paris/Bridgeman-Giraudon/
Art Resource, NY

reproduction
slide 39 | CD 74

Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853–1890

La Mousmé, 1888
Oil on canvas, 28 7/8 x 23 3/4 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.151



In a letter to his brother, Van Gogh described how this painting consumed his attention. “It took me a whole week...but I had to reserve my mental energy to do the mousmé well.” This name, he explained, came from a character in a novel set in Japan, *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti: “A mousmé is a Japanese girl—Provençal in this case—twelve to fourteen years old.”⁶

Her portrait is a contrast of patterns and complementary shades: bold orange dots on her blue skirt; red stripes against the pale green lattice of vertical and horizontal brushstrokes in the background. The vigorous patterns express Van Gogh’s sympathetic response to his young sitter. Her flowering oleander branch probably suggests his pantheistic faith in the power of nature’s cycles of life and renewal.

The women of Arles, *les Arlésiennes*—with dark hair and eyes, a traditional small bonnet and neck scarf—had long been a common subject for painters. Their presence was enough to localize a scene for audiences. But this girl does not wear traditional costume; she is not a “type.” *La Mousmé* is one of a series of portraits Van Gogh painted in Arles of women, young and old, of farmers and gypsy performers, postmen, babies, and innkeepers. They were, he wrote, “the only thing in painting that excites me to the depths of my soul, and which made me feel that infinite more than anything else.”⁷

Consider this

Identify various patterns that Van Gogh contrasts in this portrait.

- spotted skirt
- striped bodice
- crisscrossing brushstrokes in background

Where do you find shadows? Where do you find outlines? What color are they?

What is the effect of the orange dots on the blue skirt? Why did the artist pair these colors?

- they are complementary and therefore reinforce each other and give a scintillating impression

Van Gogh’s letters frequently mention the oleander buds in the girl’s hand—what meaning or association might they be intended to convey?

- open to speculation—perhaps natural cycles of birth and renewal, or freshness of youth

slide 40
CD 75

Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853–1890

Harvest—The Plain of La Crau, 1888
Reed pen and brown ink over graphite
on wove paper, 9 ½ x 12 ¾ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, in Honor of the
50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art 1992.51.10



The sensational aspects of Van Gogh's life and suicide often cloud our understanding of the intention and deliberation in his approach to the craft of art. Behind his highly charged and expressive style are countless drawings with bold, sure lines. He made studies, sometimes with notes about color, in preparation for painting, but he also drew scenes (like this one) that he had already painted, to further his skill and understanding.

CD 76

Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853–1890

The Olive Orchard, 1889
Oil on canvas, 28 ¾ x 36 ¼ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.152



During the last six or seven months of 1889, Van Gogh produced at least fifteen paintings of olive trees, a subject he found both demanding and compelling. He wrote to his brother Théo that he was “struggling to catch [the olive trees]. They are old silver, sometimes with more blue in them, sometimes greenish, bronzed, fading white above a soil which is yellow, pink, violet tinted or orange to dull red ochre. Very difficult.”⁸ He found that the “rustle of the olive grove has something very secret in it, and immensely old. It is too beautiful for us to dare to paint it or to be able to imagine it.”⁹

In the expressive power of the olive trees’ ancient and gnarled forms, Van Gogh found a manifestation of the spiritual force he believed resided in all of nature. His brushstrokes make the soil and even the sky seem alive with the same rustling motion as the leaves, stirred to a shimmer by the Mediterranean wind. These strong individual dashes seem more drawn than painted onto the canvas. The energy in their continuous rhythm communicates to us, in an almost physical way, the living force Van Gogh found within the trees.

The Artists

Paul Cézanne

French, 1839–1906



Paul Cézanne with walking stick and backpack, c. 1874 or c. 1877

John Rewald Papers, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gallery Archives

Paul Cézanne was born in Aix-en-Provence. A small city with a storied past, Aix was the capital of René d'Anjou's kingdom (b. 1409), and seat of a famous court of justice during the Renaissance. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, and despite increasing industrialization, Aix was a provincial town, far removed from avant-garde trends in the capital. Cézanne's father, originally a hatmaker, had become part owner of a bank, and the family was well-off, though never quite accepted by the town's conservative, bourgeois elite. Cézanne received a strong education in classical languages and literatures. His adolescent years were shared with Émile Zola, future novelist and critic. With other friends, who would later distinguish themselves as naturalists and poets, they roamed the countryside to hunt and fish, and swim in the Arc River. They discussed literature and exchanged poetry.

After finishing secondary school, and at his father's insistence, Cézanne studied law but was increasingly drawn to art. In the spring of 1861, he negotiated parental permission to study in Paris. He drew from live models at the Académie Suisse and analyzed old master paintings in the Louvre. But the city held little appeal for him, and he returned to Aix to work in his father's bank. The next year, however, Cézanne was back in the capital with firm intention of becoming a painter. Zola, who had moved to Paris ahead of him and was already beginning to see some success, provided encouragement and support. Cézanne associated with advanced artists like Manet and the future impressionists. His own early works, however, were very different. Cézanne's pigments were dark and heavy, applied with emphatic brushstrokes or palette knife. His subjects were often considered difficult, sometimes violent and erotic, deeply personal. He assumed the persona of a rude provincial, deliberately awkward, coarse, and bearded, and exaggerated his Provençal accent.

In the early 1870s, under the influence of the impressionists, Cézanne's style changed. Working alongside his mentor Pissarro, in the open air around the Île-de-France, he turned to landscapes and adopted the impressionists' broken brushwork and brighter colors. He exhibited with them in 1874 and 1877 (his submissions provoking some of the most stinging ridicule).

During the Franco-Prussian War, Cézanne avoided the draft in the village of L'Estaque, near Marseilles. He was growing increasingly disillusioned in Paris and started to divide his time between Provence and the capital. His paintings did not sell (and, in fact, were seen by few, other than his fellow painters). In 1886 he broke with Zola after the novelist used Cézanne as the model for the character

of a failed painter. When his father's death the same year left him the family *bastide* (country estate), the Jas de Bouffan, Cézanne moved permanently to Provence (though he kept a Paris studio and made extended stays there).

In the south Cézanne found the subjects he wanted to paint. The familiar landscape—his center of gravity—was his most frequent motif. But even his still lifes evoke a sense of place, with their olive jars and lemons and colorful printed cotton cloths. His depictions of bathers, a subject he pursued to the end of his life, recall the idyllic days of a youth spent in the southern sun.

In Provence, rejected by critics and working in isolation, Cézanne's style developed independently. Beginning in the late 1870s and increasingly through the next decade, his brushwork became more ordered and systematic. This "constructive stroke," as it is often described, results from penetrating analysis. It represents rather than imitates visual effects. Color relationships render the fundamental nature and connectedness of what Cézanne saw and felt. In his late paintings, those made after about 1895, these color harmonies become more sonorous, autumnal, and the paintings more meditative and melancholy. In failing health for several years—but still going out to paint in the countryside almost every day—Cézanne died after being caught in a cold rain.

Visit the hillside studio Cézanne built in 1901–1902, now a museum, to learn more about the painter and his sites:
www.atelier-cezanne.com (in French, English, and other languages)

Vincent van Gogh

Dutch, 1853–1890



CD 79 | Vincent van Gogh

Self-Portrait, 1889 | Oil on canvas, 22 ½ x 17 ¼ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay
Whitney 1998.74.5

Vincent van Gogh was born and spent his childhood in the village of Groot Zundert, in the southern Netherlands, where his father was a minister. The oldest of six, he grew up within a close-knit family of deeply rooted religious faith. At sixteen he took a job, arranged by an uncle, in a well-known commercial art firm. During the next seven years, he worked for the company's branches in The Hague, London, and Paris, but was not a success at the business of art. Driven by a desire to help humanity, he resigned to work as a teacher, preacher, and missionary—but succeeded at none of them. Working in the Belgian coal-mining district of Borinage, he began to draw in earnest. After being dismissed by church authorities in 1880, Van Gogh finally found his lasting vocation in art.

In 1881 he began to study in The Hague with painter Anton Mauve, a relative of his mother. He left The Hague in 1883 for a remote part of the country to “be alone with nature,” and afterward moved to his father’s parsonage. There, he painted nature, which always held great power for him, and scenes of peasant life. His palette consisted of earth tones that express, almost literally, the dirt-poor existence of rural workers. He was drawn to Millet’s images of peasants for their sympathetic portrayal of laborers (see p. 65).

In 1885 Van Gogh traveled to Antwerp, enrolling briefly in the arts academy. He was influenced by his growing exposure to Japanese prints and the work of impressionist painters in France. In March 1886 he arrived, three months earlier than planned, on his brother Théo’s doorstep in Paris. Théo, an art dealer, provided constant emotional and financial support throughout the rest of Van Gogh’s life. Much of what we know about Van Gogh’s experiences and ideas about art is owed to their vast correspondence.

Van Gogh had only been painting for a few years when he moved to Paris, and only after he met Pissarro and other avant-garde artists did his real education as an artist take flight. Pissarro encouraged Van Gogh to brighten his somber palette and to juxtapose complementary colors for a luminous effect. Van Gogh wrote his sister that he had spent the first summer in France painting nothing but flowers to get used to colors other than gray. At the same time, influenced by younger artists like Lautrec and Gauguin, he began to use color symbolically and for emotional effect.

He was exhausted, however, by the hard life he lived in Paris and said he wanted to “look at nature under a brighter sky.” Early in 1888 he moved south to Arles, in Provence.

He hoped the warm climate would relax him and that bright colors illuminated by a strong sun would provide inspiration for his art. He hoped to find a natural environment that projected the kind of coloring and composition he admired in Japanese prints. He worked feverishly, pushing his style to greater expression with intense, active brushwork and saturated, complementary colors. “I have tried,” he wrote, “to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green.”¹⁰ Yet, neither his colors nor the rhythmic surfaces of his heavily painted canvases were divorced from nature—they were tools to communicate the spiritual power that he believed molded nature’s forms.

Van Gogh hoped to attract like-minded painters to Arles to form a “studio of the South,” but only Gauguin joined him, staying about two months. It was soon clear that their personalities and artistic temperaments were not compatible. For Gauguin, the artist alone propelled artistic creation, but Van Gogh believed strongly that each subject should have an intrinsic power the artist could explore and reveal.

Opinions about the nature of his illness are still debated, but just before Christmas, Van Gogh suffered a breakdown. In April, following periods of intense work interrupted by recurring mental disturbances, Van Gogh committed himself to a sanitarium in nearby St.-Rémy. He painted whenever he could, believing that work was his only chance for sanity. After a year, in the spring of 1890, he returned north to be closer to Théo; in July he died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

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