

Lesson 2 Art and the City

Arles, the City of Light and Art

Certain artists are so closely linked with particular places that it is hard to separate them. Arles and Van Gogh are like that. Arles is located five hours southeast of Paris and is well known for its magical light and colorful landscape. The most famous resident of this town was Vincent van Gogh. Leaving behind the gray skies of Paris, he arrived in Arles in 1888.

The town inspired an explosion of creativity. Vincent claimed, "The whole future of art is to be found in the south of France." He worked enthusiastically and produced nearly 200 paintings in just fifteen months. None of Vincent's works are left in Arles now, but today you can see a number of them have been recreated in street-side panels. Let's follow Vincent's traces that remain in Arles.

The Roman Arena

Arles is an ancient city dating back to Roman times. Many Roman buildings remain, including an arena that was built in 90 A.D. The arena used to seat over 20,000 people who would go to watch various entertaining events.

Vincent sometimes went to the bullfights that were held in the arena every Sunday. He particularly liked to watch the colorful crowds. He told a friend that he found the crowds fascinating. They inspired the painting Arena at Arles. The arena is in the top right corner of the painting and is barely visible. Below, there is a faint image of two bulls. However, Vincent paid lots of attention to the people and their colorful clothes. Some of the people are chatting with friends, others are cheering on the bulls, and the entire painting has a powerful energy.

Café van Gogh

Vincent painted the world-famous Café Terrace at Night in September 1888. He created this work while sitting outside the Café van Gogh at night. This was unusual because most painters did their night scenes from memory and worked during the daytime. As such, they used a lot of black paint. Vincent, however, believed that night scenes contained diverse and vibrant colors. Indeed, the Café Terrace at Night has such a rich harmony of yellows, blues, and oranges that Vincent did not have to use a single drop of black paint.

Even today, there is still a café at the site of Vincent's painting. It was renovated in the 1990s and painted yellow to look like the café in the painting. However, it is uncertain whether the color of the original café was yellow or not. The reason is that Vincent painted the wall of the café yellow to show the lamp light.

Former Arles Hospital

In December 1888, Vincent suffered from a mental illness and was sent to the hospital in Arles. He stayed there for five months. During this time, his mental stability improved, and the doctors allowed him to paint outdoors. Vincent took advantage of this freedom and produced several beautiful landscapes, such as The Garden of the Hospital in Arles. The picture illustrates a spring garden filled with flowers and trees with different colors and tones. The flowers are in full bloom, and the small trees are leafy. The big trees, however, have few leaves. This is rather odd given that the season is spring. Perhaps this contrast reflects the painter's complex feelings during the most difficult time of his life.

The hospital closed in the 1980s, and the building reopened as a library and exhibition space, with a café and gift shops. The garden was renovated to resemble Vincent's painting as much as possible.

Arles and its provincial countryside inspired Vincent to create brighter, more exciting landscapes. He had searched for brighter colors and softer light in Paris. In Arles, he found them. Today, more than 200 years later, this beautiful city remains just as attractive. The combination of Roman historic sites and Vincent's story creates a unique mood that will inspire you just as the city had inspired Vincent.