When one experiences the stars and infinity with great vividness, then despite the routine, life becomes almost enchanted. When I have a terrible need of—shall I say the word?—religion, then I go out at night to paint the stars.

Vincent van Gogh

On April 24, 1889, Theo van Gogh made the following request to the director of the Hospital of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France:

With the consent of the person concerned, who is my brother, I would like to ask you to admit to your establishment Vincent Willem van Gogh, artist, age 36, born at Groot-Sundert (Netherlands), at present living in Arles. . . . As his confinement is required more to prevent a recurrence of previous attacks rather than because his mental condition is at present affected, I hope that you will find no inconvenience in granting him the liberty to paint outside the establishment when he wishes to do so.

On May 8, 1889, Vincent was admitted to the hospital asylum and, on admission, was “perfectly calm and explained his case himself to the director as a man fully conscious of his condition.” The following month, in mid June, asymptomatic, and supported by the structured life of the asylum, he painted The Starry Night.

Vincent was initially hospitalized in Arles on December 24, 1888, after the notorious episode when he apparently threatened Gauguin with a razor and, later that night, cut off the lower part of his own left ear. He presented the ear fragment to a prostitute; much as a matador does to his lady after the death of the bull, although he had no recollection of these events. Vincent suffered 3 attacks in Arles, from December 24, 1888, to January 19, 1889, from February 4 to February 18, 1889, and February 26 to mid April 1889. Although he seemed fully recovered between episodes and was treated by a local physician, 30 citizens of Arles petitioned the mayor asking that Vincent be returned to his family or committed to an asylum stating that “he does not dispose of his full mental faculties, that he indulges in excessive drinking after which he finds himself in such a state of excitement that he does not know what he says or does and that his instability inspires public fear.”

His home in Arles was the famed “Yellow House” that he and Gauguin shared for 2 months in an aborted attempt to establish the Studio of the South. This was to be an art colony that would promulgate a new postimpressionist movement in art that would express the religious impulse with an authentic emotional immediacy and directness that they felt must be restored in the modern era. Vincent’s father and grandfather were ministers in the Dutch Reform Church and, after initially failing as an art dealer he, too, had pursued the ministry and lived for a time as an evangelist until his efforts to identify with the poor and lead a Christ-like life proved too much for the authorities of the church. Subsequently, he turned away from traditional religion, preferring a religion of nature. Although stimulated toward a religious vocation by his family, Blumer suggests that his heightened religiosity might also have been linked to underlying temporal lobe epilepsy.

The painting is the culmination of his examination of the night sky initiated a year earlier with Starry Night Over the Rhône. An avid reader, he had written to his sis-
ter Anna then that he sought to reproduce in his painting the feeling that Walt Whitman elicited in him in his poetry when Whitman wrote of “the great starlit vault of heaven.”

The Starry Night is an imaginative reconstruction of natural images. Vincent wrote that the “imagination alone can lead us to the creation of a more exalting and consoling nature than a single brief glance at reality.” Yet he preferred to accurately reflect nature, noting that he may “exaggerate and sometimes change a motif but in the end I never invent.” Thus, The Starry Night depicts the eastern predawn sky as Vincent saw it from his room at Saint-Rémy at about 4 AM in mid June. The position of the morning star, Venus (near the cyprus tree on the left), and the waning moon, with its aureole, are astronomically consistent with the early morning sky of June 19, 1889, the day he said he completed the painting. The central image of interlocking clouds may be drawn from his knowledge of popular depictions of the whirlpool galaxy (M51). Out of these elements, with the intervention of his imaginative genius, The Starry Night has become a visionary image with its network of pulsating white, orange, and blue stars above the village surrounded by wheat fields and an olive grove. Although the sky is in turmoil, the overall effect of the painting is an invigorating calmness.

For Vincent, this may be an image of psychological mastery following the suffering that he had experienced. The cloudlike images in the center of the sky assume the archetypal form of a mandala, a symmetrical form that frequently emerges as psychological conflicts come into balance. The flaming cyprus tree dwarfs the traditional church steeple on the right. The olive trees seem to echo the undulating currents in the sky. It is as if the tidal wave of his illness represented by the turbulence in the sky and the flowing lines on earth have now been sublimated into a composition that documents his newfound stability. Yet despite the balance found here, the looming dark cypress, which is on the viewer’s left, the funeral tree and symbol of death in this region of France, may portend another episode of illness. Indeed, in July, a month after completing this painting, van Gogh suffered another attack.

His temperamental difficulties were a lifelong problem in his relationships with others. He was exquisitely sensitive to loss and rejection and responded with depression. Epilepsy was the diagnosis he was given at the time in both Arles and Saint-Rémy. Blumer reviews the psychiatric aspects of temporal lobe epilepsy and applies diagnostic criteria to Vincent’s illness, arguing convincingly that Vincent’s presentation is consistent with the psychosis of epilepsy and interictal dysphoric disorder. It is proposed that Vincent’s facial asymmetry may have resulted from a birth injury that led to mesial temporal sclerosis. The cylothemic quality of his moods has led Jamison to a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, or at least, periods of major depression and hypomania. Arnold has proposed the diagnosis of acute intermittent porphyria with attacks initiated by his poor nutrition and use of absinthe, alcohol, turpentine (to mix paints and clean brushes), pinene, and camphor (for insomnia).

Regardless of the diagnosis he received, all authors agree that his use of absinthe, the “cocaïne of the artists of the last century,” may have contributed to his attacks. Because of its toxicity, absinthe was subsequently banned in France and throughout the world. A major ingredient in absinthe is alpha thujone a convulsant that blocks the γ-aminobutyric acid type A (GABAA) receptor chloride channel. It is proposed that when Vincent was released from the hospital in Arles, his return to the use of alcohol and absinthe precipitated the recurrence of his attacks. After diagnosing his condition as epilepsy, Dr Ray, his physician in Arles, used a bromide salt, the standard medication available at the time for treatment. Vincent seemed to respond and wrote to Theo that “the unbearable hallucinations have ceased, and are now reduced to simple nightmares, in consequence of taking bromide of potassium, I think.” Potassium bromide may well have benefited him, as it functions as an anticonvulsant that also affects the GABAAergic system. Yet when he entered the asylum in Saint-Rémy, his custodian physician discontinued its use.

Vincent probably suffered from partial complex seizures (temporal lobe epilepsy) as well as a mood disorder aggravated by stress and his concerns about continued support from Theo. His illness may have been exacerbated by his chronic use of absinthe, brandy, turpentine, and camphor.

Ironically, an ornamental tree, the thuja tree, Thuja occidentalis, a source for alpha thujone was planted over his grave where it remained for 15 years. When his coffin was disinterred for reburial next to that of his brother Theo, the roots of the thuja tree entwined it. Alpha thujone, the most toxic compound in absinthe, the drink that contributed to his at-risk life, the roots of the Thuja tree entwined it.

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**REFERENCES**