



Lifeworks

In a hospital garden

What ailed Vincent van Gogh? Explanations of his mental illness have covered the ground from syphilis and heavy metal poisoning to schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, Ménière's disease and epilepsy, where the balance of opinion now seems to rest. Epilepsy was the judgement of Dr. Théophile Peyron, the director of the mental asylum housed in a monastery in Saint-Rémy, Provence, where van Gogh was admitted in May 1889. Four months earlier had occurred his disastrous quarrel with Gauguin and the infamous ear-cutting incident. His rapid recovery at the hospital at Arles surprised everyone, but the townspeople did not want him among them. Nor did van Gogh feel equal to coping on his own; he described himself and his fellow patients at Saint-Rémy as "too thoroughly shattered for life outside."¹ Nonetheless, within days of his arrival he was able to report that he was painting again.

Van Gogh described the asylum's director as "a gouty little man — several years a widower, with very dark spectacles" who "seems to get no great amusement out of his job."¹ Although van Gogh had admitted himself voluntarily, his brother Theo was clearly regarded as the competent decision-maker: "The director mentioned that he had had a letter from you and had written to you; he tells me nothing and I ask him nothing, which is the simplest."¹ The treatment was also simple, consisting of rest and long soaks in stone tubs of water. The food was bad: "It tastes a bit musty, of course, as in a cockroach-infested restaurant in Paris, or in a boarding house. The poor wretches here, having absolutely nothing to do ... have no other daily distraction than to stuff themselves with chick peas, haricot beans, lentils and other groceries and colonial produce, in set amounts and at stated hours. ... [T]he digestion of these foodstuffs offers certain difficulties."² Van Gogh preferred to subsist on soup and bread.

He was sometimes worn down by the difficulty of getting along with his fellow



Vincent van Gogh, *Long Grass with Butterflies*, May 1890. Oil on canvas, 64.5 × 81 cm. National Gallery, London (UK)

patients, but even more oppressive was the religious atmosphere: "[W]hat annoys me is to keep on seeing these good women [the nuns] who believe in the Virgin of Lourdes and make up things like that, and to think that I am a prisoner under a management of that sort, which very willingly fosters these sickly religious aberrations, when the proper thing would be to cure them."¹

Van Gogh took a view of mental illness that patient advocates have trouble putting across even today: "What comforts me is that I am beginning to look upon madness as a disease like any other and to treat it as such."² His acceptance of the fact that attacks would recur only spurred him to take every opportunity to work, before "a more violent attack [destroys] forever my ability to paint."¹ Despite this fortitude, he accused himself of "cowardice" and wrote that "I know well that healing comes — if one is brave — from within."¹

Long Grass with Butterflies was painted near the end of van Gogh's year at Saint-Rémy, soon after he had suffered

another prolonged attack. He reported that when he was able to return to painting in the garden his "lucidity for work returned" and "the brushstrokes [came] like clockwork."³ Yet he longed for the kinder atmosphere and gentler sun of the north. By early summer he was under the care of Dr. Paul Gachet in the countryside of Auvers, which would prove to be the setting of his last paintings and of his death by a self-inflicted bullet wound in July 1890.

Long Grass with Butterflies is part of a small, highly focused exhibition entitled *Van Gogh's Irises: Masterpiece in Focus* on view until September 19 at the National Gallery in Ottawa.

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References

1. Roskill M, editor. *The letters of Vincent van Gogh*. New York: Atheneum; 1963. p. 317-8.
2. de Leeuw R, editor. *The letters of Vincent van Gogh*. London: Allen Lane; 1996. p. 443.
3. Bailey CB. *Van Gogh's irises: masterpiece in focus*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada; 1999.