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Linda Seidel, *Vincent's Arles: As It Is and as It Was*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. xii + 158 pp. Maps, figures, plates, and index. $22.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-226-82219-8; $21.99 U.S. (pdf/epub). ISBN 978-0-226-82298-3.

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The Provençal town of Arles provided Vincent van Gogh (1853-90) with a much-needed refuge from Paris. He arrived by train in February 1888 while snow settled on France's southernmost region. When spring emerged and he ventured around Arles, he wrote in his letters how captivated he was with his new environment. He remarked on the mountains, sea, sun, and foliage, and the images he generated--such as *The White Orchard* (1888, Van Gogh Museum) and *The Sower* (1888, Van Gogh Museum)--attest to the landscape's impact on his innovative approach. These iconic works have remained a scholarly focus of the artist's oeuvre. Deborah Silverman, for instance, heralds *Sower* as an early "symbolist" work that "marked an important point of departure for van Gogh."[1] Silverman positions van Gogh's early foray into symbolism in relation to Arles's Alyscamps, an ancient Roman necropolis, and the church of Saint-Trophime, a twelfth-century Romanesque cathedral. She convincingly argues that *Sower* combined the power of nature with that of a celestial realm and conveyed "a generalized paragon of work, light, nature, and exertion."[2] Van Gogh's painting offered, she concludes, a counterpoint to the upswell of Catholicism in 1880s Arles.

Linda Seidel's *Vincent's Arles: As It Is and as It Was* returns to the Alyscamps and Saint-Trophime to further consider how Arles's distant past informs our understanding of van Gogh's Arlesian paintings. In Seidel, we can have no better guide. The Hanna Holborn Gray Professor Emerita in Art History at the University of Chicago, Seidel has spent her career researching medieval reliquaries, pilgrimages, and religious devotion.[3] She reminds us that the ancient and medieval history pulsing through the heart of Arles has become overshadowed by van Gogh's residence, a fifteen-month sojourn that ended with an unfortunate ear-slicing incident and subsequent hospitalization in nearby Saint-Rémy. Modern-day markers of van Gogh's life in Arles let tourists know where the Yellow House once stood or the location of the *Night Café* (1888, Kröller-Müller Museum), which cannot be missed as the stone façade has been painted yellow and adorned with sunflowers. Seidel deftly connects our own obsession with van Gogh's life to the medieval pilgrims' relationship to holy relics, anchoring her study in a dialogue at the intersection of art, travel, and myth. In a carefully researched, tenderly written call to reacquaint ourselves with the Roman traces and beacons of early Christianity in Arles, Seidel shows that they have not only offered hope to pilgrims for centuries but are also intertwined with van Gogh's painterly practice.

Conquered by Roman soldiers in the first century BCE, Arles (or Arelate, as it was known) came under the fold of Julius Caesar. Relying on the twelfth-century *Pilgrim's Guide*, Seidel explains that the town would later become an important stop for pilgrims going to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, a church begun in 1075 and said to house the remains of Jesus's apostle James the Great. The Way of St. James began in the ninth century with pilgrims traversing Europe and, for some, across the southern reaches of modern-day France--with stops in Arles and Toulouse, among others--on their way to the northwestern tip of Spain. It is still a popular journey for Catholics today. Against this backdrop, Seidel turns our attention to van Gogh's residency.

In the first three chapters, Seidel explores van Gogh's engagement with the ancient and medieval remains of Arles. Her point of departure is a curious passage from one of van Gogh's letters when he first warms to Saint-Trophime. "There's a Gothic porch here that I'm beginning to think is admirable, the porch of St Trophime, but it's so cruel, so monstrous, like a Chinese nightmare, that even this beautiful monument in so grand a style seems to me to belong to another world, to which I'm as glad not to belong as to the glorious world of Nero the Roman."[4]

Although van Gogh did not depict Saint-Trophime directly, church towers appear in the background of one of his landmark paintings: *Wheatfield with View of Arles* (1888, Musée Rodin, Paris). Seidel reproduces a study of the painting, *Arles: View from the Wheatfields* (1888, J. Paul Getty Museum), to establish how van Gogh perceived Arles. Refreshingly, Seidel focuses on the conceptual underpinnings of van Gogh's work in relation to the religious iconography of his surroundings rather than detailing compositional similarities or attempting to find the exact locale of the painting. To do so, Seidel sets the Duc de Berry's prayer book (1412/16-1485/86, Musée Condé), luxuriously illustrated by the Limbourg brothers, against van Gogh's *Arles: View from the Wheatfields*. In both, a deep perspective foreground provides a main stage for peasants harvesting. The recognizable buildings of Paris and Arles respectively rise in the background of the prayer book and *Wheatfield*, yet remain disconnected from the fields. The push and pull between distant and close leads Seidel to conclude that the looming city on the horizon, a "distant, inaccessible entity, alienated from the landscape," is "how Vincent saw Arles" (p. 13). Van Gogh was from a religious background and would have understood the iconography of the relief sculpture from Saint-Trophime but the architecture remains an opaque reference in his Arlesian works.

A dichotomy between historical details and indirect references frames Seidel's key points early on in her book. For instance, she shows how a seemingly innocuous subject in van Gogh's *The Mulberry Tree* (1889, Norman Simon Art Foundation), a striking image with a central tree radiating against a crisp blue sky, relates to pilgrims traveling through Arles. A fourth-century Christian martyr, Genesius, is thought to have been beheaded by Romans on the banks of the Rhône River and buried in the Alyscamps. Seidel notes that "devotional rituals soon developed" in the necropolis and that "Christian pilgrims who went there to venerate Genesius took away with them bits of bark and branches from a mulberry tree growing nearby" (p. 57). In a second example, Seidel addresses the use of mirrors as they were significant to pilgrims because they held reflections of divine objects and were thus precious. She draws a parallel to van Gogh's use of a mirror in self-portraits, writing that "anyone standing before Vincent's self-portraits and observing his penetrating glance imagines it fixing on whatever he contemplated as he thought

about how to paint it" (p. 22). She makes a creative connection by seeing "the shiny implements pilgrims wielded [that] were transformed into sacred objects" analogous to van Gogh's portraits (p.22). *Yellow House* (1888, Van Gogh Museum) and Joseph-Étienne Roulin's *Postman* (1889, Barnes Foundation) come to mind when Seidel notes that "the places and people Vincent painted have achieved comparable status because of the renderings he made of them. For those who come looking for traces of Vincent, the sites he painted are imprinted with palpable memories of his presence" (p. 22). Seidel convincingly shows that van Gogh's Arlesian works--imagery whose artistic influences and compositional strategies have been so carefully studied--still bear oblique cultural references that bound them in a centuries-old history of ritual and mythic storytelling.

In the last two-thirds of *Vincent's Arles*, Seidel recounts a fascinating history gleaned from the twelfth-century *Pilgrim's Guide*, a bust with mysterious provenance that was dredged up from the Rhône River in 2007, and Saint-Trophime's tympanum and portal. She establishes that Arles is not relevant merely because of its famous resident. One of the most impressive chapters is her analysis of the portal of Saint-Trophime. The relief sculptures tell the story of Jesus's infancy as well as important figures from early Christianity, such as Trophimus, the evangelizer and supposed first bishop of Arles under Roman rule, and Saint James the Great. In Saint James's scene, he "travels to distant places, during which, according to various legends, he occasionally masqueraded as a pilgrim" (p. 95). In Seidel's analysis, the portal preserves the pilgrims passing through Arles in visual and unspoken ways. Lime, a principal ingredient for mortar, was sometimes carried by pilgrims in the form of marble (a lime-rich stone) from one site to the next. In Saint-Trophime's portal, marble plaques that "likely came from sarcophagi" from the nearby Alyscamps suggest that Arles's marble-rich cemetery contributed to the mortar of Saint-Trophime and beyond (p. 104). Socially unaccepted activities, like prostitution, were also indirectly referenced in the portal's lowest level, sure to be seen. In visual imagery and materiality, the portal, Seidel points out, affirmed "Arles's claim to be an ancient center of Christianity in which one's prospect for the afterlife was inextricably tied to pious deeds and virtuous behavior in this life and in this place" (p. 112). Seidel makes it clear that the portal's iconographic program would have been legible, establishing a connection between salvation, pilgrimage, and Arles.

One of the key contributions of Seidel's study is her ability to break with conventional chronological inquiries. She brings a fresh perspective to the study of a nineteenth-century artist through a discussion of ancient Roman remains, medieval Christian landmarks, and modern-day visitors to Arles. Seidel's model opens a new pathway to consider and reconsider iconic works and their relationship not just to their immediate historical circumstances, but to an ever-widening web of remarkable events that occurred well before the painting began and long after the paint dried.

NOTES

[1] Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000) p. 49, p. 82. Symbolism is a late nineteenth-century aesthetic that prioritizes an imaginative use of hue and form to elevate the viewer's experience and bring about a state of mind free from the restraints of the material world. See Robert Goldwater,

Symbolism (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) and Reinhold Heller, "Concerning Symbolism and the Structure of Surface," *Art Journal* 45 (1985): 146-153.

[2] Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, p. 90.

[3] For example, Linda Seidel, *Pious Journeys: Christian Devotional Art and Practice in the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[4] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, Wednesday, 21 or Thursday, 22 March 1888, letter 588 in *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009), https://vangoghletters.org/vg.

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