

A FIFTH NIGHT-SKY PAINTING BY VINCENT
VAN GOGH HAS REAPPEARED AFTER
BEING LOST FOR A HALF CENTURY. WHAT
CELESTIAL OBJECT DID HE INCLUDE IN
WHITE HOUSE AT NIGHT?



Identifying the "Star" in a Long-Lost van Gogh

During the last century four paintings by Vincent van Gogh have emerged as the most familiar and often-reproduced images of the night sky. *Cafe Terrace at Night* and *Starry Night Over the Rhône* depict the heavens above Arles, a town in Provence in southern France. In nearby St. Rémy he created the famous *Starry Night* as well as *Road with Cypress and Star*.

But recently, to the astonishment of the art world, a fifth night-sky painting by van Gogh has resurfaced at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. In his exhibition catalog, *Hidden Treasures Revealed* (1995), Albert Kostenevich explains:

The paintings in this book were long thought to have been destroyed in the war. Only now has it been revealed that they spent the last half century hidden in the store-rooms of the Hermitage, their existence a carefully guarded state secret. . . . Outstanding paintings include several



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To make a convincing identification of van Gogh's "star," we needed to answer four questions: Does the painting depict an actual house? Could we find this distinctive house in present-day Auvers? What is the orientation of the house? What part of the sky is shown in the painting?

by van Gogh, among them his remarkable *White House at Night*, painted six weeks before his death and depicting the kind of nocturnal sky seen in his well-known *Starry Night* . . .

The pictures in this book . . . have a most unusual history. . . . They are virtually unknown, not only to the public but to the most conscientious scholars.

During the late 1920s *White House at Night* disappeared into the private collection of Otto Krebs, a German industrialist in the village of Holzdorf. When the Nazis rose to power in the 1930s, the painting became even more inaccessible. Fearing political reprisals against collectors of so-called degenerate art, Krebs had to avoid attracting attention to his holdings because, according to Kostenevich,

to be known as a champion of modernist art did not sit well with the image of a successful businessman in the Germany of that time.

Kostenevich describes the Russian pursuit of the retreating German army in 1945:

Private collections and museum objects . . . found their way into specially prepared [German] bunkers. . . . Guns were still firing when Soviet troops began to discover these bunkers. . . . Soviet representatives sent to the East everything they considered important. . . . Art objects were coming in from different places, in railroad cars.

Van Gogh in Auvers

Although much of the history of *White House at Night* is cloaked in mystery, enough is known to establish the work as an authentic van Gogh. The painting appeared in several exhibitions in Switzerland during the 1920s, and an early black-and-white photograph of the canvas exists. Moreover, van Gogh wrote a letter (no. 642)* on June 17, 1890, to his brother, Theo, in Paris, describing a painting that portrayed

une maison blanche dans de la verdure avec une étoile dans le ciel de nuit et une lumière orangée à la fenêtre et de la verdure noire et une note rose sombre.

a white house in the greenery with a star in the night sky and an orange light in the window and dark greenery and a note of somber rose.

Van Gogh sent this letter from Auvers-sur-Oise, a town about 20 miles northwest of Paris. He spent the last 70 days of his life in Auvers and produced more than 70 paintings there before his death on July 29, 1890. This remarkable pace suggests that he likely created *White House at Night* only a short time before June 17th.

As part of a recent honors course at Southwest Texas State University, we first studied the four well-known van Gogh night-sky paintings and then, after seeing the color illustration in Kostenevich's book, we wondered if we could identify the brilliant celestial object in this rediscovered masterpiece.

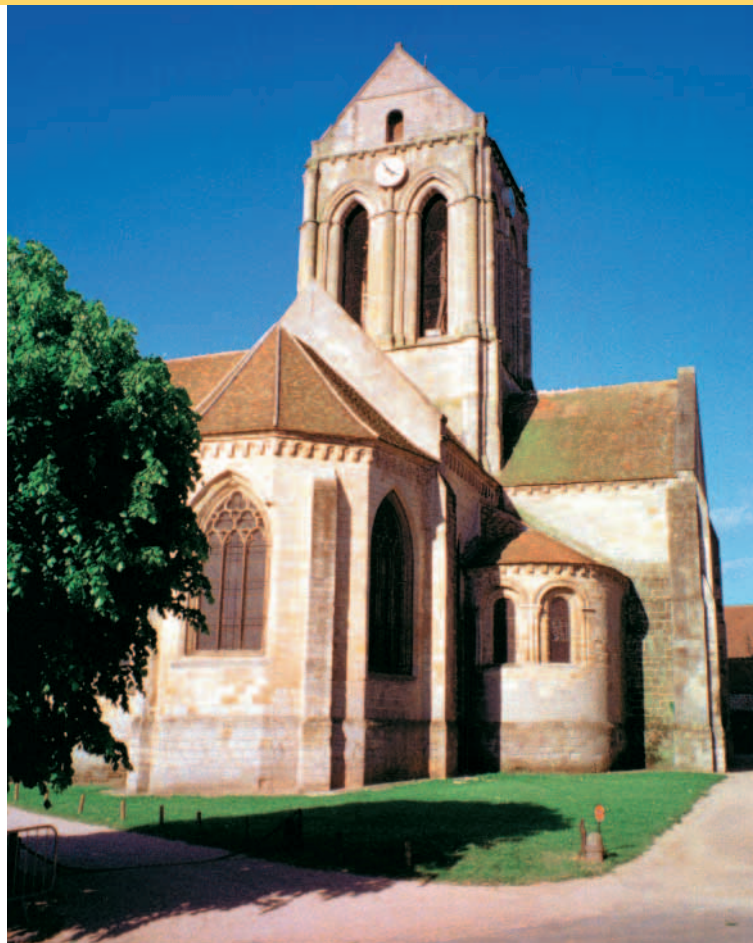
Candidates for the Star

We set our planetarium computer programs for northern France in mid-June of 1890 and looked for bright stars and planets. The brightest stars visible at this time of year were Arcturus and Vega high overhead at evening twilight, and Capella low in the northeastern sky before sunrise. A new Moon fell on June 17th, which helps explain the Moon's absence from the painting.

*Letters of Vincent van Gogh 1886–1890: A Facsimile Edition (2 volumes, Scholar Press, London, 1977). Also available at www.vangoghgallery.com. Other letters referenced in this article are from the same source.



SELF-PORTRAIT DONE AT SAINT-REMY IN LATE 1889. COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D.C.



The morning photograph (right) shows the church at Auvers, probably the easiest van Gogh painting site to locate in the town. The shadows in the painting show that van Gogh viewed the scene with afternoon light. Painting courtesy Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photograph courtesy Donald W. Olson.

Three planets were especially prominent in mid-June. Venus shone as an evening star at apparent magnitude -3.9 , visible in the western sky for about two hours after sunset. Mars (apparent magnitude -1.9), which had been in opposition on May 27, 1890, was, by mid-June, standing low in the southeast at sunset. The red planet was in retrograde motion through Scorpius and far outshone its nearby rival, the red giant star Antares. Jupiter was rising about an hour before midnight and, at apparent magnitude -2.6 , was dominating the southeastern and southern sky until sunrise.

Of course, such a list of candidates might be irrelevant if the painting were derived totally from the artist's imagination. Or the work might be a composite, with a bright star or planet from one compass direction superimposed above a foreground viewed in a different direction. To make a convincing identification of van Gogh's "star," we realized that it would be necessary to answer four questions about *White House at Night*: Does the painting depict an actual house? Could we find this distinctive house in present-day Auvers? What is the orientation of the house? What part of the sky is shown in the painting?

In Search of the White House

To find the answers, we traveled to France and spent four days in Auvers during late May 2000. Because no battles occurred in the town during either World War I or II, we had reason to hope that the house from 1890 would still be standing today. Our group was warmly received in Auvers, where municipal officials, the staff at the tourism office, and many other residents went out of their way to help us. We walked along every street and studied windows, chimneys, walls, and gates of houses for miles in each direction from the center of town. In the course of our search we passed by dozens of van Gogh painting locations, including the church, the town hall, cottages, gardens, farms, and wheat fields.

Eventually we all agreed that *White House at Night* matched only one house — a villa on the south side of the main road. The modern address is 25 & 27 rue du Général de Gaulle, and the house stands only two blocks west of the Auberge Ravoux, the inn where van Gogh resided in June 1890. Some modifications to the house have been made between 1890 and the pres-

During our visit to Auvers we stood in the exact spot where van Gogh must have set up his easel. One evening, through broken clouds in the sky to the right of the house we could see Castor and Pollux, the same stars that were adjacent to Venus in mid-June 1890.



Above: Late on spring and summer afternoons, the setting Sun obliquely illuminates the north-facing front of the house at 25 & 27 rue du Général de Gaulle in Auvers. The “White House” can still be recognized despite such changes as the dormers added to the roof.

Above right: The three windows on the left side of the second story have a noticeably uneven horizontal spacing and, more distinctively, are not directly above the windows on the ground floor. These odd misalignments exactly match the windows in van Gogh’s painting.

Right: Several local guidebooks direct visitors to this house at number 44 rue du Général de Gaulle as the site of *White House at Night* — incorrectly, in the view of the authors.

ent day. For example, dormers were added to the roof, as has been the case for many of the older houses in Auvers.

Van Gogh’s painting shows seven windows in the second story, of which the six large windows with shutters remain today, along with a blank space above the center door. We were allowed inside the house and confirmed that the narrow central window originally provided light to a stairwell and was filled in during a construction project that removed the front stairs and added a spiral staircase in a tower at the rear of the house.

As the accompanying photographs show, the three windows on the left side of the second story have a noticeably uneven horizontal spacing and, more distinctively, are not directly above the windows on the ground floor. These odd misalignments exactly match the windows in van Gogh’s painting.

After visiting bookstores in Auvers, we were gratified to learn that a memoir by a contemporary of van Gogh identified the house in the painting with the same house that we had found independently. Paul Gachet was 16 years old in 1890 when he met van Gogh through his father, a homeopathic physician who helped care for van Gogh during his stay in Auvers. According to Paul Gachet (*Les 70 jours de van Gogh à Auvers*, 1994), the “White House” was once known as the Villa des Ponceaux and was the home of a woman named Victorine, a local merchant who sold cheese, eggs, and butter.

The front of this house faces north. From van Gogh’s point of view across the street, the façade was obliquely lit from right

to left by the last rays of the Sun setting in the northwest. Our computer calculations place Venus about 15 degrees to the north of west, somewhat farther to the right than the depiction in van Gogh’s painting. But with no other bright candidates in the western sky, the brilliant object must be the planet Venus in the evening twilight glow.

During our visit to Auvers we stood in the exact spot where van Gogh must have set up his easel. One evening, through broken clouds in the sky to the right of the house we could see Castor and Pollux, the same stars that were adjacent to Venus in mid-June 1890.

In addition to Paul Gachet’s book, stores in Auvers sell a half dozen guidebooks and souvenir maps that direct visitors to the *White House at Night* location. But all these other authors identify the house as number 44 rue du Général de Gaulle!

However, the lighting seen in van Gogh’s painting cannot be matched at number 44, because this house stands on the north side of the main road. Near the summer solstice, the south-facing facade is not illuminated at either sunrise or sunset, when the light slants in from the northeast or northwest, respectively. Another inconsistency is that the second story of this house has only five windows. The mayor’s office and the tourism office gave us access to more than 300 turn-of-the-century photographs of Auvers. Two of these views showed the house at number 44 with the same five windows it now possesses and allowed us to conclude that this was not the one painted by van Gogh.

It is almost certain that van Gogh worked on "White House at Night" on June 16th, when clear blue skies prevailed all day and the observer's remarks described the weather as very beautiful.

Meteorological Evidence

Before we left France, we hoped to determine a more precise date for *White House at Night* by consulting weather records for June 1890. In the Météo France archives at Montsouris Observatory in Paris, we examined a set of large handwritten ledger books with detailed weather observations and remarks, recorded at six times during each day.

The records show a week-long period of overcast and bad weather extending from the 7th to the 14th of June, with remarks mentioning rain, heavy showers, or thunderstorms on each day. The skies began to clear on the 15th. It is almost certain that van Gogh worked on *White House at Night* on June 16th, when clear blue skies prevailed all day and the observer's remarks described the weather as very beautiful. By the 17th, when van Gogh mentioned the painting in a letter, the weather had turned bad again, with the records showing 100 percent cloud cover and the threat of thunderstorms.

Venus and Vincent van Gogh

Based on the accumulated evidence, we conclude that *White House at Night* accurately depicts the north face of the Villa des Ponceaux in Auvers near sunset on June 16, 1890, with brilliant Venus in the western sky. But this was not the first van Gogh work involving this planet — it was his third painting to include Venus!

The first such canvas is none other than the famous *St. Rémy Starry Night*, dated to mid-June of 1889. UCLA art historian Albert Boime (*Arts Magazine*: December 1984, page 86) and Harvard astronomer Charles Whitney (*Art History*: September 1986, page 351) have independently identified Venus as the very bright object near the eastern horizon in this painting. Venus reached maximum brilliance during the first week of June 1889, and a letter (no. 593) from that week definitely establishes that van Gogh had observed Venus:

Ce matin j'ai vu la campagne de ma fenêtre longtemps avant le lever du soleil avec rien que l'étoile du matin laquelle paraissait très grande.

This morning I looked at the countryside from my window for a long time before sunrise with nothing but the morning star which appeared very large.

While still in St. Rémy, van Gogh may have also witnessed the evening twilight grouping of Venus


and Mercury near a slender waxing crescent Moon on April 20, 1890. According to a previous analysis (*S&T*: October 1988, page 406), the artist used this spectacular sight as the inspiration for the sky in his *Road with Cypress and Star* painted in late April or early May. Several weeks later he drafted a letter (no. 643) from Auvers that included a sketch of this painting and recalled

une étoile à éclat exagéré.

a star with exaggerated brilliance.

While preparing the present article we realized that van Gogh's letter (no. 643) describing *Road with Cypress and Star* has been dated to June 16, 1890 — exactly the same day when he was creating *White House at Night*! Our discovery of this intriguing connection between the two paintings helps support our conclusion that both feature similar astronomical subjects — evening twilight scenes with Venus in the western sky.

Venus in 2001

As this issue of *Sky & Telescope* appears, Venus will again be dominating the evening twilight sky. The planet reached greatest eastern elongation (farthest from the setting Sun) on January 17, 2001, attained greatest brilliance during the last week of February, and remains a spectacular sight until dropping out of view near inferior conjunction on March 29th. Throughout this period the brilliant evening star will attract the attention of observers worldwide, just as it did more than a century ago when Vincent van Gogh included the planet in three of the most memorable night-sky paintings ever created. 



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