

Part 12 Horology in Art

By Bob Frishman (MA)

Vincent Van Gogh's *The Night Cafe* heavily influenced Tennessee Williams' famous play, *Streetcar Named Desire*. The author's stage notes reference the painting's "lurid nocturnal brilliance" for the pivotal scene when a drunken Stanley Kowalski strikes his wife Stella. Appearing in a new production, actor Joe Manganiello also has studied the 1888 painting at the Yale University Art Gallery, finding the playwright's inspiration and noting that "It's so funny to see the guy in the white coat and mustache—he kind of resembles Tennessee Williams."

The actor is describing the figure of Joseph Ginoux, owner of Cafe de la Gare in Arles, France. The mentally ill artist wrote, in one of hundreds of his existing letters, that it was "a place where one can ruin himself, go mad, or commit a crime." Van Gogh moved to Arles in February 1888, after two years in Paris, suffering from anxiety and depression worsened by too much alcohol and tobacco. In addition to this painting of the interior of the cafe, he completed five portraits of Madame Ginoux, the proprietor's wife. In July 1890 the artist died at age 37 from a self-inflicted gunshot to his chest. The classic 1956 film, *Lust for Life*, stars Kirk Douglas as Van Gogh in despair at never being able to truly represent on canvas what he saw in real life.

The painting certainly portrays silent static despair, with harsh colors, shimmering lamps, and a tilted perspective, as if the viewer shares the inebriation of the slumped patrons. We know the time, just after midnight, from the face of the large clock hanging above the bar. One of my first clock purchases, back in January 1982, was an almost identical example of these Morbier or Comtoise French wall clocks. Called picture frame and bakery clocks, they are described in Lawrence Seymour's 2009 book, *Morbier Clocks: History, Identification, and Repair*, available from the NAWCC store.

My clock was signed "Ch. Beile a Janze" on its alabaster dial. It is typical of these commercial clocks to show the seller's name and location. The cases are black painted wood, often decorated with contrasting incised scrolls and inlaid mother of pearl. The iron frame spring-driven 8-day movements share the hour-repeating feature of the larger weight-driven versions that are the focus of Seymour's study. Made in the Jura region of eastern France from the



Vincent Van Gogh's *The Night Cafe*. YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY.

late seventeenth century until World War I, these distinctive timekeepers were lower-price alternatives to the costly and ornate productions of the Parisian workshops. It is no surprise that such a clock oversaw one of the scenes of Vincent Van Gogh's tragic decline.

P.S. Special thanks to the Yale University Art Gallery for its enlightened "open-access" policy of freely sharing digital representations of art in its collection. Our readers may not know that publication of photographic images of paintings, even old ones long past copyright protection, often requires payment to museums and galleries. The high cost of permissions has prevented me from including, in my "Horology in Art" series, iconic paintings such as the well-known melting clocks by Salvador Dali, about which I frequently am reminded.

About the Author

Bob Frishman has restored and sold vintage clocks since 1980 and is a past-president of New England Chapter 8. He is a frequent contributor of articles and newsworthy items to the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*. His "Clocks in Art" program was presented at the 2011 NAWCC National Convention. He was head of publicity for the NAWCC Symposium "Time for Everyone," November 7-9, 2013, in Pasadena, CA. Bob can be reached at www.bell-time.com.