

# Accidental Entrepreneurship: Uncovering the Value of Van Gogh's Last Painting Inspiration

**Sabine Jentjens**

*ISC Paris, France*

**Fernanda Arreola**

*ESSCA, France*

**Abstract.** In 2020, a retired French couple suddenly learned that their property was home to a recently discovered cultural heritage, the relics of the roots that world-known painter Vincent Van Gogh immortalized in his last painting in 1890. This unexpected discovery forced the couple to question what they should do, later deciding to accept the responsibility to develop this cultural heritage site and share it with the world of Van Gogh admirers. This case study offers insight into an accidental entrepreneurial venture by discussing the first steps of an entrepreneurial endeavour. It addresses the debate on the entrepreneurial opportunity processes, opposing alertness to opportunity versus an intentional desire to open a business. The case further illustrates the international business perspective of entrepreneurship. Students are invited to engage in opportunity evaluation and internationalization avenues based on a real case.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurship, opportunity evaluation, Dunning's eclectic paradigm, cultural heritage, business model canvas.

## 1. Introduction

In 2020, Helene and Jean-Francois Serlinger, a retired French couple with some former entrepreneurial experience, learned that the tree roots that inspired world famous artist Vincent Van Gogh's last painting were lying in their backyard in the French village of Auvers-sur-Oise. This discovery forced them to consider what to do about this cultural relic of a world-famous artist. The journey into the story of the Van Gogh Roots discovery, and the Serlingers' decision to engage in a cultural venture, by landscaping and opening the site to visitors and making it nationally and internationally known, encourages students to explore and to understand entrepreneurial opportunity dynamics.

*This shortened version of the article is for promotional purposes on publicly accessible databases.*

*Readers who wish to obtain the full text version of the article can order it via the url*

<https://www.neilsonjournals.com/JIBE/abstractjibe20vg.html>

*Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson [pneilson@neilsonjournals.com](mailto:pneilson@neilsonjournals.com)*

*© NeilsonJournals Publishing 2025.*

## 2. The Beginning of the Van Gogh Roots Story

Vincent van Gogh, a Dutch Post-Impressionist painter of the late 19th century, is renowned for his expressive use of colour and brushwork, which produced iconic paintings like *Starry Night* and *Sunflowers*. Most of his over 600 oil paintings, produced in France, rank now among the world's most valuable<sup>1</sup>.

On May 20, 2020, two representatives from the Van Gogh Institute knocked on the door of Jean-François and Helene Serlinger, a retired couple living in the picturesque French village of Auvers-sur-Oise, where Vincent Van Gogh painted more than 70 paintings before his death. They brought the unexpected news that inside the Serlingers' estate laid the piece that inspired Van Gogh's last painting: *The Roots*. After the first excitement of this extraordinary discovery, the Serlingers began to wonder what they had to do with this cultural relic: keeping for themselves, selling, or sharing with the world?

## 3. The Discovery of "The Roots"

In the spring of 2020, as France was under lockdown, Wouter van der Veen, the scientific director of the Van Gogh Institute in Auvers-sur-Oise<sup>2</sup>, was confined to his home in eastern France. While browsing through a collection of old postcards from Auvers-sur-Oise, his attention was captured by one labelled Auvers-sur-Oise, rue Daubigny (see Appendix 1), which instantly reminded him of Van Gogh's final painting in 1890, *Tree Roots* (van der Veen 2020).

As Van der Veen (2020, p. 9) recalls in his book:

'(...) I remember opening a picture of Van Gogh's last painting on my screen and comparing all the elements one by one, feverishly looking for something that would disprove the improbable and dizzying theory that was taking shape in front of my eyes: I was looking at Van Gogh's *Tree Roots*, but twenty years later. Which meant I suddenly knew where Van Gogh had spent his last day and that an enduring mystery about the end of his life had been solved.'

Van der Veen shared his hypothesis with curators at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, where the painting (Appendix 2) is displayed and after five weeks of analysis, the conclusion was clear: the location of the scene in Van Gogh's *Tree Roots* had been identified. The direction of the sunlight in the painting suggested Van Gogh painted it in the late afternoon of July 27, 1890, just before returning to the Ravoux Inn—where he would later end his life (van der Veen 2020).

On July 29, 2020, an event was held at the Serlinger estate to officially announce the discovery of the roots. Attendees included local entrepreneurs (notably the owner of Ravoux Inn, where Van Gogh spent his final days),

1. Source, <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/art-and-stories/vincent-s-life-1853-1890>

2. <https://www.institutvangogh.org/en/institut-van-gogh.php>