

Art PEAK



St. Paul de Vence is a spectacular tangle of medieval dwellings and cobbled passages immured behind massive 13th century ramparts. Its lofty perch on a spur in the craggy foothills of the Maritime Alps offers stunning views across cypress-studded valleys toward the distant Mediterranean and the azure shores of Le Cap d'Antibes.

It's no wonder artists and artisans have been attracted to the place since the Middle Ages. Humble weavers, and stone and wood carvers abounded in the early days, but

later, a number of those who walked the town's medieval streets would become great names in 20th century art.

They first came in the 1920s, a cadre of avant-garde artists with a common passion for expanding their creativity into realms few others appreciated in that era. Drawn from their studios in the surrounding countryside, they were attracted not by St. Paul's history or its panoramic views, but by a cool shady inn built on a rocky outcrop just outside the village walls. There they would meet, eat, drink and perhaps play a form of *boules* known locally as *pétanque* in the elm-shaded outdoor square.



Clockwise, from top left: Outdoor dining on the patio of the Hotel St. Paul de Vence overlooking the cypress-studded valley below. The Medieval cobbled square and walkways of the Place de la Fontaine mark the center of the village. A huge mosaic by Léger is built into an ivy-clad wall of the outdoor dining terrace at La Colombe d'Or. The village cemetery, where Marc Chagall is buried, overlooks a valley that sweeps down to the distant Mediterranean.





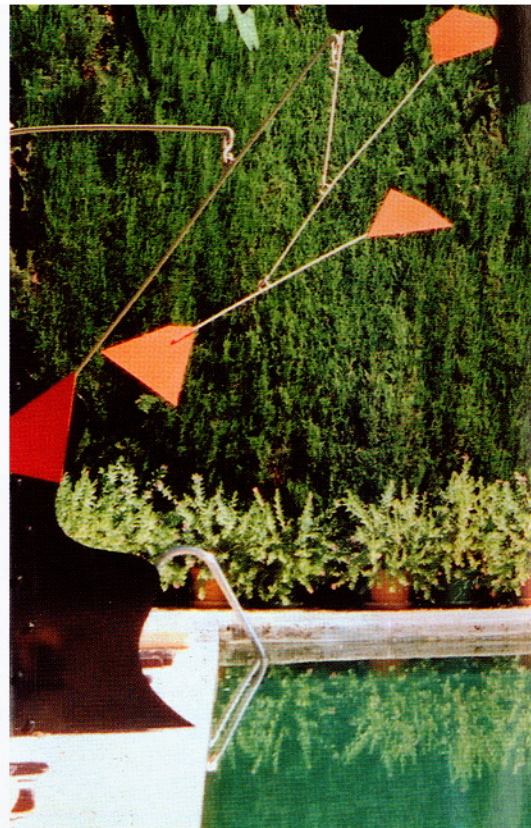
Clockwise, from above: A white mosaic dove by Braque and a Calder mobile grace the swimming pool at La Colombe d'Or. Outside the Café de la Place is a sandy square shaded by elms where Marc Chagall and friends would play pétanque. Lunch is served on the terrace of the Hotel Metrofole in Beaulieu-su-Mer, a short distance from art sites. The main street, known as *rue Grande*, is a cobbled passage little more than a hand-drawn cart wide. Many galleries are in former hallways or living rooms in the arts-crowded community. There's even a gallery parked in a former garage.



Although the artists were often short of funds, the innkeeper, Bernard Roux, welcomed and encouraged them, willingly accepting their art in exchange for food, wine and lodging. It was the smartest thing he ever did. In addition to making him a very wealthy man, it began a revival for St. Paul de Vence.

Among the first artists to pay their way in kind at the inn were Chagall, Signac, Modigliani, Bonnard and Soutine. Among the many that followed were Picasso, Miró, Matisse and Dufy. Within the span of a few years, the Roux family found themselves owners of one of the finest 20th century private art collections in the world.

Today, the old inn is an internationally renowned hotel and restaurant known as La Colombe d'Or. Inside, enough 20th century masterworks to fill a small museum decorate almost every available space. Some are large, impressive and of unmistakable origin. Others are little more than a doodle on a scrap of paper pinned to a corridor wall. Outside are works as big as the stature of the artists who created them. A huge mosaic by Léger is built into an ivy-clad wall of the summer dining terrace. Another



Village

mosaic of a dove by Braque is installed in a wall fringing the swimming pool, one end of which is overhung by a Calder mobile as tall as the cedar trees that flank it.

Through the years, the eye-popping collection has attracted an impressive list of celebrity guests that have included Greta Garbo, Sophia Loren, Yul Brynner, Burt Lancaster, Yves Montand, David Niven, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Roger Moore, Tony Curtis and more. And they keep coming. Last July, Michael Caine swung by on vacation.

Located outside the village is the Fondation Maeght, a world renowned museum opened in 1946, displaying an even more extensive and impressive collection of 20th century paintings, sculpture and ceramics, many by the same artists, but largely donated or acquired from a variety of private collections. This gem, however, is frequently overlooked in favor of its more celebrity-associated rival.

Both destinations helped put St. Paul on the map with artists and collectors alike. Today, dozens of studios and ateliers fill the little village and more than 70 fine art galleries attract an average of 7,000 visitors a day.

Main Street is the *rue Grande*, although it is hardly grand by today's standards. It is a narrow, cobbled passageway little more than the width of a hand-drawn cart in some places. Underfoot, the cobbles are laid out in decorative designs, with a complex floral still life here and abstract swirls resembling clouds there. The little street snakes through the village from one side to the other, rising and falling, twisting and turning, lined with shops like a medieval mall.



At first glance, Naples and St. Paul de Vence, the most visited medieval village in France, appear to have little in common. One is a sea level community less than 100 years old; the other is an ancient village on top of a mountain. However, they share one characteristic: Both are thriving art centers attracting thousands of visitors each year. While dozens of such communities are sprinkled throughout Europe, with the South of France housing plenty of its own, this little village has a unique and inspiring history, beginning with the story of how it became an art destination.





Some of the tightly cramped shops, often sweetly scented with lavender, sell herbs, olives and oils from the region; others stock fabrics, tablecloths, napkins and bags in the distinctive patterns typical of Provence. But these shops are mere diversions. Those offering art greatly outnumber them.

Some of the galleries are upscale, spacious and well appointed. They exhibit paintings and sculptures with attitudes, and prices inflated enough to give even the fattest wallet a hernia. Others are in a sliver of space little more than a doorway wide. There's even one called The Garage Gallery parked in a single room .

Artists often own these quaint showrooms, which have the more affordable and unusual art. One such gallery offers tiny miniatures of famous French shops, cafés and restaurants individually crafted from Limoges porcelain. Another displays sculptures created in unusual abstract shapes that when lit cast shadows that look like a violin, a flower or a shapely nude.

While Marc Chagall spent the latter part of his life in St. Paul and is buried in the village cemetery, others who came here decades ago are more notably connected to other surrounding communities.

Picasso, who spent most of his life in Provence, lived in nearby Mougins, another picturesque mountain village now also peppered with galleries and studios. In 1946, he was loaned space for a studio in the

Galleries



Château Grimaldi down the road in Antibes. During the six months he worked there, he created more than 70 drawings and paintings, which he donated to the city at the end of his stay. Those works form the nucleus of the Picasso Museum that also displays the art of Ernst, Léger, Miro and Nicolas de Staël.

Just a quick brush stroke away from St. Paul lies the town of Cagnes-sur-Mer. Here is Les Collettes, the wonderfully tranquil retreat that was once Renoir's home and now is a museum. On display are a few of his original paintings, drawings and sketches. In a small studio his easel, paints, brushes and palette are poised as if awaiting his return.

In Nice, a museum dedicated to the life and works of Henri Matisse sits close to the Hotel Regina where he once lived. In the mountain village of Eze, just outside Monte Carlo, ascent to the galleries and studios above is permitted only by mule or on foot.

Provence holds many places of interest to the art lover; a map pin-pointing them all would resemble a pointillist painting. But there is none that can rival St. Paul where so many giant's paths crossed, creating a legacy still thriving almost a century later. **NI**

Roger Weatherburn Baker, a former journalist, owns The Weatherburn Gallery in Naples and travels through Europe in the summer looking for art.