

Van Gogh's Postman : the portraits of Joseph Roulin

[Kirk Varnedoe]

Author

Gogh, Vincent van, 1853-1890

Date

2001

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

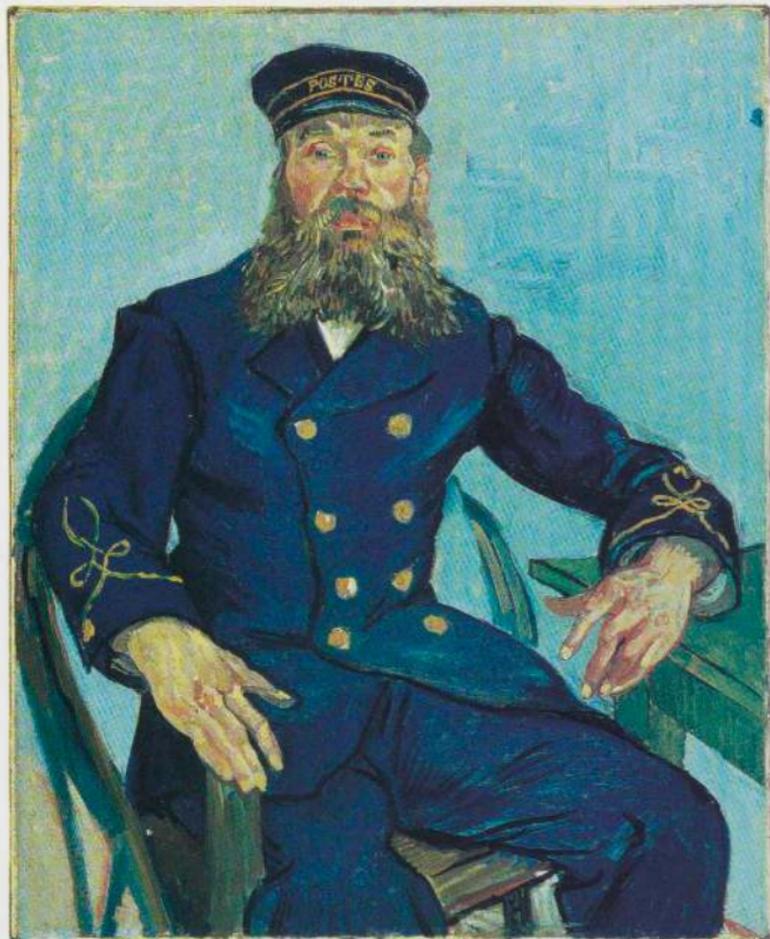
Exhibition URL

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VAN GOGH'S *Postman*

THE PORTRAITS OF JOSEPH ROULIN



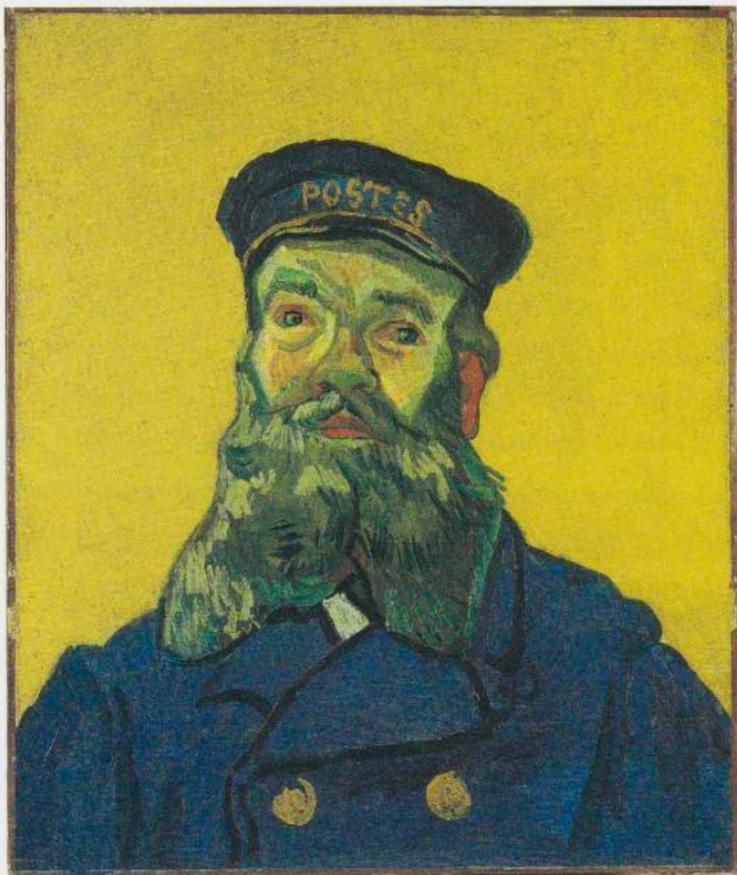
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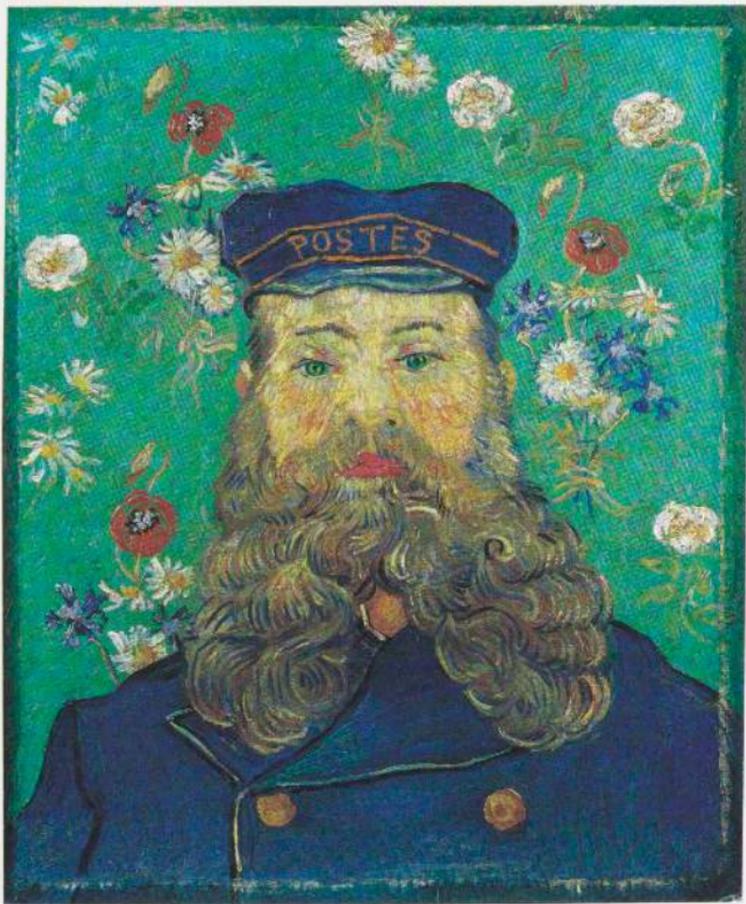
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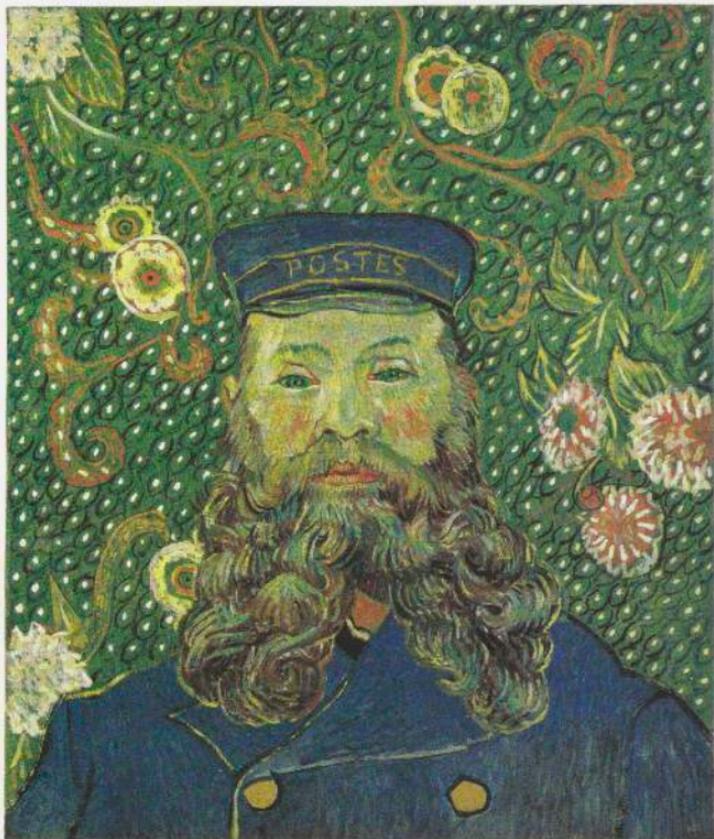
PORTRAIT OF POSTMAN ROULIN. 1888. Oil on canvas, 25¼ x 18⅞" (64 x 47.9 cm). The Detroit Institute of Arts. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Buhl Ford II. Photograph ©2000 The Detroit Institute of Arts



THE POSTMAN JOSEPH ROULIN. 1888. Oil on canvas, 25³/₈ x 21¹/₄" (65 x 54 cm). Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Switzerland. Gift of the heirs of Georg Reinhart, 1955



THE POSTMAN ROULIN. 1889. Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{2}{3}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (65 x 54 cm).
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, the Netherlands



PORTRAIT OF JOSEPH ROULIN. 1889. Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (64.6 x 55.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A. M. Burden, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Rosenberg, Nelson A. Rockefeller, Mr. and Mrs. Armand Bartos, Sidney and Harriet Janis, Mr. and Mrs. Werner E. Josten, and Loula D. Lasker Bequest (by exchange). Photograph ©2000 The Museum of Modern Art, New York



THE POSTMAN JOSEPH ROULIN. 1888. Brown ink and black chalk, 20¼ x 16⅝" (51.4 x 42.2 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art. George Gard de Sylva Collection. Photograph ©2000 Museum Associates, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. All Rights Reserved

PORTRAIT OF THE POSTMAN ROULIN. 1888. Pen and ink on paper, 12½ x 9½" (31.8 x 24.1 cm). Private collection

During the year Vincent van Gogh spent in the South of France, between late winter 1888 and spring 1889, he made six paintings and three drawings of the Arles postman Joseph Roulin.

The Museum of Modern Art acquired one of the painted portraits in 1989. This exhibition reunites it with all but one of the other paintings (the remaining canvas, owned by the Barnes Foundation, cannot be lent by stipulation of the Foundation's charter), and with two of the three drawings (the other, owned by The J. Paul Getty Museum, could not be lent for reasons of conservation).

Roulin was not a door-to-door letter carrier, but an official in charge of sorting mail at the Arles railway station. His rank bolstered his pride in the blue uniform, ornamented with gold buttons and braid, that he seems to have worn night and day. He probably met van Gogh soon after the artist arrived (they lived on the same street), and he was among the first to consent to pose when van Gogh decided to paint an array of picturesque local figures. In various letters, the artist sized up his subject as "a man more interesting than most," and noted his distinguishing characteristics: a short-nosed physiognomy, reminiscent of Socrates; the flushed coloration of a heavy drinker; and vehemently populist politics.

The letters attest that van Gogh's first portrait of Roulin, done in the early days of August, was the seated half-length image—with erect torso, sprawled arms, and huge, gothically crimped hands—now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. But, concerned by the awkwardness with which his sitter posed, the artist almost immediately began another head-and-shoulders picture (now in The Detroit Institute of

Arts), and worked on both simultaneously. Still getting to know Roulin, he may have thought of these pictures as capturing a type more than probing an individual. He spoke of treating the postman in the manner of Daumier, the renowned master of caricature, and boasted of having done the head-and-shoulders image on the fly, in a single session.

During these initial sittings, Roulin's wife gave birth to their third child. It was an event that had the postman glowing with pride and that doubtless increased the estimation in which van Gogh—perpetual loner, tormented by his sterile alienation from love—held him as a figure of virile energy. In November, van Gogh pursued a concerted series of portraits of the whole Roulin family, including the two sons, aged eleven and sixteen. It was in this context that he made his third oil portrait of the father, now in the Kunstmuseum Winterthur. The slightly stiff alertness of the initial encounter in August was replaced by a tilted head and a more distant, possibly melancholy, expression. The forms of this painting are bounded in softly heavy outlines, with the features and beard rendered

more summarily, and its yellow ground may reflect experimentation with the decorative strategies favored by van Gogh's fellow painter Paul Gauguin—who by then had come from Brittany to live and work with him in Arles.

These two artists had sharply different temperaments and ideas about art, and Gauguin's sojourn produced a friction that culminated, notoriously, in an emotional explosion in late December, during which van Gogh severed his own ear. Following that incident of derangement, it was Roulin who took the artist home, then saw him into the hospital, looked after his affairs during recuperation, and shepherded his efforts to return to normal life. Never were the postman and the painter closer, nor van Gogh more in debt to their friendship, than during these weeks. But the artist's letters give no indication of any new posing before January 21st, when Roulin left Arles for a better-paying post in Marseilles. Since the two men saw each other only intermittently thereafter, scholars have speculated that the remaining portraits may not have been painted from life but from earlier pictures and from

memory. These last portraits are now in the Barnes Foundation (not shown here), the Kröller-Müller Museum, and The Museum of Modern Art. Their dating and sequence are still debated. Nearly identical in scale and in their head-and-shoulders format, they share a hieratically frontal, mug-shot pose, a roiling beard, and (in varying degrees of graphic intensity) a backdrop of a wallpaper-like floral pattern, parallel with other portraits van Gogh conceived that January. The Museum of Modern Art's picture is the most intensely stylized of these works. In it, Roulin's beard takes on a cascading turbulence like that of van Gogh's characteristic cypress trees, and the whorling floral backdrop seems akin to the sky of *The Starry Night*. The artist's deepened feeling for this compassionate friend and protector, expressed through a newly aggressive commitment to the abstracted means of patterned linear energy and heightened color, yielded an imposing, elevated icon of Roulin's persona, sharply transformed from the more garrulous, naturalistic characterizations of the previous summer.

Kirk Varnedoe

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Van Gogh's Portraits of Joseph Roulin

Tuesday, March 6, 6:30 P.M.

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2

In this lecture, Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, will trace the development of Vincent van Gogh's crucial friendship with the Arles postman Joseph Roulin, and examine in depth the six different portraits van Gogh made of this remarkable man. The changing ways in which Roulin is portrayed will be examined in light of his deepening relationship with the artist, and as a case study in van Gogh's development of a new, modern approach to portraiture.

Tickets are \$8; members \$7; students and seniors \$5 and are available at the Lobby Information Desk.

For more information, please call the Department of Education at (212) 708-9781.

This exhibition is made possible by BNP Paribas, Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder, and an anonymous donor.

Front cover:

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