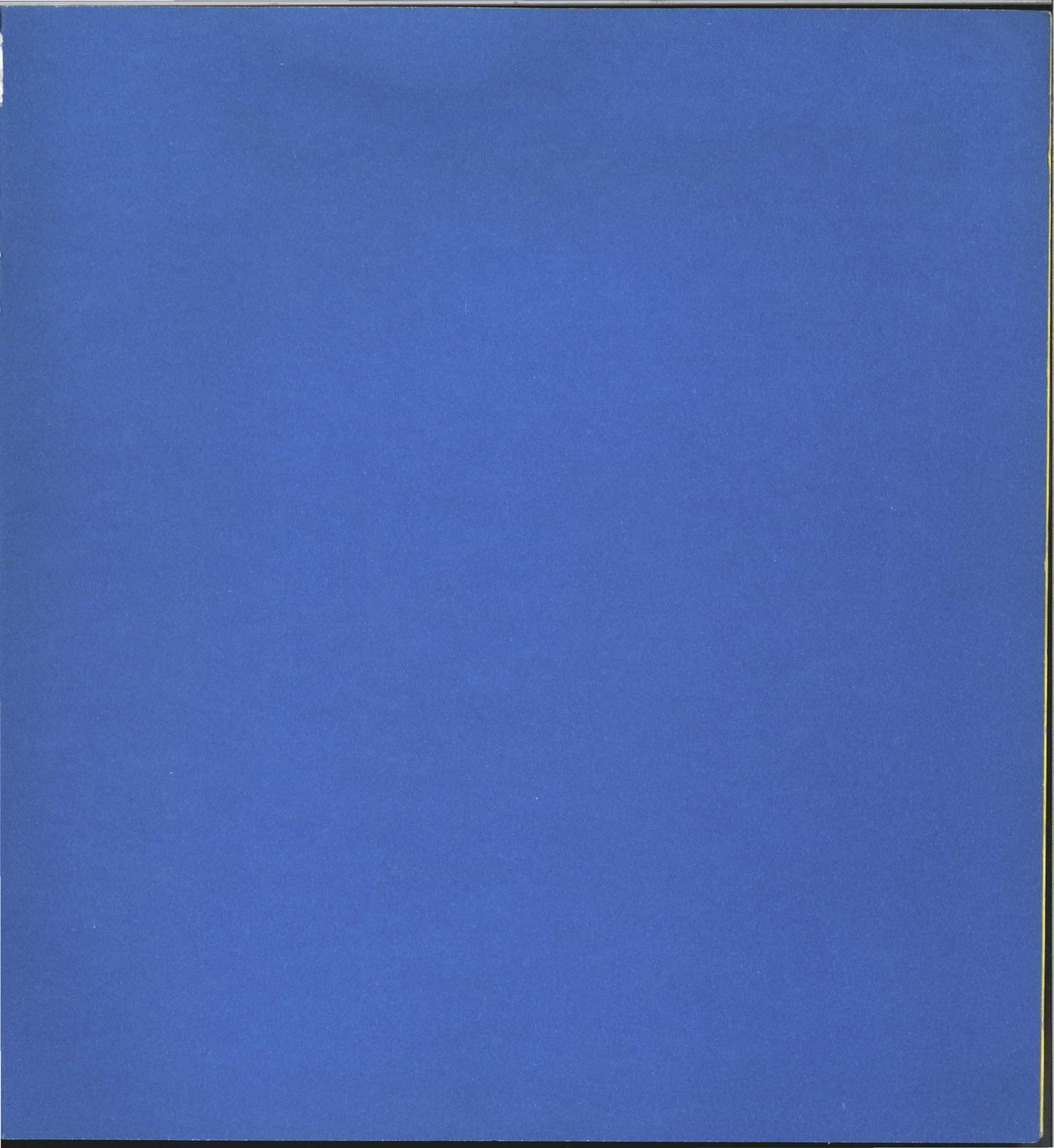


1975  
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# VAN GOGH in Auckland



AUCKLAND CITY  
ART GALLERY

# VAN GOGH in Auckland

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## FOREWORD

The exhibition *Vincent Van Gogh in Auckland* consists of paintings on loan from key art galleries and museums overseas and represents up to two years of planning and negotiation.

The success of any exhibition depends upon the stature of the artist, or artists, concerned and the availability of works. *Vincent Van Gogh in Auckland* is a small exhibition, in terms of the number of paintings included, by an artist of the highest stature whose works are constantly in demand the world over.

The Auckland City Art Gallery has been very fortunate in assembling eight paintings which span the five most productive years of Vincent Van Gogh's career.

Planning an exhibition of this scale involves not only the professional staff of the Art Gallery but also Auckland City Council itself through the Cultural Activities & Property Committee and especially through the Art Gallery Sub-committee, appointed by Council to supervise the Gallery and develop policies that ensure as high a standard as possible in exhibitions and in all its other activities. Evidence of the work of these committees has already been seen in exhibitions such as *John Constable the Natural Painter, 17th Century Pastoral Holland* and now *Vincent Van Gogh in Auckland*.

Sponsorship has an important place in the Auckland City Art Gallery's exhibition programme. Without sponsorship major exhibitions would be virtually impossible to stage. The main burden falls upon Auckland City Council, but the burden has been considerably lessened by the support of the following sponsors who have helped to make this exhibition possible: Johnson Wax New Zealand Limited and TV2 South Pacific Television.

On behalf of the Auckland City Council, we wish to thank the Directors and Governing Boards of the Art Galleries and Museums who have generously contributed works to the exhibition. They are: The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, U.S.A.

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Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, U.S.A.

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3 Glasgow Museums & Art Galleries, Scotland  
4 The Baltimore Museum of Art, U.S.A.  
5 The Art Institute of Chicago, U.S.A.  
6,8 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, U.S.A.  
7 The Philadelphia Museum of Art, U.S.A.

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## INTRODUCTION

With this small collection of paintings by Vincent van Gogh, we have at once a range of his post-Dutch period works, extending from immediately after his arrival in Paris to within weeks of his self-inflicted death on 29th July 1890 at Auvers-sur-Oise.

In March 1886, Vincent arrived in Paris from Antwerp, where he had spent some three months en route from Holland. In Paris he was immediately confronted with the light and colour of Impressionism, and the startling drawing and compositional devices of the Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints which had recently found their way in the form of wrappings to Europe.

These were nothing less than a revelation to his artistic sensibility, and the dark sombre social realism of his preceding periods (*Potato Eaters*, for example), particularly of Nuenen (December 1883–November 1885), was cast aside in favour of a new Impressionist palette. His first experiments were those of an Impressionist his paint application being always somewhat broader and more vigorous than that of the preceding generation of Impressionists. These experiments carried him across the whole gamut of Impressionist optical illusionism, and by 1887 we find him employing a personal variant upon the delicate divisionist techniques of Seurat and Signac. An illusionist mode of painting concerned exclusively with rendering effects of light and atmosphere was destined to be far too restrictive to a painter of Vincent's emotional intensity. Even in his earliest Impressionist studies, such as the three works *Moulin de la Galette*, *Head of a Man* and the *Bowl with Summer Flowers*, all of the summer of 1886, his drawing retains the breadth of the Dutch works and struggles to shed itself of the constraints of a purely sensory art form.

When we look at Van Gogh's painting, we are witnessing the collision between sensory art in its final manifestation, as Impressionism certainly is, and Vincent's talent, swollen with emotional intensity, substituting the spiritual for the physical. Colour ceases to be a mere vehicle for the snapshot freezing of transitory light and atmospheric effects, becoming in its place the agent of expression, a symbol for experience. Colour is for Vincent and his numerous successors the means by which emotions felt, rather than visual phenomena seen, could be given tangible form. In 1888, in writing of the *Night Cafe*, he says, "It is colour not locally true from the point of view of the trompe l'oeil realist, but colour to suggest some emotion of an ardent temperament," and, "Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use colour more arbitrarily, so as to express myself more forcibly."

These three early Paris works show Vincent busy with three of the themes which would most fully occupy his energies, still life: especially bowls of flowers with the opportunity they presented for bringing sharp clear colours in combination; landscape — and here in one of the numerous paintings he painted of the Montmartre windmills, is revealed in the foreground the accentuated brushwork to become such an unforgettable quality of his art; and finally, portraiture. In all three, the motif itself is vigorously painted with free brushstrokes, but placed against, and quite separate from, the much more controlled flat backgrounds.

Two works from the Spring of 1887 are included in this collection, again, one a still life, *A Pair of Shoes*, and the other a landscape, *Fishing in Spring*. Indeed, flower studies and still lifes, landscapes in and about Paris and self portraits, constitute the bulk of his Parisian work. Already in these two works we are able to see that background and motif have become much more one, the slashing brushstrokes previously concentrated upon the central subject are carried through into the previously flat, closed backgrounds. The entire surface of the painting has become much more taut, and the pictorial space shallower and less arbitrary. In the painting *A Pair of Shoes*, ground plane and background have almost become one continuing, flowing surface, breaking with academic convention and clearly delineated space. *Fishing in Spring* reveals also Vincent's concern with perspective which was engaging him at this time. Whilst the entire surface of the picture is more tautly organised with the painting of the sky not markedly different from that of the foreground or the water, we find a much more conventional attitude to space and greater depth. The foreground, boat and trees to the left, acts as a *repoussoir* assisting in the illusion of depth. The skiff, from which the man is fishing, is placed in a strongly diagonal position thrusting the eye from the foreground deeper into pictorial distance, a movement carried on more gently by the gradual upward sweep of the far bank of the river. The scene is one of tranquillity and of sunlight, a moment of warmth, stillness and peace, produced when Vincent, inspired by the contacts he had made via his brother Theo with the avant-garde of Parisian art, was probably enjoying the greatest personal tranquillity experienced at any time during his brief ten-year career as an artist.

The fifteen months spent at Arles (February 1888–May 1889) are represented here by a key personality and his wife and child, the *Postman Joseph Roulin*. From his correspondence we are able to experience Vincent's intense loneliness in provincial France, quite a contrast to the sense of companionship and identity he had felt in Paris. One of his closest friends was Roulin, and Vincent was to paint six portraits of him: all five others are frontal heads and shoulders in varying degrees of stylization. In addition there exist three drawings of the

same subject, two of which employ the same pose as this piece.

In letter S 17 he refers to this painting and one of the heads: "So I have now two figures in hand, one the head, and one a half-length with the hands of an old postman in a dark blue uniform. He has a head like Socrates, interesting to paint."

In letter W 5, he expresses admiration for his subject, stating "This man is an ardent republican and socialist, reasons quite well, and knows a lot of things."

The portraits, particularly the heads, reveal a real warmth, a real affection, an exchange between artist and subject — a relationship which is hinted at in letter S 18: "Last week I did not one only, but two portraits of my postman, a half-length with the hands (F 432— our picture), and a head, life size. The good fellow, as he would not accept money, cost more eating and drinking with me, and I gave him besides the Lantern of Rochefort. But that is a trifling evil, considering that he posed very well . . ."

The contour of the figure strongly placed silhouetted against a light background, is energetic and bold, and the characterisation of his subject is so very great that it is as if we are allowed to share something of the intimacy of their relationship.

In the Roulin household, Vincent was able to share in the friendly family circle and he painted a number of portraits of Madame Roulin, with and without her baby. The painting which we have here, *Mother Roulin with her Baby*, is one of the earlier works. There followed later a whole series of Madam Augustine Roulin, dressed in green, sitting against a swirling green and orange floral background with bright red chair and floor. In these she holds the string of the cot, *la berceuse*, from which the paintings derive their names. The string is the umbilical cord connecting mother to the child unseen in these paintings, the physical expression of the family bond — the family and love which Vincent so desperately sought and needed and which was denied him.

The *Houses at Auvers with one Figure* dates from within a week or two of the artist's death, the result of a self-inflicted gunshot wound, at the end of July 1890. Vincent had moved in May to Auvers-sur-Oise, to be closer to Theo, the brother with whom he had engaged in a voluminous correspondence (more than 750 letters are extant), and, who had recently married and shifted there. Theo arranged accommodation for Vincent in agreeable surroundings, with the congenial patron and connoisseur, Dr Gachet, who both admired and understood his patient's art. There a relationship such as he had found with the Roulins developed, and it was hoped that Vincent would regain his health. There began a tremendous burst of activity, with paintings being completed at an average of one a day during the last two-and-a-bit months of his life.

This landscape with its agitated lines, organic twisting impastos of paint, thick swirling encrusted clouds in the sky and perspective flattened in response rather than denial of the surface of the canvas, is a fine example of these last works. Here we have in its final maturity Van Gogh's symbolic and expressive use of colour, and his re-evaluation of pictorial perspective, freeing art from the quasi-scientific restrictions which had incarcerated western painting since the fifteenth century.

We are now so familiar with the art of Van Gogh and popularised notions of it, that it is sometimes difficult to realise how revolutionary and how prophetic it was in the final decade of the last century. It appeared almost brutal to the nineteenth century eye — a denial of the yardstick of 'good taste', but to those of vision, and to younger generations of artists, it was a light shining in the sky. Van Gogh was much more than a prophet providing something upon which others might build, he was a giant, and few have been privileged to even approach the heights he attained. Yet appreciation followed his death quickly, although in his own lifetime few possessed the insight of the artist Emile Bernard (1868-1941), an early promoter of Van Gogh's genius in France.

The decade after Vincent's death, the 1890's, saw steadily increasing recognition of the significance of his art: Theo's widow was a promoter of considerable energies, and the art critic, H.P. Bremmer (1871-1956) successfully persuaded Mrs Kroller-Muller to collect his works, amassing what is now unquestionably one of the two most important Van Gogh holdings. It was not until the early years of the new century that we find a creative response to Vincent's art, in Germany with the Expressionists and in France with the Fauves. Following their example, collectors slowly, but with steadily increasing enthusiasm, began to take an interest in the works — romanticising literature began to appear, and developed into an avalanche of writings obscuring the nature of his art in romanticised and pseudo-psychological works, all, one suspects, more entranced by his attachments to women, his fits and the incident involving his ear, than the value of his art as art. Fortunately the tide has turned, more and more of the public are seeking a better understanding than superficial, vulgarly romanticised biographies are capable of providing. These eight works represent an opportunity for our public long deprived of the opportunity of a meaningful first-hand contact with Van Gogh's art, to purge their minds of ears and epilepsy and to feast their senses.

## CATALOGUE

Sizes of paintings in this catalogue are given in millimetres height before width.



1 *Head of a Man: three quarters to the left*

Paris, Summer 1886, (F 209, H 220), oil on canvas on panel, 310 x 395mm.

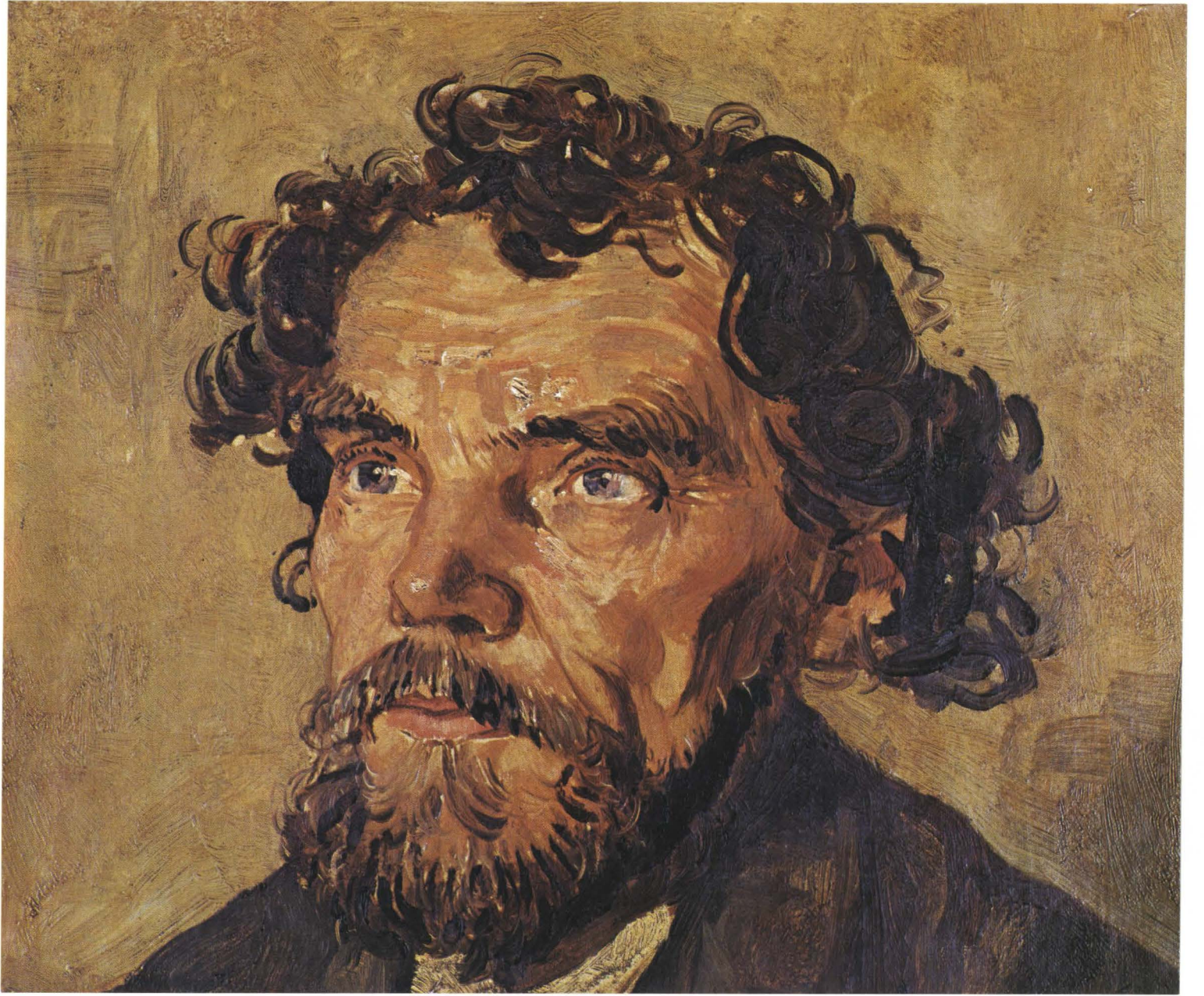
On loan from Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, cat. 1948, no. 57 (Felton bequest 1939)

There has been some uncertainty about this portrait. Early catalogues by Faille state that it was painted in Antwerp in January 1886 and Faille assured Tralbaut, a later cataloguer, that the Dutch painter A.H.C. Briët remembered the man who sat for the portrait from the time when he, Briët, studied in Antwerp. Tralbaut, however, thought that the style indicates the Paris period and this idea was accepted by the later editors of the Faille catalogue. They comment on its stylistic connections with still lifes and portraits painted in Paris in the summer of 1886. One of these still lifes *Bowl with Summer Flowers* is included in this exhibition (cat 2), and *Moulin de la Galette* (cat 3) was also painted at about this time.

Portraits and figure groups had formed an important element in Van Gogh's earlier work and always later were a favourite subject, but they rarely occur among the works painted in Paris in 1886. Only this portrait, one of a woman (Faille 215b) and a few self portraits are of this period.

This portrait, thought at one time to be of the painter Meyer de Haan, still retains characteristics of Van Gogh's earlier work, the more flowing brush work, the more naturalistic use of colour, the brown, dark, 'Dutch' palette and denser handling in contrast to the hatched brushwork, the expressionistic colour and brighter palette of his work of the following year.

This is what he had come to Paris to correct through contact with the Impressionists and their works.



- 2 *Still Life: Bowl with Summer Flowers (Heliopsis and Gypsophila?)*  
Paris, Summer 1886, (F 251, H 295), oil on canvas, 495 x 610mm.  
Signed *Vincent* (LR).  
On loan from Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, inv. no. 5808

Prevented by his limited finances from painting the figure during the summer of 1886 in Paris, Van Gogh turned to still lifes and especially flowers for his subjects. 'I have lacked money for paying models else I had entirely given myself to figure painting. But I have made a series of color (sic) studies in painting, simply flowers, red poppies, blue corn flowers and myosotys, white and rose roses, yellow chrysanthemums — seeking oppositions of blue with orange, red and green, yellow and violet seeking *les tons rompus et neutres* to harmonise brutal extremes. Trying to render intense colour and not a grey harmony.' (extract from letter in English to English painter Levens, 1886).

It is evident that these are experimental paintings to clear his palette. 'He paints chiefly flowers especially to make the colour of his next pictures brighter and clearer', wrote his brother Theo to his mother.

Colour in this study is still relatively naturalistic and has not achieved the overall intensity and brightness of the flower paintings for which he is so well known — the sunflowers and irises, painted three and four years later.



3 *Moulin de la Galette*

Paris, Summer 1886, (F 274, H 272), oil on canvas, 460 x 380mm.

Signed *Vincent* (LR).

On loan from Glasgow, Glasgow Art Gallery, inv. no. 2425 (McInnes bequest 1944)

When not painting his still lifes and flowers, or sitting taciturn with his student friends in a little Parisian cafe, Vincent spent long hours walking the streets of Paris. Many sketches and paintings of Paris and of people wandering the parks and boulevards resulted from this. One subject drew him back again and again, the windmills of Montmartre and especially the Moulin de la Galette, which he painted both in winter and, as here, in summer.

The Moulin de la Galette stood in the Rue Girardon on Montmartre and was a favourite spot, with its wooden viewing platform, for Parisians and visitors seeking to look out over the city. The area was still largely unbuilt on in those days, with only gardens and sheds and the windmills themselves, all soon to be swept away and remembered only in the names of dance halls, restaurants and cafes — Moulin de la Galette, Moulin Rouge.

There is still a sombre quality in the colour of this painting but Van Gogh is achieving a greater airiness and spontaneity of handling.



4 *A Pair of Shoes*

Paris, first half 1887 (F 333, H 251), oil on canvas, 340 x 415mm.

Signed and dated *Vincent 87* (LR).

On loan from Baltimore, The Baltimore Museum of Art (Cone Collection 1949), cat. The Cone Collection 1967, no. 26

This is one of four studies of boots painted in Paris in the first half of 1887. Some writers have read a great significance into this choice of subject matter and spoken of 'these down at heel objects' that 'recall the endless wanderings of the vagabond seeking in vain for a haven of rest'. Unfortunately Vincent and his brother Theo were living together at this period so there are not letters to reveal Vincent's state of mind.

François Gauzi in his *Lautrec et son temps* tells how 'Vincent was living in a good-sized well-lighted room which also served as a studio. He was just finishing a still-life, which he showed me. In the Flea-market he had bought a pair of old, heavy, thick-soled boots, carter's boots, but clean and freshly polished. They were rich croquenots, with no originality. One wet afternoon he put them on and set out for a walk along the fortifications. Splashed with mud, they became interesting. A study is not necessarily a picture; a pair of clodhoppers or a bunch of roses may both serve their turn.

'Vincent faithfully copied his pair of boots. There was nothing revolutionary about the idea, but it seemed peculiar to some of our fellow-students, who could not imagine a pair of clodhoppers in a dining-room as the companion picture to a plate of apples.'

The colour is still relatively naturalistic, but richer, and there is the use of the hatched brushwork which was to be so important a feature of his painting style later that year and onwards.





- 5 *Fishing in the Spring, probably near the Pont Levallois*  
Paris, Spring 1887, (F 354, H 367), oil on canvas, 490 x 580mm.  
On loan from Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago (donated by Charles Deering McCormick, Brooks McCormick and Roger McCormick 1965)

It was Vincent's second springtime in Paris and suddenly all sombreness is swept away. In street and river scenes in Paris and its suburbs, in fields of corn, in gardens and woods and, later in the year, in sunflowers, portraits and self portraits all is colour and airiness. Colour is strong and pure and no longer naturalistic and the paint is dashed on in short hatchings that recall the work of the Neo-Impressionists Seurat and Signac, whose work Vincent had seen at the eighth Impressionist exhibition the previous year. The organisation of the painting and the insistence upon perspective also recall the work of the Neo-Impressionists, who were in revolt against the loose organisation and denial of space of the earlier Impressionists.

The scene appears to be on the Seine looking from the island La Grande Jatte, where Seurat painted his masterpiece, towards the Pont Levallois. This is in Asnières, a NW suburb of Paris, a boating centre for the Parisians and one of Van Gogh's favourite places for painting.



6 *The Postman Joseph Roulin: half length, sitting at table*

Arles, August 1888, (F 432, H 461), oil on canvas, 810 x 650mm.

On loan from Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 35. 1982 (Robert Treat Paine II bequest)

Van Gogh had learned all he could from Paris and felt the need for the sunlight and warmth of southern France, where he hoped a brotherhood of artists would be founded. He left his brother, friends and colleagues in Paris and went to Arles, a provincial town at the head of the Rhone delta, recommended to him by Toulouse-Lautrec.

Here, ill and wretched though he was, he worked with fantastic intensity and speed. Landscapes, portraits, figure paintings, flower and still life studies, interiors and night studies poured from his brush.

Lonely for his art friends he clung to the small group of townspeople who alone befriended him in Arles, particularly the postman Joseph Roulin, his wife and children, of whom he painted many portraits, including this, painted in August 1888, and the next. References to Roulin in his letters to Theo are quoted in the Introduction.

In 1886 Theo had introduced Vincent to Paul Gauguin and thereafter that artist's influence appeared much in Van Gogh's painting, particularly in the use of intense expressionistic colour and of black to outline forms, seen to some extent in this portrait.



7 *Mother Roulin with her Baby*

Arles, November/December 1888 (F 490, H 520), oil on canvas, 920 x 735mm.  
On loan from Philadelphia, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, inv. no. 50-92-22 (Lisa Norris Elkins bequest 1950)

In August 1888 Van Gogh wrote to Emile Bernard, 'I want to do figures, figures and more figures. I cannot resist that series of bipeds from the baby to Socrates (Joseph Roulin), and from the woman with black hair and white skin (Madame Ginoux — '*L'Arlesienne*', F 489) to the woman with yellow hair and a sunburned brick-red face (Mme Roulin). In the meantime I am mostly doing other things'. He did not in fact get around to painting Mme Roulin and her baby until November or December.

Gauguin's influence is even more apparent in this painting — the flat, almost unmodulated yellow background, the black outlines, the dense brushwork, the shallow space and the rather stylised pose. These were to be but temporary aspects of Van Gogh's style. His personality suited better a freer, more open treatment with dashing brushwork.



8 *Houses at Auvers with one figure*

Auvers, June/July 1890. (F 805, H 789), oil on canvas, 730 x 605mm.

On loan from Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 48.549 (John T. Spaulding bequest)

To illness and penury was now added the burden of increasing madness. The self-mutilation of the ear was followed some months later by committal to the hospital at Saint-Remy, at his own request, by his leaving the hospital against his doctor's objections and by his final settling in Auvers-sur-Oise in Northern France under the care of Dr Gachet. Two months later on 29 July 1890 he shot himself.

During these last 70 days of his life he worked with even greater speed and intensity as if he knew the end was near.

Already at Arles he had begun to supplement his hatched strokes with a more flowing brushwork and this tendency had increased at Saint-Remy until swirling forms and brush strokes dominated the paintings. At Auvers he retreated a little from this extreme style and used hatching to greater effect, a more pronounced hatching of longer strokes. The organisation of the paintings is looser and there is a buoyancy and vitality that sadly belie a state of mind leading to suicide.

*Houses at Auvers* is therefore among the last of Van Gogh's paintings. At the age of only 37, after less than ten years of painting in which he helped to change the course of Western art, he brought his own life and career to an end.





