

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release

MASTER PORTRAIT BY VINCENT VAN GOGH
ACQUIRED BY THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

That which excites me most, much, much more than other things in my work--is the portrait, the modern portrait....I would like to make portraits that, a century later, might appear to people of the time like apparitions.

--Vincent van Gogh*

Wednesday, August 2, 1989.....Richard E. Oldenburg, director, The Museum of Modern Art, announced today that the Museum has acquired a major masterpiece by Vincent van Gogh, Portrait of Joseph Roulin, 1889. The portrait has a visionary intensity similar to that of the Museum's great The Starry Night, previously its only van Gogh painting, and shows the artist at the height of his powers. Acquisition of the painting was made possible through the exchange and sale of works of art which were not normally on view. Beginning August 3, the new work will be on permanent display in the second-floor galleries.

The Museum acquired The Portrait of Joseph Roulin from a private collection in Switzerland. The work was in the collection of the artist's relatives until the 1920s, and, prior to its last ownership, had been in another private collection. The donors of the works involved in the exchange or sale, or their relatives and descendants, were consulted and expressed enthusiasm for the acquisition. In recognition of their generosity, the original donors will be credited as the donors of the new van Gogh. They are Mr. and Mrs. William A. M. Burden, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Rosenberg, Nelson A. Rockefeller, Mr. and Mrs. Armand Bartos, Sidney and Harriet Janis, and Mr. and Mrs. Werner E. Josten.

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Agnes Gund, chairman of the Committee on Painting and Sculpture, stated, "Each year, we use all of the acquisition funds donated to the Department of Painting and Sculpture to purchase works by contemporary artists. However, the Museum is also attentive to the occasional opportunity to improve its representation of masterworks of early modernism. The acquisition of this magnificent van Gogh portrait reaffirms our continuing efforts to make all aspects of our collection as excellent as possible."

Mr. Oldenburg added "Coming to us precisely 100 years after it was painted, this work marvelously fulfills van Gogh's hope that his portraits would retain their force a century after their creation. We are enormously grateful to the donors to our collection who have made this acquisition possible."

Kirk Varnedoe stated, "The story our collection galleries tell, of the history of modern art, begins with the Post-Impressionism of the 1880s, especially the work of Cézanne, Seurat, Gauguin, and van Gogh. Until now, a crucial foundation stone of that history has been lacking. The lineage of twentieth-century art that has been concerned not just with portraiture in a traditional sense but with new ways of probing and giving form to the energies of an individual's personality, has its prime point of origin in van Gogh's portraits. By adding the Portrait of Joseph Roulin, we can now offer our visitors an aspect of the artist's work which he himself felt to be critically important, and which had a decisive impact on the formation of twentieth-century painting."

Beginning in the late summer of 1888, van Gogh painted a series of portraits of Joseph Roulin, a postman in Arles, and of his family. The Museum's painting, the most forward-looking of these in its design, is thought to be the culminating work in the series, painted in early 1889. Van Gogh

renders Roulin in the radical way that made his work so important to the German Expressionists and to Matisse. According to Mr. Varnedoe, "The severity of the iconic frontal pose and symmetrical composition combine with the exuberance of the cascading beard and floral-patterned backdrop, and especially with the bold color combinations of acid green, red, and blue, to produce a stunning marriage of different energies. This is a commanding, premonitory creation, and its radiant human content should make it among the most beloved, as well as admired, of our early modern masterpieces."

Donald B. Marron, president of the Museum, said, "For an institution to acquire a work of this exceptional quality and scarcity in today's intensely competitive art world requires concentrated effort on the part of many people, the wholehearted commitment of our Trustees and friends, and a certain measure of good luck. I am immensely pleased that The Museum of Modern Art was equal to this challenge, and able to act on this special opportunity."

Chairman David Rockefeller added "All of us who have over the years cherished the Museum's collection are happy today that, in making this great painting permanently available to our public, we can make a noteworthy contribution to our local and national patrimony."

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*Vincent van Gogh, letter to his sister Wilhelmen van Gogh, Auvers, 1890.

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