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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART PRESENTS VAN GOGH'S PORTRAITS OF POSTMAN JOSEPH ROULIN

Five Paintings and Two Drawings Reveal van Gogh's Deep Feelings for His Friend and Protector

Van Gogh's Postman: The Portraits of Joseph Roulin
February 1 - May 15, 2001

New York, January 5, 2001 - Vincent van Gogh's portraits of Joseph Roulin - the postman who helped and supported him during some of his darkest days - will be the focus of a special exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art from February 1 to May 15, 2001, MoMA Director Glenn D. Lowry announced today.

Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, who organized the exhibition, states: "Ever since this Museum acquired its Portrait of Joseph Roulin, we have dreamed of one day bringing the other Roulin portrayals to join it here. We knew that this gathering of dispersed masterworks could offer fresh insights into van Gogh's efforts to capture a distinctive personality, to embody his own deepening feeling for a crucial human relationship, and to remake the idea of portraiture itself."

This exhibition became possible when six of the works were included in the exhibition Van Gogh: Face to Face, on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art until January 14, 2001. With kind cooperation from the owners of the works and from the organizers of this exhibition, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, MoMA's visitors will be able to see this remarkable series of paintings and drawings reunited.

Van Gogh's Postman contains five of the six paintings that the artist made of his friend and protector during 1888 and 1889. MoMA's own portrait of Roulin, which was acquired by the Museum in 1989, will be juxtaposed with paintings borrowed from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Detroit Institute of Arts; the Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Switzerland; and the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands. Two of the extant drawings of Roulin, one from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the other from a private collection, are also included.

In the spring of 1888, Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853-90) left Paris for the provincial town of Arles in the south of France. There he met Joseph Roulin (1841-1903), who became one of his closest companions. Roulin was not a door-to-door letter carrier, but a brigadier who sorted mail at the Arles railway station. The artist called Roulin "a man more interesting than most" and was fascinated by his distinguishing characteristics: a
short-nosed physiognomy, reminiscent of Socrates; the flushed coloration of a heavy drinker; and vehemently populist politics. Intensely lonely, van Gogh was also struck by Roulin's role as a devoted father of a large family.

The works in the exhibition show the evolution of van Gogh's depiction of Roulin, from the first, more naturalistic portrayals of the postman made in mid-1888, to the intense stylization of the last portraits painted in the first months of 1889. Van Gogh painted Roulin for the first time in the summer of 1888. In this painting, owned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the largest of the portraits van Gogh made, Roulin, in his blue, gold-trimmed postal uniform and cap, is seated at a table and set against a simple, light-blue background.

Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo of his excitement about "the modern portrait" - a picture that renders character not by the imitation of the sitter's appearance but through the independent, vivid life of color. Pursuing this goal in the portraits he painted of Roulin, van Gogh was influenced by the artists Honoré Daumier (for his expressive and caricatural line) and Eugène Delacroix (for his use of color). Another, more immediate influence may have been Paul Gauguin, who worked with van Gogh in Arles in the fall of 1888. Gauguin urged less dependence on observation and more reliance on memory and intuition. This advice may have been especially telling in the case of van Gogh's later portraits of Roulin (including MoMA's), which were likely painted after the postman had left Arles for Marseilles.

Between the first portraits and the MoMA version, van Gogh's relationship with Roulin had deepened. Just before Christmas 1888, spurred by an argument with Gauguin, van Gogh experienced a psychotic episode in which he cut off part of his ear and handed it to a prostitute. Roulin tended to the artist that night, and oversaw his admission to a hospital the next day. The postman then watched over him during his hospitalization, and provided constant solace during the painter's efforts to recover his mental balance. As van Gogh struggled to get well, Roulin's friendship and support became increasingly important. Mr. Varnedoe states, "The strength of the MoMA portrait, its centered stability and immense, overbrimming energy, must embody these feelings."

After Roulin moved to Marseilles, van Gogh saw him only intermittently, but even these brief visits held tremendous importance to the artist. In April of 1889, van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo that Roulin had redeemed all that had been so alienating and tragic in the artist's experience in the south of France. Van Gogh writes: "Roulin, though he is not quite old enough to be like a father to me, nevertheless has a silent gravity and a tenderness for me as an old soldier might have for a young one." The painter continues: "[Roulin is] a man who is neither embittered, nor sad, nor perfect, nor happy, nor always irreproachably just. But such a good soul and so wise and so full of feeling and so trustful. I tell you I have no right to complain of anything whatsoever in Arles when I think of some of the things I have seen there which I shall never be able to forget."

This exhibition is made possible by BNP Paribas and an anonymous donor.

Van Gogh's Postman: The Portraits of Joseph Roulin Checklist
Postman Joseph Roulin. 1888
Oil on canvas
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Robert Treat Paine, 2nd

Portrait of Postman Roulin. 1888
Oil on canvas
Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Buhl Ford II

The Postman Joseph Roulin. 1888
Pen and ink on paper
Private Collection

The Postman Joseph Roulin. 1888
Pen (ink and chalk) on paper
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. George Gard de Sylva Collection

The Postman Joseph Roulin. 1888
Oil on canvas
Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Switzerland, Gift of the heirs of Georg Reinhart

The Postman Roulin. 1889
Oil on canvas
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands

Portrait of Joseph Roulin. 1889
Oil on canvas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A.M. Burden, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Rosenberg, gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Armand P. Bartos, The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Werner E. Josten, and Loula D. Lasker Bequest (all by exchange)