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THE FRICK COLLECTION

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VAN GOGH'S *PORTRAIT OF A PEASANT (PATIENCE ESCALIER)* ON LOAN FROM THE NORTON SIMON MUSEUM, PASADENA

FIRST TIME IN NEARLY FORTY YEARS THAT THIS IMPORTANT PORTRAIT HAS TRAVELED

October 30, 2012, through January 20, 2013



Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *Portrait of a Peasant (Patience Escalier)*, 1888, oil on canvas, Norton Simon Art Foundation, Pasadena, California; photo: Stacey Rain Strickler

This fall The Frick Collection will present Vincent van Gogh's *Portrait of a Peasant (Patience Escalier)*. The painting has not left its home institution, the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California, in nearly forty years, making this a rare and exciting viewing opportunity for East Coast audiences. In conjunction with this presentation, the painting has undergone a comprehensive technical analysis at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The modern masterpiece will be shown in the Frick's Oval Room from October 30, 2012, through January 20, 2013. It will be accompanied by lectures, a seminar, and gallery talks. In the nearby Multimedia Room, a brief video presentation will discuss the results of new research and the painting's examination, while an introductory video will be shown in the Music Room. The special loan is part of an ongoing exchange program with the Norton Simon Museum that

began in 2009 when a group of five works from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries traveled to New York. Other loans have followed: the Frick's *Comtesse d'Haussonville* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres was shown at the Norton Simon in the fall of 2009, and Hans Memling's *Portrait of a Man* was on view there this past winter and

spring. The van Gogh presentation in New York is being coordinated by Frick Senior Curator Susan Grace Galassi, who comments, “Our exchange program with the prestigious Norton Simon Museum has offered both institutions opportunities to see their works in different contexts. For the most part, we have featured artists not represented in our own holdings, as is the case with the selection of this remarkable van Gogh portrait. In this instance, the timing feels particularly fortunate, as we’ve spent the last year focusing on artists—Renoir and Picasso—active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and their relation to earlier artists in our collection.” Support for the exhibition is generously provided by Agnes Gund.

AN ARTISTIC TURNING POINT WITNESSED

Writing from Arles on August 18, 1888, Vincent van Gogh announced to his brother and dealer, Theo, “You’ll shortly make the acquaintance of Mr. Patience Escalier—a sort of man with a hoe, an old Camargue oxherd, who’s now a gardener at a farmstead in the Crau.” He was referring to the painting known as *Portrait of a Peasant (Patience Escalier)*. A drawing in reed pen that he had made after the painting and sent to Theo would not have prepared his brother for the shock of the life-size, bust-length figure painted in vivid blue, bright yellow, and green, with a network of reds, ochers, gold, and green in the face. Such audacity in portraiture would not be seen again until the early twentieth century in the work of Matisse. The painting, together with Vincent’s many statements about his artistic process and the deep significance of portraiture for him at this time, is a profound testament to a turning point in a great artist’s work. Using high-keyed colors, he stepped boldly off the path of strict naturalistic representation into a more subjective realm in which he attempted to express the spirit or essence of his sitter through color and its symbolic associations. At the same time, the sitter, whom he refers to in another letter as a “pure-bred” peasant, brings him back to his early work in Nuenen, Holland, in which he aspired to be a “peasant painter” and to dignify and give recognition to the common man through portraiture.

TIME IN ARLES: MOVING BEYOND IMPRESSIONISM

The Dutch-born Vincent van Gogh arrived in Arles in February 1888 and remained there until May 1889. In Paris, where he had spent the previous two years, the largely self-taught minister’s son studied in the atelier of Fernand Cormon and befriended such artists as Camille Pissarro, Émile Bernard, and Paul Gauguin. There he also gained familiarity with the Impressionists’ optical mixing of colors, Seurat’s pointillism, and the Symbolists’ ideas of the relation of color to emotion. His palette brightened, and he shared with his fellow artists an appreciation of Japanese prints, with their flat forms, brilliant colors, and strong outlines. Yet Vincent’s lack of success and poor health made him unsuited to life in the capital, and he sought a new home where he could live cheaply and closer to nature. Although he had never visited Provence, his letters show that he envisioned it as an exotic place, a “Japan in France.” Images of a rural utopia drenched in sunlight had already captivated the highly literate artist through the books by contemporary writers from the region.

Arles offered a combination of vivid natural colors and inhabitants who shared traditions of dress, customs, and folkloric festivals dating back to medieval times, as well as a common tongue (Occitan or *langue d'òc*), giving Arlésiens an identity distinct from the French. Provençal pride was then on the rise under the leadership of the region's favorite son, the poet Frédéric Mistral, a passionate advocate for preserving the culture of the area, which was under the threat of rapid modernization. As his letters show, van Gogh admired Mistral's work and was steeped in the writing of a leading contemporary novelist, Alphonse Daudet. Van Gogh's work in Arles reflects his participation in this regional renaissance on his own terms. During his first three months there, he captured the characteristic features of the place in scenes of the rocky outcropping of La Crau over extensive wheat fields, blossoming meadows, and the coastal town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, all painted in bold, expressive brushstrokes. In these works he intensified the colors of nature but did not depart from them significantly. His deeper interest, however, lay in the figure, and particularly in the individual as a product and shaper of his setting. He sought out the characteristic types of his adopted home—such as the postman, innkeeper, women in Arlésien costume, and swaggering Zouave soldiers stationed there—and offered them a small fee to sit. Within this gallery of townsfolk, *Patience Escalier* fits in as both a quintessential Provençal type—an oxherd from the Camargue, a wild marshland bordering the sea—and as a generic “peasant,” or tiller of the earth, whom van Gogh identified with the anonymous “man with a hoe” in Jean-François Millet's eponymous painting of 1860–62. Anticipating rejection of his peasant in Paris, Vincent lamented to Theo that the Parisians lacked sufficient appreciation for “rough things” or “paintings in clogs” (a term borrowed from Millet) and would misunderstand his new painting as mere caricature.

PORTRAITURE: CREATING A COLLECTIVE PORTRAYAL OF HUMANITY

For van Gogh, as for his Dutch forebears Rembrandt and Hals, whom he revered, the portrait was a vehicle for expressing the sitter's inner self. Extending this idea to a group of works, Vincent aimed to create a collective portrayal “of humanity, let's rather say of a whole republic,” as he wrote to his friend Emile Bernard. While his underlying mission in painting portraits in Arles links them with a series carried out a few years earlier in Nuenen, color takes on a far greater significance. By then, van Gogh had moved beyond the lessons of Impressionism and turned for inspiration to the great colorist of the Romantic era, Delacroix, availing himself of the current literature on color theory. “What Claude Monet is in landscape,” he wrote to Theo, “the same thing in figure painting—who's going to do that? Yet, like me, you must feel it's in the air....The painter of the future is a *colorist such as there hasn't been before*.” Indeed, the *Portrait of a Peasant (Patience Escalier)* leaps off the wall from a distance. The simplification of design, brilliant color, flattening of form, and animated brushwork give the painting an almost electrical charge. In this work van Gogh begins to put into practice his ideas about color used in an exaggerated and arbitrary manner, departing from strict naturalism and Impressionist technique for something more vibrant and emotive.

Vincent achieves forcefulness of expression in his portrait through the juxtaposition of large areas of primary and secondary colors. While aiming for maximum optical impact, he also uses color symbolically to convey the character of his sitter as integral to his setting. Thus, the traditional yellow straw hat with its rounded dome, worn for protection from the sun, is also a surrogate for the sun itself. It blazes all the more intensely, submerged in a field of its contrasting blue, which suggests the deep azure of the Provençal sky. The large area of green both defines the color of the man's smock and evokes the lush vegetation of the region that he cultivates. A red outline separates the green of the jacket from the blue of the background and increases the vibration of color. Similarly, the prominent signature in red in the upper-left corner of the canvas intensifies the blue through contrast. Within the major areas of blue, yellow, and green, van Gogh reserves his ammunition for the tanned face of his subject, modeling his craggy features—almost a landscape—in irregular strokes and blobs of hot red and gold, offset with dashes of cool green in his beard. Touches of red and turquoise surrounding the irises of his eyes reinforce the intensity of the peasant's gaze. The face is a hub of nervous energy surrounded by the colors of this region of France.

NEW TECHNICAL STUDY UNDERTAKEN

A comprehensive technical examination of the painting undertaken in the summer of 2012 by conservators at the J. Paul Getty Museum under the supervision of Devi Ormand, Associate Paintings Conservator, yields fresh insight into van Gogh's process of painting. This technical study comprised surface examination, ultraviolet examination, microscopy, X-radiography, infrared reflectography, paint analysis, and an automated canvas thread count. With the illuminating findings about the work's support, underdrawing, and paint layers, we can appreciate as never before the genesis of the picture, tracing van Gogh's brush as he transformed a smoothly primed white canvas into an essentially three-dimensional object, thick with impasted paint and pulsating with intense color.

The findings of the examination make clear that the powerful impression the painting makes is the result of a deliberate and thoughtful process involving on van Gogh's part multiple sessions in front of the easel, careful planning of the composition and ongoing modifications to it as he painted, the controlled layering of paint and build-up of tones, and a brilliant handling of paint—all geared to very specific coloristic and textural effects.

Van Gogh began by using charcoal to sketch onto his primed canvas the outlines of the figure, establishing the scale, shape, and position of the man's body, head, and hat, the relationship of face to torso, and probably the general placement of his facial features. With these lines in place, he laid in his first layer of paint, intended for tonal effect: in the areas of the hat and face, for example, a light green underlayer lends an earthy tone to the yellows, tans, and reds on the surface.

The painting's forcefulness comes primarily from van Gogh's manipulation of the paint surface. He applied a large amount of paint in dazzlingly varied ways, creating contrasts of loose and controlled strokes and of thick and thin

paint consistencies. Throughout most of the picture, paint was applied wet-in-wet, producing a thick impasto. Moving a brush loaded with thick, buttery paint back and forth in a basket-weave pattern, van Gogh created a dense and rugged background of gleaming blue. At left, blue and white are blended together to create a sense of shifting light across the picture. In a series of precise, parallel strokes, he followed the weave and curve of the straw hat and the contours of the man's face to achieve a convincing sense of three-dimensionality. A great variety of pigments—a rich yellow, mint green, hot red, deep purple, and turquoise blue among them—make up the sun- and age-weathered flesh of the face, its paint standing up in peaks and furrows suggestive of deep wrinkles.

In other areas, van Gogh opted for a drier application of paint by using a lightly loaded brush to capture the cloth texture of the man's jacket. For the eyes, he waited for each application of paint to dry before adding the next so that the individual touches of complementary color remain distinct from one another—the turquoise used for the whites of the eyes contrasting with the warm yellow highlights and red edges. These passages make clear the high degree of discipline and deliberation that went into van Gogh's creative process.

A video presentation in the Frick's Multimedia Room featuring the new X-radiograph, infrared reflectograph, and microphotographs produced by the Getty conservators will allow visitors to study the underlayers and surface of the painting under high magnification and to follow van Gogh's execution of the painting step by step.

RELATED EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

Lectures

Unless otherwise noted, lectures are free. No reservations are necessary, and seating is on a first-come, first-served basis. Lectures will be webcast live and thereafter can be viewed on our Web site or The Frick Collection's channel on FORA.tv.

Date Wednesday, November 7, 6:00 p.m.
Speaker Judy Sund, Professor of Modern European Art and Art of the Americas,
Graduate Center of the City University of New York
Title *The Essence of Earthiness: Van Gogh's Peasants*

Van Gogh's portraits of Patience Escalier, one of which will be on loan to the Frick this fall, were part of his long-term project to capture the essence of the peasant. Inspired by literary descriptions as well as by the art of the past, he was intent on giving definitive form to a well-established type. Abandoning strict accuracy in favor of evocative color and texture, van Gogh aimed to convey a sense of the agrarian laborer's life on the land and to capture something "truer than the literal truth."

Date Wednesday, January 16, 6:00 p.m.
Speaker Cornelia Homburg, independent art historian
Title *Patience Escalier: Peasant à la Japonaise*

When Vincent van Gogh moved from Paris to the South of France in 1888, the rural environs inspired him to revisit some of the central themes of his Dutch years, such as the changing seasons and the "labors of the fields." At the same time, his work was greatly influenced by his admiration for Japanese art and culture, coupled with his ambition to create distinctly modern pictures. This lecture will discuss van Gogh's *Portrait of a Peasant (Patience Escalier)* in the context of these interests, which played such a crucial role in the painter's efforts to define himself as a member of the avant-garde.

Gallery Talks—Free with admission. Advance reservations are required; to register, please visit our Web site.

Vincent van Gogh's *Portrait of a Peasant*

Saturdays at 12:00 noon, November 10, December 8, and January 12

Join curators for a close look at van Gogh's *Portrait of a Peasant (Patience Escalier)*, on loan to the Frick from the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California.

Seminar

Seminars provide unparalleled access to works of art and encourage thought-provoking discussion with experts in their fields. Sessions, held when the galleries are closed to the public, are limited to twenty participants. Advance registration is required; register online or by calling 212.547.0704. \$100 (\$90 for Members).

Date Monday, November 5, 2:00 to 3:30 p.m.
Speaker Susan Grace Galassi, Senior Curator, The Frick Collection
Title *Van Gogh's Portrait of a Peasant: One Work in Context*

Considered to be one of van Gogh's masterpieces, *Portrait of a Peasant (Patience Escalier)* was made in 1888, at a critical turning point in the artist's career. We will discuss the painting in the context of van Gogh's life and work during the fifteen months he lived in Arles. Recent conservation studies carried out at the J. Paul Getty Museum in anticipation of the picture's presentation at the Frick will aid us in our understanding of the artist's process, as will vivid passages from Vincent's letters to his brother, Theo, written while he was completing the painting.

BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: 212.288.0700

Web site: www.frick.org

E-mail: info@frick.org

Where: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

Hours: open six days a week: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11 a.m. to 5 p.m.) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.

Admission: \$18; senior citizens \$15; students \$10; "pay as you wish" on Sundays from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection.

Subway: #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

Tour Information: included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Museum Shop: the shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

Group Visits: Please call 212. 288.0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

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For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Head of Media Relations & Marketing, or Alexis Light, Manager of Media Relations & Marketing

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