

# French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945

The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Editor



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## Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Man*, mid- to late March 1885

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<b>Artist</b>	Vincent van Gogh, Dutch, 1853–1890
<b>Title</b>	<i>Head of a Man</i>
<b>Object Date</b>	mid- to late March 1885
<b>Alternate and Variant Titles</b>	<i>Portrait of Gijsbertus de Groot; Study of a Peasant's Head</i>
<b>Medium</b>	Oil on canvas
<b>Dimensions (Unframed)</b>	16 9/16 x 12 9/16 in. (42.1 x 31.9 cm)
<b>Credit Line</b>	The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 37-1

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### Catalogue Entry

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In the fall of 1883, after living for two years in the relatively cosmopolitan Dutch city of The Hague,<sup>1</sup> Vincent van Gogh wanted "nothing other than to live deep in the country and to paint peasant life."<sup>2</sup> On December 5, 1883, he boarded a train to the rural town

of Nuenen in the east of the North Brabant province of the Netherlands,<sup>3</sup> and over the next two years he embarked on a significant artistic journey to create a series of studies of peasants' heads. These studies, of which the Nelson-Atkins painting is one example, had a pivotal role in shaping his artistic development. They ultimately culminated in his most substantial figural composition, *The Potato Eaters*, a dimly lit interior scene of five rural farmworkers enjoying a modest meal by lamplight (Fig. 1).

Peasant themes in general, and shared meals in particular, were popular subjects among many of Van Gogh's near contemporaries, including French Barbizon painters like Jean-François Millet (1814–1875); their Dutch counterparts in the Hague School, such as Jozef Israëls (1824–1911);<sup>4</sup> and nineteenth-century English and Continental wood engravers like Hubert von Herkomer (Dutch, 1849–1914), among others.<sup>5</sup> The theme, which also had religious undertones, resonated deeply with Van Gogh. In particular, he drew inspiration from Rembrandt van Rijn's (Dutch, 1606–1669) *Supper at Emmaus*, which Van Gogh encountered in Paris at the Louvre in 1875 (Fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> The painting depicts the moment in Luke 24:13–35 when the resurrected Christ reveals his identity through breaking bread and offering



a blessing to two disciples he encounters on a journey. Van Gogh's fascination with this work underscores the artist's exploration of the spiritual in the everyday.<sup>7</sup> Following the scriptural account, Van Gogh saw something holy in the simple act of sharing a humble meal.



Fig. 1. Vincent van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*, April–May 1885, oil on canvas, 32 5/16 x 44 7/8 in. (82 x 114 cm), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), s0005V1962

Van Gogh explored peasant life in a series of works he titled “Heads of the People,” building on a project he initiated in The Hague.<sup>8</sup> He began the series in Nuenen at the end of October 1884 and completed thirty studies by the end of February.<sup>9</sup> A few months later, he expanded his vision to encompass fifty works.<sup>10</sup> A total of forty-seven paintings from this series have survived, with the last known work created in May 1885.<sup>11</sup> Throughout this period, Van Gogh actively experimented with contrasting and complementary color combinations, explorations of tone, representations of light sources, and themes honoring rural life. Van Gogh's interest in this subject matter was also informed by his deep respect for the workers themselves. He connected their humility, dignity, and the grace of a shared meal—procured through the arduous labor of their own hands—to a profound sense of spirituality.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 2. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Pilgrims at Emmaus or Supper at Emmaus*, 1648, oil on mahogany, 26 3/4 x 25 5/8 in. (68 x 65 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, Inv. 1739. Photo: Adrien Didierjean. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

Van Gogh was the son of a Dutch Reformed minister, and his spiritual foundation was deep-rooted. His journey began with theological studies in 1877 and evolved through his role as an evangelical lay preacher among coal miners in the Borinage region of Belgium in 1879.<sup>13</sup> Although he was dismissed from this position, his connection to Biblical study and tenets of Christianity endured, channeled through his new vocation as an artist. On this new path, Van Gogh sought to reconcile his faith with the modern world, finding the divine in everyday life. He viewed laborers as genuine servants of God, believing that their earthly contributions and inherent worth transcended those of someone like himself: a self-taught artist who wrestled with both internal and external pressures for validation.<sup>14</sup> While his perception of these people was undeniably idealized and influenced by his own relative class privilege, there is no question that he held genuine sympathy for the impoverished.<sup>15</sup> It was through this self-scrutinizing lens that Van Gogh undertook his study of heads, including the Nelson-Atkins composition.

Van Gogh approached his studies of peasants' heads not as individual portraits but as embodiments of authentic types. His intent was to encapsulate the very essence of rural life, selecting subjects with rough, weathered faces and elevating those with unconventional appearances.<sup>16</sup>



Writing to his brother Theo in July 1884, he explained what he looked for in his subjects: “Coarse, flat faces with low foreheads and thick lips, not that sharp look, but full and Millet-like and with those very clothes.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, this distinct physicality is reflected in the figure in the Nelson-Atkins portrait.

The head-and-shoulder study of a young man, whose skin is bronzed as a result of toiling in the sun and who appears in a dark blue-green smock and matching cap, is oriented in a nearly full-frontal perspective. This compositional approach, which Van Gogh utilized in many other works from this series, facilitates a direct and engaging interaction between viewer and subject, providing insight into the character of these hardy people. Van Gogh’s somber palette takes inspiration from Rembrandt’s *Supper at Emmaus*, which as previously noted, he saw in Paris and avidly read about in *Les maîtres d’autrefois* (The Masters of Past Times), a treatise by French painter and critic Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876).<sup>18</sup> Fromentin noted Rembrandt’s use of a “palette [that] affects a sobriety suited to the circumstances” of the subject matter.<sup>19</sup> Van Gogh was also acutely aware of Millet’s palette, which he liked to describe as depicting peasants in the very hue of the soil they cultivated.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Van Gogh opted for an earth-toned palette to capture both his subjects and their surroundings. His goal was to convey the essence of “a dusty potato, unpeeled.”<sup>21</sup> In the Nelson-Atkins painting, Van Gogh loaded his brush with red and yellow ochers and chrome orange,<sup>22</sup> among other pigments, and skillfully laid in the features of the sitter’s ruddy complexion (a complementary color pairing with his blue-tinged jacket) and large, penetrating dark eyes rimmed in flickering semicircles of gold. This brilliant highlight, painted quickly wet-into-wet, appears again down the bridge of the sitter’s flat nose and helps define his chin and plump lips.<sup>23</sup> The bravura brushwork, and the speed at which it appears to have been executed, recalls the work of earlier Dutch Masters like Frans Hals (1582–1666) and Rembrandt, to whom Van Gogh saw himself as a modern successor.<sup>24</sup>

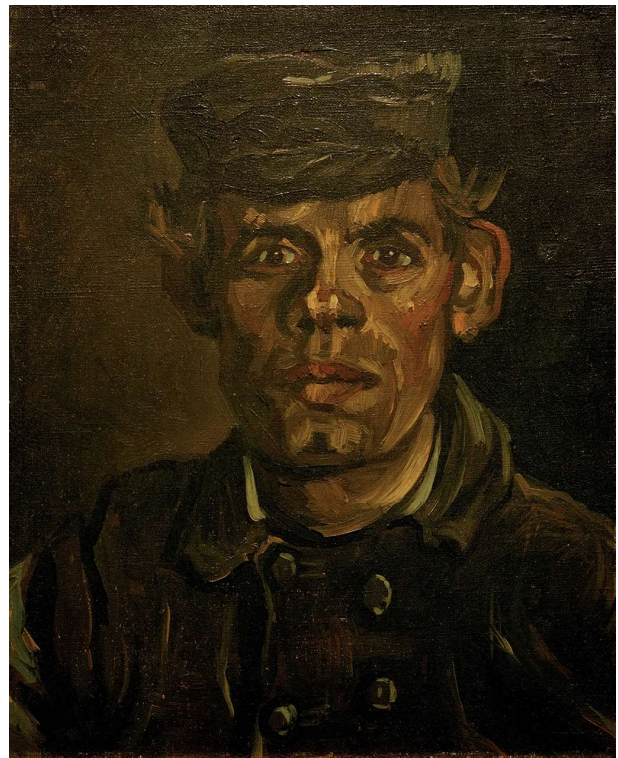


Fig. 3. Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of a Peasant*, 1885, oil on canvas, 15 3/8 x 12 in. (39 x 30.5 cm), Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels. Acquired through Mr. Jacob Baart de la Faille (1886–1959), inv. 4910. Photo: J. Geleyns—Art Photography

Many studies in Van Gogh’s series employ a dark and nuanced background, a technique borrowed from Rembrandt to project the figure forward and emphasize the sitter’s face. One can see this technique in practice in one of Van Gogh’s peasant head studies (Fig. 3). The Nelson-Atkins composition, however, deviates from this practice; instead, Van Gogh places the figure against a light background, with strokes of paint that follow the contour and shape of the subject’s head and create a halo effect of reverberating intensity emanating outward from the subject’s head and torso.<sup>25</sup> In early March 1885, Van Gogh transitioned to painting in the evening by lamplight, experimenting with unique nocturnal lighting effects that cast pronounced shadows.<sup>26</sup> This shift coincided with his interest in portraying figures positioned against windows, as seen in related works (Fig. 4).<sup>27</sup> He communicated this new interest and practice to Theo in a letter written sometime around mid-March, supplementing it with a few sketches.<sup>28</sup> This letter has allowed scholars to date a collection of six paintings and related drawings tentatively to this pivotal month of March 1885.<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 4. Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Woman*, March 1885, oil on canvas, 15 5/16 x 12 5/16 in. (38.8 x 31.3 cm), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), s0132V1962

Historically, dating this series of heads has been difficult, with very few assigned a specific month of creation; most are dated generally within the broader period of 1884–85, encompassing the duration in which he realized the series. Some, however, are dated based on stylistic grounds, with scholars attributing works that display more meticulous brushwork and prioritize tone over color exploration, like the *Head of a Peasant Woman* in London (Fig. 5), to earlier in the period.<sup>30</sup> The works that focus on backlighting, with subjects cast into deep shadows, are typically dated to March 1885, based on Van Gogh's letter cited above. Although the contrast between foreground and background elements in the Nelson-Atkins composition is less pronounced than in these window-themed paintings (see Fig. 4), the figure nevertheless remains shrouded in deeper shadow than the background. This hints at a primary unknown light source emanating from behind the subject. Recent technical examination of the canvas has revealed a faint rectangular outline behind the depicted sitter (see Fig. 10), suggesting that Van Gogh may have initially intended to include a window, similar to his works featuring women set against windows.<sup>31</sup>

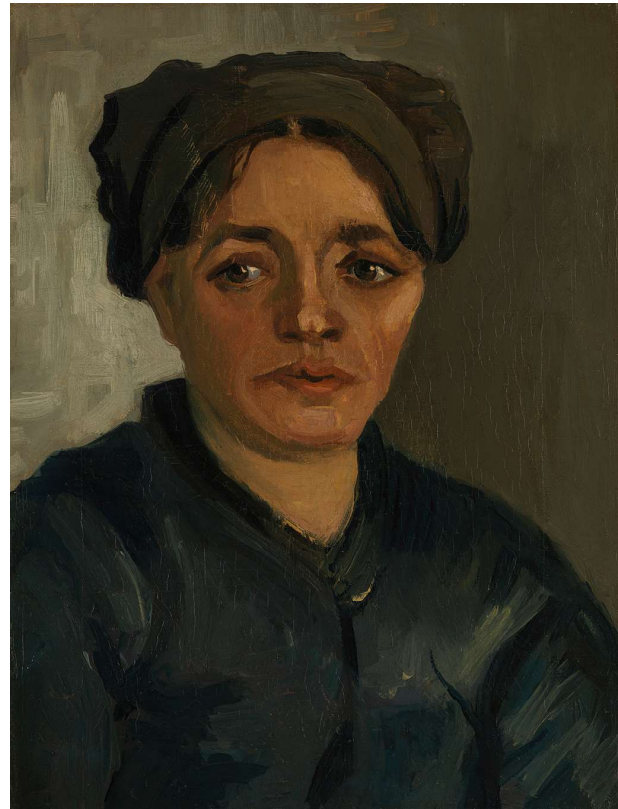


Fig. 5. Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Peasant Woman*, ca. 1884, oil on canvas, 15 7/8 x 12 in. (40.3 x 30.5 cm), oil on canvas, National Gallery, London. Accepted under the Cultural Gifts Scheme by HM Government and allocated to The National Gallery, 2013, NG6648. © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY

This discovery, published here for the first time, substantiates the inclusion of the Nelson-Atkins painting within this group of works dated to mid- to late March of 1885. Notably, however, neither a cast shadow from a window or lamp nor an indication of a primary light source—artificial or natural—is evident in this painting. Something made Van Gogh change his mind and paint over what would have been an obvious source of light within the composition, leaving room for interpretation. Could it be that he intended the light source to be a representation of the divine?

Van Gogh continued to grapple with the challenge of expressing light through opposition with dark, a technical puzzle he had been wrestling with since at least mid-June 1884. He corresponded with Theo about a specific passage in Fromentin's *Les Maîtres d'autrefois*, which he interpreted as "starting in a low register and making colors that are still relatively dark appear light."<sup>32</sup> This strategy of light is vividly demonstrated in the Nelson-Atkins painting and thoughtfully elucidated

by paintings conservator Mary Schafer and Mellon Conservation Science Advisor John Twilley in their accompanying technical essay. Beyond its technical aspects, working from dark to light carried a profound symbolic significance during this phase of Van Gogh's artistic production.

Van Gogh regarded the labor-worn people whom he depicted in such dark earthy tones as the most deserving recipients of eternal light and life. In the Nelson-Atkins composition, he conveyed this sentiment in part by situating the light source, akin to a halo, directly behind the figure's head. While some of the artist's compositions employ a light source coming from one side, the halo effect is a relative rarity within this series. Through this approach, he effectively illuminated the inherent sanctity of his subject. Years later he wrote to Theo: "I'd like to paint men or women with that *je ne sais quoi* of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we try to achieve through the radiance itself, through the vibrancy of our colorations."<sup>33</sup> He began to explore conveying the eternal in his series of peasants' heads and then extended that approach with *The Potato Eaters* (see Fig. 1), where an enveloping plume of steam rises from the plate of potatoes and surrounds the central figure. This connection symbolically links the Nelson-Atkins *Head of a Man* to Van Gogh's most ambitious figural composition.

Van Gogh's art, particularly his peasant series, transcended mere representation. It served as a conduit for him to express reverence for the ordinary, the humble, and the divine in everyday life. This spiritual dimension, often intertwined with his exploration of light and its symbolic significance, underscores the importance of the Nelson-Atkins painting. Ultimately, Van Gogh's *Head of a Man*, like many of his Nuenen works, beckons us to contemplate the interplay between the finite and the infinite, the material and the spiritual. It serves as a testament to his unwavering commitment to capturing the essence of rural life, revealing the profound spirituality he found in the mundane.

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan  
September 2023

## Notes

1. Van Gogh spent two periods living in The Hague, from July 30, 1869, until May 10, 1873, and from November 27, 1881, to September 11, 1883. In between these sojourns, he spent time in France, England, Belgium, and elsewhere in the Netherlands.
2. Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, Monday, April 6, 1885, published in Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, eds., *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters*, online edition (Amsterdam and The Hague: Van Gogh Museum and Huygens, 2009), no. 490, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let490/letter.html>. All English translations of Van Gogh's letters are from this publication.
3. Van Gogh left The Hague on September 11, 1883, and spent nearly three months in Drenthe, a province in the northeastern part of the Netherlands, before taking a train to Nuenen, where his parents lived. For more on this moment in Van Gogh's career, see J. Dijk Wout and Meent W. van der Sluis, *De Drentse Tijd Van Vincent Van Gogh: Een Onderbelichte Periode Nader Onderzocht, 1883* (Groningen: Boon Uitg, 2001).
4. Many scholars have made this observation, including Bregje Gerritse in *The Potato Eaters: Van Gogh's First Masterpiece*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2022), 31–32. Van Gogh mentions a painting by Israëls, presumed to be *Peasant Family at the Table* (1882; Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), in a letter to Theo, Saturday, March 11, 1882, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 211, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let211/letter.html>.
5. For additional insight on this topic, see Martin Bailey and Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh in England: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1992), cited in George Keyes, "The Dutch Roots of Vincent van Gogh," in Roland Dorn et al., *Van Gogh Face to Face: The Portraits*, exh. cat. (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2000), 24n17. For a more recent publication about Van Gogh's nineteenth-century sources, see Eik Kahng, *Through Vincent's Eyes: Van Gogh and His Sources* (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2021).



6. See Vincent van Gogh, Paris, to Theo van Gogh, May 31, 1875, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 34, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let034/letter.html>.
7. The idea of finding the spiritual in the everyday, particularly among the working classes, aligned with the practice of Van Gogh's father during his ministry of the Dutch Reformed Church in the rural farming community of Zundert in the southern Netherlands region of Brabant. For more on the region and this branch of religion, see Deborah Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 143–51. Van Gogh makes the subjects of the *Potato Eaters* Catholic, however, through his inclusion of the devotional print of the *Crucifixion with the Virgin Mary and St. John*; see Louis van Tilborgh and Marije Vellekoop, *Vincent Van Gogh: Paintings*, vol. 1, *Dutch Period, 1881–1885*, *Van Gogh Museum* (London: Lund Humphries, 1999), 138–39.
8. During Van Gogh's second sojourn in The Hague, he embarked on his "Series of the People" drawn from life. His aim was to create lithographs that could be commercially available at a small cost. Van Gogh conceived of another series, entitled "Heads of the People," inspired by images of laborers in Hubert von Herkomer's series of the same title, featured in *The Graphic* from 1875 to 1885. See Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Saturday, June 3, 1882, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 235, n37, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let235/letter.html>.
9. See Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, between about February 5 and 26, 1885, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 483, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let483/letter.html>. Also cited in Tilborgh and Vellekoop, *Vincent Van Gogh: Paintings*, 1:84n2–4.
10. See Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, November 2, 1884, no. 468, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let468/letter.html>; November 17, 1884, no. 470, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let470/letter.html>; and on or about December 14, 1884, no. 475, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let475/letter.html>, all in Jansen et al., *Letters* (also cited in Tilborgh and Vellekoop, *Vincent Van Gogh: Paintings*, 1:84n3).
11. Tilborgh and Vellekoop state that the last time Van Gogh discussed the heads was in June 1885. See Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, on or about June 2, 1885, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 506, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let506/letter.html>, cited in Tilborgh and Vellekoop, *Vincent Van Gogh: Paintings*, 1:84n2–4.
12. Van Gogh's reading of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) in or around 1876 reinforced this belief. See Vincent van Gogh, Isleworth, to Theo van Gogh, November 3, 1876, no. 96, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let096/letter.html>, and Vincent van Gogh, Isleworth, to Theo van Gogh, November 25, 1876, no. 99, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let099/letter.html>, both in Jansen et al., *Letters*. Bunyan argued that God's grace favored those who were modest, selfless, and detached from worldly wealth, qualities that Van Gogh associated with workers and the poor. See also Deborah Silverman, "Pilgrim's Progress and Vincent van Gogh's Metier," in Bailey and Silverman, *Van Gogh in England*, 100.
13. Van Gogh had been practicing as a minister to the coal mining families in the Borinage for approximately six months, and the local evangelical committee decided he was not well suited to the profession. See Vincent van Gogh, Brussels, to Theo van Gogh, Tuesday, August 5, 1879, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 153, n8, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let153/letter.html>
14. Deborah Silverman makes this point in *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, 109.

15. Nienke Bakker makes this point in “On Rustics and Labourers: Van Gogh and ‘the People,’” in Chris Stolwijk and Nienke Bakker, *Van Gogh’s Imaginary Museum: Exploring the Artist’s Inner World* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 87.
16. Van Gogh’s concept of specific character types draws from the pseudoscience of physiognomy, which attributed a person’s personality and character to their physical appearance. He was familiar with Johann Caspar Lavater and Franz Joseph Gall’s book *Physiognomie et phrénologie rendues intelligibles pour tout le monde* (1862), which he read in 1880. See Vincent van Gogh, Brussels, to Theo van Gogh, Monday, November 1, 1880, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no.160, n8, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let160/letter.html>.
17. Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, on or about Wednesday, July 2, 1884, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 451, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let451/letter.html>.
18. See Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, mid-June 1884, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 450, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let450/letter.html>.
19. Eugène Fromentin, *The Masters of a Past Time, or Criticism on the Old Flemish and Dutch Paintings* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1913), 273, originally published as *Maitres d’Autresfois: Belgique, Hollande* (Paris: E. Plon, 1876), 367.
20. In his letters, Van Gogh often spoke of how Millet’s palette derived from the soil, which the former had read about in Alfred Sensier, *La Vie et l’Oeuvre de J. F. Millet* (Paris: A. Quantin, 1881), 127: “Il y a du grandiose et du style dans cette figure au geste violent, à la tournure fièrement délabrée, et qui semble peinte avec la terre qu’il enseme” (There is something imposing and stylish about this figure [*The Sower*, 1850; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston] with its violent gesture, and proudly run-down bearing, which seems to be painted with the very soil which he sows). See also Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, April 21, 1885, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 495, n9, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let495/letter.html>.
21. Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, on or about Saturday, May 2, 1885, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 499, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let499/letter.html>: “I had finished all the heads and even finished them with great care—but I quickly repainted them without mercy, and the color they’re painted now is something like the color of a really dusty potato, unpeeled of course. While I was doing it I thought again about what has so rightly been said of Millet’s peasants—‘His peasants seem to have been painted with the soil they sow.’” Emphasis original.
22. For a more thorough analysis of pigments Van Gogh utilized in this composition, see the accompanying technical essay by Mary Schafer and John Twilley. Incidentally, as advanced by Schafer and Twilley, Van Gogh’s use of chrome orange helps to secure the new proposed date of March 1885.
23. Louis van Tilborgh indicates that the majority of the heads were painted swiftly, with the exception of the woman with the red cap, who seems to have been realized in more than one sitting. See van Tilborgh and Vellekoop, *Vincent Van Gogh: Paintings*, 1:87.
24. Van Gogh wrote to Theo about the Dutch proclivity for painting quickly; see Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, on or about Tuesday, October 13, 1885, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 535, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let535/letter.html>. For a focused study on this topic, see Griselda Pollock, “Vincent Van Gogh and Dutch Art: A Study of the Development of Van Gogh’s Notion of Modern Art with Special Reference to the Critical and Artistic Revival of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art in Holland and France in the Nineteenth Century” (PhD diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, London University, 1980), cited in Dorn et al., *Van Gogh Face to Face: The Portraits*, 43n47. Pollock suggests that Van Gogh’s interest in Rembrandt’s *Supper at Emmaus* was probably heightened by Fromentin’s review.
- Brigid M. Boyle has connected Paul Cezanne’s painting of a laborer, *Man with a Pipe* and its halo affect, to Catholic holy cards. Read more in this catalogue, Boyle, “Paul Cezanne, *Man with a Pipe*, 1890–1892,” catalogue entry.

25. The halo effect around the Nelson-Atkins head is different from what Van Gogh would later incorporate into some of his self-portraits. See his *Self Portrait*, September–October 1887, oil on cotton, 17 1/2 x 14 5/8 in. (44.5 x 37.2 cm) Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0016V1962>.
26. See Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, on or about Monday, March 2, 1885, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 484, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let484/letter.html>.
27. This was not the first time that Van Gogh positioned figures against windows. He had also done so in Etten and The Hague. However, his concern there was not on the light effects, as it is here. Louis van Tilborgh makes this point in Tilborgh and Vellekoop, *Vincent Van Gogh: Paintings*, 1:118.
28. See Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, between about Monday, March 9, and about Monday, March 23, 1885, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 485, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let485/letter.html>.
29. The six paintings identified from sketches in Van Gogh's letters include the following: *Woman Sewing* (March–April 1885; Van Gogh Museum, F71/JH719), *Head of a Woman* (March 1885; Van Gogh Museum, F70a/JH716), *Woman at Table* (March–April 1885; Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, F72/JH718), *Peasant Woman, Seen Against the Window* (March 1885; Asahi Beer Oyamazaki Villa Museum of Art, Japan, F70/JH715), *Peasant Woman, Peeling Potatoes, Seen against the Window* (March 1885; private collection, F73/JH717), and *Interior with Peasant Woman Sewing* (March 1885; location unknown, F157/JH712). See Louis van Tilborgh and Marije Vellekoop, *Vincent van Gogh: Paintings*, 1:118–20. See also the accompanying technical essay by Mary Schafer and John Twilley, n9. Van Gogh's works are referenced by F numbers or JH numbers from the catalogues raisonnés: J.-B. de la Faille, *The Works of Vincent van Gogh: His Paintings and Drawings*, rev. ed. (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International, 1970); and Jan Hulsker, *The New Complete Van Gogh: Paintings, Drawings, Sketches; Revised and Enlarged Edition of the Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of Vincent Van Gogh*, rev. ed. (Amsterdam: J. M. Meulenhoff, 1996).
30. Louis van Tilborgh makes this point in Tilborgh and Vellekoop, *Vincent Van Gogh: Paintings*, 1:95.
31. See accompanying technical essay by Schafer and Twilley, specifically Fig. 10.
32. Vincent van Gogh, Nuenen, to Theo van Gogh, mid-June 1884, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 450, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let450/letter.html>.
33. Vincent van Gogh, Arles, to Theo van Gogh, September 1888, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 673, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let673/letter.html>.

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### Technical Entry

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Rendered in the somber tones of his Dutch palette, Vincent van Gogh's *Head of a Man* explores light and color with loose, bold brushwork. The prevalence of wet-over-wet painting suggests that the study was completed quickly, perhaps in a single session, and overlapping paint strokes confirm that Van Gogh worked over the entire canvas all at once. Blue-brown paint of the man's hat overlaps the light background, and a



stroke of beige paint from the background covers the figure's proper right ear (Fig. 6). In the lower left, the paint colors of the background and jacket intermix (Fig. 7).

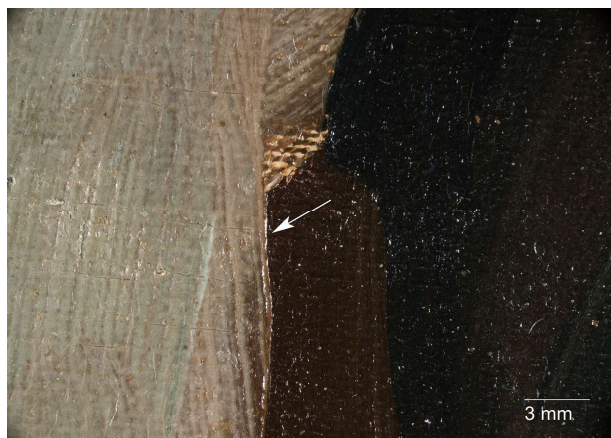


Fig. 6. Photomicrograph of the proper right ear, *Head of a Man* (1885)

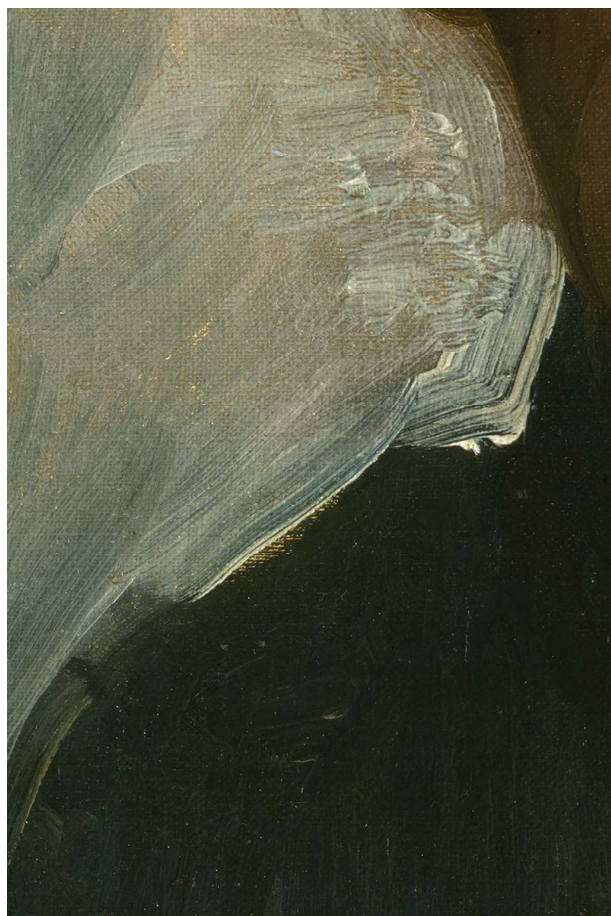


Fig. 7. Detail of the jacket and background at lower left, *Head of a Man* (1885)

Although the tacking margins are no longer present and the painting is lined, x-radiography confirms that the original canvas is an open, plain-weave fabric.<sup>1</sup> While there are limited opportunities to view the ground layer, its elemental composition appears to be lead-based and unlikely to include calcite or barium sulfate, common white pigments employed in the ground layers of nineteenth-century paintings, whose absence can be inferred from elemental mapping by X-ray fluorescence spectrometry (MA-XRF). The even density of the ground layer visible in the x-radiograph and the strong cusping at the right edge imply that the canvas was cut from a commercially prepared roll (Figs. 8 and 9). The canvas weave revealed in x-radiography was studied in detail using automatic thread counting software, conducted in partnership with the Thread Count Automation Project.<sup>2</sup><sup>3</sup> The resulting average thread count, 16.0 threads per centimeter in the horizontal (weft) direction and 13.8 threads per centimeter in the vertical (warp) direction, appears to be consistent with thread counts acquired by hand on other canvases painted while Van Gogh resided in Nuenen.<sup>4</sup> At the date of this comparison (June 2023), there are no weave spacing matches between the Nelson-Atkins painting and other works by Van Gogh from this period that have been similarly studied and could have been cut from an adjacent position in the same roll.

Early in his career, Van Gogh is believed to have employed a perspective frame,<sup>5,6</sup> though no evidence of this tool's use is apparent beneath the paint of the Nelson-Atkins *Head of a Man*. There are, however, freely sketched lines drawn around the figure's head near both ears, which are visible with infrared reflectography (Fig. 10). In addition, a few vertical and horizontal lines in the background appear to represent a window that was eliminated from the composition (see further discussion of this artist change below).

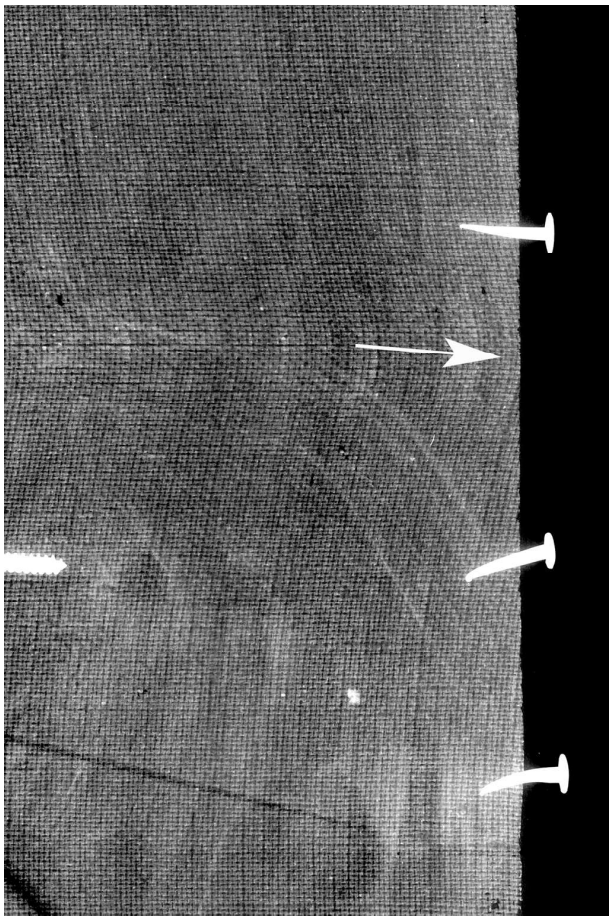


Fig. 8. Detail of radiograph, *Head of a Man* (1885), showing the cusing of the canvas on the lower right

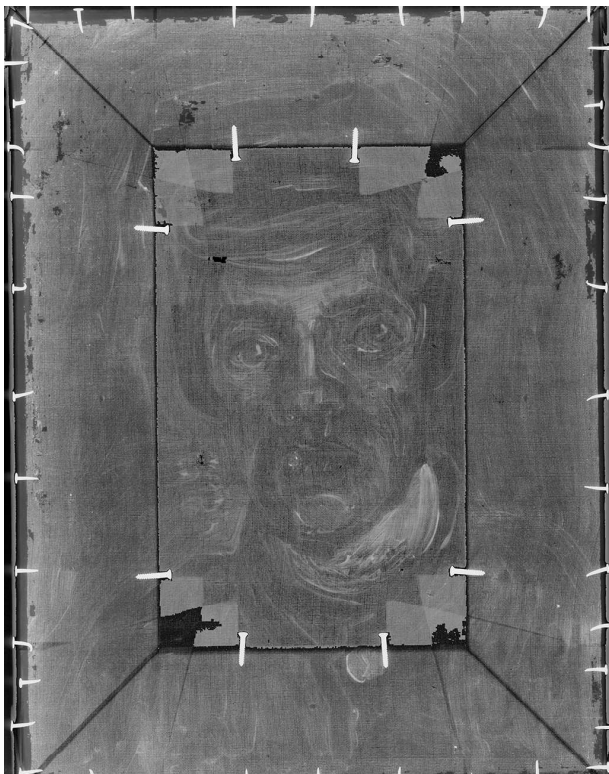


Fig. 9. Radiograph of *Head of a Man* (1885), a composite of two radiographs captured at different exposures in order to minimize the thick, underlying stretcher members

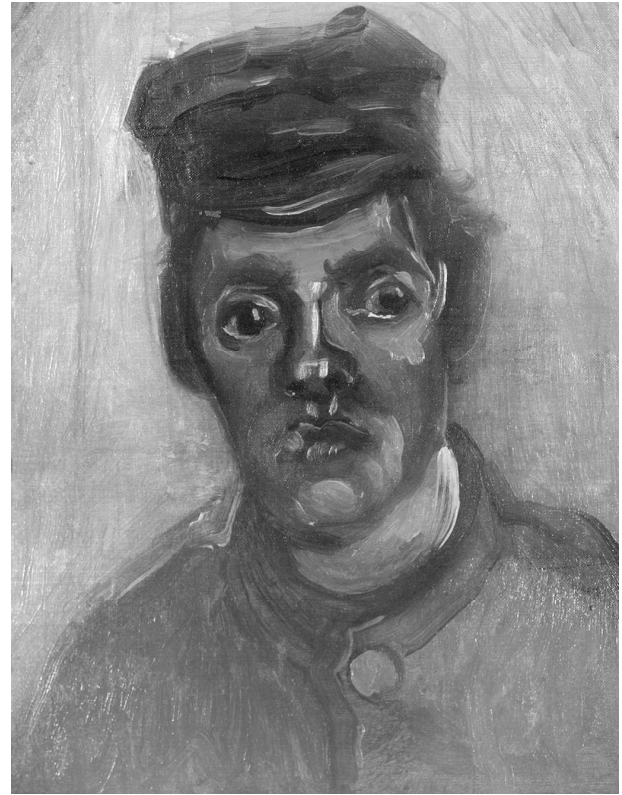


Fig. 10. Infrared reflectogram in the wavelength range between 1.4 and 1.6 microns, *Head of a Man* (1885). A narrow band across the top of the background was excluded from the captured image.

Like he did with other head studies from this period, Van Gogh blocked in the principal forms with thin, fluid paint: blue-green paint forms the basis of the jacket; shades of dark brown lie beneath the face; and a beige tone covers the background. The composition was further developed with subsequent paint strokes, working from dark to light colors. In fact, the brightest highlights on the eyes, nose, and neck consist of a medium-toned yellow-orange paint that appears lighter when juxtaposed against shades of brown. In his letters, Van Gogh described a similar approach by Dutch artist Jozef Israëls (1824–1911): “I read *Les Maîtres d’Autrefois* by Fromentin with great pleasure. And in different places in that book I again found the same questions dealt with that have preoccupied me very much recently, and about which I actually think continually, specifically since, at the end of my time in The Hague, I indirectly heard things that Israëls had said about starting in a low register and making colors that are still relatively dark appear light. In short, expressing light through opposition with dark.”<sup>7</sup>



Overall the study is thinly painted, though there are limited areas of low impasto, like the thicker paint strokes around the eyes (Fig. 11). With round brushes up to 5/8-inch wide, Van Gogh surrounded the figure with numerous wet-into-wet, curving strokes that transition from pale green at the center to medium green at the outer edges. The fluidity of the pale green allows the warm beige underpainting to be apparent in areas, and the underlying canvas weave texture is prominent. While the pale green adjacent to the figure produces a backlighting effect, highlights on the neck and face suggest a second source of light, directed at the sitter from the lower right.

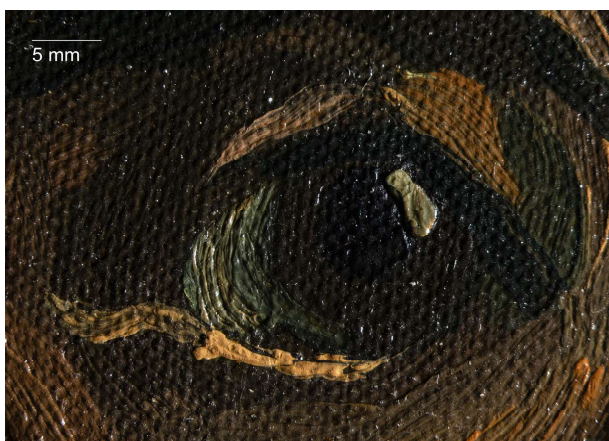


Fig. 11. Photomicrograph of the proper right eye, captured with raking light, *Head of a Man* (1885)

A partial view of Van Gogh's palette was obtained from MA-XRF<sup>8</sup> and from a small set of samples studied by scanning electron microscopy (SEM), polarized light microscopy (PLM), and Raman spectroscopy. MA-XRF reveals distinct roles for the white pigments (Fig. 12). Despite the dark brown tonality of the face, lead white may be present in some of the paint mixtures.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, zinc white played a primary role in the brighter color of the background and was restricted to only lighter components of the figure and facial highlights.<sup>10</sup>

Lead is present throughout the figure, and the antimony map confirms the presence of Naples yellow, a compound of lead and antimony (Fig. 13), often in combination with chrome yellow and orange and located throughout the background, facial highlights, and neck. Chrome orange, a pigment that Van Gogh introduced onto his palette in March of 1885,<sup>11</sup> was found in abundance and identified by Raman spectroscopy.



Fig. 12. Elemental map revealing the differing roles of zinc (red) and lead (green), *Head of a Man* (1885)



Fig. 13. Elemental map showing the antimony distribution near the surface (left) and at depth (right), *Head of a Man* (1885)

Notably, there were no green pigments found in the six samples analyzed. A high response for chromium was found to be due to the prevalence of lead chromate yellow and chrome orange, while neither of the green chromium pigments, viridian or chrome green, were



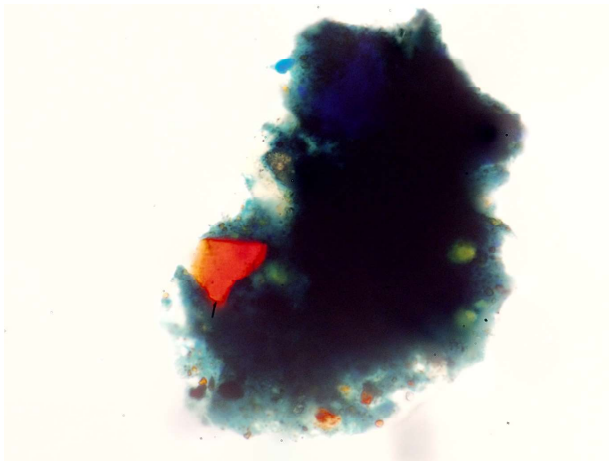


Fig. 14. Dispersed pigments from *Head of a Man* (1885), showing Prussian blue with Naples yellow and an unidentified red-orange particle, normal transmitted light, 400x

encountered. Van Gogh relied heavily on Prussian blue (Fig. 14). He achieved dark blue-green colors by mixing two primary colors (in this case Naples yellow and Prussian blue or, alternatively, chrome yellow and Prussian blue), followed by a third primary color (here, an unidentified red-orange pigment).<sup>12</sup> Cobalt was detected in the figure, and its lack of clear correlation to any other detectable elements points to the presence of cobalt blue, perhaps at a low concentration in paint mixtures. The presence of silica in the rendering of the figure, but not the background, indicates that earth pigments, probably iron earths, were employed. Mineral species were found in abundance in the SEM, and some of them are colorless varieties such as white, iron-free clay. This material may be a manufacturer's filler added to the paints. High levels of potassium and iron (in this case lacking silica) are prominent in the pupils, nostrils, and darker blue strokes of the hat and jacket. However, despite localized, single-particle analyses in the SEM and PLM study, the reason for the high potassium response remains unclear.

Although Van Gogh is said to have withdrawn red lake from his palette while in Nuenen, organic red and red-brown pigments were identified in the flesh tones of *Portrait of a Peasant* (April 1885; Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, F163; Fig. 3) and the background of a slightly later work completed in Antwerp, *Head of an Old Woman* (December 1885; Van Gogh Museum, F174), respectively.<sup>13, 14</sup> For the Nelson-Atkins study, fine red particles resembling lake pigments were observed across the paint surface (proper right nostril, darkest blue of the hat and jacket, brown passages on the face,

and the stroke of orange on the neck), although no lake pigments were identifiable with SEM-based elemental analyses.

Only minor adjustments were made to the figure's shoulders and proper left ear. However, a more substantial artist change is evident in the background, where the vertical and horizontal sketch lines seem to roughly mark a window that was never developed further. In a letter dated March of 1885, Van Gogh described his exploration of subjects placed in front of a window:

*Should I get a clear idea of how to achieve the effects that I have in mind . . . Namely figures against the light from a window. I have studies of heads for it, both against the light and facing the light, and I've already worked on the whole figure several times, seamstress winding yarn, or peeling potatoes. Full face and in profile. I don't know whether I'll get it finished, though, because it's a difficult effect. Still, I think I've learned a few things from it.*<sup>15</sup>

The window sketch combined with the presence of chrome orange suggests that the Nelson-Atkins study was completed closer to the spring of 1885, a period when Van Gogh explored this type of lighting effect and sketched several window studies in his letters.<sup>16</sup> Six paintings have been identified from these sketches,<sup>17</sup> including *Head of a Woman* (Fig. 4), a painting of a woman silhouetted by a windowpane backdrop. In terms of construction and technique, several parallels can be drawn between this study and the Nelson-Atkins painting. For *Head of a Woman*, Van Gogh drew the windowpanes with horizontal and vertical sketch lines, underpainted passages with thin paint colors, and used fluid, pale green paint to render light and to allow the beige underpainting to show through, all of which is comparable to the Nelson-Atkins painting.<sup>18</sup>

The tacking edges of *Head of a Man* have been removed, and it is unclear whether the dimensions have been altered. Early documentation of the painting, written shortly after its 1937 acquisition, refers to the wooden panel as a "later mounting"<sup>19</sup> attached with "strong furniture glue."<sup>20</sup> Few characteristic features remain on the painting that could indicate what type of auxiliary support was first used (i.e. canvas tacked to the wall, canvas mounted to cardboard, or canvas on stretcher). For instance, there is no evidence of pinholes at the outer edges or four corners, like those on *Woman Sewing* (March–April 1885; Van Gogh Museum, F71/JH719)<sup>21</sup> to indicate that Van Gogh tacked the canvas to a rigid

surface prior to painting. Sharp folds or cracks at the painting corners, often signaling the weak corners of a cardboard support, are also absent.<sup>22</sup>



Fig. 15. Detail of the Kunsthandel Oldenzeel label that was removed from the former panel and encapsulated, *Head of a Man* (1885)



Fig. 16. Photomicrograph of the outer edge of *Head of a Man* (1885), showing remnants of red-brown paper



Fig. 17. Photograph captured during the 1940 treatment, showing *Head of a Man* (1885) with raking illumination



Fig. 18. Photograph captured during the 1940 treatment, *Head of a Man* (1885)

A Kunsthandel Oldenzeel label was once affixed to the oak panel reverse (Fig. 15),<sup>23</sup> and vestiges of red-brown paper on the turnover edges relate to this former mounting of the canvas (Fig. 16). The oak panel and remnants of red-brown paper are common attributes for many Van Gogh works that were treated, exhibited, and sold by Oldenzeel in Rotterdam.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately,



condition issues arose for many of the Nuenen canvases adhered to panels, as one collector lamented in the early 1900s: “What a pity that the wood to which the paintings are attached is apparently so young. The pieces are warping badly, and we will have to find a remedy for dealing with this problem.”<sup>25</sup>

Small recurring movements of the Nelson-Atkins panel, the result of environmental fluctuations, caused the paint film to detach in areas and form blisters that required intervention (Fig. 17). Given these circumstances, the painting was treated in 1940; the paint was stabilized with a facing, the panel was mechanically separated from the canvas (Fig. 18), and the canvas was wax-lined to a secondary canvas and stretched.<sup>26</sup> Surface irregularities related to the transfer procedure are apparent with raking illumination. Currently, the paint is stable and well adhered, although residues of discolored natural resin varnish and possibly facing adhesive are visible throughout. The painting was last treated in 2007, at which time a glossy synthetic varnish was removed, a thin layer of synthetic varnish was applied, and areas of paint loss were addressed.<sup>27</sup> Retouching is largely present along the left edge and upper background.

Mary Schafer and John Twilley  
August 2023

## Notes

1. Film-based x-radiograph, no. 503, April 16, 2015, Nelson-Atkins conservation file, 37-1.
2. C. Richard Johnson Jr., Don H. Johnson, and William A. Sethares, “Study of a Peasant’s Head, Vincent van Gogh, 1885 (F165 / 37-1), from the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art,” unpublished thread count report, June 2023, Nelson-Atkins conservation file, 37-1.
3. For an overview of automated thread counting and Van Gogh’s canvases, see Ella Hendriks, C. Richard Johnson Jr., Don H. Johnson, and Muriel Geldof, “Automated Thread Counting and the Studio Practice Project,” *Van Gogh’s Studio Practice*, ed. Marije Vellekoop, Muriel Geldof, Ella Hendriks, Leo Jansen, and Alberto de Tagle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 156–81.
4. Ella Hendriks and Muriel Geldof, “Van Gogh’s Antwerp and Paris Picture Supports (1885–1888): Reconstructing Choices,” *Art Matters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art 2* (2002): 45.
5. Consisting of a wooden or cardboard frame, often with “lines” of thread or wire that form an inner grid or cross, this tool provided the artist with a focused view of the subject. The segments of the grid could serve as reference points to aid in transferring the subject or design to the support. Van Gogh’s use of a perspective frame to overcome his early struggles with perspective and proportion is discussed in Teio Meedendorp, “The Perspective Frame,” in *Van Gogh’s Studio Practice*, 133–41.
6. Louis van Tilborgh and Marije Vellekoop, *Vincent van Gogh Paintings*, vol. 1, *Dutch Period 1881–1885*, *Van Gogh Museum* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers, 1999), 87. See also Vincent van Gogh to Anton Kerssemakers, on or about Thursday, July 16, 1885, in Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, no. b880 V/1962; published in Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, eds., *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters* (Amsterdam and the Hague: Van Gogh Museum and Huygens, 2009), no. 518, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let518/letter.html>.
7. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, mid-June 1884, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 450, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let450/letter.html>. In reference to *The Potato Eaters* (April–May 1885; Van Gogh Museum), Van Gogh described the low key of the dark scene and that the lighter colors “appear as lights on the canvas because of the strong forces that are opposed to them.” See Vincent van Gogh to Anthon van Rappard, on or about August 18, 1885, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 528, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let528/letter.html>.
8. X-ray fluorescence spectrometry elemental mapping was carried out on October 26, 2022. This equipment was constructed as part of a collaboration with the Laboratory of Molecular and Structural Archaeology, directed by Philippe Walter (CNRS/Pierre and Marie Curie University, Paris), by which their instrument design and operational software was provided to the authors.

9. The assignment of individual elements detected by MA-XRF, such as lead, to specific pigments, is limited by the presence of the same element in multiple pigments of the same palette. In this case, lead is known from the MA-XRF work to occur in Naples yellow, for which lead and tin responses are obligatory and demonstrated, and chrome yellow, based upon SEM-based individual particle analyses. In the presence of these two pigments, the simultaneous presence of lead white cannot be ruled out by MA-XRF alone.
10. Zinc white was used in a similar, limited capacity to accent the figure of *Head of Peasant* (April 1885; Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, F163). See Catherine Defeyt, Dominique Marechal, Francisca Vandepitte, and David Strivay, "Survey on Van Gogh's Early Painting Technique Through the Non-invasive and Multi-analytical Study of *Head of Peasant*," *Heritage Science* 8 (2020): 4–5. At this time Van Gogh relied on zinc white more than lead white, although it is unclear why. He may have selected zinc white based on its brighter tone, rheological properties, and ability to form a more transparent paint. See Muriel Geldof and Luc Megens, "Van Gogh's Dutch Palette," in *Van Gogh's Studio Practice*, 237.
11. Geldof and Megens, "Van Gogh's Dutch Palette," *Van Gogh's Studio Practice*, 236.
12. The authors are grateful to Marco Leona, head of the research lab of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, who carried out a small number of additional Raman spectroscopy analyses.
13. Defeyt et al., "Survey on Van Gogh's Early Painting Technique," 4–5.
14. Maarten van Bommel, Muriel Geldorf, and Ella Hendriks, "An Investigation of Organic Red Pigments used in Paintings by Vincent van Gogh (November 1885 to February 1888)," *Art Matters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art* 3 (2005): 116, 129, 134.
15. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, March 23, 1885, in Jansen et al., *The Letters*, no. 485, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let485/letter.html>. The English translation is from this publication.
16. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, April 4, 1885, in Jansen et al., *Letters*, no. 489, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let518/letter.html>.
17. The six paintings identified from sketches in Van Gogh's letters include the following: *Woman Sewing* (March–April 1885; Van Gogh Museum, F71/JH719), *Head of a Woman* (March 1885; Van Gogh Museum, F70a/JH716), *Woman at Table* (March–April 1885; Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, F72/JH718), *Peasant Woman, Seen Against the Window* (March 1885; Asahi Beer Oyamazaki Villa Museum of Art, Japan, F70/JH715), *Peasant Woman, Peeling Potatoes, Seen against the Window* (March 1885; private collection, F73/JH717), *Interior with Peasant Woman Sewing* (March 1885; location unknown, F157/JH712). See Tilborgh and Vellekoop, *Vincent van Gogh Paintings*, 1:118–20.
18. Tilborgh and Vellekoop, *Vincent Van Gogh Paintings*, 1:119–22, fig. 22c. "Head of a Woman (cat. 22) is smoothly painted. In some places—for example, in the window—the paint layer is so thin that the cream-coloured primer shows through. Infrared reflectography revealed traces of underdrawing on this ground layer. Lines clearly related to the painted image appeared in various parts of the woman's cap and throat, where they run parallel to her shawl, indicating that it was originally located slightly higher. There are also several horizontal and vertical lines; these seem to represent the window panes. This preparatory sketch was followed by a division of the canvas into monochrome passages, which in turn were worked up into areas of light and shade. The base tone for the woman's face is brown, for the window a light grey-green, and for the cap a greenish blue."
19. James Roth, handwritten on an envelope that contained labels removed from the panel reverse (now encapsulated), Nelson-Atkins conservation file, 37-1.
20. James Roth, April 1940, treatment report, Nelson-Atkins conservation file, 37-1.
21. Tilborgh and Vellekoop, *Vincent van Gogh Paintings*, 1:122.
22. Tilborgh and Vellekoop, *Vincent van Gogh Paintings*, 1:21–22, 36n.

23. The Oldenzeel label, now encapsulated and located on the back of the painting, was preserved in an envelope with a notation by conservator James Roth: "Labels removed from the back of the panel upon which painting was mounted."
24. Tilborgh and Vellekoop, *Vincent van Gogh Paintings*, 1:42, 108.
25. Ribbius Peletier family archive (1813–1993), Brievenboek (1901–1903), letter 367, February 14, 1903, no. 411: "Jammer dat het hout waarop de schilderstukken bevestigd zijn, oogenschijnlijk erg versch is. De stukken trekken zeer krom en 't zal wenselijk zijn dit gebrek afdoende te verbeteren," cited in Louis van Tilborgh and Marije Vellekoop, "Van Gogh in Utrecht: the collection of Gerlach Ribbius Peletier (1856–1930)," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (1997–1998): 31, [https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_van012199701\\_01/\\_van012199701\\_01\\_0004.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_van012199701_01/_van012199701_01_0004.php).
26. James Roth to George Stout, Director of Technical Research, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, February 29, 1940, Nelson-Atkins conservation file, 37-1.
27. Scott Heffley, April 2, 2007, treatment report, Nelson-Atkins conservation file, 37-1.

With Kunsthandel Wed. Oldenzeel, Rotterdam, Netherlands, by September 15, 1908, no. 75 [1];

Anna Müller-Abeken (1868–1922), Scheveningen, The Hague, by May 19, 1920 [2];

Her sale, *Tableaux et Aquarelles Modernes Provenant de I. Collection G. W. van N . . . à Amsterdam, II. Collection d'un amateur à B . . . , III. Collection W. P. van Ingenegeren à Utrecht, IV. Collection Mme A. Müller-Abeken à Schéveningue, V. Collection M. H. Souget à Bussum, VI. Liquidation de la Société Fierens, De Maeght et Cie à Bruxelles, VII. Diverses Provenances*, Frederik Muller et Cie, Amsterdam, May 19, 1920, no. 87, as *Portrait d'homme*;

With Kunsthandel Huinck und Scherjon, Utrecht, Netherlands, by 1928 [3];

Mlle E. Snellen, Utrecht, Netherlands, by December 10, 1935 [4];

Purchased at her sale, *Tableaux Anciens et Modernes Antiquités: Collections et Successions: M.lle.-E. Snellen, Utrecht; M.-H. Klein Van Gogh, Amsterdam; M.-Ruys de Perez, Amsterdam; M.-L. J. Brantjes, Driebergen; Diverses Provenances*, Frederik Muller et Cie, Amsterdam, December 10–11, 1935, no. 103, as *Portrait d'homme*, by Bernheim-Jeune et Cie., Paris, stock no. 26801, as *Portrait d'homme*, December 13, 1935–February 25, 1936 [5];

Purchased from Bernheim-Jeune et Cie, Paris, probably through Henri-Pierre Roché, Paris, by Theodore Schempp, Brodhead, WI, February 25, 1936–January 18, 1937 [6];

Purchased from Schempp by The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 1937.

## Notes

[1] See decorative rectangular paper label now attached to the painting's backing board, middle right side, with green Art Nouveau woman holding a paintbrush, in printed text: Kunsthandel / Wed. Oldenzeel / Rotterdam / 20, Gedempte / Glashaven. / [at left corner of label] Dagelijks / geopend / van / 10-4 [uur.] / [on right side of label] Permanente / Tentoonstelling / van Schilderijen / en Aquarellen / [handwritten in pen] Vincent van Gogh. / N° 75 / 15 September 1908. It is not clear if the painting was lent for exhibition or was owned by Oldenzeel. According to Martha Op de Coul, "In search of Van Gogh's Nuenen Studio: the Oldenzeel Exhibitions of 1903," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (2002): 106, no archives of the Oldenzeel firm appear to have survived.

## Documentation

### Citation

**Chicago:** Meghan L. Gray, "Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Man*, 1885," documentation in *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, ed. Aimee Marcereau DeGalan (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.735.4033>.

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Gray, Meghan L. "Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Man*, 1885," documentation. *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, edited by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2023. doi: 10.37764/78973.5.735.4033.

## Provenance



[2] Anna Müller-Abeken was married to Gustav Harry Müller (1865–1913). His sister was Helene Kröller-Müller (1869–1939), who was an avid Van Gogh collector and later donated her collection to the Dutch government (now the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo). In 1908, Helene Kröller-Müller began hosting lectures in her home by the noted van Gogh enthusiast, H. P. Bremmer (1871–1956), to which she also invited her brother and sister-in-law. According to Teio Meedendorp, *Drawings and prints by Vincent van Gogh in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum* (Delft, The Netherlands: Thieme Grafimedia Groep, 2007), 274, Mrs. Kröller-Müller passed on the opportunity to buy the painting now in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins.

[3] According to the RKD (Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, Netherlands Institute for Art History), the archive for Huinck and Scherjon was destroyed. The painting was in the collection of this dealer when it was published in Jacob-Baart de la Faille, *L'Œuvre de Vincent Van Gogh: Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: éditions G. Van Oest, 1928), no. 165.

[4] This is possibly Emma Snellen (1872–1940). Her sister was Kate Dusser de Barenne-Snellen (1883–1931), a small-scale art collector who attended art classes in the 1920s by H. P. Bremmer. According to Hildelies Balk, Kate attended the classes with one of her six sisters, another art collector. Unfortunately, this sister is not identified by name. See Hildelies Balk, “De freule, de professor, de koppman en zijn vrouw, het publiek van H. P. Bremmer,” *Jong Holland 2* (1993): 13.

A provenance is listed on a label found on the painting's backing board, bottom center side, on piece of ledger paper, handwritten in ink: Hauteur HH. Largeur 32. / Peint à Nuenen entre 1883.1885 / Collection M<sup>me</sup> : A Muller. Abeken, Schiveningue 1920 / " [ditto marks indicating "Collection"] M<sup>elle</sup> E Snellen, Utrecht. / " [ditto marks indicating "Collection"] Israël / Reproduit dans : J. B. de la Faille, *L'Œuvre de Vincent Van Gogh / catalogue raisonné* n°: 165.

It is unknown who “Israël” might be. Snellen's sales catalogue was published by “Atelier Isaac Israëls” in 1935. The Dutch artist, Isaac Israël (1865–1934), died almost a year before Snellen's sale, making it difficult to rectify his ownership in this provenance narrative.

[5] Bernheim-Jeune purchased the painting from the “Hôtel des ventes d'Amsterdam” on December 13, probably meaning they bought it directly from Snellen's sale. See letter from Guy-Patrice Dauberville, Bernheim-Jeune et Cie, Paris, to Meghan L. Gray, NAMA, September

1, 2011, NAMA curatorial file. See also small, rectangular label on the painting's backing board, middle left side, typewritten: 1936 / N° [handwritten in pen:] 26801 / Van Gogh / Paysan / L.Z. ~~E-Z~~: It is unclear to what “L.Z.” might refer.

[6] According to Bernheim-Jeune's stock books, they sold the painting to “Roche.” See letter from Guy-Patrice Dauberville, Bernheim-Jeune et Cie, Paris, to Meghan L. Gray, NAMA, September 1, 2011, NAMA curatorial file. This was probably Henri-Pierre Roché (1879–1959), a French journalist, author, art collector, advisor, and dealer. By 1919, he was working in Paris as an agent and dealer with many contacts. According to a letter from dealer Theodore Schempp to Paul Gardner, NAMA, January 18, 1937, Schempp purchased the painting from Bernheim-Jeune on July 21, 1936.

For more on these two dealers, see Sean O'Hanlan, “Henri-Pierre Roché,” and Maria Castro, “Theodore Schempp,” in *The Modern Art Index Project* (August 2018), Leonard A. Lauder Research Center for Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://doi.org/10.57011/NHLY4635> and <https://doi.org/10.57011/ACVY8386>.

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### Related Works

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Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Man*, Nuenen, December 1884–January 1885, pencil, pen, brush and ink on paper, 5 5/8 x 3 1/8 in. (14.2 x 8.0 cm), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), d0275V1969.

Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Young Man*, Nuenen, December 1884–May 1885, pencil on paper, 13 11/16 x 8 1/2 in. (34.7 x 21.6 cm) Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), d0368V1962.

Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Young Man*, Nuenen, December 1884–May 1885, pencil on paper, 13 5/8 x 8 7/16 in. (34.6 x 21.5 cm) Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), d0424V1962.

Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Young Man with a Pipe*, Nuenen, December 1884–May 1885, pencil on paper, 13 1/8 x 8 1/8 in. (33.3 x 20.7 cm) Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), d0089V1962.

Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Young Man*, Nuenen, December 1884–May 1885, chalk on paper, 13 5/8 x 8 5/16 in. (34.6 x 21.1 cm), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), d0094V1962v.

Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of a Peasant*, Nuenen, March–April 1885, oil on canvas, 15 3/8 x 12 in. (39 x 30.5 cm),

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Vincent van Gogh, *Man Seated at a Table*, March–April 1885, oil on canvas, 17 7/16 x 12 7/8 in. (44.3 x 32.5 cm), Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands, inv. no. 105.938.

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Kunsthandel Wed. Oldenzeel, Rotterdam, Netherlands, September 15, 1908, no. 75, no cat.

*Five Years of Collecting*, The William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, Kansas City, MO, December 4–11, 1938, no cat.

*Work by Vincent Van Gogh*, Cleveland Museum of Art, November 3–December 12, 1948, no. 2, as *Head of Peasant (Portrait de Paysan)*.

*Two Sides of the Medal: French Painting from Gêrôme to Gauguin*, Detroit Institute of Arts, September 16–October 6, 1954, no. 120, as *Head of a Peasant*.

Possibly *Impressionism: Selections from Five American Museums*, The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, November 4–December 31, 1989, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, January 27–March 25, 1990, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, March 21–June 17, 1990, The Saint Louis Art Museum, July 14–September 9, 1990, The Toledo Museum of Art, September 30–November 25, 1990, hors cat., as *Head of a Peasant*.

*From Farm to Table: Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Masterworks on Paper*, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, August 12, 2017–January 21, 2018, no cat.

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