

Text of the video about the order and the authenticity of the various (F 504-509) versions of :

La Berceuse

Benoit Landais

Traduction

R. G. Harisson

Virginia Vogwill

I baptized it « La Berceuse », or, as we'd say in Dutch like van Eden' — (you know who I mean. He wrote that book I had you read) — which, in van Eden's Dutch would simply be « Ons wiegelied » or « De vliegster ».

It is a woman dressed in green, the bodice olive green and skirt of pale Véronèse green.

A key work in Vincent van Gogh's quest for the “modern portrait”, the painting was perhaps too avant-garde. In a letter to his brother Theo, he said that, “perhaps”, the canvas is *incomprehensible*.

Towards the end of December 1888, Augustine Pénicot had posed for the sketch. She was the wife of a close friend, « the Postman Roulin », Joseph Roulin, the Arles postal official. At the beginning of that month, Vincent had proudly announced:

I have done portraits of a whole family, that of the postman whose head I had done previously — the man, his wife, the baby, the young boy and the 16-year-old son, all characters, and very French, although they have the look of Russians. The cord held by Augustine hints to the suspended cradle where sleeps the five month old Marcelle.

Forty years later, when Jacob-Bart de la Faille compiled his catalogue raisonné of “The work of Vincent van Gogh”, he registered the six known examples of the *Berceuse*.

The sketch became F 504, and the five replicas were assigned the numbers F505 to 509. In de la Faille's opinion, Vincent had painted, in **this**

order, this series of “size 30 canvases”, some two feet by two feet six.

In 1939, in the second edition of his catalogue — since Vincent’s letters had voided the possibility of a sixth version — De la Faille had to declassify one of them.

The *Bercesse* F 505 was reproduced here in colour, but F 509, the innocent victim of his revising, was no longer mentioned. Viewed as the last one to have been painted, it was also the last one to appear on the market. It was only exhibited once, in 1912, twenty years after the death of Vincent.

It was not reproduced. The painting was declared a fake, with no explanation or comment. The only trace of it can be found in the reference tables on the last few pages of the book.

Eleven years after the death of De La Faille, a committee of Dutch experts again revised his catalogue. They too cast away 509. It was registered under the *Rejected works* and no information was added to that of the 1928 catalogue where it was listed in a private collection in Paris.

The description, common to all five versions, largely quotes Vincent’s letters. The editors vaguely add that the *Bercesse* 504 and 505 seem to date from January 1889 and that « *stylistic reasons* » appear to suggest that 506 precedes 508, which is followed by 507.

It should not be that difficult to figure out the order in which Vincent produced the *Bercesse* series. He did say : *I wish to paint in such a way that, at least anyone with eyes could clearly see*”.

The sketch is the starting point. It is distinguished from all the other versions by a carefully researched background, by the order of the graduation of the colours and by the colourist’s attention. Today it is in the Kröller-Müller Kreuller-Muller Museum in Otterlo. Vincent said : *I started it at the end of December, before I became ill.* That was at the very end of Paul Gauguin’s two-month stay in the yellow house.

As he wrote to Theo on January 22, it was simply a *portrait of Roulin’s wife*. In a letter to the painter Arnold Koning written either the same day or the day after, he described it in detail:

It is a woman dressed in green (bodice olive green and skirt in a pale Veronese green). The hair is completely orange, and plaited. The colour of the face is chrome yellow, with, naturally, some broken tones for modelling purposes. The background is a dull vermilion, simply representing a tiled floor. The wall is covered with wallpaper, naturally calculated by me to be in harmony with the rest of the colours. A green-blue paper, with pink dablías touched with orange and ultramarine.

I have baptized it « La Berceuse »

Convinced that he was onto something new, the sketch was promptly copied into painting F507, the Amsterdam version. A simpler wallpaper was preferred to the studied tapestry arabesques. The background recedes more and the stalks have become oblique. The drawing is smoother and the outlines softer. The face is more defined and the bodice is darker. Only 507 and 504 share the treatment of the double collar and the fold to the left of the belt.

On the 28th, Vincent was visited by Roulin, who had recently been transferred to Marseille and had returned to Arles for the first time.

I have just finished the repetition of my sunflowers, and I showed him the two examples of the berceuse between these four bouquets.

And then the yellow and orange tones of the head take on a glow next these yellow shutters.

You see that this framing with simple laths works quite well, and a frame like this costs very little.

My idea had been to make a decoration , for the lining a ship cabin, let us say.

I would like to do a further repetition for Holland, if I can get the model again.

By the 30th, he had begun another replica:

Today I have a third «Berceuse » in progress.

The third of the series, *Berceuse* F 509 is derived straight from 507. The expression and composition are the same. This canvas, whose present location is unknown, only shares with the Otterlo version and with this one, the large flower stalk at the lower left. Above this, higher on the left, the garland in the shape of a « 9 » is the same. The shape that binds the two pink blue dahlias behind the head is only present on these two canvases. Similarly, the flexible stem of the central dahlia, over the right shoulder and the armrest.

The colours used are known only through the description published by De la Faille in his 1928 catalogue:

She is seen sitting on a dull red armchair, the hands crossed, holding a cord. She wears a deep green bodice and a clearer green skirt. Yellowish complexion, red hair, swept up in front and knotted in braids on top of the head. The painted background is decorated with garlands of leaves and flowers.

Like 507 and like the other portraits of Roulin, the canvas is not signed. The inscription *la Berceuse*, which would mean nothing to Augustine, is not painted in. Abandoned for 509, 507 does not bear the inscription “*la*

Berceuse’ either.

I have done the «Berceuse » three times, and since Mme Roulin was the model and I was nothing but the painter, I let her choose between the three, her and her husband, only on condition that I could make myself a repetition of the one she chose, which I actually now have under way.

An echo of 509, the *Berceuse* 508, the most accomplished of the series, is now in the *Boston Museum of Fine Arts*. Vincent did not start in his usual way. Generally working direct from nature, he painted his subject first, adding his background afterwards around the subject. Here, knowing how to proceed, he painted the base colours first. The green of the dress painted at the first stage invades the leg of the chair and *La Berceuse* is painted on top of the already dry red lacquer.

Several details only appear in these two paintings, such as the three hooklike branched garlands above the head.

Vincent’s hospitalization interrupted his work. 508 was completed without 509:

When Mme Roulin also left to go to live with her mother in the countryside temporarily, she took the Berceuse with her. I had the sketch and two repetitions, she had a good eye and took the best one, but I am redoing it at the moment and I don’t want this one to be inferior.

The stays in the Arles hospital prevented him from working, but Vincent never lost sight of his ambitions. The 29th of March, he announced:

And now for the fifth time I am redoing my figure of the «Berceuse ». And when you see it, you will agree with me that it is nothing but a chromolithograph from the bazaar and again it does not even have the merit of being photographically correct in proportions or anything else.

In this canvas, now at the *Chicago Art Institute*, the foot of the armchair is again a part of the dress, and its angle is wider. The three oblique stems, which were only partly delineated in blue-white on the Boston canvas, become a more united blue and are crisper.

Various other elements confirm the order — the oblique stem in the lower right, for example. This establishes that 506 was definitely made straight after its elder sister painting in Boston. It the last of the series and the only one to be both signed both “*Vincent*” and dated “*Arles 89.*”

At the end of April, before leaving Arles for the asylum of Saint-Rémy de Provence, Vincent sent virtually all his canvases to his brother. Amongst them were four *Berceuses*.

Theo was in poor health. He was late to acknowledging the receipt, but when he did write, three weeks after they had been sent, he mentioned the *Berceuse* as the first among his favorites .

One copy had been for the model, one for Theo, one was for the market and one *Berceuse* each was to be sent to Gauguin and Bernard; since the two **artists** were closest to Vincent in artistic competition, they both had the right to a version:

If he will accept it, you may give Gauguin one of «La Berceuse » which is not mounted on a stretcher, and also one to Bernard, as a token of my friendship.

Later on, Vincent would speak of these exchanges.

Emile Bernard was the first to get his *Berceuse*, almost certainly right after the letter of November 17th 1889:

Bernard has spoken to me of an exchange, you are quite free to arrange that with him if he wishes and if he mentions it to you. I want you to have one good thing from him besides the portrait of his grandmother. It seems that he wants « La Berceuse ».

Of the two canvases on stretchers, Theo keeps the center piece of the group Vincent offered him and his wife Johanna:

What you must know is that if you put La Berceuse with the two sunflower canvases to the right and to the left, this forms a kind of triptych. The frame for the central piece is then the red one. And the two sunflowers which go with it are those framed in narrow lats. This way the format is enlarged and the roughness of execution makes sense.

Vincent would only mention his *Berceuse* once before his offer of an exchange with Gauguin:

Give him my kindest regards, and if he likes, he can take the repetitions of the Sunflowers and the repetition of La Berceuse in exchange for something of his that would please you.

Six months later, Vincent ceased painting for ever.

Oh Mother, he was so much my own brother!

Theo was devastated by the death of his elder brother, his mentor and accomplice. He worked tirelessly to render homage to him. As the manager of the modern art branch of the renowned art dealer Goupil, he knocked on many doors in willful efforts to arrange an exhibition of Vincent's work, but they were all closed.

In September, he decided to show some of them at his own apartment. Emile Bernard lent a hand.

«Bernard came here Sunday and the days after to help hang the canvases in our apartment, and it is very well done, so that those who are interested can see a certain

number, until we can, sooner or later, arrange an exhibition.”

Twenty years later, Bernard recalled:

“I left no empty space on the walls. On them was the green Berceuse which shone between the yellow and orange suns, like a village Madonna between two golden candelabras.

At best, Bernard kept his *Berceuse* for four years before the dealer Julien Tanguy, to whom he had consigned it, arranged the sale to Count Antoine de la Rochefoucauld for 600 francs.

Theo van Gogh did not survive his brother by more than six months, losing his mind in October 1890. One month after being interned, his brother-in-law Dries Bonger with Emile Bernard, drew up an inventory of the collection, assigning each canvas a number which was used for loans to exhibitions. Cross-references in the archives allow us to identify the three *Berceuses* bequeathed by Theo.

Number 109 is 504 the *sketch*. Its separate classification is explained by it being mounted on a stretcher and its being exhibited at Theo's, while the two *Berceuse* kept rolled up are found, side by side: 192 for 506 the Chicago version, 193 for 507, the ‘distant relative’ in Amsterdam.

When widowed, Johanna kept the three versions, but on March 29, 1894, Gauguin requested his *Berceuse*. *For some years [...] always traveling [...] I was not concerned with recovering my paintings by Vincent, which included amongst others a Berceuse — a woman seated on an armchair.*

Gauguin received his canvas and thanked Johanna on the 4th of May: *I have received your letter and the roll. Many thanks for your generous kindness in this matter, and I will send you a study as you have asked.*

He did not keep his *Berceuse*. It soon appeared in the collection of Auguste Bauchy, the manager of the *Café des Variétés*— rich with numerous works by Gauguin and many by Vincent — but which he soon liquidated.

In 1907, Johanna sold the sketch to Bernheim-Jeune. The gallery re-sold it in 1912 to Hélène Kröller-Müller who, at her death, bequeathed her entire collection to the Dutch State.

Johanna's son offered the third to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1945 to thank them for sheltering the Van Gogh family collection amid their own during the Second World War. In 1998, it was given on long term loan to the Van Gogh Museum.

On the 4th June 1899, the Roulins gave up their *Berceuse*, which they sold to the Parisian art dealer Ambroise Vollard for little more than 100 francs. Vollard kept the canvas for eleven years before selling it to Fred Thévoz on

the 20th July 1910, for 10,000 francs.

Thevoz had already seen another *Berceuse*, but, contrary to those who buy a reproduction after admiring an authentic work, he had bought “*the better one*”... after having been lured by the seductress hosted by Bernard.

In the beginning of January 1910, Emile Bernard learnt that Johanna van Gogh was on the point of publishing Vincent’s letters with the Galerie Bernheim Jeune.

Since he had already printed excerpts in the *Mercure de France* in 1893, he wanted to see the letters that Vincent had written to him published first. On January 25th, he signed a contract with Vollard for 2 000 francs, ceding the reproduction rights for six years.

He wanted a luxurious edition, illustrated with colour reproductions. A new procedure, heliogravure, gave remarkable results. Vollard gave Bernard free choice of paintings to be entrusted to the best heliogravure company, the Société Anonyme des Arts Graphiques of Bellegarde. Fred Thévoz was the manager there. Bernard chose three paintings, a self-portrait of Vincent he owned, and two loaned by Amédée Schuffenecker, the *Town Hall of Auvers* and... a *Berceuse*, the one which today is in the New York *Metropolitan Museum*.

First recorded as owned by Amédée Schuffenecker in 1904, it was loaned by him the following year in the Van Gogh Retrospective organized by the *Artistes Indépendants* Exhibition.

It is not very difficult to figure out where it came from. His brother was the painter Emile Schuffenecker, a second rate artist who had been very close to Gauguin. He had enough talent to produce works that closely resembled those he copied. Certain subjects gave him more trouble than others.

The sixth in a series of five canvases, this *Berceuse* appears to borrow everything in a clumsy manner from the Chicago canvas, even down to the signature and date on the armrest.

The dented forehead, the shrunken braids, the face flattened without any modeling or expression; the eyes corrected are placed on the same level; the stiff sleeved bodice with one decorated sleeve lining; broken flower stems; streaky ribs on the leaves, the flattened armrest, accidents repeated from the original, the armchair shaky, false decorative contours painted with a hesitant hand lacking in rhythm.

A first-rate forger, Schuffenecker introduced a variation, placing the right

hand over the left. In this variant, everything is for the most part disastrous. It results in a broken wrist, stick-like fingers with fingernails which are gnawed, whereas they are always neat on the other versions.

The cord is absurdly tangled between the fingers.

There is certain evidence that Bernard and Vollard considered the *Berceuse* was a fake.

Why? On the 29th of January 1912, Vollard wrote: “*Monsieur, Please suspend the binding of Vincent Van Gogh immediately, there will probably be a new modification to the book, and do not deliver any copies before I have given you instructions to do so. Greetings.*”

If there was a problem, it was somehow solved.

The place of honour in colour in the edition of Vincent's Letters to Bernard established the legitimacy of Schuffenecker's *Berceuse* for many years.

This appearance in fact condemns it, Vincent's letters exclude it, the order of execution bans it and the provenances of Vincent's *Berceuses* prevent any alternatives. It has been protected by the mistaken belief that it had come from Roulin, an error that was perpetuated in the revised 1970 catalogue: “*The version which Mme Roulin took is 505.*”

De la Faille was mistaken (or deceived) in thinking that Augustine Roulin had chosen the *Berceuse* 505. No, that was not the one! Without a question, 505 occupies 509's place of honour.

What has been taken for an equivalent is not .

An accomplished work by Vincent is of extreme accuracy. The two arms of the chair are perfectly centered at the same height. The horizontal line is subtly rendered by the thumbs of the hands posed on the body, hands that are painted in such a way that is quite daring on such a large painting. The axis of the painting cuts through the thumbnail, across the bodice button and bisects the mouth. The woman waits, immobile and silent, her gaze in the distance, lost in her thoughts. One can endlessly contemplate.

With the impostor, all is flat and clumsy.

A collector beyond suspicion, Schuffenecker was regarded as “*the gentleman who has such beautiful things*”. On the 31st of July 1934, he took all his secrets with him...

Three years later, Emile Bernard visits the very official exhibition organised for the opening of the Palais de Tokyo entitled: *Masterpieces*

of *French Art*. There, he discovers a Paul Gauguin signature on a *Breton Landscape* which he had painted himself in 1888 and had sold to Amédée Schuffenecker in 1925.

He immediately informs the *General Director of Fine Arts* and the press. Newspapers jump on the savoury story. The owner of the *Landscape* is Emile Labeyrie, a former director of the Banque de France.

In his answer, Labeyrie promises Emile Bernard to have the signature removed as soon as he recovers the painting. Obviously uneasy about the affair, he writes — “*Since this incident gives me the pleasure of getting in touch with you*” — he asks him to give “*reassurance of the authenticity*” of five “Bernards” acquired from « *the Schuffenecker family* » in the same lot.

Labeyrie adds: « *I also acquired from the same source two works which I believe to be by van Gogh.* » He delicately announces that, on the back of one of them is written: « *Certified an authentic Vincent van Gogh work by Emile Bernard in 1928.* »

« *The other one, a 34 by 42 centimeters oil on canvas, represents the head of the Berceuse. This painting does not bear any signature either, but it does not seem to me to be a copy, because, it shows significant changes when compared to the other paintings of the subject. A label titled van Gogh is attached to the frame.* »

This “seventh” *Berceuse*, a partial copy, was not to be admitted as an authentic *van Gogh*. Chances are the affair drove De la Faille to cast off one of the six *Berceuse* which he had listed in his first catalogue.

Vincent painted five of them and to settle matters that’s how many were to be included in future catalogues.

Generations of experts were somehow convinced that Emile Schuffenecker lacked the talent to duplicate masterpieces ... Most of the artworld today still agrees that there no proof of forgery.

“As my good friend Roulin says: “*It is being someone else’s pedestal* ” *But at least one should know for whom or what ...*”

Light changes from a different angle.

So, you understand that my idea had been to make a decoration for the boards of a ship cabin, for example.