

Text of the video on (the forged) *Selfportrait with bandaged ear*

Benoit Landais

A Masterpiece? No. A second rate painting.

Admirers of the *Portrait with a Smoking Pipe* must not be offended, objectivity is not the first criterion for admiration. The main reason why this small painting is celebrated in all respects, why this icon is the guest painting of major shows is that it reflects an amazing episode : an artist, highly revered today, cut off his ear, brought it to a prostitute and painted his bandaged head.

This in no way proves the authenticity of the picture.

To talk about painting, to attribute, one must be rid of the emotional component that is believed to have motivated the artist and his admirers.

Is it a « good » portrait? Since the answer to this question may be biased, we should not ask this question, but wonder if this picture is related to other portraits painted by Vincent. On a first key point, the answer is no. To be convinced let's take the

portraits painted by Vincent (those painted with a similar angle suffice), measure the distance between the eyes, measure the distance between the axis of the eyes and mouth and see what the ratio is. Nowhere that of *The Man with a Pipe*. One could be satisfied with the idea that this Portrait with a Pipe is a genuine work and a noticeable exception, but who knows that – beyond all the liberties he may have taken – Vincent respects, on this point, the convention of realism, which a major impediment.

Similarly, if you notice that the button of the collar of the coat is not sewn on anything, you conclude to a major discrepancy after watching all the buttons on clothes painted by Vincent.

The number of exceptions of the kind should at least lead the amateur to think that the picture may not be by Vincent. The idea of forgery eventually dissolves the veil of admiration. Simply examining the painting is enough.

The poorly pasted nose is too short and not Vincent's the nostrils are wrong. The deformed and misaligned stem of the pipe clumsily distorts the upper lip giving the feeling of missing teeth. The weak mustache contradicts what is known of Vincent's hair. The round fat chin is not his. A bulge on the left cheek looks like a chew.

The stiff coat stands up in an unlikely way.

The unstable dressing, with its compresses, placed too low, is singularly wrong and the sort of three steps it forms under the cap are brutal. The anecdotal scrolls of smoke, invariably absent in Vincent's art, are another factor.

The painting is flat and the complementary colors are shoddy, without subtlety or imagination. The border line between the orange and the red in the background just above the eyes, squashes the face, amplifying that hangdog look.

Mismanagement of light, here coming from several sides, show that the portrait is not the result of observation, but built up and thus copied and forged.

Moreover, it is strictly speaking not a painting but rather a colored drawing. The shortest way to highlight the gap between a portrait of Vincent and Schuffenecker's talent is to examine the images brightness threshold. The face appears exceptionally flat. It cannot be a painting by Vincent who, when he painted, sculpted his face with shadows and shades of gray.

We may well wonder then how this picture came to light? The first step is that which caused admiration. Schuffenecker, for he is the author, decided to paint this portrait - perhaps not as a fake Van Gogh initially - because he was among the very first to have ear the amazing story of the severed ear. Gauguin fled to his home two days after the drama.

Obstacle!, may warn critics aware that one cannot paint a portrait from scratch in Van Gogh's manner. They would be right and wrong. Wrong as exceptions to Vincent's art reduce to little the typical Vangoghian aspect. Right because, even so, a forger, or an imitator or a copyist needs a model for the various elements: a face, a hat, coat, pipe, etc. The portrait from which multiple parts are borrowed is the successful *Selfportrait*, now in the Courtauld Institute in London, much more complicated and a larger canvas (a forger reduces, for enlarging the view would require invention – a far too hazardous game) Comparison of the two portraits reveals differences that are soon explained. The bad shading, the wrong attachment of the dressing, the drop of the fur hat in the neck and several other shapes are particularly poorly done in the *Portrait with the Pipe* because Schuffenecker could not read their subtlety in the model. This means that he had not the model itself, but only a reproduction. This explains the colors lost on the way or the misunderstood elements like the shadow that became a part of the hat pulled down too low.

Knowing this and knowing that the *Portrait with the Pipe* was shown for the first time in 1893, allows us to deduce that a black and white photograph was used as a model and that its author

was Emile Bernard, the only person one to have taken pictures of Vincent's works in the collection of the Van Gogh family where the "*Portrait of Vincent recovering from illness*" was. We also know that Schuffenecker took part in the shooting of these views in March 1881.

So, there is therefore no more mystery in the fact that Vincent's letters do not mention his picture but only refer to the portrait with his bandaged ear now in the Courtauld.

We must also correct the wrong provenance of the *Portrait with a Pipe*. Roland Dorn and Walter Feilchenfeldt stated that Vincent had left the painting in Arles with his friends the Ginoux and that they later passed it on to Ambroise Vollard, who would in turn sold it to Schuffenecker.

The sale to Schuffenecker is just as imaginary as the sale of the portrait by the Ginoux. Vollard bought his first Vincent in 1894 and no painting that remained at Vincent's friends in Arles moved to Paris before 1895, whereas the Portrait with a Pipe was already on show in 1893 at Le Barc de Boutteville's gallery in Paris... loaned by Schuffenecker.

He never bought the painting, but wrote to his buyer when he sold it : "it's a thing of my own I part with."

It is certain that Schuffenecker painted it for another reason: first he made a draft in pastel. As is often the case for forgers, he could not bring himself to part with this work. After his death, his daughter put the pastel on the market and it was acquired in 1974, by the Van Gogh Museum, which presents it as a «copy in tribute» to Vincent. It is not very difficult, comparing inch by inch, to establish that the pastel is the model of the painting, simply by focusing on the differences and looking at their meaning. When one discovers that it would be impossible to make the pastel from the painting and that the pastel is closer to Vincent's painting, the case is solved. It's enough to examine the detail of the button, absent in the pastel ; the collar behind

the pipe, a failure in oil ; the pencil marks as smoke against the cheek, natural in the pastel, weak in oil version; the drawing of the eyes, consistent in the pastel, weak in oil painting, the deformation of the upper lip, incoherent also in oil.

That is why the *Portrait with the Pipe* was “ignored” by the *Correspondence*... which, in fact excludes it. That is why there is no early provenance... despite attempts to document its history. This is always the case with forgeries.