

# Vincent's

## Portrait of Ivan Pokhitonov

### Paris 1887

#### English text of the video

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While works of art remain the same, their status may change. The authenticity of a painting may be challenged and it then becomes considered a downgraded work or even a forgery. Another work, perhaps even the same one, may follow the reverse path. When a canvas is deemed suspect experts weel out a familiar range of statements : "doubtful authenticity", " possible misattribution", "work attributed to... ". An undeniable fact remains : a painting is either genuine or it is not.

A painting may fall from grace at any time and we would like to believe that changes in experts opinion are based on the study and correct interpretation of the works themselves. This is often the case, however, infamous cases in Art History have taught us that intense disputes among specialists in expertise can also be rooted in rivalries, pretexts and human fallibility.

Thus, the authenticity of the Melbourne *Portrait of a Man* would probably not have been challenged had Martin Bailey, a journalist at the *Art Newspaper*, not organised two Van Gogh exhibitions in the U. K. In an article written a decade earlier he had challenged several of Professor Ronald Pickvance's conclusions. This unwelcome intrusion of an outsider into what Pickvance considered to be his specialist field prompted him to publish

belligerent article in the *Burlington Magazine* about Bailey's show. The authenticity of several exhibited works was questioned by the professor, including that of the unsigned : *Portrait of a Man*. A number of rumour mongers immediately seized on the article as an opportunity to cast further aspersions on the Van Gogh from the former colony. Such doubts about the work's authenticity would probably not have arisen in the first place had Bart de la Faille, in his original catalogue in 1928, not mistakenly dated the canvas to the Antwerp period. Twenty years later, Marc-Edo Tralbaut a Belgian art historian, rather than confidentially stating that the painting belonged to the Paris period, to which a large number of features clearly link it, merely called for a technical review. Jan Hulsker corrected the error in his 1978 catalogue, however art historians, jealously guarding their field, ignored the opinions of this linguist.

Following doubts raised by Pickvance – which relegated the portrait to Antwerp and reattributed it to an art student from there – the classification of the painting as a genuine Van Gogh became untenable. Three major reasons led to this : firstly the failure of the organisers of the British exhibitions to defend the canvas and the two classic sources at the root of such mistakes : the fact that the canvas could not be traced back to Vincent and the mystery surrounding the identity of the sitter. Media pressure was such that the director of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, had no choice but to transfer the task of resolving the dispute to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam – the self-appointed supreme judge in the field. After the exhibitions the, now suspicious, *Portrait of a man* was sent to the Netherlands.

A year later, the *Portrait of an unidentified person*, was deemed to be "painted by a contemporary of Van Gogh", and newly accredited with a range of – Non existent – technical flaws and returned to Melbourne, with an expertise stating that it could *under no circumstances* remain attributed to Vincent : “*The sum of the anomalies makes it plain that the work cannot be attributed to van Gogh.*”

Tellingly the Amsterdam museum's conclusion was reached by a team of “*curators, conservators and researchers*” – which one time had been advised by none other than Professor Ronald Pickvance.

Curiously, One Vincent's best known techniques – extreme care in crucial areas and apparent loose strokes elsewhere – was cited as a reason for rejection.

Whilst challenging the verdict on the basis of the evident stylistic qualities of the Portrait proved impossible – the flawless treatment of the light, choice for colour and Vincent's familiar brushstrokes – due to the fact that the Amsterdam team has exclusive rights in these matters – it is however possible to defend the canvas authenticity by identifying the sitter, an individual that Vincent encountered in Paris... less than a mile from his home.

The appearance of the unkempt model and his thoughtful eyes are proof enough that he was an artist. This is confirmed by the testimony of the Dutch painter Arthur Briët who told Bart de la Faille he had known him. Unfortunately the name of the sitter was not revealed when Tralbaut reported the fact.

A careful study of a photographic portrait of "the most French of Russian painters" of the time, Ivan Pavlovich Pokhitonov, taken in 1880, and its comparison to the Melbourne Portrait makes the identification certain. Portraits painted in Moscow in 1882 by Ilya Repin and by Nikolai Kuznetsov, or his self-portrait, makes the certainty absolute. While it is difficult for lack of explicit documentary evidence, to date the *Portrait* the dating is given by its style, colour, touch, which exclude any date before the series of portraits that Vincent began in early 1887. The dates of Pokhitonov presence in Paris provides a further time constraint. After a winter spent in Biarritz, he returned, around May 5, to his apartment in the Villa des artistes at 15 impasse Helène, where Vincent was a frequent visitor, indeed, John Peter Russell, also had his studio there & painted Vincent's portrait.

Ailing, after having suffered two attacks of pleurisy, which explains the emaciated face in the *Portrait*, did not deliver six of his paintings at the Goupil gallery until May 26th, which had taken him under contract a year earlier. It seems likely that Theo Van Gogh, who headed the Modern Art branch of the Goupil gallery, alerted his brother to the return of Pokhitonov – a brilliant artist that Vincent cannot have ignored – and that the portrait was painted shortly after. The date for the painting of the *Portrait* can

therefore be narrowed down to June 1887; since in early July, Pokhitonov was back in the South.

The rehabilitation of the "Portrait of Ivan Pokhitonov" is central to understanding Vincent as an artist for whom the study of the human figure was central.