

# Van Gogh Museum Articles

November 2024

## When Did Van Gogh Paint *The Smoker*?

Teio Meedendorp



Vincent van Gogh, *The Smoker* (detail). Arles, c. 27 February 1888. Oil on canvas, 62.9 x 47.6 cm. The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, F 534 JH 1651

Van  
Gogh  
Museum

Amsterdam



Hotel-Restaurant Carrel, Rue Amédée Pichot 30, Arles, c. 1900. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (archief Tralbaut)

For the latest volume in the Van Gogh Museum's series of collection catalogues, all seventy-two of the paintings held by the museum from the period 1888-90 have been extensively studied from both an art-historical and a technical perspective.<sup>1</sup> This has generated fresh insights not only into the works in the Van Gogh Museum, but occasionally into paintings in other collections too. Study of *An Old Woman of Arles* (fig. 2), for instance, which Van Gogh painted toward the end of February 1888 shortly after arriving in Provence, has allowed the redating of another portrait, *The Smoker* (fig. 1) from The Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. It was long assumed that Van Gogh painted the man with the pipe in Arles in late 1888, a moment in which he was vying with Paul Gauguin and felt the need to prove his artistic worth through portraits. There is good reason to conclude, however, that the painting was actually done much earlier – shortly after *An Old Woman of Arles* to be more precise.

## Paris?

The initial assumption was that *The Smoker* dated from slightly earlier still and was painted in Paris, where Van Gogh lived until February 1888. In 1905 at any rate, when the work still belonged to Johanna van Gogh-Bonger's collection, the large-scale Van Gogh exhibition held that year at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam placed it among the Paris paintings, listing the title as *Man met pijp* (Man with Pipe).<sup>2</sup> Pursuit of a correct date took on a new dimension, however, when Vincent's correspondence with his brother Theo was published in 1914 and no mention of the work was found. Knowledge of Van Gogh's overall oeuvre had been rather limited up to then, but the letters changed all that, especially when the first catalogue raisonné was published in 1928. Its author, J.-B. de la Faille, situated *The Smoker* in the 'Arles Period' (époque d'Arles), more precisely in December 1888, along with several other portraits that Van Gogh painted at the time, including those of the Roulin family (fig. 3).<sup>3</sup> When a revised edition of the catalogue appeared in 1970, however, the editors pushed the date back a few months.<sup>4</sup> They suggested the summer of 1888, when Van Gogh was likewise occupied with portraits, including those of a Zouave, a postal worker and Patience Escalier, a former cowherd from the Camargue (fig. 4). Jan Hulsker's catalogue raisonné (first edition 1977) subsequently returned *The Smoker* to the second half of December 1888, 'in view of Vincent's great activity in portrait painting' at that time.<sup>5</sup> The influential catalogue of the exhibition *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South* (2001-02) pinned the date down a little more precisely still, placing it among the works that Van Gogh painted between 13 and 23 December. This dating has not subsequently been challenged until now.<sup>6</sup>

1 *Paintings 3 - Arles, Saint-Rémy, Auvers-sur-Oise, 1888-1890*, scheduled for publication in 2026.

2 *Tentoonstelling Vincent van Gogh*, exhib. cat. Amsterdam (Stedelijk Museum), 1905, p. 21, no. 69.

3 J.-B. de la Faille, *L'œuvre de Vincent van Gogh. Catalogue raisonné*, 4 vols., Paris and Brussels 1928, vol. 1, p. 153, F 534.

4 J.-B. de la Faille, *The works of Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1970, p. 229.

5 J. Hulsker, *The New Complete Van Gogh*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia 1996, p. 378.

6 Douglas W. Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin. The Studio of the South*, exhib. cat. Chicago (Art Institute of Chicago); Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), 2001-02, p. 244.



1. Vincent van Gogh, *The Smoker*. Arles, c. 27 February 1888. Oil on canvas, 62.9 x 47.6 cm.  
The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, F 534 JH 1651



2. Vincent van Gogh, *An Old Woman of Arles*. Arles, around 24 February 1888. Oil on canvas, 58.1 x 42.6 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), F 390 JH 1357

## When exactly?

The shifting dates for *The Smoker* illustrate the difficulty of pinning its creation down. Since the work is not mentioned in the artist's correspondence, we have to rely on our assessment of its stylistic, physical and technical features and on the choice of motif. The loose painting style, the richly nuanced colour and the figure type immediately rule out Van Gogh's Dutch period, as well as his time in Paris where, in contrast to his preceding phase, he no longer sought his models so much among the working class. This would change again in Arles, a period that also offers the best stylistic fit. During the almost fifteen months he spent in the Provençal town, Van Gogh threw himself enthusiastically and copiously into portraiture twice: once during the summer months and again in the later autumn of 1888. It is understandable, therefore, to consider a date in the course of one of these two periods.<sup>7</sup> There is, however, also a third possibility. When Van Gogh arrived in Arles at the end of February, he was keen to prove himself straight away through portraiture, the genre with which he had rounded off his time in Paris.<sup>8</sup> Although his letters mention only *An Old Woman of Arles*, this does not rule out the possibility that *The Smoker* might also have been painted at this juncture, bringing us back to the question of dating based on style and technique.

There are clear stylistic differences between *The Smoker* and Van Gogh's portraits from the second half of 1888. The latter often feature a uniformly toned background, in some instances to emphasize a colour contrast with the sitter, in others to provide a harmonious effect (figs. 3 and 4). Van Gogh's emphasis on flat areas of colour and outlines was also becoming increasingly important in this period, whereas *The Smoker* is generally conceived more freely and painted more evenly, with brushstrokes that flow into one another. The background is not rendered uniformly, but in shades of light and dark blue, suggesting shadow and an illusion of three-dimensionality. Unlike the later portraits, the spatial effect here is fairly pronounced. We also make out a curtain on the right beneath a canopy, possibly indicating a window or the kind of draught-excluder sometimes found at the entrance to a café or restaurant to keep out the cold. De la Faille described 'a light-blue background with a violet curtain with red stripes on the right'.<sup>9</sup> Due to discolouration, the effect of those alternating red and violet stripes is no longer visible: the canopy alone is still clearly red in tone. The man's face, meanwhile, is made up of a variety of colours, both matching and contrasting, with Van Gogh using the brush here and there like a pen to indicate eyebrows, moustache and accents in the hair with short, thin, straight strokes. He coloured the white of his model's eye in a striking light green.

7 De la Faille, for instance, also dated other portraits not mentioned in the letters to the end of 1888, including several of the Roulin family (by no means all of which are specifically mentioned in Van Gogh's correspondence), a portrait of Joseph Ginoux (F 533 JH 1649, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo) and the head of a man with a damaged eye (F 532 JH 1650, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam). Of these two latter works, De la Faille's dating of the first is correct, while the second has been redated to Saint-Rémy, October 1889.

8 See L. van Tilborgh, 'Van Gogh's Self-Portraits: Reaching for the Infinite', in K. Serres (ed.), *Van Gogh. Self-Portraits*, exhib. cat. London (The Courtauld Gallery), 2022, pp. 37–63, esp. pp. 45–46.

9 De la Faille 1928, *op. cit.* (note 3): 'un fond bleu clair avec à droite un rideau violet, rayé de rouge.'



3. Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of Armand Roulin*.  
Arles, November–December 1888. Oil on canvas, 65  
x 54.1 cm Museum Folkwang, Essen, F 492 JH 1642

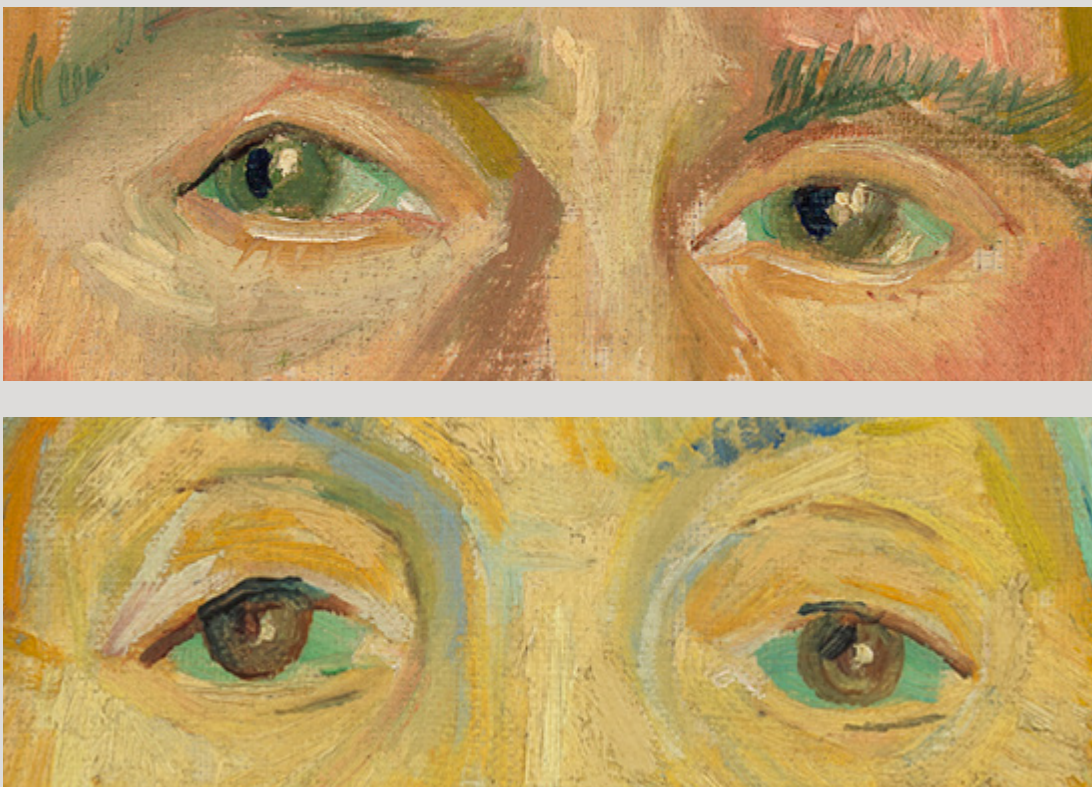


4. Vincent van Gogh, *Patience Escalier ('The Peasant')*.  
Arles, late August 1888. Oil on canvas, 69 x 56 cm.  
Private collection, F 444 JH 1563

As a result, the portrait is more reminiscent of *An Old Woman of Arles* in terms of style and the working out of the motif than it is of the execution of Van Gogh's later portraits. The similarities are even more apparent if we view the heads and details of the two works side by side (figs. 5 and 6). *An Old Woman of Arles* also has a background with a clear three-dimensional detail (the corner of a bed), while the decorative wallpaper with its stripes and green and pink dots stands out, although the colour effect has diminished due to fading pigments and will originally have formed a more intense contrast. In painterly terms, the two portraits are closely related and their kinship is further supported by reference to Van Gogh's correspondence and what he wrote about his progress in those first few weeks.



5. *The Smoker* (detail) and *An Old Woman of Arles* (detail)



6. Comparison of the eyes



## The first studies from Arles

Van Gogh arrived in Arles on Monday 20 February and in his second letter to Theo, dated around the twenty-fourth, he rounded off by announcing that he had painted three studies in the preceding days, all of which we can identify. As he did quite often, Van Gogh began by mentioning the painting he had been working on most recently: ‘an old woman of Arles [fig. 2], a landscape with snow,<sup>10</sup> a view of a stretch of pavement with a butcher’s shop’ [578].<sup>11</sup> A few days later, around 27 February, he wrote, without providing any further description: ‘I have one more study’ [580]. By 2 March, the artist had completed another three studies, which can once again be identified: two small still lifes with sprigs of flowering almond in a glass and a large snowy landscape.<sup>12</sup> He added a still life with oranges, reporting on 9 March:<sup>13</sup> ‘That makes eight studies I have up to now’ [583]. It was previously assumed that the fourth and only unidentified study in this series was *Still Life with Potatoes*,<sup>14</sup> but that work, which is not mentioned in the correspondence, was persuasively allotted a while ago to January 1889, almost a year later.<sup>15</sup> Hulsker’s catalogue raisonné likewise dated a still life with a pair of leather clogs to February 1888, which we know Van Gogh did not paint until Saint-Rémy.<sup>16</sup> This did not leave any further candidate with the result that in the online edition of the Van Gogh correspondence the letter in which he mentions the fourth study included a footnote stating that ‘it is not known which new study this was’.<sup>17</sup>

*The Smoker* thus appears to have found its place within the series comprising the first eight studies from Arles. Van Gogh spent his first two months at Hotel-Restaurant Carrel in the north of the town. The sitter for the elderly Arlésienne is likely to have been landlord Albert Carrel’s sixty-eight-year-old mother-in-law Elisabeth Garcin-Pau, who also lived on the premises.<sup>18</sup> Vincent was still working on her portrait on 24 February, a Friday, having completed the fourth study the next Monday. It is entirely possible that he came across the pipe-smoker in the same place that weekend – an idea that is potentially supported by the inclusion of the curtain in the background to keep the winter cold out of the hotel. We do not know the name of the man dressed in a simple brown suit with a waistcoat and a colourfully striped shirt – the clothes of a workman rather than a peasant. He smokes a small pipe with a protective lid (a ‘spark-catcher’) attached to the bowl with copper wire, to protect his clothes. Van Gogh did not mention the other guests in his letters, but we know from a later source that the hotel-restaurant was mostly used by herdsmen from the Camargue and that it could get quite busy at times.<sup>19</sup>

10 F 290 JH 1360, Guggenheim Museum, New York.

11 F 389 JH 1359, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Letter numbers refer to Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh. The letters* (<https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters>).

12 The sprigs of flowering almond F 392 JH 1361, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam and F 393 JH 1362, private collection; the snowy landscape F 391 JH 1358, private collection.

13 F 395 JH 1363, private collection.

14 F 386 JH 1365, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

15 Based initially on stylistic considerations, which were confirmed when it became clear that the work had been painted on the same canvas as several others dating from January 1889; see Louis van Tilborgh, *et al.*, ‘Weave matching and dating Van Gogh’s paintings: an interdisciplinary approach’, *The Burlington Magazine*, CLIV (February 2012), pp. 112–22, esp. p. 112.

16 F 607 JH 1364, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, see Hulsker 1996, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp. 306–07. It is now dated to September 1889.

17 Letter 580, note 10. The note will be adjusted.

18 For more information about her, see Bernadette Murphy, *Le café de Van Gogh*, Actes Sud, Arles 2024, pp. 57–70.

19 G. Coquiote, *Vincent van Gogh*, Paris 1923, p. 161. For his biography, Coquiote interviewed both Carrel’s wife and the hotel keeper who ran the business ten years after Carrel’s time. For a possible identification of the pipe-smoker, see Murphy 2024, *op. cit.* (note 18), pp. 41–42, 71–85.

## Canvas type

The type of canvas used for both paintings further supports the idea that *An Old Woman of Arles* and *The Smoker* were done not long after one another. Van Gogh brought canvas with him from Paris, but he probably also purchased a little more during his first week in Provence. *An Old Woman of Arles* is painted on a canvas with an average thread density of 12.5 x 11.7 per square centimetre, as determined by the Automated Canvas Analysis Project.<sup>20</sup> The thread count for *The Smoker* has only been calculated manually, but it yielded a comparable density of 12 x 12 threads per square centimetre.<sup>21</sup> These averages are typical for both the canvas that Van Gogh sourced locally in Arles and the type he sometimes used in Paris. From around the end of June 1888, he actually began to employ this type less frequently and to order large rolls of canvas via Theo in Paris, which he then cut himself. This canvas has entirely different characteristics and so also supports the new dating.<sup>22</sup>

Taking all of this into account, there are already sufficient grounds for shifting the date of *The Smoker* from 13–23 December 1888 to around 27 February of the same year. Ideally, Van Gogh wanted to become a figure and portrait painter and so he seized his opportunity on arriving in Arles to paint two portraits straight away. He was unable to take this any further, however, and frequently complained that he could not find any models. It was only in June that he came across a soldier from the third Zouave regiment who was prepared to sit for him. This enabled the artist to embark on a first, modest portrait campaign, followed by a more intensive one in the final months of 1888. In the meantime, *The Smoker* was already with Theo in Paris as Van Gogh had sent his brother all the studies from his first months in Arles on 7 May 1888.<sup>23</sup> Theo's widow, Jo Bonger, sold *The Smoker* to the art dealer Paul Cassirer in 1906 and in 1912, after a number of detours, the work came into the possession of the collector Albert C. Barnes (1872–1951) in Philadelphia. Since 1925, it has been displayed in the museum he founded there.

---

20 Research project in collaboration between the Van Gogh Museum and American computational engineers, in which the canvas type and weave characteristics of more than 450 paintings have been examined since 2009. See also note 15.

21 Druick and Zegers 2001, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 356.

22 To the naked eye, the priming of both canvases appears to match as well. Further technical examination of *The Smoker* will be important, however, to determine whether precisely the same fabric was used. The Van Gogh Museum is currently in contact with The Barnes Foundation in this regard.

23 See letter 606.



Rue Amédée Pichot, Arles, c. 1905 - postcard. Hotel-restaurant Carrel left of the horse and carriage.

‘I don’t have enough power to get what I want to pose for me, where I want and for as long or as short as I want. The problem I have to bring to an end, to overcome, lies there and not in the technical difficulty. And today I’m a landscape painter whereas I’m actually more suited to portraits.’

Vincent van Gogh to his sister Willemien van Gogh, Arles, between 16-20 June 1888 [626]

Teio Meedendorp is a Senior Researcher at the Van Gogh Museum. He has a special interest in Van Gogh’s works on paper, as well as authenticity issues and everything connected to the places where Van Gogh lived and worked. He has contributed to various publications on Van Gogh, including the exhibition catalogue *Van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise* (Amsterdam and Paris, 2023-24). He is one of the authors working on the museum’s final collections catalogue devoted to Van Gogh’s paintings: *Paintings 3 - Arles, Saint-Rémy, Auvers-sur-Oise, 1888-1890* (expected 2026).

Van Gogh Museum Articles are scientific articles written by researchers and curators who work at or are affiliated with the Van Gogh Museum. As a knowledge center, the Van Gogh Museum conducts research into Vincent van Gogh and his contemporaries.

<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/about/knowledge-and-research/van-gogh-museum-articles>