



1888 or 1889

Oil on canvas

36 3/8 x 28 15/16 inches
(92.4 x 73.5 cm)

Framed: 49 1/2 x 42 x 5 1/2 inches
(125.7 x 106.7 x 14 cm)

VINCENT WILLEM VAN GOGH
Dutch

Bequest of Lisa Norris Elkins,
1950, 1950-92-22

LET'S LOOK

Who are the people in
this painting?

What words would you
use to describe them? Why?

Are the figures distorted or
do they look real? Why?

What colors were used?

Why do you think Vincent
chose these colors?

Are the brushstrokes
small or large?

Is the paint thick or thin?

How does this painting
make you feel?

Is it disturbing? Comforting?
(Your reactions will be different
depending on who you are;
there is no "right" answer.)

PORTRAIT OF MADAME AUGUSTINE ROULIN AND BABY MARCELLE

Vincent van Gogh painted this portrait of Madame Roulin and her baby daughter Marcelle in 1888 when he was living and working in Arles, a town in southern France. After cold weather forced him to work indoors, Vincent asked the Roulin family close friends of his, to model for him.

Look at the heavy outlines around the lumpy figures of the mother and baby. The mother's sloping shoulders, her bulging upper arm, and her thick hands tell us that she worked hard taking care of her family. In those days modern conveniences like washing machines did not exist.

You may be wondering about the pose, or position, of Madame Roulin and her baby—why isn't the mother hugging her baby or letting her lie down? Madame Roulin is holding her baby up for us to see, gently supporting the baby's back in the crook of her right arm and steadying the baby's tummy with her left hand. When you look at family photographs of new babies and their mothers, or at pictures of the Madonna and Child in churches and museums, you will see lots of variations on this traditional pose.

Throughout his life Vincent wrote many letters to his brother, Theo, describing his goals as an artist. In one he wrote:

. . . in a picture I want to say something comforting as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to communicate by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring.

Look at the bright yellow background. It creates a warm glow around the figures, like an enormous halo. We also know from Vincent's

letters that yellow was his favorite color. Find the deep blue outlines surrounding the vibrant greens and yellows of Madame Roulin's dress and the areas of warm orange in her face and the chair. These intense color combinations may seem jarring. In a letter to Theo, Vincent explained:

. . . instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use color . . . to express myself more forcibly.

If you move close to this image, you will see many different kinds of brushstrokes. Some are turbulent like waves in the ocean, while others are straight as rulers. The brushstrokes allow us to see many layers of different colors covering the surface of the painting and filling it with energy and motion, almost like water in a rushing stream. The brushstrokes at the bottom of the painting look like they are flowing right off the canvas!

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Vincent van Gogh was born in 1853 in a small town in the Netherlands (Holland). When he was sixteen years old, his uncle helped him get a job with a firm of art dealers in The Hague, a large city in the Netherlands. Vincent and his favorite brother, Theo, started writing letters to each other, a tradition they continued for the rest of their lives. After four years, Vincent was promoted to the firm's gallery in London. He did well at selling art and enjoyed meeting many artists, but when he was rejected by a sweetheart, he became severely depressed, lost interest in his work, and was eventually dismissed from his job.

Vincent was briefly employed as an assistant teacher near London, and then tried missionary work in Belgium. Finally, hoping to become a newspaper illustrator, Vincent started teaching himself how to draw. At the age of twenty-seven he decided to devote his life to making art.

Supported by his father and Theo, who had become an art dealer, Vincent studied art in Brussels and then in The Hague. In 1886, he moved in with Theo in Paris. There new worlds opened up for him. He met young artists like the Impressionists, who were discovering revolutionary ways of painting the world around them. He was enchanted by Japanese block prints (then being seen in Europe for the first time) with their flat areas of color outlined in black.

After a few years, Vincent tired of city life and moved to Arles, a town in the south of France. For months he painted constantly, hardly stopping to eat. A friend, the painter Paul Gauguin, came to

Arles and the two artists lived and worked together for several months, until they quarreled and Gauguin left. Extremely upset, Vincent had hallucinations, cut off his own earlobe, and had to be hospitalized.

Despite these problems, Vincent kept on painting. In 1890, he moved to Auvers, a village near Paris, to live and work under the care of Doctor Gachet, a collector and amateur artist. For two months Vincent completed a painting every day. And yet, while out painting one July afternoon he shot himself in the stomach. He died two days later with Theo at his side.

Although Vincent was virtually unknown during his lifetime, today he is one of the world's most loved artists. In fact, one of his works was recently the most expensive painting ever sold!

VINCENT'S EAR

No one knows exactly why Vincent cut off his own earlobe. He may have been upset about his quarrel with Gauguin, or discouraged that he had no money and that no one wanted to buy his paintings. He may have been exhausted from working hard, not eating, and drinking too much coffee and alcohol. At the time, his doctor believed that he suffered from epilepsy. Today, doctors think he may have had acute intermittent porphyria (a rare metabolic disorder) or syphilis (a sexually transmitted disease). The amazing thing is that he was able to paint so many beautiful pictures in so short a time, despite periods of intense illness.

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

How do you feel about this painting now? Your responses may change depending on how long you look. Whatever your reactions, find evidence for them in the painting.

Working together in small groups, discuss what the following terms could mean: outlines, parallel brushstrokes, squiggly brushstrokes, under-painting, impasto.

Madame Roulin and Baby Marcelle does not show the mother and child as they would appear in real life. Is the painting real in another way?

HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

Vincent owned a lacquered box made in Japan. He kept colored yarns in it and used them to experiment with different color combinations. Use yarn or squares of colored paper, and choose

some colors you like. Which ones are intense? Which ones are pale? Find some colors and color combinations that are similar to the colors Vincent used in *Madame Roulin and Baby Marcelle*.

WRITING ACTIVITIES

Read over the quotes from Vincent's letters to Theo (in "About This Painting"). Write a letter to your best friend, an imaginary friend, or a relative telling them about something important that you have done or hope to do someday.

Vincent was interested in Japan. He used ideas from Japanese prints in his paintings. In a self portrait he made himself look like a Japanese Buddhist monk. He called southern France a "second Japan." Use haiku, the Japanese poetry form, to express your thoughts or feelings about Vincent's *Madame Roulin and Baby Marcelle*.

This painting is included in The Figure in the Impressionist Era, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.