

Faux Pas? Questioning the Authenticity of the Melbourne ‘Van Gogh’

The analysis of the National Gallery of Victoria’s *Portrait of a Man*, attributed to Van Gogh since its acquisition in 1940 but recently rejected, raises questions about the roles of scientific and stylistic connoisseurship in determining the authenticity of works of art. When doubts are expressed about the attributions of paintings it is reasonable to assume the best way to address such suspicions is to undertake thorough scientific, stylistic, and historical investigations. Certainly, such analyses can lead to decisive outcomes for or against attributions. However, in light of the issues left unresolved in the *Summary Report* prepared at the Van Gogh Museum on the *Portrait of a Man*, which purports to exclude the possibility of Van Gogh’s authorship on technical as well as stylistic grounds, it is a moot point how definitive this re-assessment can be considered.

To begin, a résumé of the painting’s history. The earliest dated record of it is from 1928, some thirty-eight years after Van Gogh’s death.¹ In the same year it was published as a Van Gogh in the first major catalogue raisonné for the artist, written by J.-B. de la Faille.² The work passed through the hands of various collectors and commercial galleries in Germany, Holland, France, and Britain, before coming to Australia in 1939 for the touring *Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art*. In the following year the *Portrait of a Man* was acquired by the Felton Bequest for the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) for £2,196.³ For the next sixty years or so the attribution was not rejected in any major publication. More problematic was the work’s date. Van Gogh committed suicide in 1890 at the age of thirty-seven. Virtually his entire output of over 2000 works on paper and easel paintings dates from the last decade of his life, excluding his juvenilia. Given his occasional sudden changes in style, this compressed oeuvre has posed a number of problems to art historians seeking to establish a secure chronology for his works.

For convenience, the oeuvre has been categorised by the principal locations Van Gogh worked: Brussels, Etten, The Hague, Drenthe, Nuenen, Antwerp, Paris, Arles, Saint-Rémy, and Auvers-sur-Oise. The *Portrait of a Man*, as with the majority of Van Gogh’s

¹ In Sonia Dean’s catalogue entry the work is first recorded in the Abels Gallery, Cologne in 1928 (*European Paintings of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries in the National Gallery of Victoria*, (Melbourne, 1995), p. 56). The *Summary Report* from the Van Gogh Museum identifies earlier owners, but none is securely dated [p. 3].

² J.-B. de la Faille, *L’Oeuvre de Vincent van Gogh*, 4 vols (Paris and Brussels, 1928), 1, p. 62: no. 209.

³ On the exhibition and the history of the work’s acquisition, see: E. Chanin and S. Miller, with an introduction by J. Pugh, *Degenerates and Perverts: The 1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art* (Melbourne, 2005), especially p. 230.

paintings, is not dated. When and where paintings were executed can be established if they are referred to in the artist's ample correspondence, much of it addressed to his brother Theo (although not all works are recorded this way), from circumstantial evidence such as subject matter, or by style. When Vincent lived in Paris with his brother the correspondence is naturally much more limited and so only approximate datings are often possible in this period. Although Van Gogh was one of the most varied artists of his generation stylistically, general transitions can be described over the approximately ten years of his activity as a painter: from the frequently sombre, rural peasant imagery of the pre-Antwerp period, to the generally lighter palette and more academic style of the Antwerp and Paris periods, to the typically vibrant, high key paintings of the Arles period and after, distinguished by the boldly stylised brushwork for which the artist is most admired.

Since coming to the attention of scholars the Melbourne painting has been dated progressively later and later. Initially, De la Faille placed it between late 1885 and early 1886 (in the Antwerp period),⁴ the posthumous re-edition of his catalogue supervised by a committee of experts changed that to late 1886 or early 1887 (the first half of the Paris period),⁵ while Jan Hulsker thought January to March 1887 was better (closer to the middle of the Paris period),⁶ and Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov came to a similar conclusion.⁷

The painting certainly contains ambiguous indications of date. The unkempt hair and plain costume (as far as it can be seen) of the subject seem reminiscent of Van Gogh's early peasant subjects, and the autumnal tones of the palette, largely consisting of fawns, shades of peach, and dark chocolaty browns, agrees with that to an extent. Yet the palette is lighter overall than the majority of the works up to and including the Antwerp period, and the execution is generally more modulated, and suggestive of three-dimensional forms. In a later, Parisian, context, the sitter's unkempt hairstyle may assume a different significance, as an attribute of a late nineteenth-century bohemian. The poet, novelist, and dramatist, Jean Richepin (1849–1926), for example, sported a luxuriant, curly head of hair in the period. In

⁴ J.-B. de la Faille, *L'Oeuvre*, 1, p. 62: no. 209.

⁵ J.-B. de la Faille, *The Works of Vincent van Gogh: His Paintings and Drawings* (Amsterdam and New York, 1970), no. 209.

⁶ J. Hulsker, *The Complete Van Gogh: Paintings, Drawings, Sketches* (Oxford, 1980; original edition Amsterdam, 1977), p. 266; J. Hulsker, *The New Complete Van Gogh: Paintings, Drawings, Sketches, Revised and Enlarged Edition of the Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of Vincent van Gogh* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1996), pp. 264–65.

⁷ B. Welsh-Ovcharov, *Vincent van Gogh: His Paris Period, 1886–1888* (Utrecht and The Hague, 1976), p. 224: gave the date as late 1886 or early 1887. In a letter written to Sonia Dean in 1992 (Dean, 1995, p. 57) Welsh-Ovcharov noted the points of reference to the Nuenen and Antwerp periods, but ultimately connected the style with Van Gogh's works of early 1887 from Paris.

1976 Welsh-Ovcharov tentatively connected the subject of the Melbourne picture with a certain Raoul, an ‘old Bohemian student fellow’ Van Gogh had known in Paris in 1887, mentioned by the artist in a letter written later in Arles.⁸ However, neither this nor any other potential identification has been verified.

Sonia Dean, former Senior Research Curator for International Art at the NGV, perceptively described the *Portrait of a Man* as a transitional work stylistically, between Realism and a freer technique with a greater use of colour.⁹ It is perhaps odd that no author has drawn attention to the rhythmic, curved patterns in the brushstrokes for the subject’s curly hair, with an occasional stroke trailing lazily across the surface. This approaches the painterly stylisation of Van Gogh’s Arles landscapes, in which realism is often sacrificed to achieve more decorative pattern making in the brushwork. Furthermore, it is in the Arles period that more or less plain, light coloured backgrounds appear most frequently in his portraits. Certainly, the palette of the Melbourne painting is not as vibrantly multi-coloured as the hues dominating the Arles period. However, some works from this period come close to it, such as a few of the depictions of golden-brown wheat fields.¹⁰ Given this, the *Portrait of a Man* could be said to share traits with a slightly later period than has traditionally been recognised. It could be viewed as a transitional work between the Paris and Arles periods, of mid-to-late 1887 or early 1888 — either painted in Paris, while anticipating the freer brushwork of the Arles period, or painted in Arles, and looking back to the muted palette of earlier times. The work could conceivably have been painted over a number of months or more.

It is no great wonder, then, that the portrait might be viewed as problematic from an art historian’s perspective. The style is outwardly that of Van Gogh, yet the work is unsigned and undated, and difficult to pin down — its history before 1928 is unknown, the identity of its subject is unconfirmed, and the period of its execution is difficult to determine precisely. The attribution was questioned publicly for the first time by the Van Gogh scholar Ronald Pickvance when he reviewed the exhibition *Van Gogh and Britain. Pioneer Collectors*, held at Compton Verney and the Dean Gallery, Edinburgh, from July to September 2006, to which

⁸ B. Welsh-Ovcharov, *Vincent van Gogh*, p. 224. The reference to the student is found in *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 3 vols (London, 1958), 3, p. 2.

⁹ S. Dean, ‘34 *Head of a Man F209*’, in *Van Gogh: His Sources, Genius and Influence*, J. Ryan (ed.), exh. cat., National Gallery of Victoria, 19 November 1993—16 January 1994; Queensland Art Gallery, 22 January—13 March 1994 ([Melbourne, 1993]), p. 76.

¹⁰ For example, *Wheat Fields with Sheaves and Arles in the Background* (Musée Rodin, Paris), JH1477, p. 326.

the portrait was lent.¹¹ While the work was illustrated in Pickvance's review with the caption 'Head of a Man, by Vincent van Gogh (?)', in his discussion he expressed the view that it was more likely by one of Van Gogh's fellow students in Antwerp — without specifying what he found uncharacteristic about its execution. Even though he had doubts about the Melbourne painting, he declared it was another painting in the exhibition that really worried him.¹² After the exhibition, the *Portrait of a Man* was sent to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam for scientific and stylistic analyses and historical research.

The Vincent Van Gogh Foundation was established in 1960, and the Museum opened in 1973. It is, then, a relatively new institution, although it benefited from the earlier stewardship of parts of its collection by the Rijksmuseum and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.¹³ The size of its staff has grown in recent years, and, among other achievements, they have published exemplary technical studies of some of Van Gogh's works. An example is Ella Hendriks and Louis van Tilborgh's article on the *Garden of the Asylum* in the Museum's collection — a painting described by some as a forgery, but convincingly argued by the authors to be characteristic of Van Gogh's works from the Saint-Rémy period.¹⁴ On the other hand, Sjraar van Heugten has rejected Van Gogh's authorship of a modest still life in the Museum's collection, partly on technical grounds, although, this de-attribution was published in less detail, and arguably on less convincing grounds.¹⁵

¹¹ M. Bailey, *Van Gogh and Britain. Pioneer Collectors*, exh. cat., Compton Verney, 31 March—18 June and Dean Gallery, Edinburgh, 7 July—24 September 2006 (Edinburgh, 2006).

¹² R. Pickvance, 'Van Gogh: Compton Verney and Edinburgh', *The Burlington Magazine*, 158, 1240, July 2006, 500–02, p. 501. The painting that disturbed Pickvance most was the *Portrait of the Art Dealer Alexander Reid, Sitting in an Easy Chair* from the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, Norman.

¹³ R. de Leeuw, 'Director's Forward', and 'Introduction: the Van Gogh Museum as a National Museum', 1973–1994', *Van Gogh Museum Journal*, 1995, pp. 6–7 and 9–23, respectively. According to the Van Gogh Museum's former director, Ronald de Leeuw, early staffing levels were low, and the management of the Museum was not without its difficulties.

¹⁴ E. Hendriks and L. van Tilborgh, 'Van Gogh's 'Garden of the Asylum': Genuine or Fake?', *The Burlington Magazine*, 143, 1176, March 2001, pp. 145–56.

¹⁵ S. van Heugten, 'Radiographic Images of Vincent van Gogh's Paintings in the Collection of the Van Gogh Museum', *Van Gogh Museum Journal*, 1995, 63–85, p. 85. An x-radiograph of the *Still Life with Bottle of Wine, Two Glasses and a Plate with Bread and Cheese* revealed the presence of an underlying figure of a woman's bust. Although it was acknowledged that the earlier painting might have been scraped down, and so have lost much of its original character, it was still thought to lack Van Gogh's vigorous style and so to confirm the suspicions of a number of other authors that the still life was not by Van Gogh. This assessment is problematic for a number of reasons. First, Van Gogh's brushwork style could vary considerably, and was not always bold. Second, the appearance in the x-radiograph of

The analysis of the Melbourne portrait at the Van Gogh Museum was certainly timely, as its staff had recently undertaken an extensive program of analysis of the Antwerp and Paris period paintings by Van Gogh in the Museum's collection.¹⁶ Although it is not clear how much time the staff were able to give to the Melbourne painting, or how large their budget was, one thing would have been certain from the outset — assessing Van Gogh's authorship of a painting now commonly dated to the Paris period would not be a straightforward task. As the Van Gogh Museum's staff observed in a publication of November 2006:

For art historians this part of his oeuvre poses particular problems. At the time Vincent lived with his brother Theo and therefore had no need to correspond, depriving us of the letters and paint orders that are usually such a rich source of information on his creative goals and working procedures. Moreover, it was a period of enormous technical and artistic experimentation, producing works that widely fluctuated in terms of style and technique within a narrow space of time. Together this has complicated the task of making a plausible reconstruction of his Paris oeuvre, and left openings for debate on issues of attribution and chronology.¹⁷

The assessment of the *Portrait of a Man* was released to the media by the NGV as the four-and-a-half page (including the title page) unattributed and undated *Summary Report*. Judging by a few minor linguistic solecisms, it was written by a person or persons at the Van Gogh Museum. A second part of the release, dated 3 August 2007, consisted of an unattributed four-and-a-half page document called *Head of a Man: Background Information*. This appeared under the banner of the NGV, and was presumably put together by the Gallery's Media and Public Affairs staff with curatorial assistance. The two documents were

the brushwork in the underlying painting would depend on the nature of the pigments used, which have not been specified by a means such as microsampling. The underlying brushwork may not be entirely visible in the x-radiograph because it is not entirely in an x-ray opaque pigment. Third, the appearance of the earlier painting would be obscured not just by the putative scaping down, but also by the overlying painting of the still life, which is also visible in the x-radiograph. And fourth, while no instance may be known of Van Gogh re-using a canvas previously painted by another artist, strictly speaking, the attribution of the underlying painting need not have a direct bearing on that of the one on the surface.

¹⁶ E. Hendricks, S. Constantin, and B. Marino, 'Various Approaches to Van Gogh Technical Studies; Common Grounds?', in J.J. Boon and E.S.B. Ferreira (eds), *Reporting Highlights of the De Mayerne Programme* (The Hague, 2006), 77–88, p. 87.

¹⁷ E. Hendricks, S. Constantin, and B. Marino, 'Various Approaches', p. 79.

made available to the media, and so to the public — through the website of *The Age* newspaper (Melbourne), for example.¹⁸ In addition, the Director of the Gallery made a presentation to the media at the Gallery. The press release caused a minor sensation in the international media,¹⁹ and amidst the profusion of headlines describing the work as a fake, the evidence for the work's attribution received little critical attention.

The *Summary Report* certainly presents valuable new information about the painting. The provenance has been added to and modified, although, as the new information about three previous owners has not been dated earlier than 1928 this does not alter the status quo as far as the attribution is concerned. Furthermore, the new information about the work's provenance is based on old research notes, which seem not to have been independently verified (of which more later). A more detailed stylistic analysis of the work is provided than in any publication, but totalling seven bullet points, this is not exhaustive, and strictly speaking this does not constitute new evidence. Technically, it was discovered that the work has a white ground, which seems evenly applied, as on a commercially prepared canvas. Microsample analysis of the background revealed the presence of ochre in the underlayers, while the same pigment was found to occur pure in a thin layer on the surface. Finally, it was noted that unspecified 'traditional' and 'modern' colours occur side by side in the portrait, the latter used solely for isolated accents. Thus, not a great deal of new factual evidence was brought to light — or at least not in the *Summary Report*. Nevertheless, the study came down against the work's traditional attribution.

The most productive manner of addressing the interpretation of the evidence presented in the *Summary Report* is by a Socratic method, posing questions about unresolved issues, in the order in which they appear. In this way an ongoing discussion of the work might lead to a consensus in the future.

The title on the cover is *Summary Report*, and it could be asked whether presenting the re-attribution of an artwork long regarded as being of considerable significance on the basis of a summary is ideal. When leading art museums, such as the National Gallery, London, publicly change the attributions of their paintings they often do so in the context of a scholarly journal article or a new collection catalogue. In this case, there is no indication

¹⁸ <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/ngvs-van-gogh-a-fake/2007/08/03/1185648104036.html?page=2>.

¹⁹ For example: http://www.usatoday.com/news/topstories/2007-08-03-1947943035_x.htm, and <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/03/AR2007080300669.html>.

whether any other interim or final report has been, or will be written.²⁰ This is unfortunate, because, as will be shown, the *Summary Report* does not provide an account of the work's technical analysis that sustains all of its conclusions.

The Introduction on the second page notes that the 'examination was carried out by a team of curators, conservators and researchers', although, it does not say who these were, nor does this information appear anywhere else in the report, which is not dated — at least not in the form provided by the NGV. Even page numbers have not been given. It is usual in most academic disciplines for reports of a scholarly nature to be attributed and dated. So, might the authorship of the report and its date of completion be made known?

On the second page, the précis of the technical analysis undertaken lists a standard array of analytical methods, including microscopy and x-radiography. However, there is no mention of any form of infrared analysis, such as infrared reflectography. The précis states that it was an aim of the study to investigate any underdrawing present in the work, and undoubtedly, infrared analysis would be the best way to go about it. The NGV has the facilities to conduct this kind of analysis, so if it was not carried out in Amsterdam, could it not be done in Melbourne?

The conclusion on the second page states: 'The examination reveals that there are more differences than similarities between the portrait in Melbourne and Van Gogh's Paris and Antwerp oeuvre [sic], and the sum of the anomalies makes it plain that the work *cannot be attributed to Van Gogh*.' This excludes Van Gogh's authorship of the painting because it is said to be uncharacteristic of his work in the two-and-a-quarter year period between November 1885 and February 1888 when he painted in Antwerp and Paris. Is it not worth considering, though, that the portrait could be consistent with Van Gogh's paintings from the contiguous late Nuenen period or (more plausibly for stylistic reasons) the early Arles period? After all, there is no objective means of dating the portrait precisely.

In the second part of the conclusion it is stated that the work 'is certainly no forgery', although, no evidence is cited to sustain this conclusion. It might, then, be better to say 'no evidence is known supporting a case for the work as a forgery'. Forgeries in the style of Van

²⁰ A request for permission to research any other documentation of the Van Gogh Museum's analysis of the work (such as correspondence, the x-radiograph, and details of the pigment analysis) elicited the response from the NGV's Head of Media and Public Affairs that the 'summary document provided by the Museum is what is available for release on the issue' (Sue Coffey, personal communication, 9 August 2007).

Gogh have been identified, most famously those put on the market by Otto Wacker in Berlin in the late 1920s.²¹

The literature review for the work on the third page amounts to eight sentences, referring to four publications, and providing three footnotes. It is less extensive and less thoroughly referenced than that in Sonia Dean's catalogue of 1995, *European Paintings of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries in the National Gallery of Victoria*. Notable omissions are the majority of the work's exhibition history and most of the other scholarly publications supporting the attribution of the work to Van Gogh. Indeed, there is no mention at all of the work's appearance in the literature between 1948 and 2006.

As mentioned, potentially valuable new evidence is provided about the work's previous owners, based on notes discovered in the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (Netherlands Institute for Art History) in The Hague. These are thought to have been written by De la Faille between 1928 and 1933. However, there is no evidence in the *Summary Report* that this research was verified by independent documentation. The *Background Information* document does say that the study of the work's early provenance was hindered by the destruction of gallery records during the Second World War (p. 2). If this is the case, the new information should more correctly be presented as possibly true, rather than certainly, as the *Summary Report* represents it.²² All the more so, since the work's appearance as lot 17 in the Frederik Muller sale of 13 June 1933 in Amsterdam, which appeared in Dean's 1995 account of the provenance, is alluded to twice on the second page of the *Summary Report*, but is omitted in the new provenance for the work on the same page, only to re-appear in the provenance given in the NGV's *Background Information* document (p. 2). Is the Muller sale still part of the work's provenance? The answer is probably yes, however, this might usefully be clarified.

The new information about the provenance in the notes at The Hague suggests that before the painting was with Galerie Abels in Cologne (previously the earliest known owner),

²¹ W. Feilchenfeldt, 'Van Gogh Fakes: The Wacker Affair, with an Illustrated Catalogue of the Forgeries', *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 19, 4, 1989, 289–316.

²² The new evidence for ownership of the work by Galerie Goldschmidt & Co. of Berlin might be supported by the identification of the Melbourne painting with a 'Männerpörrat' by Van Gogh in the exhibition catalogue of *Impressionisten. Sonderausstellung* of February–March 1928, organised by M. Goldschmidt. Although, the reasons for identifying the 'Männerpörrat' with the Melbourne painting are not clear in the *Summary Report*. This says that in theory only the Melbourne painting and another painting (whose present whereabouts are unknown) could fit the bill, while this other portrait has a French provenance, which could disqualify it. However, as expressed in the *Summary Report*, this argument is not adequately explained. Why are only two works candidates for the 'Männerpörrat'?

it had been with Galerie Gurlitt, Berlin, and before that Galerie Goldschmidt & Co, Berlin, while earlier still it had belonged to a collector known only as ‘S.’ The provenance extending back to Berlin in the pre-1928 period might be a worrying development given the history of the Wacker forgeries, although Germans were among the earliest admirers and collectors of Van Gogh’s works.²³ Indeed, at least nine collectors owned undisputed Van Goghs in Germany in the first decades of the twentieth century whose surnames begin with the letter ‘S’, two of them in Berlin.²⁴

In the discussion of the sitter’s identity on the fourth page of the *Summary Report* the reader learns that there have been four proposals made in the literature: an ‘old Frenchman’ mentioned in one of Van Gogh’s letters (which records that he painted the man); a model at the Antwerp Academy in 1886; the Dutch painter Maijer de Haan (a friend of Theo van Gogh’s); and the bohemian student referred to previously. While the letter number for the last reference is provided in a footnote, none of the original references in the art historical literature is provided.²⁵ The old Frenchman is excluded as a possibility, although no reason is given. The Antwerp model is said to be probably not the sitter, again without reason. De Haan is excluded as there is no resemblance, and because Van Gogh is said never to have met him.²⁶ The student is described as unlikely, but again, with no reason. Are there, though, any real grounds to reject the first, second, and fourth proposals?

In the discussion of the work’s style on the fourth page it is stated that a comparison was made between the Melbourne portrait and Van Gogh’s portraits and self-portraits from the period between late 1885 and early 1886. This is inconsistent with the fifteen paintings cited in note 8 (on the fourth page) as the ones the Melbourne painting was compared with, which actually date from late 1885 to early 1887 — perhaps the result of a typographical error. It is unclear how broad in date the comparison was made, however, it does seem to have been fairly narrow, excluding the periods on either side of the work’s dating in the literature.

²³ On Van Gogh’s early critical reception in Germany, see: W. Feilchenfeldt, *Vincent van Gogh & Paul Cassirer, Berlin: The Reception of Van Gogh in Germany from 1901 to 1914* (Zwolle, 1988); and R. Manheim, ‘The “Germanic” Van Gogh: A Case Study of Cultural Annexation’, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 19, 4, 1989, 277–88.

²⁴ W. Feilchenfeldt, *Vincent van Gogh*, p. 157: the Berlin collectors are Georg Schwarz and Carl Sternheim.

²⁵ The ‘old Frenchman’ who Van Gogh painted appears in *The Complete Letters*, 2, p. 512; letter no. 457, from the Antwerp period.

²⁶ This may be corroborated by a letter written by Van Gogh in Arles (*The Complete Letters*, 3, p. 100; letter no. 559) in which he expressed a desire to meet De Haan one day.

Still under the heading of style, it is stated: ‘The canvas was originally bigger. The present composition is unusual for Van Gogh. He always showed more of the clothes than just the top of the shoulders.’ Since all the following points under the heading of style argue that the work is uncharacteristic of Van Gogh, it seems that this was also the intention of the first point. If so, does it succeed? Naturally, the canvas was originally bigger, canvas is usually manufactured by the bolt. If, though, by ‘canvas’ the author(s) meant ‘painting’, then it is unclear how the conclusion was reached that it was originally larger. In its present condition, the painting is on a canvas that has been attached (presumably glued) flat to a wooden panel. There is no unpainted fringe around the edge of the canvas; the brushstrokes extend to all four edges of the canvas, but do not extend onto the slightly larger panel.

Sonia Dean interpreted the fact that brushstrokes originally extended beyond the edges of the canvas as clear evidence that the canvas (and painting) had been trimmed.²⁷ While probably true, this interpretation can not be considered conclusive. The canvas might originally have been painted in its current dimensions on another auxiliary support, over which the brushstrokes continued, and was only later transferred to the present wooden support. A clearer indication would be the paint layers (and ground) appearing in cross section at the edge of the canvas, from having been cut, when viewed under magnification. The x-radiograph might also reveal a lack of cusping in the canvas from tacks fixing it to the putative original stretcher. However, it is unwise to argue from an absence of this kind of evidence. In any case, there is no mention of any related technical evidence in the *Summary Report*. If, though, it is accepted that the painting was originally larger, then the original depiction of the sitter may have been in a vertical format, and more of the torso may have been shown, as Dean hypothesised.²⁸ And thus, as has been realised for some time, the composition could, for all anyone knows, originally have been consistent with Van Gogh’s usual portrait formats.

It is worth noting, however, that the following Arles period portraits show little of the sitters’ busts: *Self-Portrait* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; JH1634, p. 376 — the initials JH refer to Jan Hulsker’s numbering of Van Gogh’s oeuvre, and the page numbers refer to his discussion of the works’ dates in the 1996 edition of his catalogue raisonné), the two versions of the *Portrait of Camille Roulin* (Philadelphia Museum of Art and Van Gogh Museum; JH1644–45, p. 378), and *Boy with a Cap* (private collection, Zurich; JH1648, p. 278). Furthermore, the close-cropped format of the Melbourne painting and the sitter’s averted gaze (from that of the viewer) could suggest that the work was painted from a photograph, as Van Gogh seems to have done on occasion. *The Portrait of Van Gogh’s*

²⁷ S. Dean, ‘34 *Head of a Man F209*’, p. 76.

²⁸ S. Dean, ‘34 *Head of a Man F209*’, p. 76.

Mother (Norton Simon Foundation, Los Angeles; JH1600, p. 364) was painted to replace a photograph in the artist's possession, as related in a letter he wrote in Arles.²⁹ Like the Melbourne painting, the Los Angeles portrait is close-cropped.

The second point under the heading of style states that Van Gogh did not use light backgrounds in the period under investigation. It is difficult to agree with this assertion. While the *Woman with her Hair Loose* (Van Gogh Museum; JH972, p. 216) has a considerable amount of dark grey in its background, there is also yellow and white, making it only somewhat darker overall than the background in the Melbourne painting. Hulsker dated the *Woman with her Hair Loose* to the Antwerp period, on the basis of its description in a letter of Van Gogh's. In the mid-Paris period there is the *Portrait of a Man with a Skullcap* (also Van Gogh Museum; JH1203, pp. 264–45) with a light background, dated by Hulsker to around the same time as the Melbourne painting. Later, but still in the Paris period, two other portraits have light backgrounds: JH1309 (p. 288) and JH1356 (p. 302).

In three further points it is suggested that Van Gogh's handling of paint in the mouths, eyes, beards, and skin of his subjects is always less detailed than in the Melbourne portrait. Certainly, the Melbourne painting is rather detailed. The man's crow's feet are shown, as are the furrows of his brow, and the creases in the flesh beside the nostril and in the cheek. There is, though, a great variety of facial detail in Van Gogh's portraits, from very little at all, to a considerable amount — as in the *Portrait of Patience Escalier* (private collection; JH1563, p. 354). No doubt, this is partly a consequence of his sitters' varied physiognomies, so at what point does the depiction of such detail become uncharacteristic of the artist?

The criticism of the painting of the face continues: 'The maker moreover left gaps for the fine outlines of the lips and some tiny hairs in the beard immediately below in his initial blocking of the face, and we know of no parallels to this in Van Gogh's oeuvre either.' It seems, though, that Van Gogh did sometimes rely on an underlying light tone for a highlight in his subjects' faces, rather than painting it in separately. For example, in the Arles period *Portrait of Armand Roulin* (Museum Folkwang, Essen; JH1642, pp. 378–80), the fine, pale line along the top of the upper lip, the fine, broken line for the jaw, the lines in the eyelids and eyebrows are all defined by a light beige colour, which seems to be the underlying preparation left unpainted. This is seen more clearly in the large gaps in the paint layer around the edges of the jacket, in the bow, and many of the contours of the hat. That these areas are the preparation left exposed by incomplete blocking in of surrounding areas of colour is also suggested by the fact that the canvas weave is more clearly visible in these places.

²⁹ *The Complete Letters*, 3, p. 69; letter no. 546.

The painting of the jacket in the Melbourne painting is described as uncharacteristic — Van Gogh is said to have painted these features only with long, parallel lines. In reality, though, might Van Gogh not have had more than one way of painting his sitters' jackets? In early 1887 he painted his jackets in self-portraits (JH1211, p. 266; JH1248, p. 278) with short strokes, as he did in a portrait (JH1574, p. 350) from the early Arles period. A number of the jackets from the Arles period are more broadly painted, with their brushstrokes partially blended (e.g. JH1642, JH1643; and JH1647, pp. 378–80), similar to the execution of the Melbourne jacket.

In the final point under the heading of style it is suggested that the portrait is 'rather odd', and such a fault is unparalleled in Van Gogh's oeuvre. What is this fault? It is said that Van Gogh had the 'unconscious' habit of depicting more of the far side of his subjects' faces when shown in a three-quarter pose than the near side. Why the author(s) supposed that Van Gogh was unaware of how he composed his portraits is not explained. In any event, the *Self-Portrait* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; JH1634; p. 376) from the Arles period shows little of the far side of the subject's face, though the face is somewhat flattened across the picture plane.

If the author or authors of the *Summary Report* have exaggerated the differences with Van Gogh's works, even considerably, their opinion concerning the Melbourne painting's attribution certainly merits consideration. Yet their assessment does not carry more weight than the opinions of the specialists who have upheld the attribution of the work to Van Gogh, unless objective, technical evidence contrary to the traditional attribution can be brought to bear on the discussion. Under the heading of 'Technical examination' on the fourth page it is stated: 'The canvas is prepared with a white ground. So far a comprehensive technical study of the preparatory layers present in the Antwerp and Paris pictures by Van Gogh in the Van Gogh Museum collection, has not revealed the artist's use of this particular type of ground. The ground seems evenly applied, suggesting a commercial application.' As it reads in the report, the ground in the Melbourne painting is considered uncharacteristic because it is white, or (allowing for possible syntactical differences between the author's native language and English) it might also be inferred that it is because the ground seems commercially applied.

Most of the paintings that have been examined by the Van Gogh Museum from the artist's Dutch period (Etten, The Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen) have cream coloured, commercially applied grounds.³⁰ In 1991 the Van Gogh Museum's conservator, Cornelia Peres, had this to say concerning Van Gogh's later technique: 'In his Paris paintings he was

³⁰ See the technical descriptions in most of the entries in: L. van Tilborgh and M. Vellekoop, *Vincent van Gogh: Paintings, Volume I, Dutch Period, 1881–1885* (Amsterdam and London, 1999).

still employing a visible, white reflecting ground, while his early Arles pictures show a greater variety than ever before in the use of ground and canvas structure.³¹ More recent analyses have identified ten commercially prepared canvases with white grounds from Van Gogh's Paris period.³²

If the ground of the Melbourne portrait is not uncharacteristic because it is white, or because it is commercially prepared, then what is uncharacteristic about it? And with the notable variation in canvas (and ground) types in Van Gogh's Paris period observed during the Van Gogh Museum's recent analyses, what would make a ground uncharacteristic? Van Tilborgh and Vellekoop accepted the authenticity of the *Still Life with Earthenware and Bottles* as a Nuenen period painting, even though they found no other Dutch period painting by Van Gogh in the Van Gogh Museum with a comparable canvas type.³³

Under the same heading, on the fourth and fifth pages, it is stated that the Melbourne painting has pure ochre in a fine layer on the surface of the background, whereas Van Gogh did not use pure ochre in any Antwerp or Paris painting examined. One is left wondering how many microsamples were taken from the work, whether the presence of pure ochre is representative or a consequence of where the sampling was made, and whether there are any signs of restoration of the paint surface. Indeed, the *Summary Report* does not provide an assessment of the painting's condition. It is also not stated how many other works have been examined for the presence of pure ochre, or whether this feature is found in an earlier or later period of Van Gogh's career. In Hendrick and Van Tilborgh's study of the *Garden of the Asylum*, when discussing how characteristic that work's canvas type might be, the authors specified that forty-two canvases had been examined, constituting approximately one-third of Van Gogh's Saint-Rémy production.³⁴ More information would need to be provided concerning the pigments in the Melbourne painting and Van Gogh's Antwerp and Paris period paintings (as well as those in the earlier and later periods) to have confidence in the *Summary Report*'s conclusion about the Melbourne portrait. Moreover, Van Gogh ordered yellow ochre pigment from his brother in the Arles period,³⁵ and he might have used it almost

³¹ C. Peres, 'An Impressionist Concept of Painting Technique', in *A Closer Look: Technical and Art Historical Studies on Works by Van Gogh and Gauguin*, C. Peres, M. Hoyle, and L. van Tilborgh (eds) (Zwolle, 1991), 24–38, pp. 26–27. In two paintings from the Arles period Peres found an off-white, commercially applied ground, while a third had a pinkish ground applied by hand.

³² E. Hendricks, S. Constantin, and B. Marino, 'Various Approaches', p. 84. The grounds in question were composed of a thin layer of chalk and glue, followed by a layer of lead white in an oil medium.

³³ L. van Tilborgh and M. Vellekoop, *Vincent van Gogh*, p. 193.

³⁴ E. Hendriks and L. van Tilborgh, 'Van Gogh's 'Garden of the Asylum'', p. 151.

³⁵ *The Complete Letters*, 3, p. 152; letter no. 584.

pure in an Arles landscape — *The Sower* (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo), whose pigments he described in a letter, including reference to ‘A field of ripe wheat, yellow ochre in tone with a little carmine.’³⁶

Finally, under the same heading on the fifth page it is stated that the Melbourne painting has a mix of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ colours, whereas the portraits and self-portraits from December 1885 to summer 1886 (a mere six months) use one or the other. Again, it is not stated how many works have been investigated for these characteristics. Furthermore, the terms ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ do not have a universally acknowledged meaning in the literature on pigments, so which pigments are being referred to here precisely? Analysis of a Saint-Rémy period landscape in the National Gallery, London, revealed a combination of some pigments available to artists from before the Renaissance, such as lead white, vermilion, and ultramarine, together with pigments available from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as zinc white, chrome yellow, and cobalt blue.³⁷ It can be said, therefore, that a combination of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ pigments is found in a painting by Van Gogh.

The *Background Information* document, prepared by staff of the NGV, accepted the de-attribution resulting from the analysis conducted at the Van Gogh Museum (p. 2). However, the shortcomings of the *Summary Report* are compounded by the way the *Background Information* document has overstated certain findings. The latter document asserts that the ‘technical analysis identified some qualities in the way the ground layer was applied not present in any other painting by Van Gogh; if accepted as Van Gogh, this would be unique in his oeuvre, thus leading to the conclusion that it is not by Van Gogh’ (p. 1). It does not indicate what the uncharacteristic feature of the ground is, and in any case, the assessment is surely precipitant when we are a long way from having examined all the paintings attributed to the artist.

Another issue is that the *Background Information* document apparently refers to technical evidence not in the *Summary Report*, specifically that ‘They did not find material qualities, either in the canvas or paint that were not contemporaneous with Van Gogh’ (p. 1). Nowhere in the *Summary Report* is the objective dating provided for any aspect of the materials of the *Portrait of a Man*. Until such information is made available for verification, doubts may remain as to its validity. If, for the sake of argument, it is accepted that the portrait was painted earlier than the twentieth century, then the possibility that it is a forgery becomes rather remote, given the lack of a market for the artist’s works in the nineteenth

³⁶ The quote is from *The Complete Letters*, 3, p. 491; letter no. B7.

³⁷ A. Roy, ‘The Materials of Van Gogh’s ‘A Cornfield, with Cypresses’’, *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, 11, 1987, 50–58, p. 51.

century. The hypothesis of the Van Gogh Museum's author(s) that the work might be by an anonymous contemporary of Van Gogh who happened to be influenced by the same artists, cited in the *Background Information* document (p. 1), is — with the utmost respect — difficult to countenance. The Melbourne painting is manifestly in the style of Van Gogh, and has been recognised as such by numerous authors. This is visible not just in its overall abrupt, earthy, and slightly frenetic style, but also in such peculiar traits as the jagged, vertical strokes of the eyebrows, and subtle mannerisms, such as the grid-like pattern of brushstrokes in the upper left and lower right parts of the background — a distinctive means of filling in a background, and one that Van Gogh adopted increasingly and more conspicuously from the Nuenen period.³⁸ A similarly isolated, grid-like pattern of brushstrokes is found, for example, in the upper left background of Van Gogh's *Three Pairs of Shoes, One Upside Down*, dateable to the middle of the Paris period (Fogg Art Museum, Harvard; JH1234, p. 272).

Thus, if the dating of the *Portrait of a Man* to the nineteenth century is correct, this painting is either by Van Gogh, or an otherwise unknown artist who closely imitated his style at a time when there is little evidence that Van Gogh inspired such a following. Given all of the above, in this author's opinion it would not be wise to reject the work's traditional attribution categorically at this stage. It could indeed be argued that the portrait is, after all, still more likely than not to be by Van Gogh.

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³⁸ The background of the Melbourne painting is brushed in rapidly with strokes following the contours of the figure's shoulders and face, while the rest is filled with short strokes in more or less random directions. However, at the top left there are two clearly horizontal strokes beside a number of vertical strokes, forming a grid-like pattern. A similar phenomenon occurs in the shadow in the background at the lower right. To cite just one other among countless works by Van Gogh with a grid-like pattern of brushstrokes in the background, see: *Joseph Roulin, Sitting in a Cane Chair* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; JH1522), which contains this feature prominently in the right background, level with the subject's head.