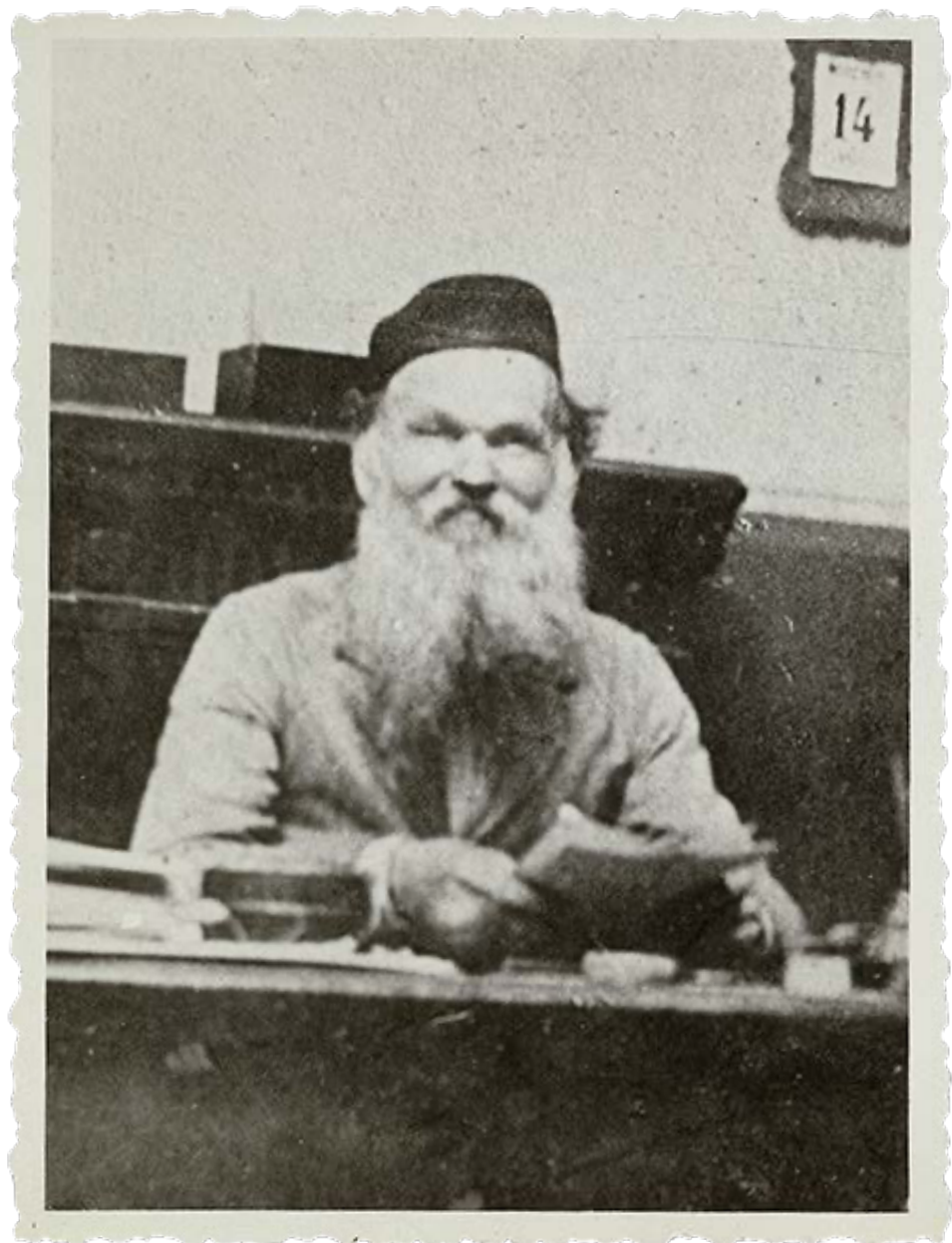
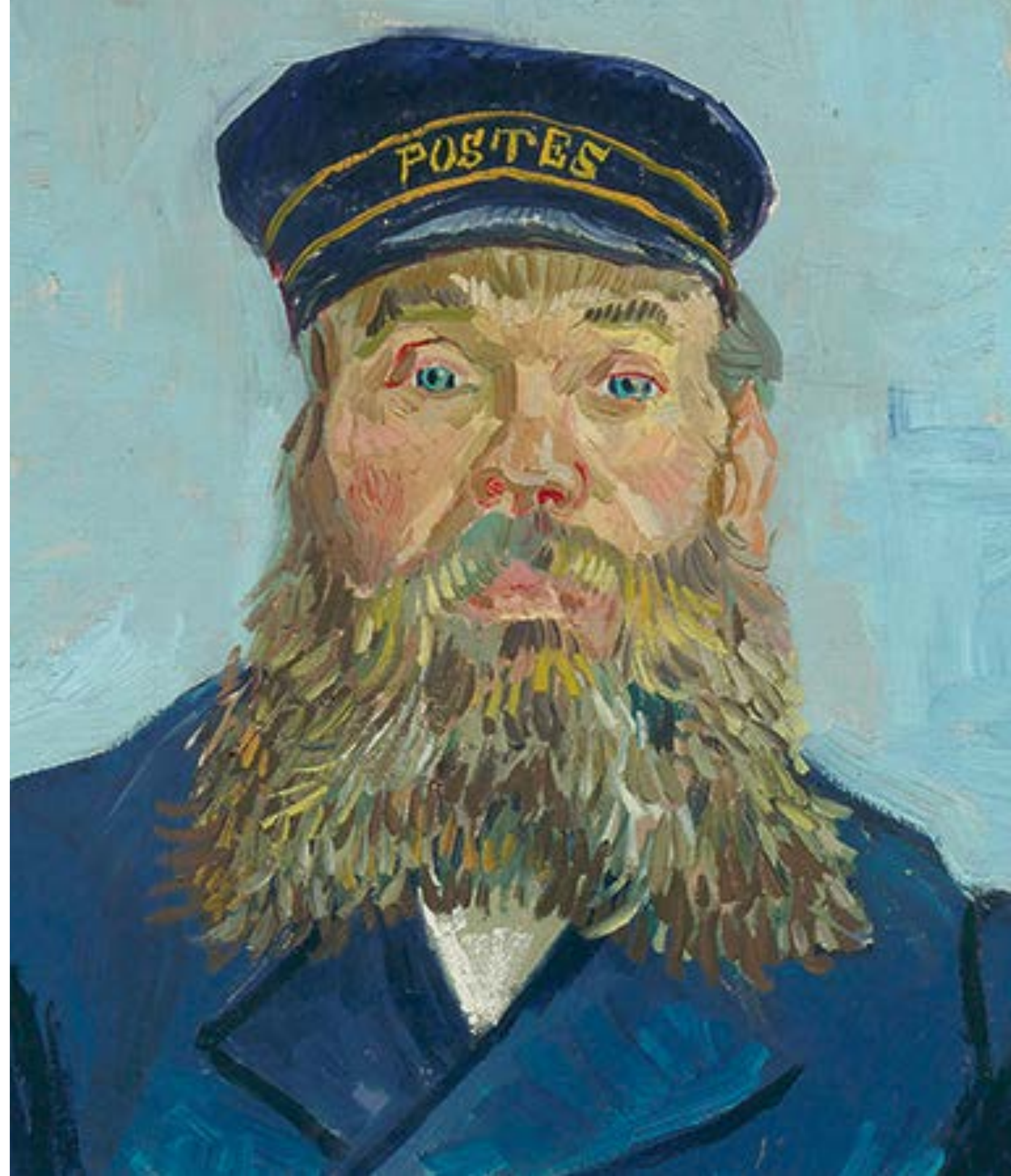


VAN GOGH
THE
ROULIN
FAMILY
PORTRAITS

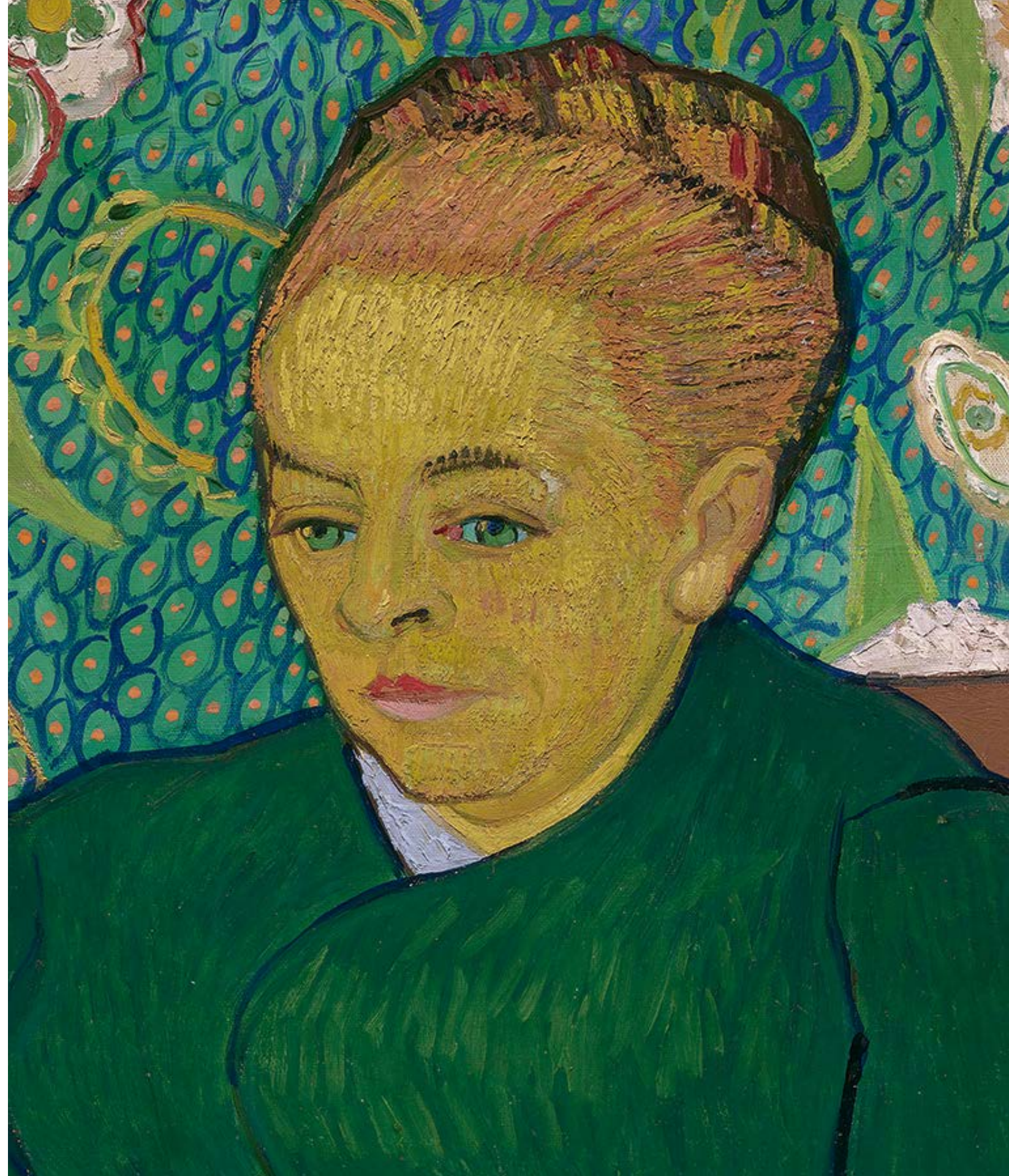


**JOSEPH
ROULIN**





**AUGUSTINE
ROULIN**





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8
Vincent van Gogh, *The Artist's Mother*, 1888, Norton Simon Art Foundation, Pasadena

9
Vincent van Gogh, *The Yellow House (The Street)*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

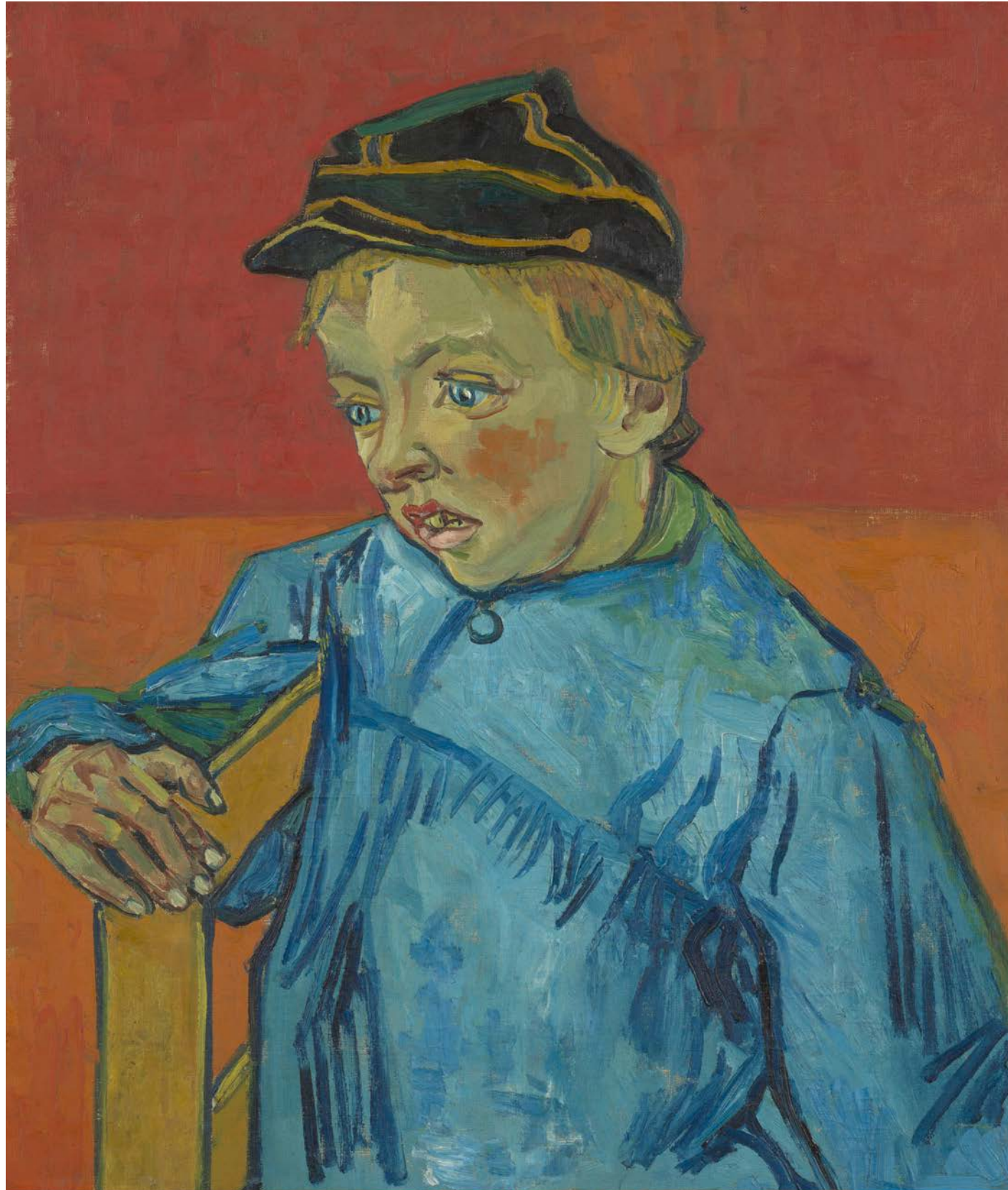
self-portrait intended for Gauguin, he bestowed on himself “the character of a bonze,” or a Japanese monk, to convey his conception of total devotion to art (see fig. 61).³⁰ He also painted a portrait of his mother from a photograph, but in “harmonious colour, as I see her in my memory” (fig. 8).³¹ Color did not have to be truthful or realistic, after all; the artist could use it as he saw fit to suggest “some emotion,” “an ardent temperament.”³²

Besides this relatively small number of portraits, including the two of Roulin, Van Gogh painted canvases of sunflowers, landscapes, and park scenes during the summer and early autumn of 1888, with which he intended to decorate the Yellow House in anticipation of Gauguin’s arrival. He continued to spend a lot of time with Roulin, often at the Café de la Gare. For three successive nights in September, “to the great delight of the lodging-house keeper, the postman [. . .], the prowling night-visitors and myself,” Van Gogh worked there on his painting of the “night café.”³³ Roulin also occasionally invited the artist to dine at his home.³⁴ By the end of August, Augustine was back in Arles with her children.³⁵ Van Gogh’s contact



with the Roulin family no doubt triggered memories of six years earlier, when he lived in The Hague with his then-girlfriend, Sien Hoornik, and her two small children, and intensified his need to create a genuine home for himself.

Van Gogh began to rearrange the Yellow House so that he could move in and was advised on furnishings by Roulin, “who has very often set up his little household and dismantled it again,” and was himself about to move elsewhere in the neighborhood (fig. 9).³⁶ Van Gogh wanted the house to be a true artist’s residence filled with paintings, and he hung two of his portraits, *The Poet* and *The Lover*,



40
Vincent van Gogh, *The Schoolboy (The Postman's Son—Boy in Cap)*, 1888, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand

41
Utagawa Kunisada, *Mashiba Hisayoshi: The Paulownia Crest*, 1862, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



As the very picture of a schoolboy, he fit perfectly into Van Gogh's series of types. The youngster stares at the ground, his mouth open and his arm draped over the back of what was no doubt one of the twelve chairs the artist had purchased for the Yellow House.⁶² Compared to the attentively painted portraits of Camille's older brother, Armand, this is a more playful work, for which Van Gogh loaded his brush with a little more paint. He abandoned the monochrome backgrounds used for the other members of the family, opting instead for a division based on the Japanese example: orange at the bottom and deep red above—colors in effective balance with the light-blue jacket and dark-blue cap (fig. 41). The same background was repeated a month and a half later in his *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*.⁶³

Van Gogh painted two no. 15 portraits of Armand Roulin, aged seventeen and with a youthful moustache. In one, the young man is shown in three-quarter profile against a very thinly executed pine-green background, staring downward



so that “in the evening we’ll work as in the daytime, chatting as we do so. Portraits of people lit by gaslight – that always seems to me a thing to do.”⁸⁷ Roulin seems more fatigued than he does in the earlier portraits, with no color in his cheeks, bags under his eyes, and green tones around the edges of his face that emphasize the wintry grayness. The sharp shadows cast by the artificial lighting would have contributed to this too. Van Gogh no longer paid attention to rendering the individual hairs of Joseph’s beard, but instead created a flat area with light and dark accents. He approached the different elements of the portrait more like one-dimensional expanses—the cheeks, the ear and the beard—due in part to the sparse lighting.

Armand’s third portrait is entirely different in character to the two previous paintings and seems to belong to this “gaslight group” (see fig. 17). Van Gogh undoubtedly painted the work around the same time as the fourth portrait of Joseph, as it shares the same flatness, bright-yellow background, and impression of having been done in the evening (fig. 43). He set this portrait up in a series of planes

44
Paul Gauguin, *Study Sheet with Portraits of Camille Roulin*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

45 (overleaf, left)
Vincent van Gogh, *Camille Roulin*, 1888, Philadelphia Museum of Art

46 (overleaf, right)
Vincent van Gogh, *Camille Roulin*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

too, without paying much attention to details. Armand has not previously been identified as the sitter, but the full lips, little moustache, and prominent ears confirm that this must be the postman’s eldest son.⁸⁸ The bold treatment of the collar is evidence of the piece’s experimental and modern character; Van Gogh deliberately left it unpainted, allowing the bright color of the canvas to do the work.⁸⁹

Camille also came with his father or mother to pose again, as there are two more portraits of him against a yellow background.⁹⁰ Sketches of the boy done by Gauguin at the same time confirm the dating of these works to December (fig. 44).⁹¹ For this bust portrait *en face* of the somewhat shy-looking eleven-year-old, Van Gogh built up the figure from loose brushstrokes rather than flat expanses, resulting in a rich range of shades in the boy’s clothes and face (fig. 45). Perhaps he took his cue for this portrait from a flickering artificial light rather than the sharp light-dark contrasts of a natural light source.⁹² It also seems to have been observed from close up. The portrait was thoroughly reworked by one of its former owners, the painter Émile Schuffenecker.⁹³ Schuffenecker enlarged the size of the canvas, added a second button to Camille’s jacket (not visible due to the frame), and overpainted virtually the whole background.⁹⁴ Louis van Tilborgh and Kathrin Pilz recently identified the Philadelphia painting as the first version, contrary to earlier opinion, based on the hurried manner of painting and the angular forms.⁹⁵

In the second version, a repetition of the first painting with the same dimensions, Van Gogh took the opportunity to improve several shortcomings (fig. 46). He built up the composition in the same way, aside from a few details, such as the sitter’s slightly closed right eye, which he had clearly observed in his first study done from the model.⁹⁶ He carefully balanced the colors, with the button forming a bright-red accent on the green jacket, while the light-blue cap, the same color as the boy’s bright eyes, was given a solid red contour.⁹⁷

Echoing the first mother-and-child portrait, a more attentive attempt at a double portrait now followed (see fig. 75). Here, Van Gogh opted for a larger support—the first no. 30 canvas he used for the Roulin series.⁹⁸ The flat stylization of the composition and the lack of detail seem once again to indicate an evening portrait. The size of Augustine’s face matches that in her portrait by the window, and that of Marcelle also corresponds with the dimensions of the baby in the Metropolitan work.⁹⁹ In other words, his earlier portraits provided a good basis for his later ones, but there are also elements in this portrait that point toward a second sitting, possibly a very short one.¹⁰⁰ Augustine’s face is rendered more *en profil*—turned away from the viewer—and the shape of her nose, her lips, and her pinned-up hair differ from the previous portrait. Reprising large parts of a composition from earlier versions offered Van Gogh an effective means of arriving