ForeWord Reviews

ART

Van Gogh, Face to Face: The Portraits
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Essays by Roland Dorn, George S. Keyes, Joseph J. Rishel with Katherine Sachs, George T.M. Shackelford, Lauren Soth, and Judy Sund

Every school child knows his name; his distinctive style and bold color make his paintings instantly recognizable; yet there is still much to discover about Vincent van Gogh. This volume of six insightful essays, designed to accompany a major touring exhibition of van Gogh's portraits, concentrates on his attainment in portraiture and emphasizes the importance of the category to Vincent himself. "What impassions me most," he wrote to his sister in 1889, "is the portrait, the modern portrait."

The story begins with the artist's keen interest in the Dutch old masters, and the brief time he studied art in the Hague. Inspired by Rembrandt van Rijn and Frans Hals, whose work he admired for its "naturalness" and "authenticity," he set about capturing on paper the likenesses of local pensioners. He drew with a lithographic crayon or chalk on thick watercolor paper and signed his work simply "Vincent," as his revered predecessor Rembrandt had done. He deliberately chose his models to convey life experience, poverty and sorrow. The value he placed on expressive character, even ugliness, over ideal beauty continued throughout his life.

Next, Paris adds much to his artistic development. His interest in portraiture continued, but he completed many still life and flower paintings as experiments with color and the new painting techniques he discovered as he met other artists and saw their work. In Arles, van Gogh is able to take up his portrait work with renewed zeal, and he develops the arbitrary use of color to heighten feeling, ardor.

As van Gogh's health deteriorated, he moved to the asylum at St. Remy, and then to Auvers, where in a burst of energy he painted 100 canvases in nine weeks. These include portraits of robust Norman natives, handsome in their rustic simplicity, and in contrast, the famous portrait of Dr. Gachet, a figure of melancholy, painted in shades of blue.

Together the essays paint a fresh portrait of van Gogh, highlighting his intellectual approach to his work and showing how he bore out his original convictions of what a portrait should be. The essays are preceded by detailed chronologies, and the superabundant illustrations

in luxuriant color afford the opportunity to study and compare, as well as simply enjoy the work of an extraordinary talent.

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