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ADELINE RAVOUX, THE INNKEEPER'S DAUGHTER

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This week I've done a portrait of a young girl [Adeline Ravoux] of 16 or so, in blue against a blue background, the daughter of the people where I'm lodging. I gave her that portrait but I've done a variant for you, a no. 15 canvas.

—VINCENT VAN GOGH

Fig. 1. Adeline Ravoux, figure at the right in the doorway of the Auberge Ravoux, Auvers-sur-Oise, May 1890. Photo Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam T-796.

In May 1890, after living for nearly a year at the Saint-Paul asylum near Saint-Rémy, Vincent van Gogh left the south of France and settled in Auvers-sur-Oise, a small town on the Oise River about 20 miles north of Paris. He spent the last four months of his life lodging at the Auberge Ravoux in Auvers (fig. 1) and seeking occasional medical treatment from Dr. Paul Gachet, a homeopathic doctor recommended by Camille Pissarro. Although Van Gogh continued painting landscapes at a prodigious pace, figure painting remained his greatest ambition. “I want to do figures, figures and more figures,” he wrote to Émile Bernard in August 1888.¹ His year-long confinement at the Saint-Paul asylum made achieving this goal difficult, but settling in the north opened new possibilities for painting portraits. On June 5, 1890, just two months before his death, he wrote to his sister Willemien: “What I’m most passionate about, much much more than all the rest in my profession—is the portrait, the modern portrait. I *would like* to do portraits which

would look like apparitions to people a century later. So I don't try to do us by photographic resemblance but by our passionate expressions, using as a means of expression and intensification of the character our science and modern taste for color."²

Van Gogh's difficulties finding willing models followed him to Auvers, but barely a month after his arrival, he persuaded the innkeeper, Arthur Ravoux, to allow him to paint portraits of his two daughters. Although the artist described the eldest daughter, Adeline (fig. 2), as sixteen years old in his letter, she was actually only twelve or thirteen at the time.³ Her younger sister, Germaine, was two years old.



Fig. 2. Portrait of Adeline Ravoux. Photo Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam T-797.

Adeline later recalled sitting for the artist in an interview: "He did my portrait one afternoon in a single session. As I posed, he did not speak a single word to me; he smoked his pipe continually."⁴ She described herself as being "[d]ressed in blue. I sat in a chair. A ribbon tied back my hair, and since I have blue eyes, he used blue for the background of the portrait, so it became a *Symphony in Blue*."⁵ Although Adeline knew Van Gogh painted three portraits of her, she only saw one of them, the version he gave to her father. "What I can confirm," she insisted, "is that I only posed for a single portrait."⁶ Adeline candidly told Van Gogh that the portrait was disappointing because it was not true to life, to which he replied, "It's not the young girl who you are that Vincent saw, but the women you will become."⁷ She does, indeed, appear much older in the painting than her actual age.

Van Gogh's first portrait of Adeline, which he gave to the family, can be identified through its provenance (fig. 3). The second version, the repetition mentioned in his letter to Theo of June 24, 1890, can also be identified because it descended from Theo to his widow, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger (fig. 4).⁸ It seems likely that Van Gogh painted the repetition in anticipation of giving the life study to the Ravoux family.

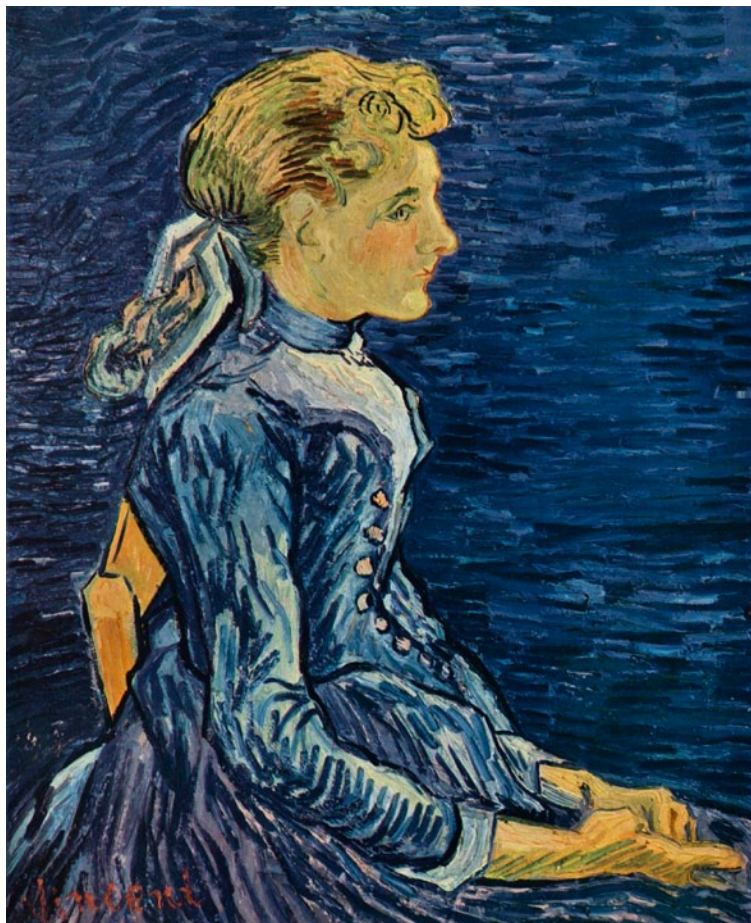


Fig. 3. *Adeline Ravoux*, June 1890. Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). Oil on canvas; 67 x 55 cm. Private collection F768.

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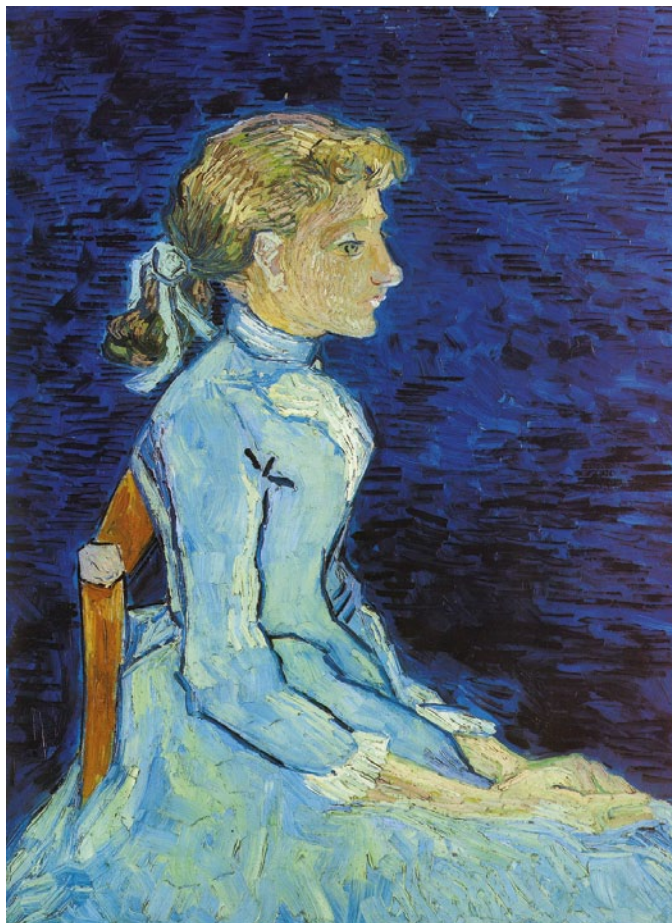


Fig. 4. *Adeline Ravoux*, June 1890. Vincent van Gogh. Oil on canvas; 71.5 x 53 cm. Private collection F769. © Christie's Images Limited 2014.

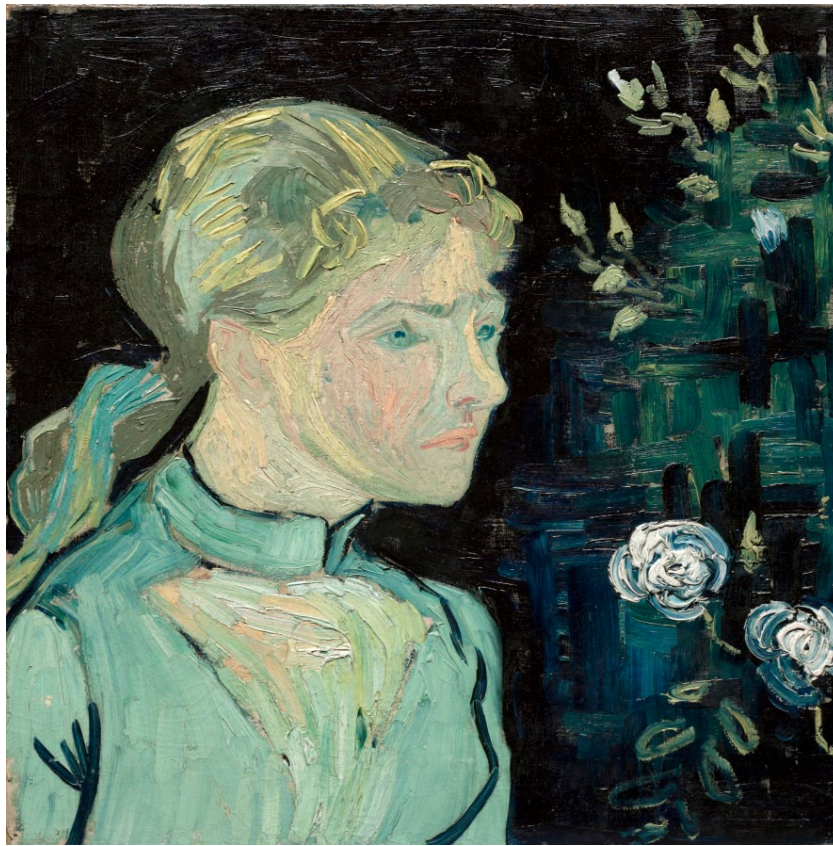
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The first and second versions of this portrait are nearly identical in format and composition, although the repetition is slightly larger around the edges by a few centimeters—particularly at the top and bottom—thereby surrounding the figure with more ample space. Both paintings depict Adeline in strict profile, from the thighs up, sitting in a chair, set against a dark blue background. She wears a blue dress with a white bodice and high collar. Folding her hands in her lap, she looks straight ahead and shows little or no emotion, although she may have felt anxious, judging by her comment in a later interview: “The violence of his paintings frightened me.”⁹ The principal variation in the repetition resides in the lighter blue of the dress and hair, which makes the figure stand out more against the dark background. Adeline is also represented with softer, more idealized features in the repetition.

The circumstances surrounding the production of the third portrait are mysterious because Van Gogh never mentioned this painting in his letters and Adeline did not pose for it (fig. 5). Why Van Gogh altered the pose and format also remains an open question. The first version, or life study, is painted in a standard vertical format for portraiture. Van Gogh used the same format for the repetition but inexplicably switched to a more experimental square canvas for the third portrait.¹⁰ Although wearing the same blue dress and hair ribbon in the third portrait, Adeline is only depicted from the

Fig. 5. *Adeline Ravoux*, June 1890. Vincent van Gogh. Oil on canvas; 50.2 x 50.5 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of Leonard C. Hanna Jr. 1958.31, F786.

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chest up, and her body and face are rotated in three-quarter view. The background, composed of long horizontal brushstrokes in the first two portraits, is now rendered with a basket weave pattern of a deeper blue, and an entirely new element appears: white flowers and green leaves float mysteriously against a dark background on the right, disconnected from any visible support. The deep blue, almost black background recalls the starry skies Van Gogh associated with eternal life and dreams. The white flowers, perhaps linked to weddings and brides, may symbolize youth, purity, and innocence. Judy Sund notes a possible relationship with Van Gogh's *La Mousmé* (F431), a portrait titled after the young woman in Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysanthème*, in which a French naval officer marries a teenage geisha on a visit to Japan.¹¹

The most striking alternations in Van Gogh's third portrait of Adeline Ravoux are found in the sitter's hair and face, now emblazoned with streaks of brilliant yellow. While Adeline looks placid and slightly bored in the life study, her large, piercing eyes and furrowed brow give her a ferocious appearance in the third portrait, implying associations with a seer or oracle who foretells the future. The intensely dark background and the tighter focus amplify the emotional intensity of Adeline's expression. The high degree of abstraction in this image suggests that Van Gogh probably invented it, inspired partly by memories of his first two portraits, but enhanced by his imaginary thoughts and ruminations. This painting might be considered an idealized or

symbolic portrait, similar to the Wintherthur Museum's *Postman* (F434), a repetition based on memory and imagination, partly repeating an early work, but mediated by the urgent necessity of conveying personal thoughts and emotion through formal abstraction.¹² "I have a terrible clarity of mind at times," he told Theo in September 1888, "... and then I'm no longer aware of myself and the painting comes to me as if in a dream."¹³



Auberge Ravoux. Photo: Yvette Gauthier.

TECHNICAL NOTES

Adeline Ravoux (F786, The Cleveland Museum of Art)

The original support is a loosely woven, lightweight, plain-weave linen (est.) fabric with the original tacking edges intact. It has a thread count of twelve vertical and fifteen horizontal threads per centimeter. The weave match project identified the canvas as part of the "Big Match," painting number 62 in this group. The light, warm, ochre-colored ground is thinly and evenly applied and may be proprietary. The ground extends to the edge of the existing tacking margins and conforms slightly to the weave texture of the support.

The painting is wax lined to a plain-weave fabric of medium-weight linen (est.). When it was lined and restretched on the stretcher, the painting shifted to the right. Part of the tacking margin is therefore exposed on the left side, and the original paint is stretched over the edge on the right side. The oil paint is applied in thick direct strokes with high impasto in the flowers as well as the figure, and with broad, high brushwork throughout. There

are many places in the paint surface where the top layer skips over underlying layers; these are not losses but original surface effects. Paint strokes extend to parts of the tacking margins on the top and bottom. The right tacking margin is completely covered with paint to the abruptly truncated edge, and parts of a flower and background foliage are preserved on it. The left margin of the composition is the only edge where the paint boundary coincides with the edge of the stretcher. The paint is penetrated by random crackle in the thickest paint layers (the figure and white flowers). There is moderate cupping in the region of the cracks, but paint layer edges are only slightly upraised. Areas of high impasto have been severely flattened and bear a slight weave impression. There are also some areas where anomalous patches of different colored paint are stuck to the surface, possibly from another painting. Some faint traces of reddish pink are preserved in the fragment of the flower on the hidden tacking margin but are not found in the flower on the surface. Presumably, fading of this pigment has occurred where it has been exposed to light.

Van Gogh began the painting with an initial blue outline of the neck, bodice, head, and profile. From then on, the painting was worked up with quick strokes of fairly thick impastoed paint. The figure was painted first, wet in wet, leaving many areas of light ground exposed. Generally, Van Gogh worked from the more muted greens to brighter pinks, oranges, and yellow highlights. The dark blue background was painted in around the figure except for one final green stroke under the chin that extends over the dark background. The background was laid in wet in wet with the green/blue of the upper right into the darker blue of the lower portion. Fluid strokes of the darker blue of the background were swirled into the figure to delineate her shoulders, right arm, and left breast. The more prominent and distinguishable flowers in the background were done wet in wet, with the final shorter strokes of the pale green leaves added over partially dry paint in the upper background.

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NOTES

Epigraph. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh (Auvers, letter 891), June 24, 1890. All letters are derived from the 2009 edition published on the website of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, www.vangoghletters.org/vg (accessed March 13, 2013).

- 1 Vincent van Gogh to Émile Bernard (Arles, letter 665), August 21, 1888.
- 2 Vincent van Gogh to Willemien van Gogh (Auvers-sur-Oise, letter 879), June 5, 1890. Van Gogh often underlined words in his letters for emphasis; the italics here reflect the emphasis in the original text.
- 3 Adeline said she was thirteen, but based on her birth date, she may have been only twelve, according to a catalogue entry published in *Impressionist and Modern Paintings and Sculpture* (New York: Christie's, May 11, 1988), p. 61, lot 22.

- 4 Louis Anfray, “Les souvenirs d’Adeline Ravoux sur le séjour de Vincent van Gogh à Auvers-sur-Oise,” *Les Cahiers de Van Gogh* no. 1 (Geneva: Pierre Cailler, 1956): p. 9.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., pp. 9–10. Arthur Ravoux sold this portrait (F768) in 1905. A year earlier, Adeline curiously told Maximilien Gauthier she posed five or six times, contradicting her statement to Anfray. See Gauthier, “La femme en bleu nous parle de l’homme à l’oreille coupée,” *Les Nouvelles Littéraires Artistiques et Scientifiques* (April 16, 1953): pp. 1–6; Gauthier, “La femme en bleu revient à Auvers,” *Les Nouvelles Littéraires Artistiques et Scientifiques* (August 12, 1954): p. 8.
- 7 Ibid., p. 10.
- 8 Van Gogh described this painting as *une variant*, but it is difficult to know exactly what he meant since he did not use the term enough to establish a clear pattern. However, he once used the term *deux variantes* to describe two paintings of nearly identical size and composition, *The Garden of the Asylum* (F659, F660), indicating that he regarded *une variant* as nearly synonymous with *une répétition*, especially if one considers that his repetitions are not always exact duplicates but often include significant variations in forms and details. See Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh (Saint-Rémy, letter 824), December 7, 1889.
- 9 Gautier, “La femme en bleu nous parle,” p. 13.
- 10 The painting Van Gogh gave to the Ravoux family (F768) is painted on a standard size no. 15 figure stretcher, the repetition for Theo (F769) comes close to a no. 20 landscape format, and the Cleveland painting (F786) corresponds to a no. 12 square canvas (52 x 52 cm). Why Van Gogh described the repetition painted for Theo as a no. 15 canvas remains a mystery, unless he made a mistake and confused the paintings. The square format of the Cleveland painting is slightly unusual for Van Gogh but not unique; during his final months at Auvers, he used a square format for three portraits (F518, F784, F785) and explored painting on large double-wide canvases measuring 50 x 100 centimeters.
- 11 Judy Sund, “Portrait Making at St.-Rémy and Auvers,” in *Van Gogh, Face to Face: The Portraits*, ed. Roland Dorn (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2000), p. 219.
- 12 If there is a certain awkwardness to the figure, it may be because Van Gogh lacked confidence when not working from a live model.
- 13 Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh (Arles, letter 687), September 25, 1888.

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HOW TO CITE THIS WORK

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Fig. 3. *Adeline Ravoux*, June 1890. Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). Oil on canvas; 67 x 55 cm. Private collection F768.

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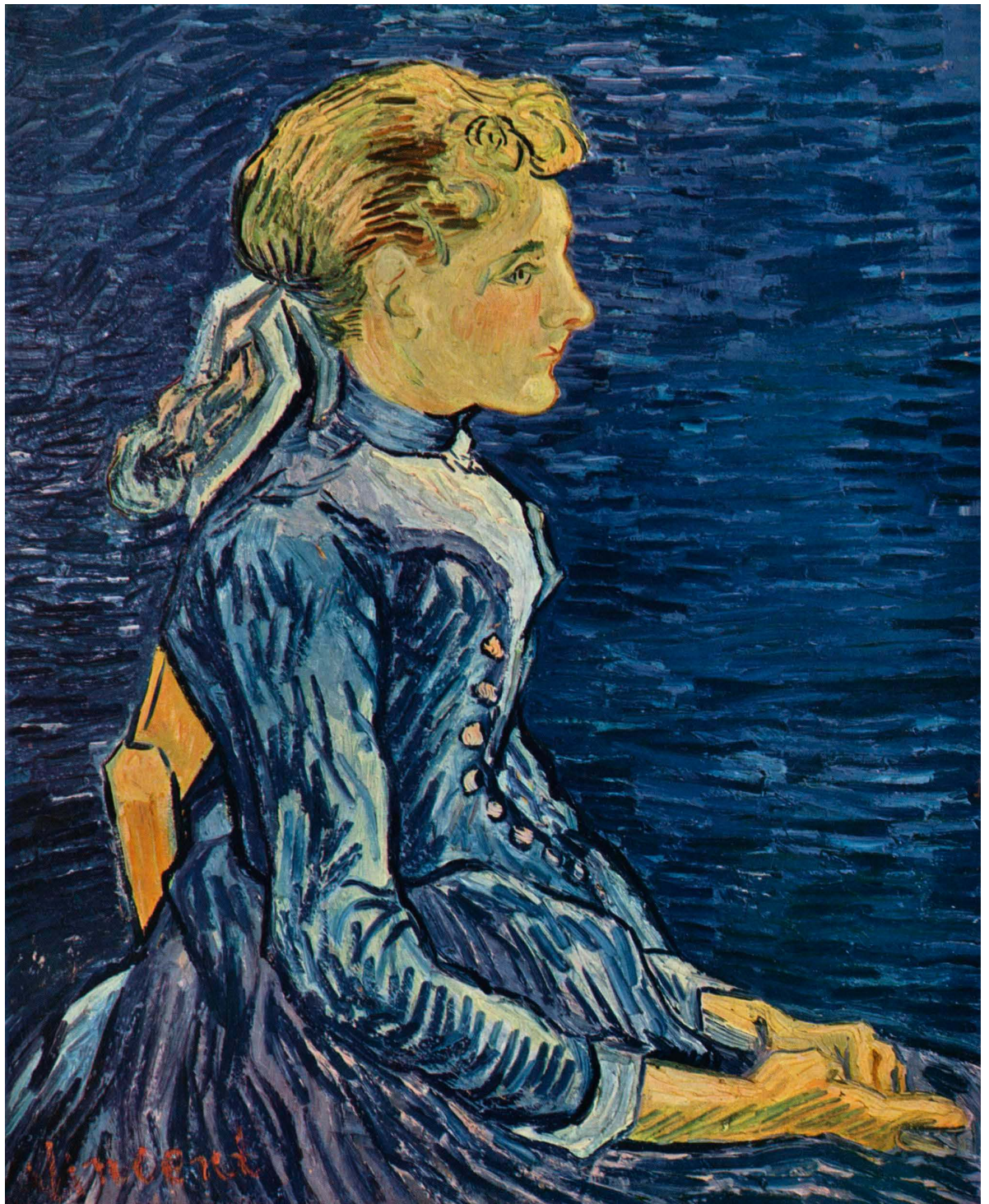


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