



Self-Portrait, 1888

Works Collected by Theo and Vincent van Gogh

Self-Portrait

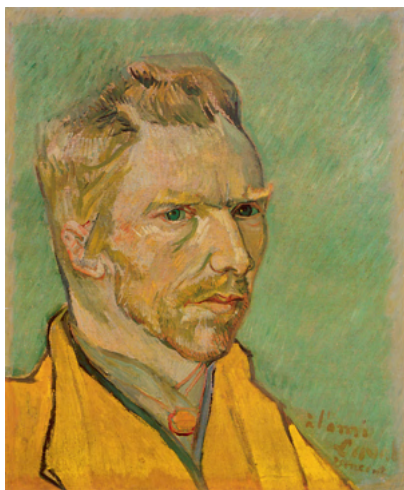
Charles Laval

Charles Laval (1861-1894) always plays a secondary role in the historiography of the Pont-Aven School and the stylistic breakthroughs achieved there in 1888. Almost without exception, art historical praise is bestowed upon his better-known colleagues Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) and Emile Bernard (1868-1941), whose monumental works *Vision after the Sermon* (1888, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh) and *The Pardon* (1888, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), respectively, command all attention. This *Self-Portrait*, which Laval sent from Brittany to Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) in the south of France in the autumn of 1888, as Gauguin and Bernard had done, also tends to receive less recognition in accounts of the artistic exchange between Pont-Aven and Arles.⁰¹ However, this may not represent a fair assessment of the work. From Van Gogh's perspective, Laval was possibly just as talented as Gauguin and Bernard. The fact that he had never met Laval personally or corresponded with him did not alter his opinion.⁰²

Laval enters the picture

Van Gogh first learned about Laval through his correspondence with Gauguin, who regularly mentioned the younger artist.⁰³ Laval and Gauguin had become good friends after meeting in Pont-Aven in 1886. In April 1887 they travelled together to Martinique, following which Gauguin returned to Paris in November 1887 while Laval stayed on for another six months. When Laval rejoined Gauguin in Pont-Aven in mid-July 1888, Gauguin reported to Van Gogh: 'My friend Laval is back from Martinique; he brought some very curious watercolours. I'll have you look at some that you'll like, they're art.'⁰⁴ Gauguin also informed him that Laval, along with Bernard, would be joining him in Arles so that all four of them could work together in the so-called Studio of the South.⁰⁵ From that point onward, Laval became a part of Van Gogh's artistic exchange with Pont-Aven, and figured in the plans for a future communal artists' studio in Arles.⁰⁶

Upon receiving the self-portraits of Gauguin and Bernard in early October 1888, Van Gogh expressed his gratitude by sending several of his paintings to his friends in Pont-Aven, one of which was intended for Laval.⁰⁷ While it is unclear which one Laval chose for himself, his self-portrait for Van Gogh in turn served as a token of appreciation. When Van Gogh received it on 11 or 12 November 1888, he had the chance to compare it with Gauguin's and Bernard's likenesses.⁰⁸ Van Gogh had nothing but praise for the portrait. In a letter to his brother Theo van Gogh (1857-1891) he wrote: 'The portrait of Laval is very self-assured, very distinguished, and will be precisely one of the paintings you speak of, which one takes before the others have recognized the talent.'⁰⁹ Van Gogh was genuinely impressed with the potential he discerned in it and even made a letter sketch to give Theo an idea of the work (fig. 1). In addition, he sent Laval a self-portrait to thank him for the painting, inscribed 'à l'ami Laval' (to my friend Laval) (fig. 2). Evidently, Van Gogh deemed the quality of Laval's self-portrait to be such that he felt that the painting Laval already had by him was insufficient compensation for the likeness. Interestingly, Van Gogh did not express the same level of enthusiasm upon receiving the self-portraits of Gauguin and Bernard. This might be because he was more familiar with their work and had higher expectations.



Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1888, oil on canvas, 46 × 38 cm, private collection

Great promise and a distinct style

The promise Van Gogh discerned in Laval's self-portrait was certainly not unfounded. Indeed, the portrait 'holds its own' alongside those of Gauguin and Bernard, showing that Laval did not merely imitate their style, as some have accused him of doing, but rather sought his own path within the manner of painting they had collectively adopted. Since meeting Gauguin in 1886, Laval's art had undergone a rapid development. While there are no known works by Laval from that year, according to Henri Delavallée (1862-1943) Laval then painted in the manner of Edgar Degas (1834-1917).¹¹ Although the works he created in the company of Gauguin in Martinique the following year indeed betray the influence of the elder artist, thirteen years his senior, Laval managed to infuse his paintings with a personal touch at the same time.¹² He delved deeper into his distinctive style in 1888, when he was in Pont-Aven with Gauguin and Bernard. During this period, he produced two particularly interesting works in addition to the self-portrait: *Going to Market*, *Brittany* and *Women Bathing* (fig. 3 and fig. 4).

These three paintings all feature short, loose brushstrokes, applied by Laval with superb dexterity. Unlike Gauguin and Bernard, who used areas of colour filled in with parallel strokes following the example of Paul Cézanne (1830-1903), Laval employed the agility of his brush to infuse dynamism into his work. This can be seen in his rendering of faces in *Going to Market*, *Brittany* and the tree in his *Self-Portrait*, but it is especially pronounced in the portrayal of the seawater in *Women Bathing*. Laval further enhanced this dynamic quality by greatly varying the colour of his daubs, which is evident in all three paintings. This combination gave Laval's paintings a distinctive panache and set them apart from Gauguin's and Bernard's work.



Charles Laval, *Going to Market*,
Brittany, 1888, oil on canvas,
37.5 × 36 cm, Indianapolis
Museum of Art, Indianapolis

Nipped in the bud

Unfortunately, Laval's creative streak could not be sustained. He suffered poor health due to tuberculosis, which may have afflicted him since 1887.¹³ The disease tragically claimed Laval's life in 1894, when he was just thirty-three years old. His chronic health issues not only hindered his artistic endeavours but also dampened his desire to work. As a result, he was insecure as an artist and lacked the constant drive to create that Gauguin, Bernard and Van Gogh possessed. A year later, in October 1889, Gauguin complained to Bernard that Laval 'did not touch a brush during his six months in Brittany'.¹⁴ A month later he lamented that 'the poor fellow has been seduced into idleness.'¹⁵ Bernard shared similar concerns during this period, complaining that Laval 'doubts and dozes' (*doute et somnole*) in a letter to his friend Emile Schuffenecker (1851–1934).¹⁶ Laval's few surviving letters confirm his struggle with low self-esteem. For example, in 1887 he wrote to Gauguin after the latter had left him in Martinique: 'I was in a dark place when you found me.'¹⁷ In 1890 he wrote to Bernard: 'Your existence is clear, mine hardly is: I've led a detestable life, and I'm deeply troubled to realise that I've never acted in a good way.'¹⁸

Due to his fragile health, lack of motivation and untimely demise, Laval's oeuvre is exceedingly small, with just over thirty-five known works by his hand.¹⁹ Moreover, the picture we have of his surviving body of work is incomplete. In a 1939 text, Bernard mentioned that after Laval's death in 1894, his brother Eugène 'Nino' Laval had auctioned off all his work.²⁰ In his later publications, Bernard portrayed Laval negatively, possibly to elevate his own role in the avant-gardes of the 1880s.²¹ This undoubtedly contributed to Laval's relatively obscure place in art history, resulting in so little value being attached to his work, much of which has faded into obscurity.

Four self-portraits

Among the surviving works there are six portraits in total, four of which are self-portraits. Three of these self-portraits date from the period when Laval was frequently in the company of Gauguin and Bernard. The earliest one is the *Self-Portrait* in the Van Gogh Museum. *Portrait of the Artist* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and *Self-Portrait 'À mon bon Nino'* (for my good Nino) (whereabouts unknown) were both made in 1889. Like the self-portrait he painted for Van Gogh, these two versions were intended for individuals close to Laval. The latter work, as its title suggests, was meant for Laval's brother, and *Portrait of the Artist* was given to Bernard, who later donated it to the Musée du Luxembourg, Paris. ²²

The fourth self-portrait (whereabouts unknown) was created earlier, during his student days in Paris (c. 1880-84). ²³ Laval received his training successively at the Académie des Beaux-Arts and in the ateliers of Léon Bonnat (1833-1922) and Fernand Cormon (1845-1924). ²⁴ Regardless of the style or period in which Laval portrayed himself, his distinct narrow face and trademark pince-nez glasses always make him recognizable. In the four times Gauguin portrayed him - once in oil on canvas and three times in chalk on paper (fig. 5) - and in the few photographs taken of him (fig. 6) , he wore his pince-nez without exception. ²⁵



Paul Gauguin, *Portrait of Charles Laval*, 1887, black chalk on paper, 20.3 × 26.7 cm, Tate, London. Photo: Tate

A skilled portraitist

During his academic training, Laval had mastered the art of painting traditionally composed likenesses that closely resembled his subjects. This skill did not go unnoticed by his confreres. In his 1939 memoirs, Bernard noted that, 'A student of Bonnat, Laval had painted some fine portraits in a black manner that revealed the finesse of his nature.'²⁶ By *manière noire*, Bernard probably meant a traditional method of portraiture that prescribes working from dark to light. Several such portraits were created by Laval's teacher Bonnat. However, only one portrait *en manière noire* by Laval has survived (with some doubts). It depicts Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) (fig. 7) from their student days under the tutelage of Bonnat and Cormon.²⁷

Although Laval's art had taken a different direction in 1886, by 1887 he found himself compelled to revert to his academic portraiture skills due to financial constraints. At that time, he and Gauguin were stranded in Panama, painting some portraits on commission to help cover their passage to Martinique. Gauguin wrote:

'They must be done in a special and *very poor* manner, something I cannot do.'²⁸ Even though Gauguin looked down on Laval's academic portrait skills, he was unable to execute such precise work himself. Unfortunately, as far as is known, none of Laval's Panama portraits have survived.

While painted in a different, more personal style, Laval's 1888 *Self-Portrait* still showcases his talent as a portraitist. He adeptly employed short and dynamic strokes to limn an expressive and authentic likeness of himself. This method of painting leaves less room for subtlety than academic fine painting, which demands that every stroke hit the mark. Laval first laid out the painting with general zones of thinly applied paint, then continued to work over it with thicker, short strokes. As a result, the ground tone of the face is relatively dark, but over it he applied short strokes in a rich variety of shades that reflect the changing light falling on the skin. He used white touches on the right side of his face to create highlights and dark blue tones for the shadowed side.²⁹ Furthermore, the distinctive and clearly applied short strokes that Laval used to model his face, hair and beard are deliberately course and effectively reveal his signature style and lend the portrait a personal feeling.

Compared to the self-portraits by Gauguin and Bernard

As mentioned above, Laval's clearly applied strokes are among the most striking distinguishing elements in relation to Gauguin and Bernard. The same is true when comparing the self-portraits they all sent to Van Gogh. Bernard focused on even areas of colour in his self-portrait, while Gauguin painted himself in a finer painterly style. Consequently, Laval's self-portrait conveys more directness than those of his colleagues. This must have been the quality that so appealed to Van Gogh. According to Van Gogh, this also translated into Laval's gaze, which he described as 'honest'. ³⁰

Additionally, Laval's composition set his portrait apart from those of Gauguin and Bernard. By positioning himself in front of a window overlooking a garden, rather than against a plain wall, he introduced a sense of space into the scene. This allowed Laval to convey something about his artistry in the broadest sense. By placing himself before a landscape, he communicated to Van Gogh that he was not only a portrait painter but also adept at landscapes.

The technique Laval used to depict his face is also applied, in part, to the garden behind him. Particularly the area beyond the window, directly to the left of Laval, is covered with distinct parallel strokes. He used short daubs of different colours to work out the tree, creating a varied and colourful representation of the foliage that beautifully reflects the autumnal mood of the season when the work was created. Laval added contours to some leaves almost randomly. This was a significant departure from Gauguin's style, whose work - according to Bernard and others - Laval imitated too slavishly. ³¹

Laval and Bernard together in Pont-Aven

Interestingly, it is precisely the depiction of the tree that bears similarities with Bernard's work. For instance, the rendering of the trees in Bernard's painting *House among Trees, Pont-Aven* (fig. 8), which, like the self-portrait, was produced in the autumn of 1888, is very similar to Laval's tree: they both feature distinct branches and loose strokes for the autumn foliage. Furthermore, the location of both paintings is likely the same, with Bernard's work showing the Pension Gloanec in the background, where the painters lodged. Laval portrayed himself in front of one of the inn's windows, with the same garden in the background as seen in Bernard's painting.³² This garden belonged to the inn.

When Laval and Bernard painted *Self-Portrait* and *House among Trees, Pont-Aven*, respectively, Gauguin had already left for Arles to join Van Gogh, leaving the two younger painters to rely on each other.³³ Initially, their collaboration faced some challenges, and Bernard must have aired some complaints about Laval in a (now unknown) letter to Gauguin. The latter felt compelled to write to Bernard, 'be friends with Laval, he has a fine and noble nature.'³⁴ Their being thrown together like this, however, might explain the stylistic affinity between these two works. Bernard may have set the example, as he already used this manner of painting trees in *Red Poplars* (1887, private collection) earlier that autumn.³⁵ He, in turn, was inspired by Cézanne.



Emile Bernard, *House among Trees, Pont-Aven*, 1888, oil on canvas, 73 × 92.5 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands)

Sufficiently finished

While Laval painstakingly rendered the tree, his own face, and parts of the background with loose brushstrokes over the general layout of his composition, he left significant portions of his thin underlayer visible. This is especially noticeable in the grass and Laval's clothing. In some sections, the paint is applied so thinly that the primer of the canvas shines through it.

Also visible are several sketchy lines in dark blue paint, suggesting the beginning of further elaboration, but left as they were. Or perhaps these lines were painted over, albeit indifferently, with a very thin and transparent layer. Although the work could be read as not entirely finished, Laval signed and sent it to Van Gogh, indicating that he may not have put much value in the traditional notion of finish. The other two paintings from this period, *Going to Market, Brittany* and *Women Bathing* (see fig. 3 and fig. 4), also appear incomplete. For example, the figure at the upper right in *Going to Market, Brittany* seems unfinished, as is the figure at the lower right in *Women Bathing*. Yet these works are also signed, suggesting Laval's satisfaction.

As mentioned above, this trio of paintings clearly demonstrates that Laval was hardly inferior to Gauguin and Bernard as an artist. He undeniably made a significant contribution to the fruitful artistic exchange between these three painters. The rhythm and personality of his brushwork, his remarkably keen eye for colour and composition, and his skill in portraiture are all qualities in which Laval's sparse body of work excels. Van Gogh recognized Laval's exceptional talent based on this self-portrait alone.

Joost van der Hoeven
January 2024

Citation

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 Copy citation



Object details

Self-Portrait

Artist

Charles Laval (1861 - 1894)

Location

Pont-Aven

Date

1888

Medium

oil on canvas

Dimensions

50.7 cm x 60.4 cm

Inscriptions

C. Laval 88

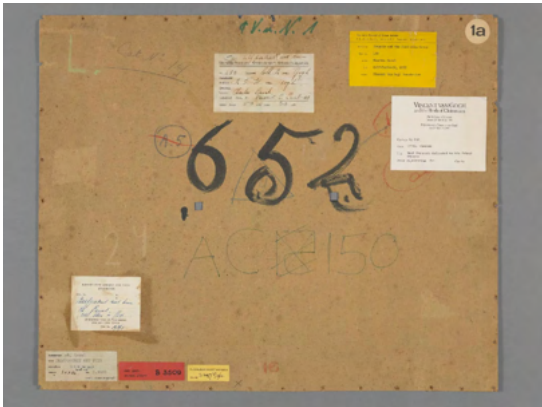
a l'ami Vincent

Inventory Number

s0247V1962

Credits

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



Self-Portrait

Front & Back



Provenance

Self-Portrait

Exchanged by the artist, Pont-Aven with Vincent van Gogh, Arles, on or shortly before 12 November 1888; sent by Vincent van Gogh from Arles to his brother, Theo van Gogh, Paris, 30 April 1889; after his death on 25 January 1891, inherited by his widow, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, and their son, Vincent Willem van Gogh, Paris; administered until her death on 2 September 1925 by Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Bussum/Amsterdam/Laren; donated by Vincent Willem van Gogh to the (1st) Vincent van Gogh Foundation, Laren, 11 March 1952; transferred by the (1st) Vincent van Gogh Foundation to the Theo van Gogh Foundation, Laren, 28 December 1960; donated by the Theo van Gogh Foundation to the (2nd) Vincent van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam, 21 July 1962; agreement concluded between the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and the State of the Netherlands, in which the preservation and management of the collection, and its placing in the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, to be realized in Amsterdam, is entrusted to the State, 21 July 1962; on permanent loan to the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh from the opening of the museum on 2 June 1973, and at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, since 1 July 1994.



Exhibitions

Self-Portrait

Antwerp, Zaal Comité voor Artistieke Werking, *Vincent van Gogh*, 7 May-19 June 1955, no. 14, *Zelfportret van Charles Laval*

Mons, Museum voor Schoone Kunsten, *Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). Son art et ses amis*, 22 March-5 May 1958, no. 98, *autoportrait*

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Collectie Theo van Gogh*, February 1960, no. 74, *Zelfportret met tuin*

Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum, *Collectie Theo van Gogh*, April-May 1960, no. 74, *Zelfportret met tuin*

Paris, Institut Néerlandais, *Les amis de Van Gogh*, 9 November-17 December 1960, no. 52, *Autoportrait en face*

Humblebaek, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, *Stedelijk Museum besøger Louisiana*, 28 October-3 December 1961

Stockholm, Moderna Museet, *Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam besöker Moderna Museet, Stockholm*, 26 December 1961-28 January 1962, no. 65, *Självporträtt i trädgård*

London, Tate Gallery, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven group*, 7 January-13 February 1966, no. 150, *Self-Portrait*

Zurich, Kunsthaus Zürich, *Pont-Aven. Gauguin und sein Kreis in der Bretagne*, 5 March-11 April 1966, no. 208, *Selbstporträt*

Amsterdam, Museum Fodor, *Zonder titel*, October-November 1970

Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, *Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism*, 24 January-22 March 1981, no. 136, *Self-Portrait dedicated to Vincent*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Theo van Gogh 1857-1891. Kunsthandelaar, verzamelaar en broer van Vincent*, 24 June-5 September 1999, no. 172, *Zelfportret*

Paris, Musée d'Orsay, *Theo van Gogh 1857-1891. Marchand de tableaux, collectionneur, frère de Vincent*, 27 September 1999-9 January 2000, no. 102, *Autoportrait*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Van Gogh en Gauguin. Het atelier van het zuiden*, 9 February-2 June 2002, no. 53, *Zelfportret opgedragen aan Vincent van Gogh*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *De keuze van Vincent. Van Goghs Musée imaginaire*, 14 February-15 June 2003, no. 171, *Zelfportret*

New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, *Painted with Words. Vincent van Gogh's letters to Emile Bernard*, 28 September 2007-6 January 2008, no. 89, *Self-Portrait*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Van Goghs brieven. De kunstenaar aan het woord*, 9 October 2009-3 January 2010

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Van Gogh aan het werk*, 1 May 2013-13 January 2014, *Zelfportret*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Gauguin en Laval op Martinique*, 5 October 2018-13 January 2019, no. 8, *Zelfportret*



Literature

Self-Portrait

- Äke Meyerson, 'Van Gogh and the School of Pont-Aven', *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 15 (1946), pp. 139-40
- Abraham Marie Hammacher, *Exposition les amis de van Gogh: catalogue*, exh. cat., Paris (Institut Néerlandais) 1960, no. 54, pp. 38-40
- Felix Andreas Baumann et al. (eds.), *Pont-Aven: Gauguin und sein Kreis in der Bretagne*, exh. cat., Zurich (Kunsthaus Zürich) 1966, no. 209, pp. 76-77
- Denys Sutton and Gabriel White, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven Group*, exh. cat., London (Tate Gallery) 1966, no. 150, p. 36
- Wladyslawa Jaworska, *Paul Gauguin et l'école de Pont-Aven*, Neuchâtel 1971, pp. 43-45
- Sophie Monneret, *Impressionisme et son époque Paris*, Paris 1978-81, pp. 316-18
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- Belinda Thomson, *Gauguin*, London 1987, p. 73
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- Catherine Puget, Wladyslawa Jaworska and Denise Delouche, *Gauguin et ses amis à Pont-Aven*, Douarnenez 1989, pp. 72, 73
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 - Christie's New York, *Impressionist and Modern Paintings and Sculpture (Part I)*, auction cat., 15 May 1990, pp. 88–97
 - Gwendolyn P. Jones, 'Restoration of Charles Laval, Self-Portrait for Vincent, 1888', *Van Gogh Bulletin* 7 (1992), pp. 11–13
 - Ronald de Leeuw, *The Van Gogh Museum: Paintings and Pastels*, Zwolle 1994, pp. 122–23
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 - Roland Dorn et al. (eds.), *Van Gogh Face to Face: The Portraits*, exh. cat., Detroit (Detroit Institute of Arts) / Boston (Museum of Fine Arts Boston) / Philadelphia (Philadelphia Museum of Art), Detroit 2000, pp. 122, 125, 135
 - Aukje Vergeest, *The French Collection: Nineteenth-Century French Paintings in Dutch Public Collections*, Amsterdam 2000, no. 629, p. 210
 - Douglas W. Druick, Britt Salvesen and Peter Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South*, exh. cat., Chicago (Art Institute of Chicago) / Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), Chicago 2001, pp. 247, 406
 - Chris Stolwijk et al. (eds.), *Vincent's Choice: The Musée imaginaire of Van Gogh*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2003, no. 171, pp. 47, 299, 308

- Clément Siberchicot, *Charles Laval (1861-1894): les ateliers parisiens, la Martinique, l'école de Pont-Aven* (MA thesis, Université Paris Nanterre 2006-7), pp. 6, 13, 76-79.
- Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh: Painted with Words: The Letters to Émile Bernard*, exh. cat., New York (The Morgan Library & Museum) 2007, no. 89, pp. 108-11, 302-13
- Fred Leeman et al., *Emile Bernard (1868-1941)*, Paris 2013, pp. 127, 131
- Marije Vellekoop et al. (eds.), *Van Gogh at Work*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2013, pp. 276-78
- Maite van Dijk et al., *Gauguin and Laval in Martinique*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2018, pp. 40-41, 155, 171
- Esther Darley and Renske Suijver, *Masterpieces in the Van Gogh Museum*, Amsterdam 2019, p. 119



Letters

Self-Portrait

- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, Arles, c. 5 October 1888, [↗ 698](#)
- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 11 or 12 November 1888, [↗ 719](#)
- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 17 January 1889, [↗ 736](#)
- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 30 April 1889, [↗ 765](#)
- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, 5 or 6 September 1889, [↗ 800](#)

Figures



Fig. 1
 Vincent van Gogh, Letter to Theo van Gogh with a Sketch after Charles Laval, *Self-Portrait*, 11 or 12 November 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

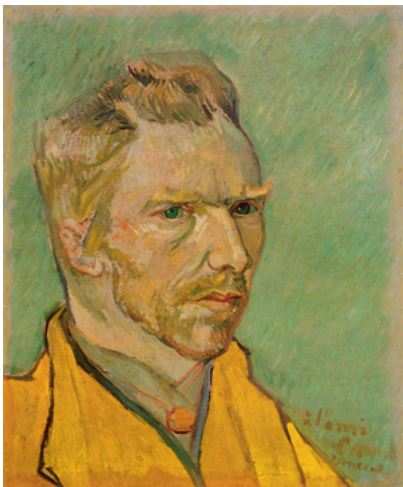


Fig. 2
 Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1888, oil on canvas, 46 × 38 cm, private collection



Fig. 3

Charles Laval, *Going to Market, Brittany*, 1888, oil on canvas, 37.5 × 36 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis

**Fig. 4**

Charles Laval, *Women Bathing*, 1888, oil on canvas, 46 × 55 cm. Kunsthalle Bremen, Der Kunstverein in Bremen. Photo: Lars Lohrisch

**Fig. 5**

Paul Gauguin, *Portrait of Charles Laval*, 1887, black chalk on paper, 20.3 × 26.7 cm, Tate, London. Photo: Tate

**Fig. 6**

Portrait of Charles Laval, n.d., Musée de Pont-Aven, Pont-Aven

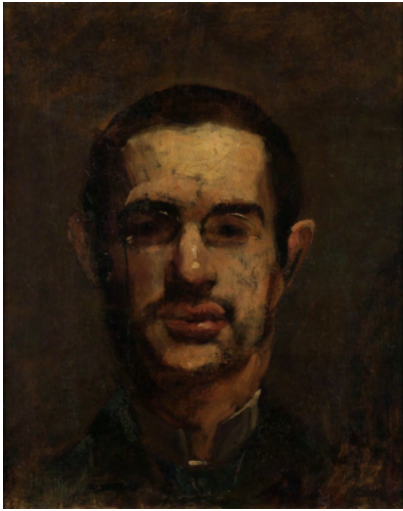


Fig. 7

Charles Laval, *Portrait of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, c. 1882-83, oil on canvas, 46 × 38 cm, Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi



Fig. 8

Emile Bernard, *House among Trees, Pont-Aven*, 1888, oil on canvas, 73 × 92.5 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands)

Footnotes

- 01 See Gauguin's *Self-Portrait with Portrait of Emile Bernard (Les misérables)* and Bernard's *Self-Portrait with Portrait of Gauguin*.
- 02 Although Laval never met Van Gogh, he did attend his funeral. He went there with Emile Bernard. See “‘Un document sensationnel et inédit: l'enterrement de Vincent van Gogh,’ par le peintre Emile Bernard’ [letter from Emile Bernard to Albert Aurier, 31 July 1890], *Art-Documents* 29 (February 1953), in Anne Rivière (ed.), *Emile Bernard, propos sur l'art*, 2 vols., Paris 1994, vol. 1, p. 30.
- 03 Van Gogh first read about Laval in a letter from Gauguin he received in early June 1888, which has not been preserved. This is evident from his letter to Theo on 12 June 1888 [↗ \[623\]](#).
- 04 Paul Gauguin, letter to Vincent van Gogh, around 22 July 1888 [↗ \[646\]](#): ‘Mon ami Laval est revenu de la Martinique; il a rapporté quelques aquarelles très-curieuses. Je vous en ferai voir que vous aimerez, c'est de l'art.’
- 05 Paul Gauguin, letter to Vincent van Gogh, around 25 September 1888 [↗ \[688\]](#).
- 06 See Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 3 October 1888 [↗ \[694\]](#).
- 07 See Vincent van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, on or around 5 October 1888 [↗ \[698\]](#), n. 1.
- 08 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 11 or 12 November 1888 [↗ \[719\]](#). For Gauguin and Bernard's self-portraits, refer to the entries on these works: *Self-Portrait with Portrait of Emile Bernard (Les misérables)* and *Self-Portrait with Portrait of Gauguin*.
- 09 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 11 or 12 November 1888 [↗ \[719\]](#): ‘Le portrait de Laval est tres crâne, très distingué et sera justement un des tableaux dont tu parles qu'on aura prises avant que les autres n'eussent reconnus le talent.’
- 10 See Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 17 January 1889 [↗ \[736\]](#). Van Gogh had hoped that Gauguin would take the portrait with him to Paris to give it to Laval. When this did not happen, Van Gogh sent it to Theo so that he could hand it over to Laval.
- 11 Henri Delavallée is reported to have said the following to the critic Charles Chassé: ‘To be honest, he wasn't an Impressionist; his painting resembles that of Degas’ (‘Ce n'était pas à vrai dire un impressionniste; sa peinture ressemblait à celle de Degas’). See Charles Chassé, *Gauguin et son temps*, Paris 1955, p. 45.
- 12 See Joost van der Hoeven, ‘Martinique Visualized’, in Maite van Dijk and Joost van der Hoeven, *Gauguin and Laval in Martinique*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2018, pp. 76-103.
- 13 See Daniel Wildenstein, Sylvie Crussard and Martine Heudron, *Gauguin: premier itinéraire d'un sauvage: catalogue de l'œuvre peint (1873-1888)*, 2 vols., Milan 2001 (hereafter Crussard 2001), vol. 2, p. 307.

- 14 Paul Gauguin, letter to Emile Bernard, around October 1889, in Maurice Malingue, *Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et à ses amis*, Paris 1946, no. 89.
- 15 Paul Gauguin, letter to Emile Bernard, around November 1889, in Malingue 1946, no. 92.
- 16 Emile Bernard, letter to Emile Schuffenecker, 26 August 1889, in Neil McWilliam (ed.), *Émile Bernard: les lettres d'un artiste (1884-1941)*, Dijon 2012, no. 40.
- 17 Charles Laval, letter to Paul Gauguin, 9 December 1887, in Victor Merlhès (ed.), *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin: documents, témoignages: tome premier, 1873-1888*, Paris 1984, pp. 51-54: 'You expanded my horizon and you created space around me. I was in a little black hole when you found me' ('Tu as reculé mon horizon tu as dait autour de moi de l'espace; j'étais dans un petit trou noir quant tu m'as trouvé').
- 18 Charles Laval, letter to Emile Bernard, 1890, Fonds J. Loize, Musée Gauguin, Tahiti, quoted in Merlhès 1984, p. 453: 'Ton existence est nette, la mienne ne l'est guère; j'ai mené une vie détestable et je suis profondément troublé en constatant que je n'ai jamais agi dans la voie du bien.'
- 19 See Clément Siberchicot, *Charles Laval (1861-1894): les ateliers parisiens, la Martinique, l'école de Pont-Aven* (MA thesis, Université Paris Nanterre 2006-7), Annexes du mémoire, p. 27: *Essai de catalogue raisonné*.
- 20 Emile Bernard, *Souvenirs inédits sur l'artiste peintre Paul Gauguin et ses compagnons*, 1939, in Rivière 1994, vol. 1, p. 303: 'Charles Laval died in 1894. His oeuvre, auctioned at the Hôtel des Ventes by his brother Nino, has disappeared.' ('Charles Laval est mort en 1894. Son œuvre, vendue à l'Hôtel des Ventes, par son frère Nino, a disparu.')
- 21 For example, Emile Bernard, 'Notes sur l'école dite de "Pont-Aven"', *Mercure de France* (December 1903), in Rivière 1994, vol. 1, p. 67: 'Charles Laval, who died of tuberculosis in Paris, produced very little and always closely followed Gauguin. Of all the oeuvres, his is the most impersonal' ('Charles Laval qui mourut de phtisie, à Paris (il a peu produit et a toujours suivi étroitement Gauguin. Son œuvre, de toutes, est la plus impersonnelle)'). Another reason for the harshness of Bernard's accounts was that Laval and Bernard's sister Madeleine had become engaged, against Bernard's advice. Madeleine Bernard died a year and a half after Laval. The cause of death was consumption, which she quite possibly contracted from Laval. The resentment Bernard must have felt surely influenced how he wrote about Laval. See Crussard 2001, vol. 2, pp. 307 and 450.
- 22 Bernard 1939, in Rivière 1994, vol. 1, p. 303: 'I offered the portrait of Charles Laval he painted himself to the Musée du Luxembourg' ('J'ai offert au Musée du Luxembourg le portrait de Charles Laval par lui-même'). The painting was transferred to the Musée d'Orsay in 1977
- 23 Siberchicot 2006-7, pp. 25-26.
- 24 See Crussard 2001, vol. 2, p. 307.
- 25 The painting is *Still Life with Laval's Profile*, 1886, Indianapolis Museum of Art. The drawings are *Portrait of Laval*, 1887, Tate, London; *Profile of Laval with Palm Tree and Other Sketches*, 1887, Art Institute of Chicago; *Profile of Laval and Studies of Heads*, 1887, Tilman and Gabriële Osterwold collection. All the works are reproduced in Van Dijk and Van der Hoeven 2018, pp. 39, 112, 114, and 123.

- 26 Emile Bernard, *L'aventure de ma vie*, unpublished manuscript, c. 1939, Bibliothèque de l'INHA, Paris, BCMN Ms 374, p. 78: 'Elève de Bonnat, Laval avait peint quelques beaux portraits en manière noire où transparaisait la finesse de sa nature.'
- 27 Siberchicot 2007, p. 24. Doubts exist because the work is not signed, and it has been attributed to a 'Javal' in a text by Gustave Coquiot. However, this is considered a typographic error; Coquiot is thought to have meant 'Laval'.
- 28 Paul Gauguin, letter to Mette Gauguin, around 12 May 1887, in Merlhès 1984, no. 126: 'Il faut qu'ils soient faits d'une façon spéciale et *très mauvais*, chose que je ne puis faire.'
- 29 With thanks to René Boitelle, paintings conservator Van Gogh Museum, 21 October 2023.
- 30 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 6 September 1889 ↗ [800]: 'Have you framed the Laval portrait, you haven't told me what you thought of it I think, I found it marvellous, that gaze through the pince-nez, such an honest gaze' ('As tu encadré le portrait de Laval, tu ne m'as pas dit ce qu'il t'en semblait je crois, je trouvais cela epatant le regard à travers le lorgnon, regard si franc').
- 31 Bernard 1939, in Rivière 1994, pp. 296-297: 'He painted canvasses so similar to those of Gauguin at the time that Gauguin implored him not to imitate him like that because, he said, he could have signed them himself' ('Il faisait des toiles tellement semblables à celles du Gauguin d'alors, que ce dernier le suppliait de ne pas l'imiter ainsi, "car, disait-u, il aurait pu les signer"').
- 32 The documentation of the Musée d'Orsay includes a black-and-white reproduction of a painting by Bernard of the same building, titled *The Garden of the Pension Gloanec at Pont-Aven*. The garden of the pension is quite flat, which is why Laval's self-portrait cannot be situated in the Lézaven country house as Sylvie Crussard suggests in Crussard 2001, vol. 2, p. 402: the garden of that country house, which accommodated painters' studios, is actually on a hill overlooking Pont-Aven. This is not the background of Laval's self-portrait.
- 33 Gauguin arrived in Arles on 23 October 1888. Van Gogh received Laval's self-portrait almost three weeks later, which must mean that Laval had only begun work on it after Gauguin's departure.
- 34 Paul Gauguin, letter to Emile Bernard, early November 1888, in Merlhès 1984, no. 176: 'Shake hands with both of them and be friends with Laval; he has a beautiful and noble nature despite his fundamental faults - when the brute surfaces, you know we all have some foibles, and you have terrible ones too' ('Poignée de main à tous deux et soyez ami avec Laval, c'est une belle et noble nature malgré ses défauts transcendants - quand le cosaque repaît, vous savez que nous en avons tous, vous en avez de terribles aussi').
- 35 In a letter to Bernard dated around 26 November 1889 ↗ [822], Van Gogh recalled how Gauguin described the work *Red Poplars* to him a year earlier. From this, it can be deduced that the work was completed before Gauguin left Pont-Aven for Arles, and thus before Bernard and Laval painted *House among Trees* and *Self-Portrait*.