LOT 118
PROPERTY FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION
VINCENT VAN GOGH
1853 - 1890
PAYSAN BRÛLANT DE MAUVAISES HERBES
Oil on canvas laid down on panel
12 by 15 1/2 in.
30.5 by 39.7 cm
Painted in Drenthe in October 1883.

ESTIMATE 600,000-800,000 USD
Lot Sold: 3,140,000 USD

The authenticity of this work has been confirmed by the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

PROVENANCE
Anna C. van Gogh-Carbentus, Nuenen & Breda, The Netherlands (the mother of the artist)
Janus Schrauwen, Breda, The Netherlands (placed in storage by the above in 1889)
Jan. C. Couvreur, Breda, The Netherlands (acquired from the above on August 14, 1902)
Kees Mouwen, Jr. & Willem van Bakel, Breda, The Netherlands (acquired from the above circa 1902-03)
C. Mouwen, Breda, The Netherlands (and sold: Frederik Muller, Amsterdam, May 3, 1904, lot 12)
Kunsthandel Buffa, Amsterdam (acquired at the above sale)
Herman Gorter, Bussum, The Netherlands (acquired in 1905)
Kunstzaal d’Audretsch, The Hague (acquired in 1927)
D.G. van Beuningen, Vierhouten, The Netherlands (acquired in 1928)
With Jacques Goudstikker, Amsterdam
Looted by the Nazi authorities, July 1940
Sale: Frederik Muller, Amsterdam, October 8 & 9, 1940, lot 13
H.E. d’Audretsch, Amerongen, The Netherlands
Tjeerd Bendien, Almelo, Netherlands (acquired in 1941)
Bouke Bendien, Mayaguez, Puerto Rico (by descent from the above and sold: Christie’s, New York, May 12, 1987, lot 22)
Private Collection, New York (and sold: Christie’s, New York, November 15, 1989, lot 360)
Private Collection (acquired at the above sale)
Restituted to the heir of Jacques Goudstikker in 2019

EXHIBITED
Amsterdam, Municipal Museum, Tentoonstelling van schilderijen en tekeningen door Vincent van Gogh, 1905, no. 4
Amsterdam, E.J. van Wisselingh & Co., Vincent van Gogh, Quelques oeuvres de l’époque 1881-1886, 1956, no. 10
Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, 1970-83 (on loan)
Ponce, Puerto Rico, Museo de Arte de Ponce, 1983-87 (on loan)

LITERATURE
Jacob-Baart de la Faille, L’Oeuvre de Vincent van Gogh, vol. IV, Brussels, 1928, no. F20
Dr. Walther Vanbeselaere, De Hollandsche periode (1880-1885) in het werk van Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam, 1937, mentioned pp. 238, 248 & 414
Marc Edo Tralbaut, Vincent van Gogh in Drenthe, Assen, 1959, no. 4, mentioned p. 224
Jacob Baart de la Faille, The Works of Vincent van Gogh, His Paintings and Drawings, Amsterdam, 1970, no. F.20, illustrated p. 49

CATALOGUE NOTE
In the fall of 1883, van Gogh left The Hague to spend three months in the rural Dutch province of Drenthe. It was a brief chapter in his early career as an artist, but the simplicity and apparent authenticity of peasant life made a deep impression. “You have seen Drenthe—from the train, in haste, long ago” he wrote to his brother, Theo, “but remotest Drenthe, if you come here, will make a very different impression on you, and even you will feel just as if you were living in the age of Van Goyen, Ruysdael, Michel; in short, in what one scarcely finds now even in present-day Barbizon. It seems to me that this is something important, because nature like this can sometimes awaken in a mind things that would otherwise never have woken” (Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten & Nienke Bakkers, eds., op. cit., letter 401, (accessed on September 21, 2019)). Living amid the bargemen, ploughmen and field-workers, van Gogh felt as though he were suddenly “transported to the era 40 years ago, when things were as they were when Corot etc. were young” (ibid., letter 401).
His correspondence over this period reflects a growing sense of relief as he rediscovered his vocation: “I’ve got something back of what I had years ago. That I’m again taking pleasure in windmills, for example, that particularly here in Drenthe I feel much as I did then, at the time when I first began to see the beauty in art” (ibid., letter 394). The move to the countryside meant parting with his mistress, Sian Hoornik, a washerwoman with young children with whom he had lived in The Hague. The romance had strained a number of van Gogh’s personal and professional relationships, and although he was still dogged by anxieties for her well-being and his own financial obligations, life away from the city had a transformative effect on his work. Once again he took pleasure in “finding the outdoor things beautiful, being calm enough to draw them, to paint them... Urban living is always the same,” he wrote; for real change, and to become “better, newer, fresher...look for it on the heath” (ibid., letter 394).

A related sketch for the present lot features in a letter written to Theo in mid-October, in which he describes the weed-burner and writes, “the vastness of the plain and the gathering dusk, and the small fire with the wisp of smoke is the only point of light” (ibid., letter 398; see fig. 1). The effects of evening light fascinated him and he would often walk out at dusk to follow the ploughmen and watch the twilight transform the same figures and fields which had appeared “tedious” and “inhospitable” at midday, into sublime subjects: “The peasants and the women aren’t always interesting, but if one is patient one will nonetheless really see the whole Millet-like quality” (ibid., letter 387; see figs. 2 & 3). By the time he had enrolled at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in 1880 van Gogh’s walls were already tacked with dozens of prints by Jean-François Millet, whose portrayal of peasants influenced the direction he would take.

The somber tone of Paysan brûlant de mauvaises herbes is characteristic of van Gogh’s early work. The clear influence of the Dutch Old Masters shaped his palette and encouraged his choice of archaic subjects as a valid concern for modern art. Their work represented “a sense of the continuity of Dutch culture and a harking back to a truer, simpler world of shared values as opposed to the fragmented reality of modern, industrialized society. This was a utopian construct superimposed by van Gogh on the tradition as he perceived it. The tradition as he chose to understand it focused on several themes: the edifying portrait; the peasant wedded to the agrarian tradition of the land as a mainstay of the social order; representations of landscape showing mankind in harmony with nature; and a perceived naturalism that expressed the truth” (George S. Keyes, Van Gogh Face to Face, The Portraits (exhibition catalogue), Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, 2000, p. 26).

“Painting with black” as he called it, was a skill that van Gogh had mastered the previous year while experimenting with drawing materials to make a series of lithographs (Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten & Nienke Bakkers, eds., ibid., letter 402, (accessed on September 21, 2019)). Combinations of greasy, jet-black lithographic crayon, pencil and pen and ink made it possible to obtain various shades of black, an effect he worked to develop in oil paint in the peat bogs of Drenthe, where the black earth was “like soot” and the furrows a “lilac black” (ibid., letter 402; see fig. 3). An account of Max Liebermann’s subtle transitions from slate-grey to brown and yellow-grey tones piqued van Gogh’s interest at this period: “I’ve never seen anything by him, but now that I see nature here I understand perfectly how reasonable it is that he arrives at it” (ibid., letter 395). It is nonetheless remarkable how the relative lack of color in his surroundings did nothing to prevent van Gogh from seeing the hours from dawn to dusk as anything other than a “symphony,” or the muddy landscape as “an exhibition of one hundred masterpieces” (ibid., letter 402).

Van Gogh was reluctant to leave, such was the “calm passion for work” that the region inspired (ibid., letter 402). “Drenthe is so beautiful, it absorbs and fulfills me so utterly that, if I couldn’t stay here forever I would rather not have seen it at all. It’s inexpressibly beautiful” (ibid., letter 405). But financial necessity and an encroaching sense of loneliness prevailed, and on December 4, 1883 he set off for his parent’s house in Nuenen where he would develop the rural themes which he had first encountered in the northeast.
Vincent van Gogh, Sketch relating to the present work in a letter to Theo van Gogh, October 16, 1883

Fig. 2
Jean-François Millet, La Fin de la journée, effet du soir, 1865-67, oil on canvas, Private Collection

Fig. 3
Vincent van Gogh, Twee vrouwen in het veen (Women on the Peat Moor), 1883, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Fig. 4
Vincent van Gogh, Two Peasant Women Digging in Field with Snow, 1890, oil on canvas, Foundation E.G. Bührle, Zurich