

The genuine achievement of *Loving Vincent*, and its limitations

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Directed by Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman; written by Kobiela, Welchman and Jacek Dehnel

“Art is something which, though produced by human hands, is not wrought by hands alone, but wells up from a deeper source, from man’s soul.”—Vincent van Gogh

Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) is one of the most beloved artistic figures in history. He revolutionized painting and is admired for his art, his humility, his personality, his compassion. He lived for most of his adult life on very limited means, often among the poor. “The Potato Eaters” (1885), an unsentimental scene of peasants eating by lamplight, was his first significant work.

Van Gogh’s brilliant art work, with its bold, urgent brush strokes, the intense drama of his short life--during which he sold only one work out of the 850 he painted--and his death by suicide have combined to strike a sympathetic chord with millions of people over the years.

This helps explain the tremendous interest in the new animated film, *Loving Vincent*, co-directed by Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman, who also co-wrote the script with Jacek Dehnel. The Polish-UK production is a tribute to the great artist and an attempt to bring his life and work to a wide international audience.

Seven years in the making, it is the first fully oil-painted feature film, with 125 painting animators having produced the movie’s 65,000 frames. For over two years, the team of painters worked at studios in Gdansk and Wroclaw in Poland and in Athens to complete the project.

As *Loving Vincent*’s press material explains, the work “was first shot as a live action film with actors, and then hand-painted over frame-by-frame in oils. The final effect is an interaction of the performance of the actors playing Vincent’s famous portraits, and the performance of the painting animators.” (We will return to the details of this fascinating process below.)

The narrative begins one year after the painter’s tragic death at the age of 37.

Armand Roulin (Douglas Booth), a listless, troubled young man sporting a mustard-yellow jacket, is given a letter by his bearded postman father, Joseph Roulin (Chris O’Dowd), addressed to Theo van Gogh, Vincent’s brother. Armand’s journey to deliver the letter to Theo begins in Paris. His first encounter is with Vincent’s paint supplier Père Tanguy (John Sessions). Tanguy tells Armand that Theo died shortly after his much-loved brother’s demise--the brothers, he says, were “two hearts, one mind.”

Black-and-white flashbacks depict the tumultuous relationship of van Gogh (Robert Gulaczyk) with fellow painter Paul Gauguin (Piotr Pamula)--“They were at each other’s throats”--including the

notorious episode in which an enraged Vincent sliced off part of his left ear. We also learn, according to the filmmakers, that for his family, Vincent existed in the shadow of an older brother, a stillborn Vincent (“He struggled to be what his mother wanted him to be”).

Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris, where Vincent eventually committed suicide, is Armand’s next stop. There, he tracks down all who knew the painter during the last weeks of his life. He begins at the inn near where Vincent fatally shot himself. The innkeeper’s daughter Adeline Ravoux (Eleanor Tomlinson) offers kind recollections of Vincent, while the judgmental and religious Louise Chevalier (Helen McCrory), housekeeper to Dr. Paul Gachet (Jerome Flynn)--the physician who treated Vincent--is convinced that “he was evil.”

Gachet, who was jealous of Vincent’s talent, stole a few of the latter’s masterpieces after his death. (In 1990, the first of two versions of van Gogh’s portrait of Gachet sold for \$82.5 million, a record price for a work of art at the time.)

Gachet’s daughter, Marguerite (Saoirse Ronan), is cautious in her testimony about the deceased artist, saying that her father and Vincent were like “chalk and cheese.” Another doctor, Mazery, even suggests that Vincent was murdered (“It [the shot] was too low an angle. He would have had to have shot himself with his outstretched toe”).

In the end, the central concern of this “relatively conventional detective story” (*Variety*) boils down to whether van Gogh was murdered or committed suicide.

Loving Vincent is hardly the first film on the subject of the famed painter. In addition to Vincente Minnelli’s *Lust for Life* (1956), Robert Altman’s *Vincent & Theo* (1990), Maurice Pialat’s *Van Gogh* (1991) and Andrew Hutton’s *Van Gogh: Painted with Words* (2010), there are dozens of television and film documentaries about van Gogh’s life in numerous languages. But the Kobiela-Welchman film is certainly unique in its artistic/film approach.

There is something remarkable and encouraging about the internationally coordinated, painstaking process by which the film was made, which involved the efforts of hundreds of artists, technicians and others.

As noted above, this is the first fully oil-painted animated film. The characters are played by actors, who “worked either on sets specially constructed to look like Van Gogh paintings,” the film’s production notes explain, “or against green-screens, with the van Gogh paintings being composited in, along with Computer Generated animation, after the shoot. The live-action shoot took place at Three Mills Studios in London and CETA studio in Wroclaw.”

Prior to and during the live action filming “the Painting Design team spent one year re-imagining Vincent’s painting into the medium of film.” This effort included working out how to show van Gogh’s

works, which come in various sizes, within the frame created by the cinema screen. “They also had to work out how to deal with ‘invasions’, where a character painted in one style, comes into another Vincent painting with a different style. They also have to, for the purpose of the story, sometimes change daytime paintings into night-time paintings, or paintings which were done in Autumn or Winter, had to be re-imagined for summer when the journey of the film takes place,” according to the notes.

A group of Character Design Painters specialized in reinterpreting the actors as their van Gogh portrait originals, “so that they would retain their own features and at the same time recognizably take on the look and feeling of their character in painting form. There were 377 paintings painted during the Design Painting process.”

The painting animators, charged with producing the actual frames of the film, worked in Painting Animation Work Studios (PAWS). “PAWS allow the painter to focus as much attention as possible on painting and animating without being concerned about lighting and technology, and allow for consistency across the photographs being taken in 97 PAWS in 3 studios in 2 countries.”

Co-director Dorota Kobiela explains, “Our team of painters were painstakingly painting 65,000 frames of oil painting, spending up to 10 days painting a second of film, moving each brush-stroke frame by frame. That takes a lot of commitment, a lot of respect for his work.” The production notes point out that “the opening shot of the film, descending through Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, contains over 600 paintings and took three painters a combined total of 14 months to paint.”

Kobiela’s collaborator, Hugh Welchman adds, “Those painters who were animating Vincent style, which is about 70 percent of the film, could only use the reference material as a guide. They had to then recreate it in Vincent style based on Vincent’s paintings and also on the Design Paintings that we made with 20 painters over the course of a year, to create the design and the world of *Loving Vincent* .

“Once they [the animators] have painted their first frame, then they have to move it 12 times a second [i.e., there are 12 frames a second], and each time that means moving every brush stroke, so they are animating the brush-strokes.”

All those involved deserve credit for their sincere efforts. However, the extraordinary technical achievements over which they have presided and their obviously heartfelt admiration for van Gogh do not insure that the filmmakers profoundly grasp the artist’s life and times. There is no reason to be so overwhelmed by the remarkable imagery and *Loving Vincent* ’s admirable qualities to the point that one shut one’s eyes to the problems.

In the course of the movie, Gachet’s daughter Marguerite asks Armand at one point: “You want to know so much about his death--but what do you know about his life?” This, unfortunately, is a question that can be posed to *Loving Vincent* as a project.

Vincent van Gogh was relentlessly driven to look at life in the most honest and untiring fashion. He found it physically and psychologically impossible to live and work in any other manner.

His paintings seem to throb with emotion. But van Gogh was not merely an instinctive painter. He was deeply versed in the history of art. Art historian Meyer Schapiro once commented that van Gogh’s “letters contain remarkable illuminations on the problems of painting; one could construct a whole aesthetic from scattered statements in the letters.”

The painter took great interest in literature as well. He makes references in his letters to writers such as Balzac, Dickens, Thackeray,

George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, Zola, Daudet, the Goncourt brothers, Maupassant, Tolstoy, Huysmans and Turgenev.

He had a strongly developed social conscience and paid considerable attention to the social and economic situation (including strikes) in France and elsewhere.

Van Gogh’s subjects included coal miners, peasants, weavers and manual laborers. He also painted women like Sien Hoornik, whom he met in 1882. As the Van Gogh Museum explains, “She became both his model and his lover. Vincent’s friends and family ... were shocked, as Sien was a former prostitute. What’s more, she was pregnant and already had a five-year-old daughter. Vincent felt sorry for Sien, though, and was determined to take care of her. They rented a studio in which she, the little girl and the new baby could all live as well.”

One of his works of the time, in chalk, watercolor, pen and ink, is entitled “The Poor and Money.” It shows a group of poor people who have shown up to watch a national lottery drawing. “Vincent wrote to his brother Theo that he saw this scene on a rainy day in The Hague,” notes the museum. “He was moved by the vain hope of these shabbily dressed ‘poor souls.’”

These are the people and the milieus to which van Gogh was drawn as an artist and a human being. In July 1882, he wrote to Theo: “Even though I’m often in a mess, inside me there’s still a calm, pure harmony and music. In the poorest little house, in the filthiest corner, I see paintings or drawings. And my mind turns in that direction as if with an irresistible urge. As time passes, other things are increasingly excluded, and the more they are the faster my eyes see the picturesque. Art demands persistent work, work in spite of everything, and unceasing observation.”

And in July 14, 1885, he wrote: “That’s to say, living in those cottages day in and day out, being out in the fields just like the peasants--enduring the heat of the sun in the summer, the snow and frost in the winter, not indoors but outside, and not for a walk, but day in and day out like the peasants themselves.”

Linda Nochlin, in an essay, “Van Gogh, Renouard and the Weavers’ Crisis in Lyons” (in *The Politics of Vision*), notes that van Gogh much admired the work of Paul Renouard, a popular French illustrator at the time, and asked specifically for a work called “Sans Travail” (“Without Work”), depicting weavers in Lyons whose looms were outdated and who faced starvation. The illustration in question was dedicated by Renouard to Cesar de Paepe, a Flemish printer and prominent socialist who founded the Belgian Workers Party in 1885, a participant in the First International of Marx, from 1867 to 1870, and a collaborator in Europe’s first socialist newspaper.

Van Gogh was committed to depicting reality, as beautiful or ugly and harsh as it might be. “The most touching things the great masters have painted,” Vincent once wrote to Theo, “still originate in life and reality itself.”

On this aspect of van Gogh’s life and on his social and aesthetic concerns, the film is weak. If *Loving Vincent* encourages people to investigate the painter’s life and work, that is all to the good. But they will have to go beyond what the filmmakers themselves see and understand about this artistic genius.



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