

MOVIES

Animating van Gogh's Life With 62,450 Oil Paintings

By JOANNA BERENDT JULY 8, 2016

GDANSK, Poland — A project that daringly set out to bring to life iconic paintings — many created in just one day — has proved to be a staggeringly laborious cinematic effort taking years to realize.

The creators of “Loving Vincent,” a biopic about van Gogh, say it is the first full-length animated film to be made entirely of oil paintings on canvas — an astounding 62,450 of them — all of which are derived either from the artist’s original works, like “The Starry Night” and “Cafe Terrace at Night,” or are heavily inspired by his distinctive, thick brush strokes.

The world got a peek at this work in progress when a **stunning trailer** was posted online in February, becoming an overnight sensation with 115 million views on Facebook. What viewers didn’t see was the many human hands behind the project.

Of the 95 painters involved, 65 arrive every day at an enormous, sweltering hangar at the Gdansk Science and Technology Park here in northern Poland, to reimagine, amid thick fumes of oil paint, van Gogh’s canvases.

Last month, the hangar, filled with rows and rows of cubicles where the artists worked, was mostly silent, except for the sound of fans. Still, the atmosphere was

charged.

“What is happening here may never happen again,” said Hugh Welchman, a British producer who along with his wife, Dorota Kobiela, a Polish painter and filmmaker, has been directing “Loving Vincent.”

The Polish painter Jerzy Lisak, 39, in the last two years alone has painted more than 400 frames, or cels, and he agreed that the huge amount of effort involved may make this the first and last time for such an undertaking.

“It’s clear this is a realization of a dream,” he said, working on a view of a room at the Auberge Ravoux, where van Gogh lived at the end of his life.

Ms. Kobiela, who has made several animated shorts in a country that boasts an array of accomplished animators, supplied the vision. After rereading the artist’s letters to his brother Theo, she decided to create an eight-minute painted animation based on van Gogh’s work.

Mr. Welchman, whose “Peter & the Wolf” won the Oscar for best animated short in 2008, fell in love not only with Ms. Kobiela but also with her project and persuaded her to make a full-length feature.

“I knew it would be difficult, bordering on crazy,” he said. “But Vincent deserves more than eight minutes.”

Ms. Kobiela, her face in her hands, still seemed overwhelmed by the project’s magnitude.

“Only this morning, I woke up to the new music that Mansell had sent for our film,” she said, referring to Clint Mansell, the British composer who scored Darren Aronofsky’s “Requiem for a Dream.” “One of my favorite composers writes music for my film! This is unreal.”

Among the actors playing characters from the paintings are the two-time Oscar nominee Saoirse Ronan, as the daughter of van Gogh’s friend Dr. Paul Gachet, as well as Aidan Turner as a boatman and Douglas Booth as another friend’s son, who’s looking into the artist’s death.

That's key to the film's plot. It delves into van Gogh's life and his death in 1890, which according to some recent studies — namely Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith's biography, "Van Gogh: The Life" — may have been murder, not suicide.

Ms. Kobiela and her team spent three years developing their painting technique, which they used to reimagine 125 of van Gogh's works. Live action was also involved. First, actors were filmed, either against a green screen or on sets built to look like the paintings. That footage then became a point of reference for artists, who painted over it with oil pigments, frame by frame.

A similar technique was used in Alexander Petrov's 1999 "The Old Man and the Sea," which won the Academy Award for best animated short.

Each of the 1,009 establishing shots in "Loving Vincent" requires a new oil painting. To make the animation look fluid, every second of the nearly 87-minute film needs to consist of 12 hand-painted frames. Creating one frame takes from an hour to two days, which means that a painter may spend nearly a month on a single second of the film.

At the end, there will be 62,450 frames, each of them complex oil paintings on canvas.

There are, however, tens of thousands of frames still to go and not much time if the film is to be released, as planned, here in October. (The producers want it to be considered for the next Academy Awards.)

"The biggest challenge now is to reconcile maintaining the high quality of painting with our very tight schedule," Ms. Kobiela said.

The production has been delayed several times. One of the biggest hurdles has been financing, as investors balked at such an experimental project. Ultimately the producers had to work with a relatively modest \$5.5 million budget. By comparison, the Pixar computer-animated hit "Finding Dory" cost a reported \$200 million.

Then production slowed when the pool of classically trained painters in Poland quickly dried up, and producers needed to look abroad for artists. After the trailer was posted, thousands of portfolios started to pour in from all over the world.

Candidates were invited for tests and then 18 days of training, during which they had to master both van Gogh's style and the animation techniques.

"People had no guarantees that if they came here from, say, Canada, they would stay," the producer Sean Bobbitt said. "They knew we wouldn't reimburse them for the tickets or hotels."

Tiffanie Mang, 24, an artist from Los Angeles with short-cropped hair and green paint smudged on her nose, said she had no idea she would pass the test when she got on a 15-hour flight to Gdansk.

"I never traveled alone and lived on my own before, but I had to take this wild chance," she said on the 10th day of her training. "This film is going to make history, that's for sure."

Despite rave reactions from viewers and film critics to the trailer, Ms. Kobiela said that she was still "terrified" about how the film, would be received: Nearly "87 minutes of relentless interplay of colors: Are people going to endure it?"

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