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Loving Vincent review: Tale of van Gogh a beautiful case of art for art's sake

By [Sandra Hall](#)

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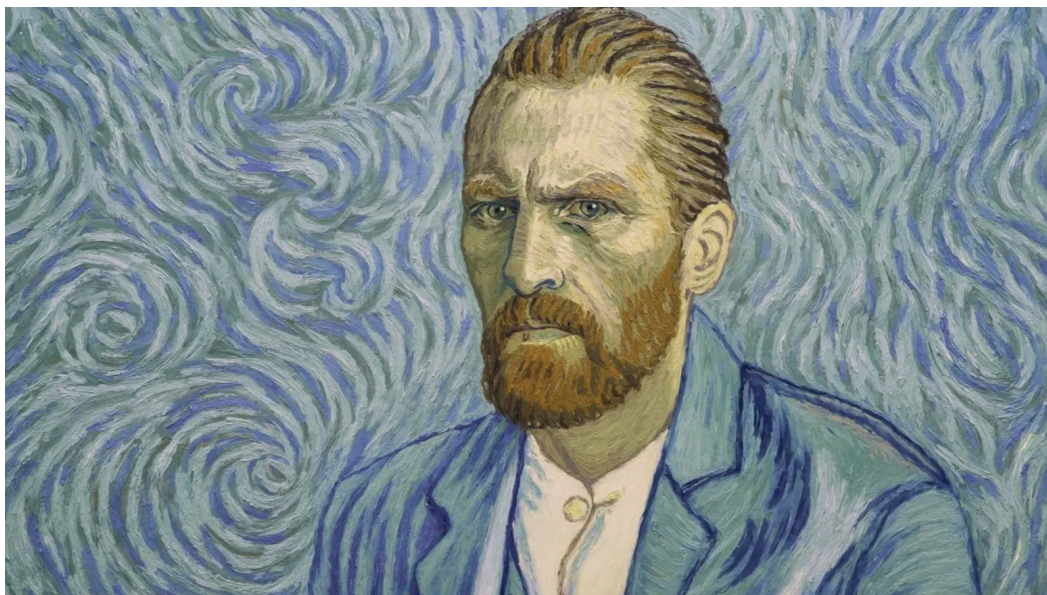
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★★★★

M, 94 minutes

Loving Vincent is a beautiful curiosity.



A portrait of Vincent van Gogh from the film *Loving Vincent*.

You can't take your mind off the machinery behind it to concentrate entirely on the story that it's telling. Nonetheless, it's enthralling - an artistic biography of Vincent van Gogh which knits the life and the work together with a firmness which illuminates both.

It's framed as an investigation into the painter's death. He has been dead for a year when the Arles postman Joseph Roulin – the subject of one of his greatest portraits – comes across a letter Vincent had written to his brother, Theo. It must be delivered, he tells his feckless son, Armand, and since he can't leave Arles to do it, Armand must do it for him.

Complaining bitterly, Armand sets off with a bottle of something strong to sustain him during the journey. And what was to be a brief trip to Paris becomes a quest, leading him eventually to the village of Auvers-sur-Oise, where he finds himself taking on the role of amateur detective.

The idea for the film was conceived years ago by Polish writer-director Dorota Kobiela, who worked it up into a Polish-British co-production with an international cast. She and her co-director, Hugh Welchman, first filmed a live-action version. Then they had their teams of painters and animators overlay it with a rendition done in van Gogh's impasto style.

A small army of oil painters from all over the world were recruited for the job and many of the paintings are copied wholly or in part, resulting in an eerie series of juxtapositions. The postman, for example, is instantly recognisable from his portrait but you're also faced with the slightly distracting presence of the actor-comedian Chris O'Dowd, who played the role in the live-action shoot.

In spite of his initial distaste for the task his father has given him, Armand (Douglas Booth) becomes obsessed by the personality of van Gogh and the circumstances surrounding his death. And as he becomes familiar with the village, getting thoroughly and regularly drunk with several of its residents, he's caught up in the feuds which have long divided two of its families.

He also begins to realise van Gogh was a man who mattered, rather than the crazy down-and-out he had thought him to be.

Inevitably, the animation keeps you at one remove from these intrigues and revelations. There is so much going on in every frame that it's hard to stop thinking long enough to become emotionally involved. But it hardly matters. This time it really is a case of art for art's sake.



Sandra Hall

Sandra Hall is a film critic for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.