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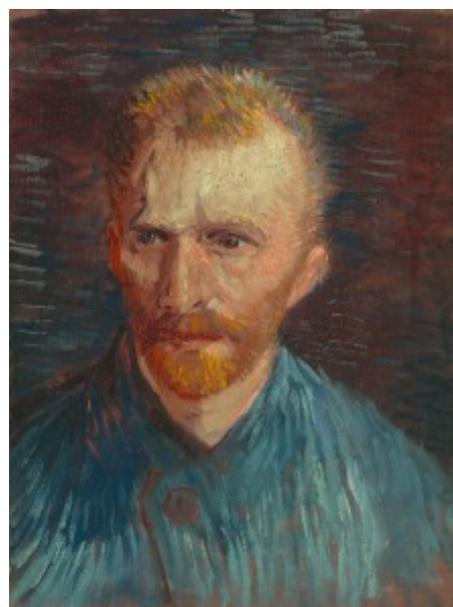
How van Gogh Became van Gogh

BY George Stolz POSTED 05/01/13

Drawing on an eight-year research project into the artist's methods and materials, an exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum reveals how he taught himself to paint

The Bedroom is one of van Gogh's best-known and most admired paintings. Started in the autumn of 1888, it depicts the artist's small, sparsely furnished bedroom in the Yellow House in Arles, where he hoped to establish an artists' colony. The painting's planar composition and slightly skewed perspective recall the ukiyo-e prints of which van Gogh and his brother Theo were enthusiasts—and indeed Vincent wrote to Theo that he intended to imbue *The Bedroom* with a Japanese-like flatness and simplicity. "The color has to do the job here," he wrote, describing the painting's complementary color scheme: red floor, "butter" yellow bedstead and chairs, green sheets and pillows, and "pale violet walls."

Today, even the quickest glance at *The Bedroom* reveals that the walls depicted are not violet at all but blue—a discrepancy all the more striking given van Gogh's precise theory-based use of color (and equally precise use of language). The mystery, however, has now been solved through the findings of a recently completed research project called Van Gogh's Studio Practice. (<http://www.vangoghsstudiopractice.com/>)



Van Gogh's 1887 self-portrait. He was not as spontaneous or impulsive a painter as people had thought.

The results of this multidisciplinary examination into van Gogh's oeuvre form the basis of the exhibition "Van Gogh at Work" at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, on view from May 1 through January 12, 2014.

The researchers discovered that the explanation for *The Bedroom*'s discoloration lies in van Gogh's use during that period of a synthetic pigment, red eosin, which had only recently been invented by chemists working for the French textile industry. The pigment turned out to be unstable: when it was mixed with blue to create purple, it eventually faded, leaving behind the blue pigment alone, as demonstrated by the appearance of *The Bedroom* today.

Van Gogh's Studio Practice began in 2005 as a joint venture that brought together the Van Gogh Museum, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, and Shell, the Dutch petroleum giant. The research project initially focused on technical analysis of work from van Gogh's pivotal Paris period of 1886–88, which is something of a black hole in van Gogh studies due to a lack of documentation. The museum provided the paintings, staff, and documentation; the Cultural Heritage Agency performed the basic paint conservation analysis, such as x-ray and infrared study; and Shell technicians carried out



high-tech analysis, such as state-of-the-art electron microscopy, to analyze the materials in unprecedented detail.

According to Rob Bouwman, a retired physicist and Shell executive who served as a project coordinator of “Van Gogh at Work,” the idea behind the joint venture was that the petroleum company, which was already a sponsor of the museum, would go beyond sponsorship and become a partner in the research. Thus, while Shell provided approximately a million euros in funding, according to Bouwman, it also supplied innumerable hours of work time by its own research staff during the eight years of the project.

“I said to myself, we have a beautiful and well-equipped laboratory right here in Amsterdam, one of the largest research laboratories in the world,” Bouwman told ARTnews. “Why not supply the museum with know-how instead of money? Know-how and commitment.”

Once underway, however, the success of the partnership quickly led the project to broaden its scope and address a different question: How did van Gogh, who was essentially self-taught as an artist, arrive at his particular way of painting? How did his choice of materials and tools affect his results? In short: how did van Gogh become van Gogh?

Eventually the project grew to include art historians, conservators, and technicians—30 in all—who branched into working groups that examined van Gogh’s complete career, from his first forays as a self-taught artist in Holland to his final, explosively prolific periods in France, while also studying work by such contemporaries as Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard.

In eight years, the project examined hundreds of paintings, drawings, and watercolors, according to Ella Hendriks, senior conservator at the Van Gogh Museum and coauthor of the catalogue *Vincent Van Gogh Paintings*. The core group—172 paintings and 500 drawings—came from the Van Gogh Museum. Another 95 paintings came from the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo. Other works by van Gogh and his contemporaries belonging to museums in several countries were also tested, some in situ and others through technical data supplied by conservators. The exhibition “Van Gogh at Work” rests on the massive amount of data compiled by the researchers.

“This is the backstory exhibition that we’ve all been waiting for, since its narrative will help us visualize how the end result of his efforts were achieved with the materials and techniques he chose to use,” says Timothy J. Standring, Gates Foundation Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Denver Museum of Art, and organizer of the recent “Becoming Van Gogh” exhibition. “Look at it this way: it’s like reading drafts of an author’s manuscript or correspondence to give us inklings about the intentionality of an author’s text.”

According to the project’s director, Marije Vellekoop, head of collections, research and presentation at the Van Gogh Museum, the research didn’t make any single major discovery that radically revises our understanding of van Gogh. But the exhaustive study did reveal the extent to which van Gogh assiduously learned his craft through experimentation, reading, and study. The cumulative portrait that emerges, Vellekoop said, is that of an artist who doggedly honed his skills through a self-directed program of trial and error, and whose working methods were far more methodical than previously understood.

“What we found is not a different artist, but our overall picture has changed somewhat,” Vellekoop told ARTnews.

“We now see that van Gogh was not as impulsive as people thought. His work looks spontaneous, but he was not actually so spontaneous an artist.”

“We found many small surprises, but not a completely different picture,” says Nienke Bakker, curator of “Van Gogh at Work” and a participant in the research project. “What is interesting is how he does his



own thing, how he looks at others, takes from them what he can use but always keeps to his own path. He's not as isolated as the popular imagination has made him seem."

"There was a general myth that he worked fast, that he improvised without forethought," adds Hendriks. "But that is not the case. For instance, he used a perspective frame to trace contours onto the canvas. With that framework he could work quickly. It might look spontaneous, but actually it is planned in detail. This is not new knowledge, but we did not know to what extent it was true. It's far beyond our expectations."

Beyond providing a fuller and more definitive picture of van Gogh's meticulousness, the project yielded some discoveries. For instance, as a result of technical analysis, two paintings that had been initially attributed to van Gogh and subsequently rejected—Still Life with Meadow Flowers and Roses at the Kröller-Müller Museum and The Blute-fin Mill at the Museum de Fundatie in Heino and Zwolle, both in the Netherlands—were reattributed to the artist.

Three works, all in the Van Gogh Museum collection—The Hill of Montmartre with Stone Quarry; Still Life with Wine, Bread, and Cheese; and Still Life with Bread—were rejected. In each case, the deattributions were based on multiple considerations, including style, materials, technique, and provenance.

Determining authenticity wasn't the aim or the objective of the research project, although its findings will be very useful in future studies of that kind. "In general," says Hendriks, "it can be said that the knowledge of van Gogh's materials and techniques that has been gained through the project forms an essential reference point for authenticity research. However, it is not a focus of the project but a separate line of activity."

There were other surprises. Close inspection of The Sower in the Bührlé Collection in Zurich revealed that tiny translucent lumps—apparently dried paint chips—were mixed into the yellow paint of the sun, causing it to sparkle. And the minute traces of newsprint ink embedded in the Van Gogh Museum's version of The Bedroom confirmed Vincent's account to Theo of trying to salvage the work after it had been damaged in a flood by pressing newsprint into it, thus confirming the Van Gogh Museum's version as the first of three the artist painted.

On the other hand, analysis of some paintings undermined van Gogh's written accounts of their making. "Van Gogh was not always telling the truth in the letters," Vellekoop says. "For instance, there is a painting he describes to Theo as having been painted in a single session, at one go. It's a nice story, but when we examined it, it is clear that it was painted in several sessions. So we said, 'Hey Vincent, that's not quite true!' But then there is another time when he writes about painting something outside, in a field, and when we looked closely at the painting we found bits of sand and grass, so we were able to confirm his story."

The project's findings are scheduled to be published in a scholarly compendium this month, and in June an international symposium of van Gogh specialists and scientists will be held at the recently reopened Van Gogh Museum.

"Van Gogh at Work" will consist of more than 200 paintings by van Gogh and certain of his contemporaries, such as Gauguin, Bernard, and Anton Mauve (van Gogh's cousin and early teacher) as well as letters, sketchbooks, and works on paper. Two of van Gogh's three virtually identical versions of Sunflowers (from the Van Gogh Museum and the National Gallery in London) will hang side by side, as will two of the three versions of The Bedroom (one from the Van Gogh Museum, the other from the Art Institute of Chicago).

The show will also display such relics as the artist's paint tubes, perspective frames like those he used, and his only surviving palette. Viewers will be able to look through microscopes similar to those used by the researchers to examine paint samples just as they did. An iPad application will allow anyone to call



up x-ray images of underlying paintings and drawings as well as a digital re-creation of The Bedroom in its “original” colors.

“We want to tell the story of how van Gogh became an artist, how he chose his materials, which techniques he used,” Bakker said. “You follow him on his path, improving himself, choosing his materials. He wasn’t doing it only out of creative genius, in a frenzy, or because of mental problems. He was very determined, very methodical. He’s a great artist. He’s not a fiend.”