

# Observing or Using Van Gogh's Bedroom: New Approach to Attracting the Art Audience

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine a successful example of using arts in creating promotional campaign that expands the concept of museum experience. It is a campaign conducted by the Art Institute of Chicago, in order to introduce the wide public to the coming exhibition which, for the first time in North America, exhibited all three versions of van Gogh's painting *The Bedroom*. The institute, advised by the leading marketing agency, created and advertised for rent a room identical to the one van Gogh painted. The results of this paper confirm that it is to use an unconventional promotional approach in order to attract the attention of the general public to an art event. The basic method in this work is the case study method, and also it is used content analysis as empirical method of data collection.

**Key Words:** Van Gogh painting *The Bedroom*, the Art Institute of Chicago, art audience, promotion,

## INTRODUCTION

We are exposed to a large number of promotional messages every day, and it is hard for an average person to notice and remember a specific one, therefore the advertising professionals make every effort to attract attention of its target audience in alternative ways. Events of high art, which generally do not have a large audience, are particularly at risk, and as a rule they are promoted by information about time, place and participants in the event coupled with a brief description.

In general, arts marketing professionals split people into two large groups - those who are interested in an arts experience, named available audience, no matter whether they inform themselves about the art events or need some incentive by the marketing experts, and a group not interested in the arts and not possible to influence by promotional techniques named non-available audience (Diglle, 1994). All research suggest that the key difference between these two groups is lack of education, and regarding high art, especially the lack of arts education (Colbert, 2007) and even though all people can enjoy different products of the culture industry, when it comes to elite culture, the gap seems insurmountable.

Since the art audience is not large, cultural institutions are increasingly trying to attract the general public, and in order to succeed, they have to adapt and promote the art experience in a way accessible to the majority. As a rule, creative experts from large advertising houses are consulted for such operations, and in combination with the imaginative artistic potential existing within the culture institution, they make specific promotional events which most people who experience them want to share with friends, initiating the wave of viral marketing (Godin, 2012, Levinson, 2007).

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In the Art Institute of Chicago, it was decided to create an exhibition called “Van Gogh’s Bedrooms” for the first time on the North American continent, exhibit all three versions of van Gogh’s famous painting The Bedroom. Many van Gogh lovers know about a large number of versions of “Sunflowers” and many self-portraits (about forty), however, not many know that there are three versions of this painting.

In order to draw attention of the general public, they consulted one of the most well-known global advertising agencies with headquarters in Chicago Leo Burnett, and the union of creators from advertising and the Art Institute brought about an extraordinary solution.

### 1. ALL VAN GOGH’S BEDROOMS

The work of Vincent Willem van Gogh, one of the most important painters in history of art, became known and recognized only after his death. Only his self-mutilation and consequent suicide had drawn the attention to his work near the end of his life.

His favorite themes were landscapes (mostly wheat fields, sunflowers, flowering orchards and cypresses), self-portraits, and still life. Among the most famous paintings, besides The potato eaters (1885), all were painted during the last three years of his life: The Red Vineyard (1888), Sunflowers (1888 all versions of sunflowers in vases painted in Arles), and The Bedroom (1888 first version, and 1889 the other two), The Starry Night (1889) Irises (1889), “an Gogh self-portrait (1889), Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear (1889), Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe (1889), Wheatfield with Cypresses (1889), and Almond Blossom (1890), Portrait of Dr. Gachet and Wheatfield with Crows (1890). He had completed the painting Wheatfield with Crows several weeks before he committed suicide, and in the letter to his brother he had written:

“They’re immense stretches of wheatfields under turbulent skies, and I made a point of trying to express sadness, extreme loneliness. You’ll see this soon, I hope – for I hope to bring them to you in Paris as soon as possible, since I’d almost believe that these canvases will tell you what I can’t say in words, what I consider healthy and fortifying about the countryside.” (Van Gogh’s Letter no. 898)

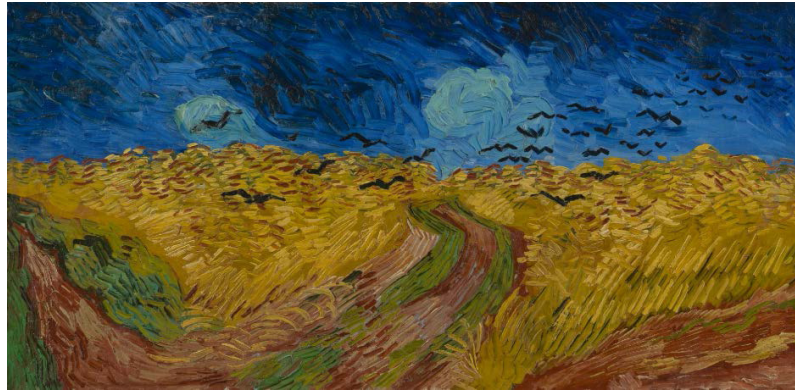


Image 1. Wheatfield with Crows

Portrait of Dr. Gachet is made in the last few months of van Gogh’s life. This painting is considered to be the most expensive of all his works sold. It was sold for more than 805 million dollars to Japanese businessman at the auction in 1990, and according to the writing in British newspaper “The Telegraph”, the Christie’s auction house bought the painting back for the eighth of initial price and it is today a part of a private collection (Crilly, 2015 May 12).

Ironically, in his lifetime van Gogh managed to sell only one of his paintings, The Red Vineyard, now in the u Pushkin Museum in Moscow, to Belgian painter Anna Rosalie Boch.



Image 2. Portrait of Dr. Gachet on the left, The Red Vineyard on the right

Considering that he had begun to paint late at life, and that he had lived for only 37 years, Vincent was an extremely fruitful author. During a period of over a decade, he created more than 2,000 works. From his letter to his brother Theo, who was an art dealer, we learn that he painted at an extraordinary rate, painting five oil canvases in a week (Van Gogh's Letter no. 205), as well as that the first version of the painting *The Bedroom* was painted on October 16 and 17, 1888, the second one on September 5, 1889, and the third on September 28, 1889.

Experts explain his special connection to this painting with a fact that during his 37 years of life he had moved 37 times, and that only near the end of his life, when he settled in the room on the second floor of the "Yellow House" in Arles, in the south of France, he ceased to be a tenant. However, from the letters to his brother, it is also obvious that he was very fond of the simplicity of the composition of the painting and put the color into the foreground:

"This time it's simply my bedroom, but the color has to do the job here... In short, looking at the painting should rest the mind, or rather, the imagination. The walls are of a pale violet. The floor — is of red tiles. The bedstead and the chairs are fresh butter yellow. The sheet and the pillows very bright lemon green. The blanket scarlet red. The window green. The dressing table orange, the basin blue. The doors lilac. And that's all... Portraits on the wall, and a mirror and a hand-towel and some clothes. The frame — as there's no white in the painting — will be white... The shadows and cast shadows are removed; it's colored in flat, plain tints like Japanese prints." (Van Gogh's Letter no. 705)



Image 3. All three versions of the picture *The Bedroom*

On all the versions of the painting, the room has unequal angles, which was interpreted as a reflection of his mental state, but it was subsequently determined that the room actually looked like that (Pickvance, 1984, p. 91).

In a letter to his brother on October 21, 1889 he wrote: "You'll probably find the interior the ugliest, an empty bedroom with a wooden bed and two chairs – and yet I've painted it twice on a large scale" (Van Gogh's Letter no. 812), and on January 22, 1889, after his recovery, van Gogh estimated that this was his best painting: "When I saw my canvases again after my illness, what seemed to me the best was The Bedroom" (Van Gogh's Letter no. 741). If we remember the words of Gombrich, "what a picture means to the viewer is strongly dependent on his past experience and knowledge. In this respect the visual image is not a mere representation of "reality" but a symbolic sistem" (Gombrich, 1972, p. 82).

Unfortunately, the first picture (72.4 cm x 91.3 cm) had suffered some moisture damage and he had sent it to his brother in Paris for repair. A year later he had painted another one, slightly larger (73.6cm x 92.3 cm), and almost immediately after, the third one, somewhat smaller (56.5cm x 74 cm), as a gift to his mother and sister. From the correspondence with his brother it is clear that the smallest was painted the last (Letter 806), but for the longest time it was not clear which one had been painted the first. Only with the help of modern technology and information about damage gained from the letter, experts have managed to establish that the first one is today in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the second in the Art Institute of Chicago, and the third, the smallest, in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.



Image 4. X-ray image of the first version of the van Gogh's painting

The painting established to have been created as the first was restored from January to August 2010, as its colors had faded. The restoration process could have been observed on the blog of the project leader professor Dr. Ella Hendriks at the Museum website (Hendriks, 2010).

The other two paintings have not been restored, but in Chicago, with the help of digital technology, a version of the painting was created to present how it supposedly had looked when van Gogh finished it and before the colors faded. The experts used his descriptions of the colors from the letters to his brother as instructions for corrections, and used pigments available to van Gogh at the time, so they believe to have been able to reconstruct how the painting really looked like at the time it was completed. Therefore the room walls in the painting are not light blue, but violet, which creates stronger contrast with the yellow used for the bed, chairs, and paintings, giving a soothing note to the painting – judging by his letters, that is exactly the effect van Gogh wanted to create. This version of the painting was also an integral part of this exhibition.

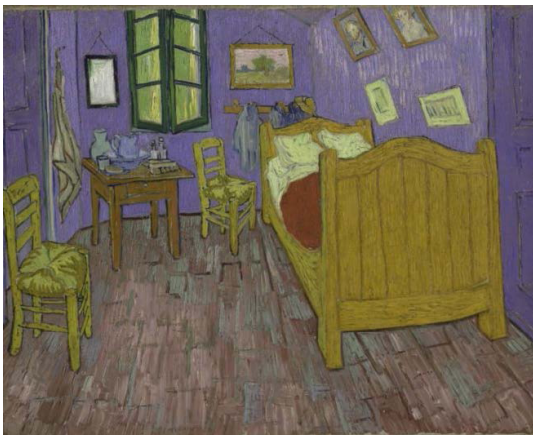


Image 5: Version of the painting by the Chicago experts

## 2. CREATING OF "FOR RENT" REPLICA OF THE VAN GOGH'S PAINTING

Last year, from February 14 to May 10, an exhibition "Van Gogh's Bedrooms" was held at the Art Institute of Chicago, when for the first time in America all three versions of the van Gogh's painting *The Bedroom* were exhibited, along with over thirty of his sketches, drawings, and illustrated letters.

The promotion took place in standard ways: the website contained a description of Van Gogh's life, showed his best works, a quiz on van Gogh in pop culture with the aim of attracting the young audience, an option to ask questions and get answers van Gogh presumably would give. Also, there are analyses of all the paintings, and three videos at the website of the Institute, introducing the exhibition to the audience. In the first, the exhibition curator Gloria Groom explains the significance of this painting and all of its versions from the art history aspect. The second one presents the analyses of the paintings by scientists from all three museums with state-of-the-art technology. The differences are not large and mostly related to the colors, the pigments he used, but thanks to the technological advances and the fact that it is known that the first version of the painting had significant moisture damage, it was possible to determine the timeline in which van Gogh painted them (Hendriks, E. i sur. 2011, January). In the third video, Gloria Groom talks with Machteld van Lear, a great-granddaughter of Theo Van Gogh, Vincent's brother, and explains how Vincent's paintings had been preserved.

However, in order to draw attention of the general public, in consultation with experts from one of the leading global advertising agencies, Leo Burnett, the Art Institute of Chicago had decided to make two replicas of the van Gogh's painting *The Bedroom* – one in a modern apartment located near the Institute and the other one in the Institute itself, comprising the integral part of this exhibition. The Institute put the first room up for rent on the popular home-sharing website Airbnb for only \$ 10 per night with complimentary two tickets for the exhibition (Shropshire, 2016. February 11). In this way, the interested public could not only see the painting of the room on the second floor of Yellow House in Arles where van Gogh lived at the end of the 19th century, but also spend the night in such a room.



Image 6. Room for rent above and the 2nd version of *The Bedroom* below

The news spread rapidly and in just a few hours from advertising, all dates in February were sold out, and those who were not able to book the room could see its replica of as part of the exhibition at the Institute.

For van Gogh lovers who were not able to visit the exhibition and see the paintings in person, there is always a possibility to order replicas from the webstore of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, which contains the largest collection of his works in the world. It is also possible to order reproductions of Van Gogh paintings from other organizations from Van Gogh Studio from Amsterdam to The Van Gogh Gallery in New Jersey, USA for very different prices, from \$ 27 to 525 Euros.

## CONCLUSION

Today, when we live at a faster pace than ever before, when we are almost constantly exposed to the most diverse media content and when advertising experts are struggling for attention of the target groups in all ways, the creative and artistic approach is proving to be a successful recipe for gaining attention. It is especially difficult to work with the art audience, because only a small number of people are interested in the events of elite art, and only a small percentage of this group attends the events without any promotional incentive. Nevertheless, more and more frequent examples of creative union of advertising agencies and people from institutions of culture and art who use the art itself to attract the art audiences, have proven incredibly successful, are encouraging.

An exhibition featuring as key exhibits three almost identical oil paintings of a bedroom does not necessarily sound exciting to most of the people, but when an interesting story is woven around the paintings, peppered by interesting details from the life of a great painter, and apart from standard promotional activities, an unusual opportunity is provided to sleep in such exact room, attention is gained and the interest in the exhibition is increased.

We believe that the example of the unusual artistic campaign that the Art Institute of Chicago has applied in attracting art audiences to the exhibition "Van Gogh's Bedrooms" is an example that will remain memorable in arts marketing practice and encourage other institutions of culture and art to make a step outside the standard advertising box and make additional efforts to attract the audience to events they are organizing by using the art itself.

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### **ANEX IMAGES**

Image 1. Wheatfield with Crows. Retrieved from [http://www.vggallery.com/painting/p\\_0779.htm](http://www.vggallery.com/painting/p_0779.htm)

Image 2. Portrait of Dr. Gachet on the left, The Red Vineyard, on the right. Retrieved from [http://www.vggallery.com/painting/p\\_0753.htm](http://www.vggallery.com/painting/p_0753.htm) and <https://www.vangoghstudio.com/the-red-vineyard/>

Image 3. All three versions of the picture The Bedroom. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/vincent-van-gogh-true-colours-of-artists-paintings-revealed-by-scientists-a6873671.html>

Image 4. X-ray image of the first version of the van Gogh's painting. Retrieved from <http://slaap-kamergeheimen.vangoghmuseum.nl/examination/?lang=en>

Image 5. Version of the painting by the Chicago experts. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-35576268>

Image 6. Room for rent above and the 2nd version of The Bedroom below. Retrieved from <http://www.thisiscolossal.com/2016/02/van-gogh-room-airbnb/>