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Sujin Kim

exhibition review of

Van Gogh's Bedrooms

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Van Gogh's Bedrooms

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Van Gogh's Bedrooms.

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Three *Bedrooms* on the same Wall

It is no exaggeration to say that Chicago was enthusiastic about Vincent van Gogh's three *Bedroom* canvases, as it was the one and only chance in the U.S. to encounter the artist's three versions of *The Bedroom* on a single wall. The line to see the show was endless everyday, and PROJECTwindows 2016—a retail window design project celebrating the exhibition—added a nicely layered landscape in downtown Chicago that blurred the distinction between art and life—exactly what van Gogh tried to achieve by drawing his own bedroom (fig. 1).^[1] In addition, the Art Institute of Chicago had been advertising this exhibition through a commissioned Airbnb room that re-creates *The Bedroom* of September 5, 1889 and where a single person can spend a night (fig. 2).



Fig. 1, One of the shop window displays influenced by van Gogh's *The Bedrooms*.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 2, The Airbnb room commissioned by The Art Institute of Chicago.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Van Gogh painted his bedroom three times in what he called the “Yellow House” in Arles, France: October 16–17, 1888; September 5, 1889; and September 28, 1889. Today, those paintings are at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Musée d’Orsay in Paris (fig. 3). These three paintings have often been considered to be identical, but the collaborative research among the curators at these three institutions has revealed their physical differences. Intertwined with the chronology of the artist’s life and

some of his major influences, these differences contextualize van Gogh as an artist who rediscovered the meaning of a single image over time by creating different versions.



Fig. 3, A mural photograph of the Yellow House, 2 place Lamartine, in Arles, France.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Gloria Groom, chair of European Painting and Sculpture and David and Mary Winton Green Curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, has said that “we wanted to show that universal quality: everyone wants a room of their own.”^[2] The motif of an artist’s home or alternatively, a peripatetic life, is a familiar subject for contemporary artists such as Do-ho Suh and Shirin Neshat, but van Gogh was the first artist who thought that the place where he could rest (what he called *utter repose*), without needing to include a human figure, was a subject that could be made into a complete work. This very earthly subject of a single artist and his aspiration became a universal concept that is transferable to contemporary artists as well as any individual who visits the show.

The gallery rooms were organized in a mix of themes such as “The Portraits” and “The Bedrooms” and places such as “Paris” and “Arles,” each painted in a different color, but overall the sequence was chronological. Most of the rooms offered viewers additional context through quotes from van Gogh’s letters on the wall (fig. 4). The most notable aspects of this exhibition were the actual-size representation of the second floor of the Yellow House, based on a blueprint, and a presentation comparing microscopic details of each *Bedroom* canvas through extensive technical study; this includes X-radiography, infrared reflectography, ultraviolet-light, transmitted light, and transmitted-infrared-light examination, and photomicrography (figs. 5, 6) (99). Every object or artwork displayed in this exhibition provided a different layer of meaning that could be helpful for interpreting the three *Bedroom* paintings. The viewers were encouraged to freely explore these objects to gain insight from each one on the meaning-making of van Gogh’s bedroom in Arles and the artist’s three paintings of it.



Fig. 4, Installation showing an image of the gallery *Welcome to the Night Café!*, which contains one of the quotes from van Gogh's letters. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 5, The actual-size representation of the second floor of the Yellow House. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 6, Installation with the video presentation comparing microscopic details of each *Bedroom* canvas through extensive technical study. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Entering into the Gallery Space

The very first room of the exhibition consisted of two large murals. On the left, the viewers could see a map of Europe that illustrates 24 regions—from Groot-Zundert, the Netherlands, to Auvers-sur-Oise, France—that exemplify van Gogh's nomadic existence (fig. 7).^[3] On the right side, viewers could see the details of the second *Bedroom* painting (September 6, 1889) reproduced at a large scale to emphasize one of the protagonists of this exhibition (fig. 8). The next room served as an introductory section for the exhibition, as it previewed three versions of *Bedroom* paintings in a slideshow with an overview of the exhibition as well as the timeline of van Gogh's life (figs. 9, 10). Because the exhibition was organized largely by where van Gogh lived, the timeline was also organized according to his residences during his life.^[4]



Fig. 7, Left side of the first gallery with a map of Europe and an overview of the exhibition.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 8, Right side of the first gallery, emphasizing some of the details that differentiate the second *Bedroom* painting from the other two.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 9, A preview slideshow of three versions of the *Bedroom* paintings.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 10, The timeline of van Gogh's life.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Nuenen: Where the Concept of “Haven” Began

Entering into the “Nuenen” section of the exhibition was unique in the sense that the entrance itself is an image of the parsonage in Nuenen where van Gogh lived with his parents from 1883 to 1885, and where the theme of “haven” that continued throughout his artistic life was initiated (fig. 11). The gallery contained a replica of a perspective frame to introduce van Gogh as an artist who preferred to work *in situ* rather than in a studio, who created works of observed reality, and to let visitors experience what it is like to use this tool in order to translate a three-dimensional perspective onto the two-dimensional planes of a canvas (fig. 12). The space also incorporated works by two Barbizon School artists, Charles-François Daubigny and Jean-François Millet, who represented subject matter realistically, a quality that van Gogh particularly admired. The theme of the bird's nest, which is connected to the concept of haven, also appeared in this gallery; it was represented by the nests that are similar to the ones that van Gogh collected, painted, and even extended into the concept of human dwellings in the form of cottages (fig. 13).



Fig. 11, Entrance into the “Nuenen” section showing the back of the parsonage with van Gogh’s studio on the right.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 12, A replica of a perspective frame: on the left an image from the front; on the right an image from one side.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 13, Installation view showing examples of a song sparrow nest and a marsh wren nest, 1879. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Paris: Times of Color Experimentation and Interior Drawing

In 1886, van Gogh left for Paris, where he lived with his brother Theo. The “Paris” gallery featured some of the themes that could serve as primers for three *Bedroom* paintings. The notion of bright colors and the artist’s experimentation with color combinations were threaded with the concept of interior drawings as a subject for an artwork. Van Gogh’s process of combining bright colors was represented by Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints, *Grapes, Lemons, Pears, and Apples* (1887), and *Self-Portrait* (1887) (fig. 14). Moreover, there was a box containing balls of wool, which directly influenced van Gogh’s experimentation with color combinations, as his choice of color usage was verified by these wool combinations before he put paint on canvas; it can also be said that his elongated brush stroke was influenced by the shape of the wool threads (fig. 15) (90–2). This sense of domesticity continued in the center of the gallery with black-and-white engravings of the empty bedrooms of recently deceased people, observed in the magazines of Paris at the time, as well as an image of Charles Dickens’s room with a chair—from which van Gogh seemed to gather the idea of drawing empty chairs. Two distinct shoe paintings, *A Pair of Shoes*, *One Shoe Upside Down* (1887) and *A Pair of Boots* (1887), acted as a finishing touch to this section, intertwining these meanings by

showing the artist's continuous longing for domesticity, while at the same time demonstrating his artistic transformation in color selection and his experimentation with complementary colors (fig. 16).



Fig. 14, Installation view of the Paris gallery showing in case at left: Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints; right rear wall: Vincent van Gogh, *Grapes, Lemons, Pears, and Apples*, 1887. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 15, Copy of the red lacquered box containing balls of wool owned by Vincent van Gogh. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 16, Installation view of the Paris gallery showing on the left of the back wall *A Pair of Boots*, 1887 and *A Pair of Shoes, One Shoe Upside Down*, 1887. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Arles: Inside and Outside of the Bedroom

The city of Arles is where van Gogh's dream of having "a home of his own"—which ultimately ended with quite a tragedy—as well as what he thought of as "living as a Japanese" came true. This gallery allowed viewers to look outside of the artist's bedroom at the landscape surrounding the Yellow House from the artist's point of view, but at the same time, it pointed the viewers toward the details of the bedroom paintings, such as the chairs and the paintings on the wall. One of the paintings that connected the world inside and outside of the bedroom was *The Poet's Garden* (1888), which portrayed the park outside of the Yellow House; the painting itself was intended to be a decoration for Gauguin's room (fig. 17). [\[5\]](#) Three chairs could be paired up in a number of ways as van Gogh himself reinterpreted the meanings of the chairs (fig. 18). At first, two empty chairs were personalized as characters, with the elegant walnut chair representing Gauguin as the leader and teacher, and the modest chair reflecting van Gogh as a student (46). Eventually, van Gogh asked Augustine

Roulin to sit on Gauguin's chair, to fill the emptiness that was created after Gauguin's departure (132). Interestingly, the painting with Augustine Roulin was situated in the center of the three in this exhibition, showing aesthetic and symmetrical quality, but making it difficult to convey the chronological sequence or the stories behind these chairs mentioned in the catalogue.



Fig. 17, Installation view showing Vincent van Gogh, *The Poet's Garden*, 1888.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 18, Installation view.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The Bedrooms: The Protagonists

There were three sections in this exhibition devoted to highlighting the three *Bedroom* canvases. The first section incorporated a full-scale reconstruction of the second floor of the Yellow House with an animated presentation focused on storytelling (figs. 19, 20).^[6] From this installation, the visitors could sense the actual size of the room as well as imagine how Gauguin and van Gogh had lived together. This very first space was quite dim as the only light in the room came from two identical animated presentations, one of them located outside of the installation, so that visitors could be fully immersed in it, and one covering the wall of van Gogh's bedroom (see fig. 5). The installation focused primarily on showing the size of the rooms on the second floor—van Gogh's bedroom, Gauguin's bedroom, and the two spare rooms. This not only explained the size of the rooms, but also allowed visitors to walk around to experience them and to walk in van Gogh or Gauguin's shoes. Most of the visitors might have felt the rooms were extremely small for a person to sleep in; and considering that Gauguin's room is smaller than that of van Gogh, they might even have imagined why the severe breakup between the two artists happened.



Fig. 19, Part of the installation of the second floor of the Yellow House showing "Gauguin's Room."

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 20, Part of the installation of the second floor of the Yellow House showing "Van Gogh's Bedroom."

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The second section was indeed the most crowded space as it exhibited the three *Bedroom* canvases. Before encountering van Gogh's bedrooms, visitors were introduced to the portraits included in the images, so that they could have a point of departure for comparing the three bedroom paintings (fig. 21). The portraits of Eugène Boch and Lieutenant Paul-Eugène Millet were part of the actual decoration of the bedroom in 1888, and were incorporated in the first *Bedroom* painting. *Self-Portrait* (1889) was simply suggested as a part of the second *Bedroom* painting, as they were painted at the same time. Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles was sketched twice and painted three times. In this exhibition, one sketch is missing; instead, it was presented as an image on the label for the other sketch (fig. 22). The sequence in which the paintings were viewed was the same as the sequence in which they were created (fig. 23). As the exhibition space was quite packed with viewers, it was difficult for visitors to view all of these pieces at once as photographed by the Art Institute, but the next gallery helped them to explore *The Bedroom* canvases in detail.



Fig. 21, View of gallery wall in the section called “The Portraits.”
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

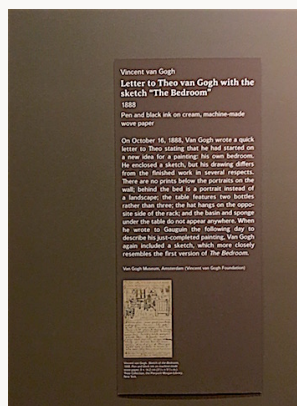


Fig. 22, Label for letter to Theo van Gogh with the sketch “The Bedroom” showing an image of another version of a “Bedroom” sketch. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 23, Installation view of van Gogh's three *Bedroom* paintings.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The collaboration of three institutions eventually led to the creation of a video that helped viewers explore and compare the microscopic details of the three canvases, which were projected on a large screen. Visitors could choose to watch the video or immerse themselves in interactive touch screens to view the details that particularly interested them (see fig. 6; figs. 24, 25). Then, they could look into the work of the conservators and scientists who researched the three *Bedroom* paintings through the documentary called “Under Cover: The Science of *The Bedrooms*” (fig. 26).^[7] This documentary incorporates the research process that revealed the previously controversial sequence of the first and the second canvases as well as suggesting and recreating the original colors of the first two paintings. For those who had enough time to sit down and watch the video, the video format was much more explanatory compared to the projectors and interactive touch screens; it incorporated interviews with the people who had participated in the investigation, and explained what the images on the interactive screen actually meant.

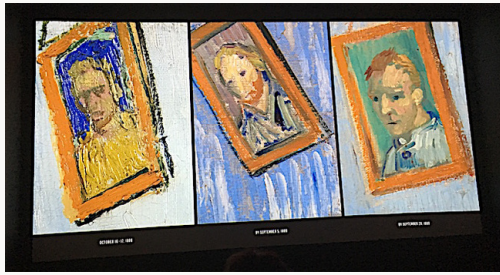


Fig. 24, A snapshot of the video that compares three canvases of *The Bedroom* in detail. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

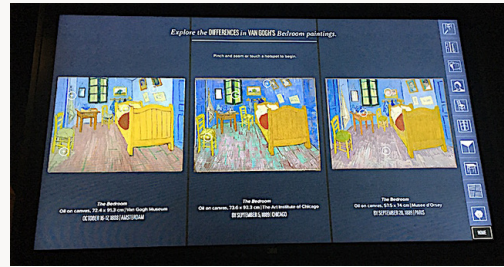


Fig. 25, Interactive touchscreen.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 26, Video section showing the documentary, “Under Cover: The Science of *The Bedrooms*.” [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Saint-Rémy and Auvers: A Nostalgia for the Bedroom in the Yellow House

The narrow aisle that led to the next gallery featured the view of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole, an asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, where van Gogh admitted himself after cutting off his left ear (fig. 27). In the asylum, he was given a room to use as a studio, and it was there that he painted the second and third versions of *The Bedroom*. This gallery incorporated the paintings of surrounding scenery near the asylum with a photograph of the bedroom in Auvers-sur-Oise where the artist spent the final months of his life. Nevertheless, *Thatched-Roofed Cottages of Jorgus* (1890) indicated the artist’s constant longing for a “human nest,” until the day he died, as this is the painting of cottages, which overlaps the themes that the artist had been drawing since the Nuenen period (149) (fig. 28).



Fig. 27, Mural photograph of the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France, with van Gogh's bedroom indicated by the red box at right.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 28, Installation view of Vincent van Gogh, *Thatched-Roofed Cottages of Jorgus*, 1890. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The last gallery invited the visitor to take a photograph in front of the large wall-sized reproduction of *The Night Café* or to sit down and read the catalogue (fig. 29). There was also a video showing the contemporary influence of van Gogh as a popular icon and inspiration in plays, on the screen, in *Vogue*, and as a muse (fig. 30). This strategy acted as an open-ended closure, which means that the video might facilitate recollections that visitors have seen in the past and encourage them to associate those memories with this exhibition. In this reviewer's case, it reminded me of one of the most moving episodes in the *Doctor Who* television series. By stirring up such reminiscences, visitors might discover the scope of van Gogh's influence on contemporary life, and have an extended experience in relation with this exhibition later.



Fig. 29, Installation view of the last gallery, "The Night Café."
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 30, Video showing contemporary influences of van Gogh.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

A Room to Be Remembered

Three years have passed since Rachel Esner said that we need a more nuanced van Gogh.^[8] This exhibition indeed suggested that van Gogh was an artist who wanted a room of his own more than anything else in his life, and this aspiration worked as a leitmotif throughout his career. This exhibition harmonized three canvases of *The Bedroom* as a core focus, as well as the conventional practices of narrating the artist's life in a chronological way so that visitors gain multifaceted interpretations surrounding the three *The Bedroom* paintings, but at the same time, continued to employ their previous knowledge of the artist's life. By presenting the differences between the three *Bedroom* canvases, this exhibition rediscovered the artist as an interior painter—an identity that has not previously received much attention—and contextualized van Gogh as a person constantly hoping for somewhere to belong. Overall, this exhibition presented both van Gogh and his *Bedroom* canvases with new eyes, and created a more nuanced van Gogh by reinvestigating the artist's paintings and illuminating the ideals that the artist explored when he lived in Yellow House.

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Notes

I wish to thank Janet Whitmore who gave me such a wonderful opportunity. Please send comments or questions to me via e-mail.

[1] To take a glance at the actual shop window displays that were influenced by *Van Gogh's Bedrooms*, go to <http://michiganavemag.com/Project-Windows-Voting-2016>.

[2] Julia Felsenthal, "A Peek Inside 'Van Gogh's Bedrooms' Just in Time for Valentine's Day," *Vogue* online, Feb. 8, 2016. See <http://www.vogue.com/13396409/van-gogh-bedrooms-art-institute-chicago/>.

[3] The curator Gloria Groom says in her video that van Gogh moved 37 times in 37 years. To see the video, go to <https://youtu.be/NKhMhkISi3g>.

[4] To view this timeline, go to <http://extras.artic.edu/van-gogh-bedrooms/timeline>.

[5] For more information, go to <http://bluecadet.com/news/step-further-inside-van-goghs-bedroom-with-executive-creative-director-troy-lachance/>.

[6] Airbnb's room was the exact size as Van Gogh's bedroom, except for the bed, which was lengthened in order to accommodate a contemporary man's average height.

[7] To watch the whole documentary, go to <https://youtu.be/9SsUzaIDsHo>.

[8] Rachel Esner, "Vincent: The Van Gogh Museum in the Hermitage Amsterdam," exhibition review, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2013), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring13/esner-reviews-vincent>.

Illustrations

All images courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago unless otherwise noted.



Fig. 1, One of the shop window displays influenced by van Gogh's *The Bedrooms*. The window is based on the painting from September 5, 1889. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, The Airbnb room commissioned by The Art Institute of Chicago. [\[return to text\]](#)



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Fig. 10, The timeline of van Gogh's life. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



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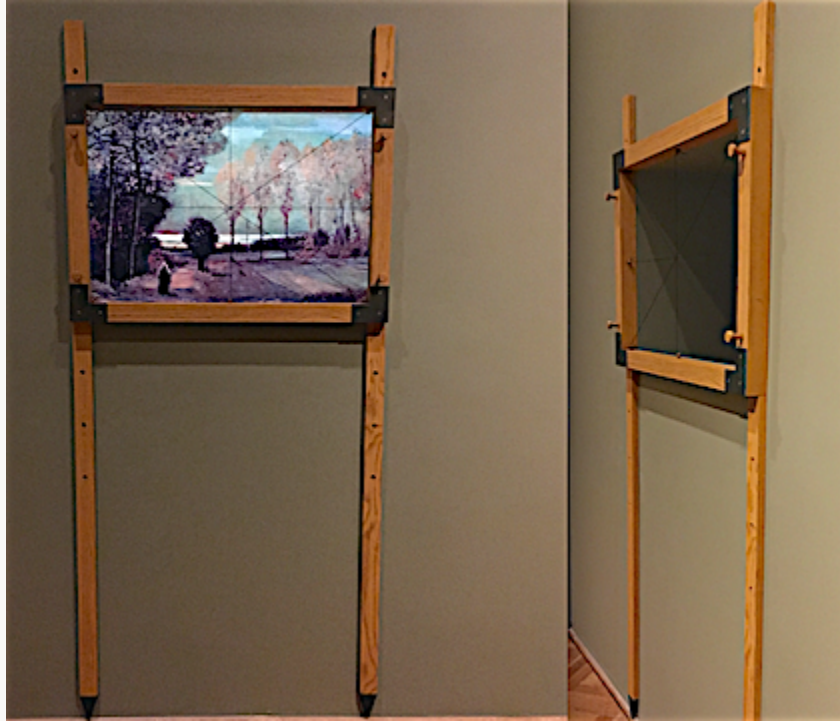


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Fig. 13, Installation view showing examples of a song sparrow nest and a marsh wren nest, 1879. On loan from the Bird Collection, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 14, Installation view of the Paris gallery showing in case at left: Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints; right rear wall: Vincent van Gogh, *Grapes, Lemons, Pears, and Apples*, 1887. Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; right wall: Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1887. Oil on artist's board, mounted on cradled panel. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 15, Copy of the red lacquered box containing balls of wool owned by Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



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Fig. 17, Installation view showing Vincent van Gogh, *The Poet's Garden*, 1888. Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 18, Installation view. Left: Vincent van Gogh, *Van Gogh's Chair*, 1888. Oil on canvas. National Gallery, London; center: Vincent van Gogh, *Madame Roulin Rocking the Cradle (La berceuse)*, 1889. Oil on canvas. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; right: Vincent van Gogh, *Gauguin's Chair*, 1888. Oil on canvas. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, (Vincent van Gogh Foundation). [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 19, Part of the installation of the second floor of the Yellow House showing "Gauguin's Room."

Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



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Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)

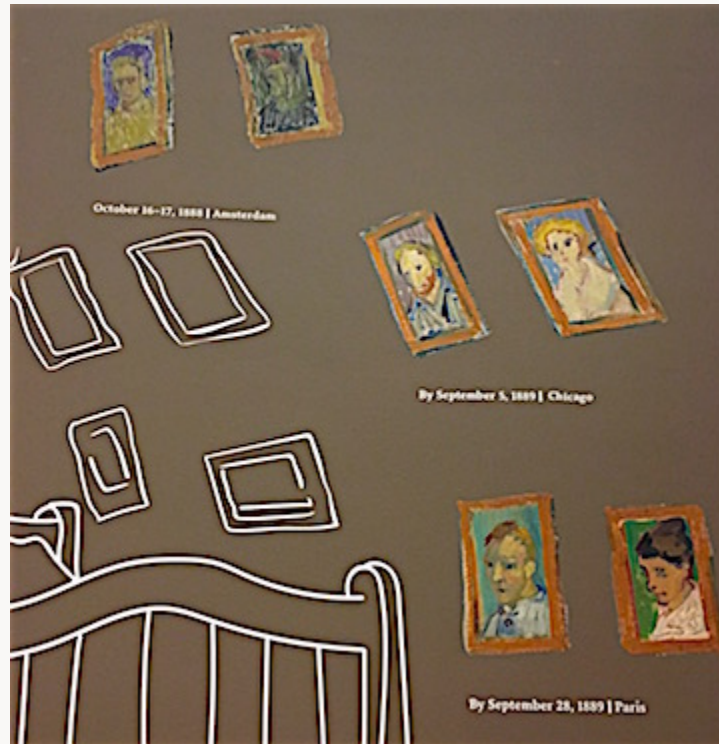


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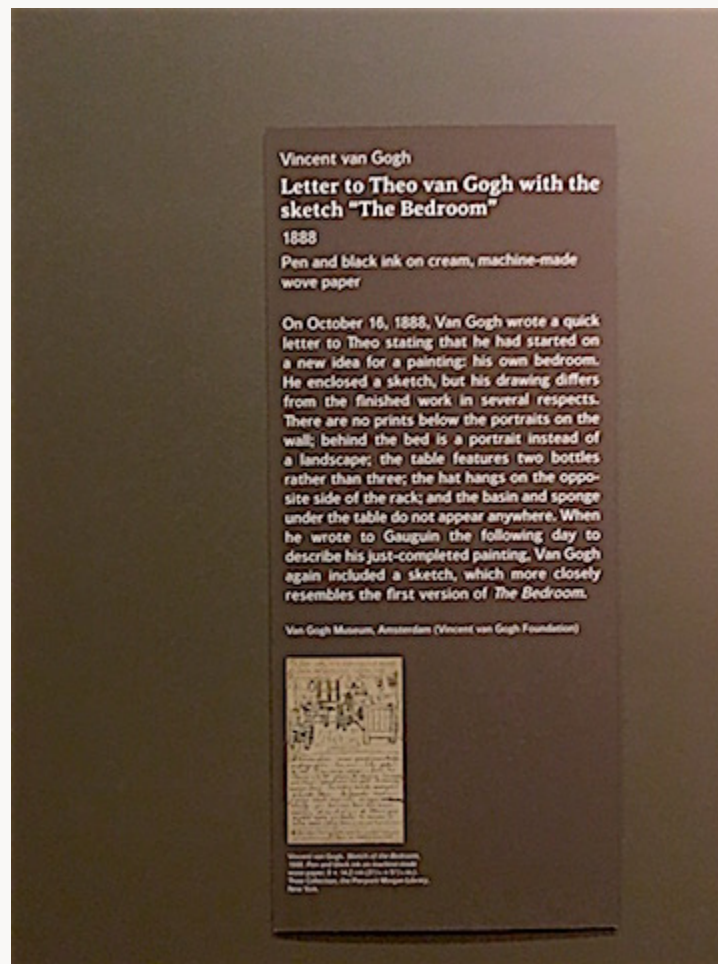


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Fig. 23, Installation view of van Gogh's three *Bedroom* paintings. Right: *The Bedroom*, October 16–17, 1888. Oil on canvas. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, (Vincent van Gogh Foundation); center: *The Bedroom*, September 5, 1889. Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; left: *The Bedroom*, September 28, 1889. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)

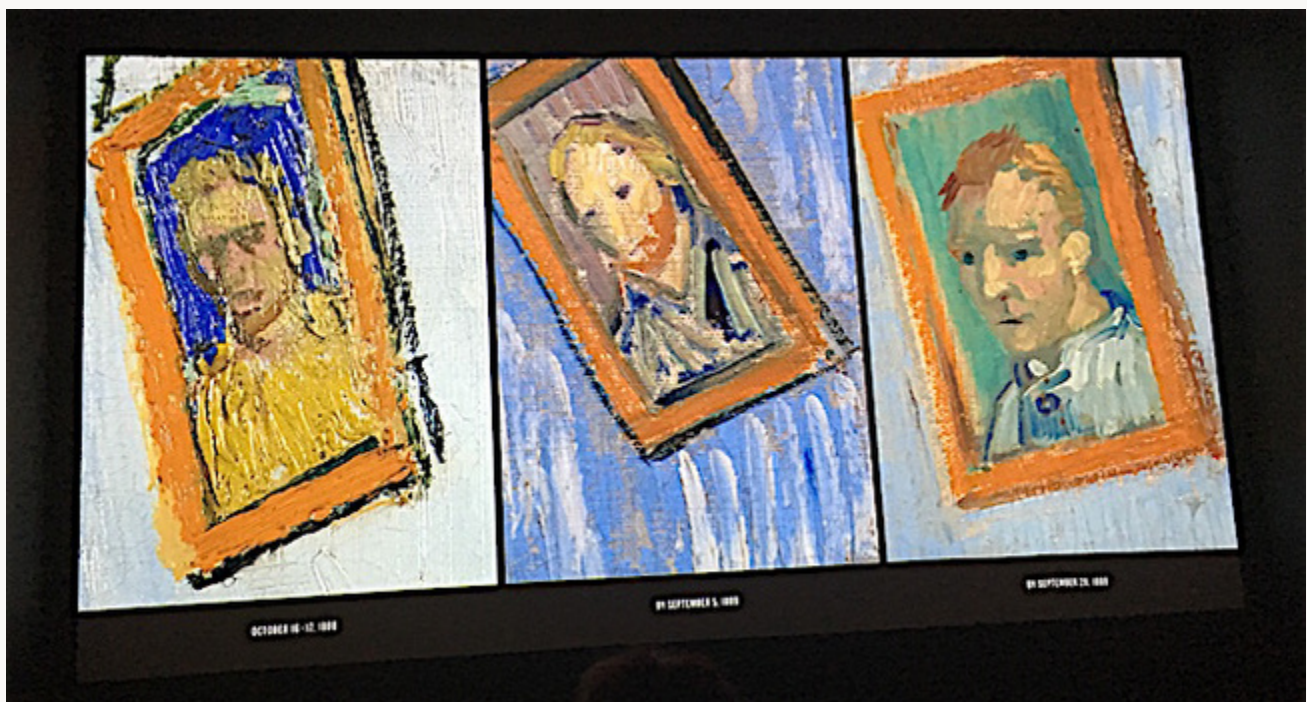


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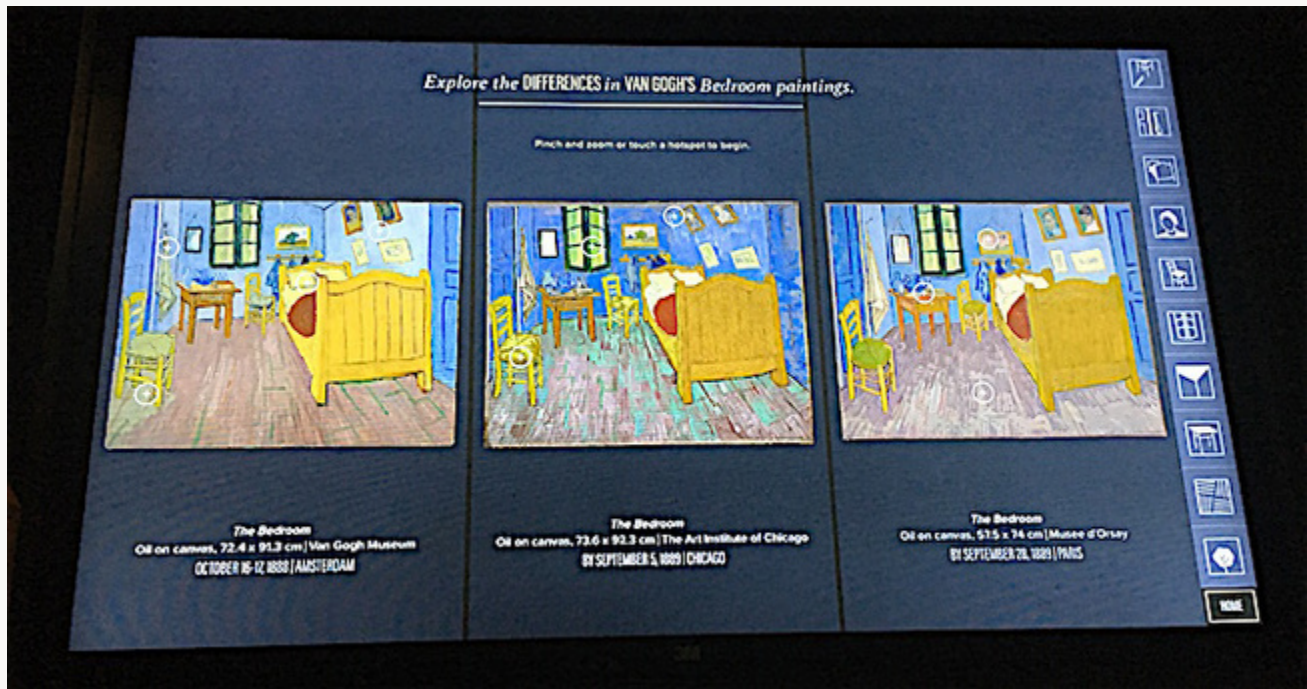


Fig. 25, Interactive touchscreen. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 26, Video section showing the documentary, “Under Cover: The Science of *The Bedrooms*.”
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Fig. 30, Video showing contemporary influences of van Gogh. Photograph by the author.

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