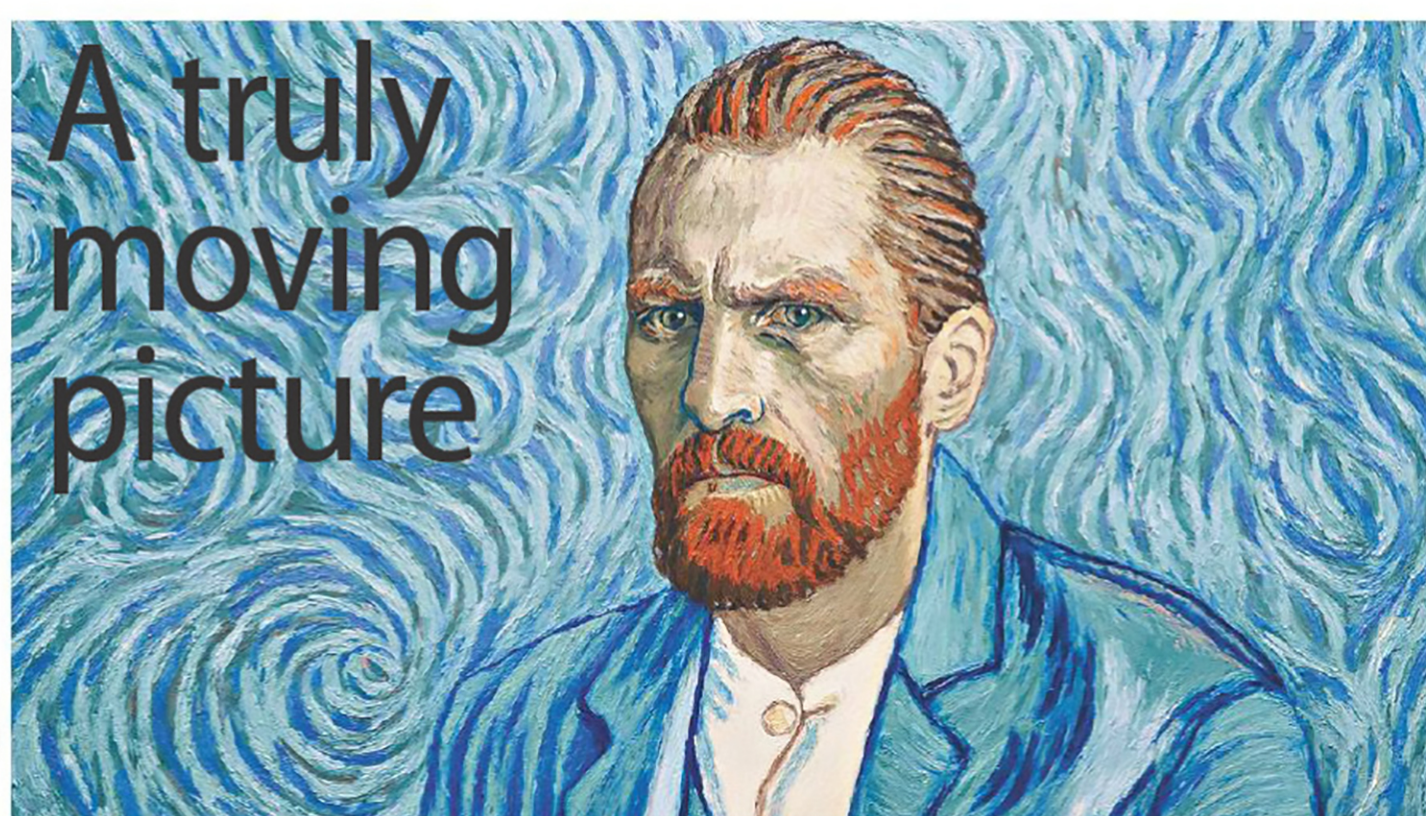


Overseas Education



A truly moving picture

Out of the Box



Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.



I HAD WRITTEN RECENTLY about *China's Van Goghs* – a Chinese-Dutch film about the story of a van Gogh painter from Shenzhen's Dafeng Village, who travelled from Shenzhen to see the original paintings in Amsterdam, as well as the artist's grave in France.

More recently, I discovered another Vincent van Gogh film *Loving Vincent*, which was shown in Hong Kong last year. An animated biographical drama about van Gogh and his death, it is a Polish-UK-US production. It has won many awards. The film title is how

van Gogh signed his last letter to his brother, just before his death.

What makes it remarkable is that it is the first fully painted animated feature film. Essentially, van Gogh's paintings form the storyboard of the film, but they are animated. Unlike Disney and Pixar animations, each of the film's frames is an oil painting on canvas, in Van Gogh style, created by a team of 125 painters selected from 5,000 applicants.

It is like going to a van Gogh museum where the paintings, including iconic ones like *The Starry Night* and *Cafe Terrace at Night*, come alive and tell the story about the painter himself.

The idea is truly innovative but the actual task is daunting. In total, there were 65,000 frames, and it took four years to make.

One of the producers admitted: "We have definitely without a doubt invented the slowest form of filmmaking ever devised in 120 years."

Unfortunately, since the artists painted multiple frames based on the same painting, only 1,000 paintings survived.

Watching the film, I wondered whether it was a pure coincidence that the scenes and subjects of the paintings needed to tell the story of the film were painted by van Gogh while he was alive. Upon reflection, I came to the conclusion that it is not. Van Gogh was a realist, who painted everyday sceneries and people that he encountered in their everyday life.

Since the story of the film is about van Gogh himself, his paintings together formed the backbone of the storyboard. Of course not every scene needed for making this movie can be found among van Gogh's 800 paintings, so a small fraction were painted in black and white by the film's painters. It is "old tech" but works charmingly well, at least for my taste.

I learned from the film that van Gogh took up painting later in life, after a series of unsuccessful careers, and mainly supported by his brother Theodore, who was an art dealer. He felt failure in life, letting down his father in expectations. He painted every day, from dawn to dusk, staying at a small village in the south of France. Over a short career of eight years, he produced 800 paintings – but only one was sold during his lifetime.

Can you imagine the pressure he felt? Yet another unsuccessful career attempt, he must be thinking. He became famous only after his death.

His life story probably resonates with many. Most people, even the most successful ones, have encountered low points in their life and career, and many must have thought about giving up on whatever their dreams were. Van Gogh should be an inspiration for all of them.

The movie ends with the classic 1971 Don McLean song *Vincent* (sung by a young British singer Lianne La Havas, who has a magnetic voice). It was one of my favorites when I was young and I often played it on guitar. I can recite the lyrics well, but I had never really known what they meant. As I listened to the song this time, I suddenly realized the meaning of the lyrics, such as: "They are not listening still; perhaps they never will."

It all makes sense now! I almost wanted to cry. It must be the combination of the lyrics, plus the sad but moving story of van Gogh's life, that took effect on me. Perhaps there was some feeling over some low points in my own life which I can draw parallels to van Gogh's life. A good film does have the ability to draw out deep feelings in people.

For *Loving Vincent*, a team of 125 artists created paintings in a tedious process that took four years. AFP

