

Spring 5-1-2016

Looking for van Gogh's Bedroom

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Recommended Citation

Kotyuk, Ida (2016) "Looking for van Gogh's Bedroom," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 38: No. 2, Article 65.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol38/iss2/65>

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Kotyuk: Looking for van Gogh's Bedroom

Ida Kotyuk's "Looking for van Gogh's Bedroom" is the winner in creative non-fiction of the College of DuPage 2016 Writers Read: Emerging Voices contest, held to showcase emerging voices in our community.

Looking for van Gogh's Bedroom

Ida Kotyuk

Bedrooms are a place for privacy. It's where we do and act out our most personal and intimate moments as well as a place for comfort and rest. I never had a desire to paint my bedrooms (my sanctuaries) as I moved from place to place. A friend once photographed me in my current bedroom peeking out from behind my open bookcase. To reveal what my bedroom looks like, even after the bed has been made and the room dusted; for me, it would be full frontal nudity.

But I became obsessed with van Gogh's bedroom years ago when it was on exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago. The moment I stood in front of his painting—something happened. I had to have a copy for myself. I went looking for either a poster, which they did not have, or a postcard. I bought two postcards, one for my studio and one for my home. Those postcards shared my life for years following me from studio to studio and the other from apartments-to-home. They were always up on a wall where I could see them. What did his bedroom have that mine never did?

I can't remember all my bedrooms; though, I remember my first one, the house I lived in until I was 12-years-old. I remember sky-blue walls, and imagined the room was huge. Years later I saw that room again with its single twin bed, one thin pillow, and a narrow chest of drawers. There wasn't even room for a mirror.

My second bedroom was smaller yet. It didn't have a chest of drawers, only the single twin and one pillow. My parents carved a large kitchen into three rooms which became a kitchen and two bedrooms; a bedroom for me and another for my brother. My bedroom had two outside walls and was always cold during the winter and my mother froze our leftover meals under my bed.

In college dorm rooms I slept in a bunk bed and, luckily, I usually got the bottom. When I moved into a furnished bedroom off campus, that was only a place to rest my head—after parties and maybe studying. No. I never studied in my college dorm or apartment, not when libraries were the social place to study.

From college I moved to Chicago and lived for a year or two in a girls' club called, "The Eleanor Club." (I am still friends with a number of those "girls" today.) That room with its single twin bed at least had a sink and mirror. But again, it was only a place to rest my head—after parties.

As I moved again and again, my bedrooms got larger, but still a single twin and that one thin pillow. I guess I loved to cuddle. Again, no mirror, (van Gogh had a mirror in his bedroom and I often wondered if that was a European thing). Instead I filled my bedrooms with books—mystery books, lots of them. I mean lots.

I never gave a thought to my bedrooms and what they looked like. They were a place to read for a few minutes until I was sleepy. I would close my eyes and wake up the next day. Who cared what came after washing my face, brushing my teeth, and falling asleep. That is, I didn't care until I stood in front of van Gogh's painting and had to own that copy.

I once came across W.H. Auden's poem titled "Musee des Beaux Arts," describing Peter Brueghel's painting, "The Fall of Icarus." I understood Auden's obsession. Like Auden's moment before Brueghel's painting, I stood before my van Gogh's postcard and slowly came to know the artist, Vincent.

Artists say the thrill of observation has no equal. There are many reasons to see an original painting. In art history classes I looked at projected slide images 40 feet wide on auditorium screens, or the same image four inches wide in art books, and today three inches wide on a computer screen (or full screen, depending on the size of my computer). Distorted images create distorted perceptions. Colors or the energy of a brush are not authentic to the original painting because no book or internet image captures Vincent's ability to take the ordinary and create something extraordinary.

I wanted to understand the artist who painted a bedroom filled with sunlight, who scrupulously realized his sensations. Painters, previous to van Gogh (and then later photographers), were concerned with giving a permanent form to the ephemeral; that is, artists made our ever changing landscapes—static. A bedroom does not move in the conventional sense but changes constantly in other ways—notably through light.

Vincent understood the specific quality of his light that fell on a specific place at a specific moment. His bedroom was not a fixed and solid sculpture but an insubstantial image, as transient as his light that continually redefined it. For van Gogh, this brilliant technique to capture light, scrape it off the objects onto his palette, nothing less would be adequate to describe his subject.

As I slowly understood van Gogh's bedroom painting, I began to understand who I was. It is the artist and not what the bedroom holds. If that had been my bedroom my eyes would have seen only shabbiness. I, the poorer artist, unable to take three primary colors red, blue, and yellow and paint a room filled with sunlight, a metaphor for Vincent's light heart in 1889, the year before he committed suicide.

Pardon me while I go and set up my easel in my bedroom.