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## Lust For Life

For many years, it was common wisdom in Hollywood that an artist's life was not a successful subject for film (and, truth be told, many potentially fascinating biographies have made dreadful movies). So, although MGM owned the rights since 1946 of Irving Stone's hugely popular 1934 novel about the tortured painter Vincent Van Gogh, a film version was repeatedly shelved as too risky. But after a very successful international Van Gogh exhibit in the 1950s introduced his work to hundreds of thousands of people and John Huston's film about painter Toulouse-Lautrec, *Moulin Rouge* (1952), proved to be a money-maker, the studio approved the project with John Houseman producing and Vincente Minnelli directing.

Minnelli was the ideal choice to bring the story to the screen. A former stage designer known for his visual style that mirrored and amplified the dramatic story of each of his films, he was the right match for a movie about a painter. But he had to fight several battles to get the look he wanted; some he won, some he didn't. Minnelli didn't want to use CinemaScope for **Lust for Life**, reasoning that, as he said in his autobiography, "the dimensions of the wider screen [bore] little relation to the conventional shape of painting," but the then-popular process was a must for MGM, which like every other studio was looking for cinematic gimmicks to overcome the threat of television. Minnelli did win a technical battle, however, concerning the film stock. The studio was using the Eastman color process which, contrary to the soft, subtle tones he wanted to depict Van Gogh's world and his art, produced colors "straight from the candy box, a brilliant mixture of blues, reds, and yellows that resembled neither life nor art," the director said. He preferred the defunct Ansco process, and he and Houseman hounded MGM executives until they bought up the remaining 300,000 feet of Ansco stock. The company then opened a lab especially to process Minnelli's footage.

Another problem concerned filming Van Gogh's actual paintings. The masterpieces could have been ruined by the intense light required for motion picture cameras, so Minnelli sent crews into museums and private collectors' homes to capture about 200 of Van Gogh's paintings with special portrait cameras that made time exposures without excessive light. Enlarged transparencies were then made of each shot, which were backlit and refilmed with special lenses.

Most of the picture was shot where Van Gogh lived and worked, including The Hague in the Netherlands and Arles in southern France. The production team even found two older citizens of Arles who had known Van Gogh 60 years earlier; one of them had sat for the painting "The Baby Roulin." Even on location, however, there were problems to be solved. Because Van Gogh's work was so well known, the film couldn't get away with showing scenes or landscapes that had been altered since the master painted them. In one case, they had to put a tree in the ground that had been removed since the original's depiction in a famous painting.

One other obstacle had to be overcome during principal photography, and it was a major one. The ten-year film rights to Stone's book were set to expire at the end of 1955 and Stone adamantly refused to grant an extension, so when the project got the green light, Houseman and Minnelli were told they had nine months to

complete the picture. They were still shooting when December 31 came around, but Stone had finally relented (to the tune of \$30,000 a week), and shooting was completed two weeks into the new year.

Kirk Douglas wanted to play Van Gogh ever since director Jean Negulesco told him he resembled the artist. He threw himself into the role, to the point of taking on so many of the artist's stormy, unstable traits he frightened his wife in his off-hours at home. He was rewarded for his efforts with an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor but lost to Yul Brynner in *The King and I* (1956). An Oscar did go home, however, with Anthony Quinn, who in his brief screen time as Van Gogh's contentious friend, painter Paul Gauguin, made an impression that earned him Best Supporting Actor. **Lust for Life** was also nominated for Best Color Art Direction and Best Adapted Screenplay.

Director: Vincente Minnelli

Producer: John Houseman

Screenplay: Norman Corwin, based on the novel by Irving Stone

Cinematography: Freddie Young, Russell Harlan

Editing: Adrienne Fazan

Art Direction: Cedric Gibbons, Hans Peters, Preston Ames

Original Music: Miklos Rozsa

Cast: Kirk Douglas (Vincent Van Gogh), Anthony Quinn (Paul Gauguin), James Donald (Theo Van Gogh), Pamela Brown (Christine), Everett Sloane (Dr. Gachet), Niall MacGinnis (Roulin), Noel Purcell (Anton Mauve), Henry Daniell (Theodorus Van Gogh), Jill Bennett (Willemien), Lionel Jeffries (Dr. Peyron), Laurence Naismith (Dr. Bosman), Eric Pohlmann (Colbert).

C-123m. Letterboxed. Closed captioning. Descriptive video.

by Rob Nixon