

VirtualART

IMMERSIVE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS AND PROJECTED ILLUMINATION INTRODUCE A NEW LEVEL OF ART APPRECIATION.

by **Claudia Alarcón**



BEYOND VAN GOGH: THE IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

Immersive art may be defined as creating the illusion of being a part of, and inside of, the surrounding artwork. Viewers become participants, experiencing the art in their own personal way. While the concept of participatory artworks is not new, technological advances are making it more accessible, and today, virtual art experiences are popping up everywhere.

One of the most popular highlights the work of Vincent Van Gogh and, in fact, there are multiple companies staging virtual experiences focusing on the Dutch artist. Through most of the summer, *Beyond Van Gogh* wowed Austin audiences with the

exhaustive work of Mathieu St-Arnaud, Creative Director from Montreal's world-renowned Normal Studio.

"It's not unusual for an artist to have many exhibitions dedicated to his work, especially someone as widely known and loved as Van Gogh," says St-Arnaud. "The number of retrospectives centered on his life and body of work in the last century is astounding. The difference between them lies within the conservatorial vision and choices made by the creative team. In this case, the focus was really to go beyond the myth of the mad genius that surrounds Van Gogh's work."



IMMERSIVE VAN GOGH, BY CHESHIRE ISAACS



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St-Arnaud explains that people tend to know or remember mainly the dark aspect of Van Gogh's life — the struggling artist, extreme poverty, cutting-ear incident, etc. And although all of this is true, you'll never see any of it in his work. "Quite the contrary: his work was filled with color, light, movement and life. He has such a craving for beauty and wanted nothing more than to share that with the world. The idea with *Beyond Van Gogh* is therefore to go beyond the myth of the tortured artist to really experience the work itself in all its awe-inspiring beauty," he says.

A project of this magnitude requires lots of thinking and open discussion between the creative team, followed by intensive research, mood boards and sketches to flesh it out.

"As we move into design then into production, we refine our creative approach into scenes or tableau filled with little details that tells the story we imagined for the audience," says St-Arnaud. Finally, there is the integration phase where everything is put together, and it all comes to life. "This last phase can be quite intense yet satisfying; we want to make it as perfect as possible and time is of the essence, but when we welcome our first guest on opening day, it's the most thrilling feeling ever." It took a team of 3 to 18 people working full time around six months from conceptualization to opening night.

A similar exhibit in San Antonio, *Immersive Van Gogh*, will run mid-November through early February.



SISTINE CHAPEL, COURTESY OF SEE ATTRACTIONS & BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

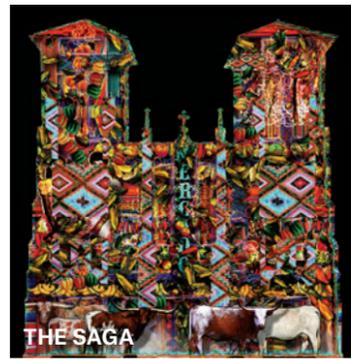
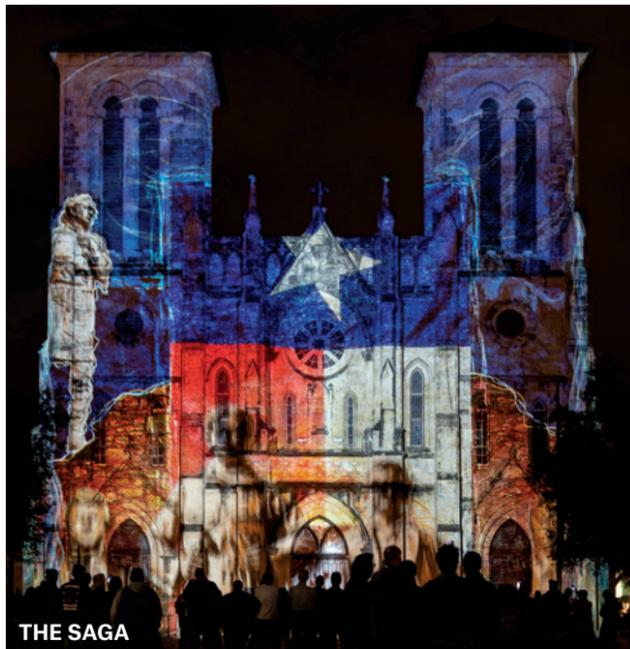


SISTINE CHAPEL, COURTESY OF SEE ATTRACTIONS & BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, the internationally acclaimed touring exhibition from SEE Global Entertainment, showcases one of mankind's greatest artistic achievements, allowing visitors to experience the masterpiece from an up-close, life-sized and never-before-seen perspective. The exhibit focuses on the artwork from the ceiling and the Last Judgment, using licensed high-definition photos from world-renowned photographer Erich Lessing brought to life through a special printing technique that emulates the look and feel of the artist's 34 frescoes.

After nearly five centuries, the paintings had been covered in a thick layer of dust and soot. In the 1980s and 90s, a comprehensive restoration work was carried out to restore them to their original brilliance. The exhibition illustrates the restoration, allowing visitors to view the paintings from only four meters instead of the 20 at the Sistine Chapel, revealing every detail.

Since the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is curved, these reproductions are as close to the original size as possible; however, some of the bordering elements such as the Ignudi angels and other framing devices were not included. It was necessary to crop some of the images to fit them into the display, and in some cases, color enhancement was necessary to match the images for consistency.



In San Antonio, San Fernando Cathedral in Main Plaza, the oldest cathedral in the United States with continuous use since 1731, is used as a canvas to project *The Saga* — a video art projection that depicts the historical discovery, settlement and development of the city. Designed by artist Xavier de Richemont, the project was inspired by two of his installations in Mexico — one in San Luis Potosi and another in Merida. The *Saga* 24-minute projection covers 7,000 square feet of light, color and visual narration projected onto the façade of San Fernando Cathedral. Since its first showing in June of 2014, as part of a revitalization effort of Main Plaza, the free show can be seen three times nightly, four nights a week.

Other virtual experiences can help reconstruct lost history, as is the case with San Antonio's *Restored by Light*. Of the five San Antonio missions designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Mission Concepcion and Mission San Jose were likely adorned with colored frescoes in geometric patterns, but these faded away with time as the missions were secularized and no longer maintained. As part of the 6th Annual World Heritage Festival, the City of San Antonio Office of Historic Preservation has partnered with the National Park Service to temporarily restore the intricate and vivid ornamentation that was once visible on the mission façades.

On September 10, the façade of Mission San Jose will be restored to its original frescoed appearance using projection technology illumination. The first *Restored by Light* event was held in 2015 at Mission Concepcion, where there is the most remaining evidence of the frescoes. At this year's event, the community is invited to celebrate our local heritage with food, music and fun. Bring a picnic or enjoy snacks from food

truck vendors available on site. While artistic representations give us a glimpse of the original appearance of Mission San Jose, nothing compares to the experience of viewing it in person and at full scale.

St-Arnaud and his team are currently working on a new experience inspired by the father of Impressionism, Claude Monet. "As with Vincent, it has been an amazing journey of discovery so far," he says. "As most people, I had some knowledge about Monet and diving into his world has shattered my impression of him (pun intended!). We discovered a man driven by passion and conviction, in search of light wherever it was. With this new and unique experience, we hope audiences will rediscover Monet, his immense body of work and the passionate artist, and truly immerse themselves in this quest for the ephemeral and the magical effects of the atmosphere. In Monet's vision lies an incandescent world without a shore, a world of fleeting and effervescent reflections that is truly mesmerizing and inspiring." ♦

