

Sooner Nation

With her timeless style, expressive eyes and perfect French, Gloria Groom might have stepped from any number of Impressionist paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago. In another era, she could have bonnet-shopped with Edgar Degas, strolled the gardens with Berthe Morisot or sipped absinthe at the Moulin de la Galette with Toulouse Lautrec.

As chair of the institute's European Painting and Sculpture department, Groom enjoys an intimate relationship with art that has shaped some of the most successful exhibitions in the museum's history, including the 2016 blockbuster, "Van Gogh's Bedrooms." Named a "Chicagoan of the Year," by the *Chicago Tribune*, the Tulsa native was hailed as "a new master of French painting."

The University of Oklahoma alumna did not begin her college career with art history in mind, but as a letters major. She remembers taking an elective — an introduction to 19th-century art with Victor Koshkin-Youritzen, Professor Emeritus of Art and Art History.

"Victor's classes were wonderful," Groom recalls. "He was so enthusiastic. He was like a jumping jack. He gave you tons of information even as he was making jokes. It was a lovely way to blend my French literature classes with the art of that time. The art was the missing piece that synthesized that time for me. Nineteenth century was really where I was always headed. It is where my heart is."

After taking a museology class with Youritzen, Groom began working at the art museum in Nichols Hills (what would later become the Oklahoma City Museum of Art). She went on to earn her master's and Ph.D. in art history from the University of Texas, living and studying in Paris for three years.

"I worked a bit for a curator at the Art Institute of Chicago while I was in Paris," she says. "He asked me if I could stay a month longer to do research for him for an exhibition."

That 1984 exhibition was "A Day in the Country: Impressionism and the French Landscape," which explored not only the aesthetics of the paintings, but the movement's place in history and the influence of politics and philosophy on the artists and writers of that time. Again, the synthesis of ingredients — history, politics, literature, art — to create something original was thrilling to the budding curator, who officially joined the museum staff as a research assistant.

Groom was named the art institute's David and Mary Winton Green curator in 1998 and senior curator in 2013. That year, she organized the exhibition, "Impressionism, Fashion, and Modernity," showcasing the symbiotic relationship between fashion and art in Paris from the mid-1860s through the mid-1880s. The show featured 75 Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works and 14 period costumes nearly

identical to those in the paintings. The exhibition examined what "modernity" meant in terms of art and fashion, but also how Parisian society was affected by the rise of ready-made goods, department stores and a growing middle class that could afford to look nearly as au courant as the upper crust. The exhibition, which opened in Paris and traveled to New York before coming to Chicago, affirmed the role of curator as social scientist.

Last year Groom curated a "small exhibition" with international impact when she brought together the three versions of Vincent van Gogh's "The Bedroom" for the first time in North America.

"The first bedroom he painted when he was waiting for [Paul] Gauguin to join him in Arles," says Groom. "That didn't work out. He does the ear thing. The townspeople think he is insane. He checks himself into the hospital at St. Rémy and asks his brother, Theo, to send him "The Bedroom" so he can make a copy. That's the one we have. Then he paints a smaller version for his mom and sister. It's at Musée d'Orsay.

"The first painting at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam is supposed to express absolute calm," continues Groom. "He was trying to seduce Gauguin and other artists to Arles to set up an artists' colony, but it all fell through. The second bedroom, the one we have in Chicago, was painted during his hospital stay. That one is not restful."

In three paintings Groom helped museum-goers understand van Gogh's lifelong struggle for domestic tranquility, mental stability and meaningful work. Securing the loan of two of van Gogh's most famous paintings from museums half a world away was a feat very few could have pulled off.

"I will say that was really, really difficult," says Groom, "and I pulled in every chit I had."

Americans are not the only ones who appreciate Groom's work. In April 2016, she received the distinction of the Chevalier in the Légion d'Honneur, the highest of the five levels of the French government's Légion d'Honneur award. In his remarks at the presentation, French Ambassador to the United States Gérard Araud said, "Gloria has dedicated her passion, intelligence, and energy to French painters of the second half of the 19th century. Without her, France would be less known and less loved."

"The Legion of Honor from the French," says Groom, almost in disbelief. "It was like I'd died and gone to heaven."

This spring the curator is preparing a new exhibition showcasing the talents of Paul Gauguin beyond painting. Groom says it will survey the full scope of his media and formats — ceramics, sculpture, works on paper, furniture, even painting on glass.

"It's foregrounding the work he did that people really don't

— For the love of art

By LYNETTE LOBBAN

know and its relationship to his well-known paintings,” says Groom. “Many people don’t realize his considerable achievements as a draftsman, sculptor, ceramist and printmaker within the history of modern art. He was amazing.”

“Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist,” opens June 25 and runs through Sept. 10. After leaving Chicago, the exhibition travels to the Grand Palais in Paris.

“I still remember the first exhibition I saw,” reflects Groom. “It was van Gogh at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I was in first grade. Now I try to create exhibitions that make an impression and live on in catalogues, so years later people can say, ‘Oh, I saw that exhibition.’ To be able to do that, it’s invigorating and exciting.”

OU alumna Gloria Groom is the chair of European Painting and Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago.

