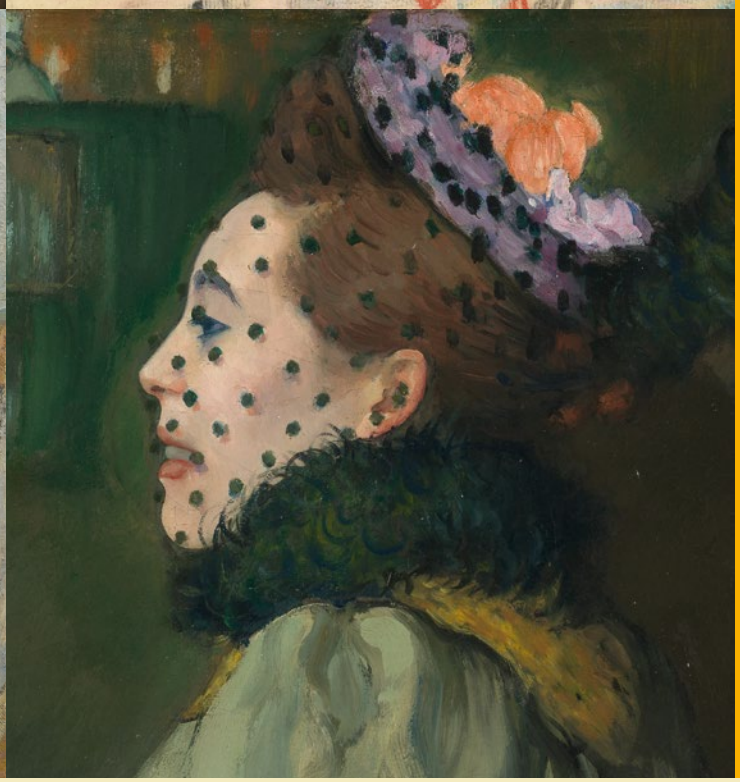
Van Gogh Museum

Amsterdam



Inclusive language style guide

Internal guidelines

Contents

Vincent van Gogh, *Head of a Woman* (*Gordina de Groot*), 1885;

Paul Gauguin, *Study of a Martinican Woman*, 1887;

Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait as a Painter*, 1887–88;

Louis Anquetin, *Woman at the Champs-Élysées by Night*, 1890–91;

All works are from the collection of the Van Gogh Museum.

Foreword

The Van Gogh Museum strives to be inclusive and to communicate with a broad public. When writing an exhibition label, catalogue, poster, newsletter or Facebook post, it is important to be aware of the potential interpretations that might arise from different perspectives. Authors may often be completely unaware of the sensitivity of certain words or topics.

The exhibition *Gauguin and Laval in Martinique* (2018–19) was a concrete reason for us to become more aware of our word choices and narrative explanations; in this case, concerning the colonialism and enslavement that lay behind the painted 'artists' paradise'. This and other experiences have taught us that our museum collection, with its nineteenth-century paintings by Van Gogh and his contemporaries, is more problematic than previously thought.

The Van Gogh Museum established a focus group to undertake further research on this topic and to write an inclusive language style guide for internal use. The group reviewed an extensive inventory of texts about our collection and identified four subject areas where sensitivities need to be acknowledged or discussed and conscious choices made. These topics are specific to our museum collection. Some are closely related to Van Gogh and are addressed within that context, while others are currently part of a broader societal discussion.

— Rural life
— Colonialism
— Gender
— Mental health

The members of the focus group discussed the four topics, associated terms and possible interpretations with each other and with other colleagues and considered alternative options. In drafting this style guide, we solicited advice from external experts and consulted other existing, relevant style guides. The result is not a complete list of right and wrong words to learn by heart, but a guide that identifies several potentially sensitive areas.

The main aim is to offer a practical guide comparable to a 'detector': one only notices offensive or belittling words and stereotypes after being made aware of the sensitivities. But just as often, it is about providing the right context. In Van Gogh's time, ranks and positions, women, colonialism and mental health were generally thought about differently than they are today. This is the message we wish to convey to the reader.

‘I don’t know the future, Theo — but — I do know the eternal law that everything changes.’

Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, on or about 14 July 1885

Language is constantly evolving and this style guide reflects today’s perspective – and will therefore also shift again in future. Stay curious and ask questions. If in doubt about a text, consult the focus group or various external organizations or interest groups. See also the list of relevant organizations mentioned in the Acknowledgements section at the end of this style guide.

The focus group: Ann Blokland (Curator of Education), Merel Dijkhuizen (Editor), Bregje Gerritse (Researcher), Joost van der Hoeven (Researcher) and Harma van Uffelen (Curator of Education).

General writing tips

This style guide provisionally focuses on four topics – rural life, colonialism, gender and mental health – each with its own specific terminology, but starts with some general writing tips for inclusive writing. To this end, we have made grateful use of existing publications. See also the Further reading section at the end of this style guide.

Accessible

— It is preferable to use English terms instead of loanwords.
— Avoid subject-specific jargon. What may be obvious to an art historian may be inaccessible for another reader. Take, for example, ‘dynamic contours’ or ‘linear perspective’.
— Do not turn adjectives into nouns to describe people. For example, instead of writing ‘the disabled’, use ‘people with disabilities’. Preferably put the person first: someone is not a depressive, but experiences depressive emotions.
— Watch out for stereotyping or labelling groups of people. In addition, if a person does not conform to a certain stereotype, avoid explicitly mentioning this. For example, it is not necessary to write ‘working mother’, because by emphasizing this, it gives the impression that it is an exception for mothers to work. There is no need to mention it unless it is important for the particular text.
— Be aware of phrasing using ‘we’. ‘Here, we are …’, ‘We are listening to …’. Who are we? It is questionable as to which readers feel included by this. Instead, it is preferable to write: ‘Here, … can be seen’, or ask: ‘Can you hear …?’

Multi-voiced

— If possible, integrate multiple perspectives (‘voices’) or discussions into a narrative, or choose a personal narrative from an expert to avoid misunderstandings and simplistic explanations.
— Bear in mind that history and art history have often been told from a European (‘Western’ or ‘white’) and masculine perspective. Consider whether it is possible to involve other disciplines (for example, from a cultural-historical or sociological perspective).
— The tendency to place art only in the time in which it was made sometimes limits the possibility of dialogue about the changing value or meaning of things. Mention this difference and/or draw parallels with the present day.

Gender-neutral

— Avoid the use of terms of address that explicitly define a certain gender, such as: ‘Hey guys’, ‘Dear ladies and gentlemen’ or ‘Hi girls’. Alternative options include folks, friends, visitors, invitees, guests, colleagues, readers and everyone. So: ‘Dear readers/visitors’, ‘Welcome everyone’.
— One can also make terms of address or titles gender-neutral by only using the person’s initials or first name, middle name or surname, without preceding it with Mr or Ms.
— Use ‘colleague wanted (x/f/m)’ instead of ‘colleague wanted (m/f)’. The addition of (x/f/m) encourages a broader group of people to feel addressed by the vacancy, also if the job title is traditionally gender specific, such as that of security guard or receptionist.
— If a non-binary person is being addressed, use the singular ‘they’ (‘they/them’). For example: ‘They are going to tell us something’, instead of ‘He/she is going to tell us something’. Where possible, ask which pronouns a person uses. If in doubt, use someone’s name instead of their pronouns.

Inspiring examples

— *Words Matter. An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, National Museum of World Cultures, Amsterdam 2018
— *Diversity & Inclusion Code*, Code Diversiteit & Inclusie, 2021
— *De Incomplete Stijlgids van WOMEN Inc.*, Women Inc., 2024 (in Dutch)

Rural life

Context for the Van Gogh Museum

Van Gogh felt drawn to the countryside his entire life. He had grown up in a small rural village and, after spending periods of time in the city, always longed to return there. In his letters, he wrote extensively about rural life in Nuenen, where he lived and worked from December 1883 until the end of 1885. Van Gogh revered the rural way of life as it had not lost its connection with nature – in contrast to modern, industrialized life in the city. He called it 'a wholly different way of life from ours — civilized people' (Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, 30 April 1885). And for him, this meant a better way of life. Although he had a positive image of 'uncivilized' rural existence, his perspective is typical of the nineteenth century: tainted by contemporary prevailing ideas about social power relations (societal classes), racism and discrimination. In addition, it is the perspective of a privileged pastor's son who had never worked on the land. Of course, the Van Gogh Museum collection also includes other artists who focused actively on depictions of rural life, such as the painters of the French Barbizon School or of the Hague School. In this style guide, however, we take Van Gogh as the main example.

Another practice that we consider completely differently nowadays is that of physiognomy, or face reading. This theory proposed that someone's personality could be deduced from their appearance. People were divided into categories based on their facial characteristics. Van Gogh had already studied the theory in 1880, at the start of his painting career, as had his great inspiration, Jean-François Millet. Today, physiognomy is no longer considered a science. It is considered discriminatory, racist and offensive to connect someone's external features to their personality. This means that certain descriptions by Van Gogh about rural workers and working the land, as well as the way he represents them in his work, require explanation.

Practical examples

Vincent van Gogh,
Sower, 1882
P. and N. de Boer
Foundation, Amsterdam

Vincent van Gogh,
Farm with Stacks of Peat, 1883
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

'This is a sort of cockerel type: a shaven face, fairly sharp nose and chin, the eye small, mouth sunken. Long legs with boots. Then a second sower [...] This is a very different type, with a fringe of beard, broad shoulders, a little stocky, a little like an ox in the sense that his whole appearance has been shaped by working on the land. If you like, more the type of an Eskimo, thick lips, broad nose.'

Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, between 4 and 9 December 1882

When using descriptions or quotes from letters like this, it is recommended to clearly state the nineteenth-century context, the theory of physiognomy and Van Gogh's intentions. It is important to acknowledge that such descriptions are stereotypical or offensive nowadays.

An example of an outdated text accompanying *Farm with Stacks of Peat* (1883): 'After living and working in The Hague for almost two years, Van Gogh moved to the unspoilt countryside of Drenthe in September 1883. He was fascinated by the heathland, peat bogs and simple peasant homes. In a letter to his brother Theo, he described this painting, which depicts primitive huts in which the peat farmers lived: "with a little green wheatfield in the foreground and withered grasses behind the cottage and stacks of peat."'

Van Gogh occasionally used terms like 'peasant' as well as 'primitive' and 'huts' when writing about rural life, and these words can, of course, be used in quotes. However, if adopting these words in your own voice, they can be considered derogatory. For that reason, it is preferable to use more neutral terms, such as 'home' or 'cottage'. Only use the words 'peasant' and 'primitive' in a historical or descriptive context, and place them within quotation marks.

Terms

— Angular/rough/crude/ugly

Background: an old wall text accompanying *Head of a Woman* (1884–85) reads as follows: 'In Nuenen, Van Gogh made a series of studies of the local peasants. He was always looking for the most unusual faces, and emphasized their most striking features – here, the sitter's sharp cheekbones and knobbly chin. This was a way for him to express his ideas about the personalities of the peasants. He saw them as crude and uncultured, but for that very reason as closely linked to nature.'

Suggestion: Consider any use of such descriptions carefully. Instead of saying, 'he saw them as crude and uncultured', one could say: 'Van Gogh wanted to depict the agricultural labourers as being "crude" and "uncultured"', and clearly note the context in which Van Gogh intended to do so, for instance, to symbolize their connection with nature, for which he admired them.

— Comparisons with animals: pig's head, rooster's head, or 'with something of a cow that's lowing'

Background: Van Gogh sometimes compared people's appearances with those of animals; for example, a sower with a rooster. In the biography of the artist Jean-François Millet, he had read that Millet had tried to provide rural workers with an expression that seemed to admit that humans are not always extraordinarily far above animals. Van Gogh was also familiar with physiognomy, as described in the example above, in which human faces were compared with those of animals.

Suggestion: When using such quotes, context and explanation on the background of Van Gogh's ideas regarding comparisons between humans and animals is required.

— Hut/farmer's hut

Background: Van Gogh himself used the Dutch word 'hut' *(la chaumière*), which also exists in English, to describe the homes of 'the potato eaters'. *Collins Dictionary* defines a 'hut' as 'a small house with only one or two rooms, especially one which is made of wood, mud, grass, or stones'. *Words Matter* characterizes the choice of the term 'hut' as placing such homes in a different time and labelling them as simplistic and childlike. It asks the reader, why do we call the homes of some people huts, but not of others? It seems to carry a negative value judgement.

Suggestion: It is preferable to use 'cottage', 'thatched cottage', 'home' or 'small house', possibly with the addition of descriptive characteristics such as 'small' or 'dark'. When using the term 'hut', indicate that this is Van Gogh's word choice.

— Impure/unclean (vs pure/clean)/spoilt (vs unspoilt)/ignorant/ unwitting/uneducated

Background: Like ‘primitive’, these terms are considered to be stereotyping and derogatory; they imply a skewed power relation and have an exclusionary, condescending effect.

Suggestion: Only employ these terms in a historical or descriptive context and use quotation marks around them. See also the term ‘primitive’ in this list of terms.

— Peasants

Background: The term ‘peasant’ refers to poor smallholders, subsistence farmers or agricultural labourers with a low socio-economic status, mainly in a historical context. In the nineteenth century, these rural residents and agricultural labourers were subordinate to a landowner. The word ‘peasant’ is also used more generally to refer to someone of low socio-economic status from the countryside in a historical context or is offensively used to refer to someone who lacks manners; a boorish or rough person.

Suggestion: Consider any use of such descriptions carefully. Instead of writing ‘they were peasants’, be more specific about the intended meaning. For example: ‘people who worked on the land’, ‘who were farm workers’ or even ‘Van Gogh wanted to depict these people as “uncivilized”.’ Make sure to clearly note the context here.

— Primitive/plain/simple/barbaric/uncultivated/uncivilized

Background: the term ‘primitive’ was used for a long time to categorize cultures that were regarded as being simple, ‘barbaric’ and not of this time. Van Gogh often described agricultural labourers as being ‘primitive’ and simple. These were the qualities that he admired in them. Nowadays, such terms are considered to be stereotyping and denigrating; they imply a skewed power dynamic and have an excluding, condescending effect.

Suggestion: the term ‘primitive’ (and other similar terms) can be used in a historical or descriptive context. When doing so, quotation marks should be placed around the term. For example: ‘Van Gogh regarded the agricultural labourers as being “primitive”.’

— Primitivism

Suggestion: The term ‘primitivism’ can be used in a historical or descriptive context. In this case, use quotation marks.

See also the terms in the chapter on colonialism.

Colonialism

Introduction

In recent years the museum world has come under scrutiny in relation to terms and concepts that have their roots in European colonialism and imperialism. The ‘Decolonize the Museum’ movement and ensuing debates, among others, have raised awareness that many museums are directly or indirectly linked to colonialism. How, therefore, should museums handle legacies from the colonial past and tell narratives about this that everyone can relate to?

Language is integral to these questions. The English language contains many words that have colonial or racist undertones and which are derogatory and discriminatory to many people. Oppression of people of colour was not only carried out through physical violence under the colonial system, but also through language. Take, for instance, the replacement of people’s actual names with European names, and the use of nicknames and racial slurs. When writing, it is imperative to be aware of controversial and potentially offensive terms and expressions. In doing so, it is important to be mindful of our own perspectives, while visitors may have different experiences or opinions.

Context for the Van Gogh Museum

At first glance, the Van Gogh Museum collection may appear to have little to do with the colonial past; for instance, there are no historical objects that refer to slavery. On the other hand, the works of art in the museum’s collection all stem from a period when European imperialism was at its height and a colonial world order existed. Although the museum was aware of this, the topic of colonialism was only actively addressed in the preparations for the exhibition *Gauguin and Laval in Martinique* (2018–19). Since then, the museum has devoted considerable time to examining how colonialism has left its traces in the collection, in research and in nineteenth-century art history in general, and about how these should be handled by the museum as an institution. This process and these discussions remain ongoing.

The context in which a given term is used often determines its meaning. For instance, writing about ‘the discovery of Martinique’ may seem innocent, but it in fact implies that this region did not exist before Europeans first encountered it. This line of reasoning denies the existence and history of the people from this region, resulting in the erasure of history.

In spite of this, problematic terms may sometimes be used in a descriptive or historical context. When doing so, always use quotation marks. For example: ‘In the nineteenth century, they were termed “natives”.’ However, it is advised to limit such use as much as possible. When unavoidable, try to indicate why the word has been placed within quotation marks or explain its problematic nature.

Practical examples

Paul Gauguin, *Cleopatra Pot*, 1887–88
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

‘Gauguin portrayed the Egyptian queen Cleopatra on this ceramic vase as a femme fatale, nude and provocative. At the time this brazen attitude was considered offensive, and even more so with the rooting pigs on the back that allude to her earthy physicality. Cleopatra was a classical subject, but Gauguin modelled her in a primitive style as a native Martinique woman. He gave the pot to Theo, aware that its primitive character would appeal to him as well as to Vincent.’

In this old wall text, the historical context is insufficiently explained. The perspective of the artist is adopted and applied to today, among other things by describing the woman as ‘native’ and linking this to the ‘primitive’ character. Typifying the woman as a naked, provocative ‘femme fatale’ goes hand-in-hand with the heterosexual male perspective (‘male gaze’). It is not clarified in the text that in the nineteenth century, it was specifically women of colour who were objectified in this way. For more on the ‘male gaze’ and ‘femme fatale’, see the chapter on gender.

Paul Gauguin, *Study of a Martinican Woman*, 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

As with wall texts, descriptive titles sometimes reflect a specific period. The title of this drawing by Paul Gauguin has been adapted over time. In Dutch, it was initially registered in the inventory book in 1962 as *De n-in* (literally: The N-Word Woman). In 1993, it was included in the book *The Van Gogh Museum: Paintings & Pastels* as *Kop van een n-meisje* (literally: Head of an N-Word Girl). This was then changed to *Kop van vrouw uit Martinique* (literally: Head of a Woman from Martinique). The official English version of the 1993 book included the drawing as *Head of a Girl from Martinique*. In response to the *Gauguin and Laval in Martinique* exhibition (2018–19), the title was changed in both languages to the current *Studie van een Martinikaanse vrouw* in Dutch, and equivalent *Study of a Martinican Woman* in English. Here, it is important to note not only the removal of historically racist slurs over time, but also the replacement of ‘girl’ by ‘woman’ and the emphasis on the work itself as a study, instead of an objectified head. The various titles under which the artwork was catalogued through the years remain stored in the collection management system.

Tips for language use

— Question whether mentioning skin colour or origin/ancestry is relevant to the narrative. Where possible, avoid describing a person's physical features in terms of their gender, background, social position or race. This can come across as exoticizing or objectifying. For example: 'A woman with "Oriental" features'. The term 'Oriental' should be avoided, as it generalizes a diverse group of people from a European gaze. Here, it would be better to use the woman's nationality or country of residence as a description, or the action that is being carried out in the painting, e.g. 'A Vietnamese woman' or 'A woman at the market'.
— Be mindful of your unconscious bias as a writer, and assumptions about the reader. For example: 'People with a different skin colour'; different from whom?
— Where possible, be specific. For example: 'Martinican woman' instead of 'Black woman'; 'Java' or 'Vietnam' as opposed to 'the Far East'. Africa is often also mentioned as a whole ('African art'), although it is an enormously diverse continent. Be careful with descriptions based on a negation (non-Western, non-White, non-European), as they are often generalizing and take whiteness or Europeanness as the default, with everything else as a deviation from this.
— Also be specific regarding historical place names. For instance, always write 'the former Dutch East Indies' in full (including 'former'), to refer to a specific historical period. In today's context, always use current place names. In doing so, always use modern spelling and not old colonial spelling (for instance, Jakarta instead of 'Djakarta' and Bandung instead of 'Bandoeng' in the context of Dutch colonialism, or Mumbai instead of 'Bombay' and Kolkata instead of 'Calcutta' in the context of British colonialism).
— When writing about marginalized groups or individuals, employ the terms used or approved by the respective group. This may involve research. When researching, try to find sources from the group or individuals concerned. For example, when writing about a certain population or ethnic group, search for writing tips published by an organization belonging to or associated with this group.
— Does a quote contain racist or colonial words or expressions? Then make sure it is clear whose words you are quoting. Always place quotes within quotation marks and provide the (art-)historical context, if there is space to do so. Regarding very explicit or offensive content, consider adding a warning or paraphrasing it.
— Draw attention to any sensitive points or difficult issues, but do so carefully and with empathy. Keep informed about various perspectives; and if in any doubt, ask for advice. For example, when writing about a specific marginalized group or region, consider having your texts read by a person from this group or region or deploying a sensitivity reader. Alternatively, if there is time and space, have texts read by a diverse group (not only from the region about which you are writing, for instance, but also diverse in terms of age, education, gender, and so on).

Terms

The publication *Words Matter*, a guide to word choices in the cultural sector published by the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures in 2018, is of great value for its list of terms on this topic. Considering that this is still the most comprehensive and nuanced document on how to handle potentially problematic words in the museum sector, we have adopted many recommendations, word for word in a few cases. Furthermore, several additions have been made and some texts have been written so that they apply to the Van Gogh Museum collection. *Words Matter* is not only a useful guide for specific words, but the contextual essays in the publication also invite readers to reflect on museum practice.

— Civilized (vs uncivilized)

Background: The terms 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' imply that European culture is the norm and qualify other cultures based on the extent to which they have adopted European culture. As with many other terms on this list, these words attest to a colonial world view in which Europe is viewed as superior.

Suggestion: Be careful about the context in using this term. It is preferable to explain how cultures differ rather than making a value judgement.

— Coloured/dark-skinned/dark

Background: 'Coloured' is now a slur word that stems from racialized thinking that positions whiteness as the norm and should not be used. The term is considered derogatory and inappropriate. Other inappropriate terms include 'dark-skinned' or 'dark'.

Suggestions: The word 'coloured' should only be used in quotations from historic source material, in which case use quotation marks. Currently accepted terms include 'Black', 'POC' (people of colour) and 'BIPOC' (Black and Indigenous peoples and people of colour). 'Black' is capitalized because it is a reflection of shared cultures and experiences. Note, however, that these terms are not interchangeable and each describes different identities and groups. For example, using the term POC or BIPOC when only describing a Black person or group of Black people can be seen as dismissive or generalizing. Be as specific as possible, and only describe a person's background, nationality or race when necessary.

— Conquer(ed)

Background: Unlike the word ‘discover(ed)’, the term ‘conquer(ed)’ is at least a better description of what actually happened when, for instance, a European power occupied a Caribbean island. Still, this term has been included here due to the romanticized connotations that it has been given. It implies a rightful capturing of a region, to benefit the malicious, enemy ‘other’. Of course, this was absolutely not the case during colonialism.

Suggestion: Words like ‘annex(ed)’, ‘occupy/occupied’ or ‘colonized’ are more suitable.

— Developed (vs under-developed/undeveloped)/First vs Third World

Background: The term ‘developed’ carries an implicit value judgement; namely that European culture, with its ‘progressive’ thinking, is superior to other civilizations. By considering a culture on the extent of its ‘development’, one is actually measuring the extent to which the culture has adopted the European manner of living. The same applies to the term ‘Third World’, which suggests a hierarchy of countries, with Europe and North America ranked as ‘First’.

Suggestion: Words affiliated with the extent of ‘development’ of a population are generally ill-advised. Be careful about the context when using such terms. It is preferable to explain how cultures differ, without making a value judgement. In addition, it is advisable to replace the terms ‘First’ and ‘Third World’ with ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’. These terms are a way of grouping countries based on their defining characteristics with regard to socioeconomics and politics, with no implied value judgement or hierarchy.

— Discover/discovery

Background: There is nothing wrong with the term ‘discover’ in itself, but it is problematic when it is suggested that an area, population or culture did not exist until Europeans became aware of it. For example, Columbus did not discover North America, but instead colonized it.

Suggestion: Instead of using the word ‘discover’, try to use ‘colonize’ or ‘occupy’. A sentence construction like ‘was the first European to…’ is also more appropriate.

— Exotic

Background: ‘Exotic’ is often used to refer to people (usually people of colour), but it is also a common term to describe plants and animals that have been introduced in a non-native location. In colloquial language ‘exotic’ is used to mean ‘foreign’ or ‘different’. It can also carry an erotic connotation. In descriptions of artworks, the word has often been used to indicate an atmosphere or environment (‘exotic setting’, ‘exotic effect’, ‘exotic scenes’). The term confirms a colonial world view in which Europe is the standard.

Suggestion: The term is applicable when referring to plant and animal species. But it is preferable not to use the word when writing about people or places. Consider which perspective you are writing from. For example, some nineteenth-century artists portray an unrealistic and romanticized image of the countries they visited outside Europe. Using a term like ‘exotic setting’ reinforces this image. The term can be used in a historic or descriptive context. In this case, use quotation marks.

— Golden Age

Background: The term ‘Dutch Golden Age’ was and is used to describe a period of Dutch history that largely aligns with the seventeenth century. It is partly due to the use of this term that the period has invariably been described as one of prosperity and influence. The term ‘Golden Age’ is now controversial, as the considerable wealth implied by the term was inextricably connected to slave labour and exploitation in Dutch colonies. The term describes the period from the perspective of those in power and therefore does not consider the negative sides to this history.

Suggestions: Instead of using ‘Golden Age’, consider using the judgement-free term ‘seventeenth century’ or ‘long seventeenth century’ for dates that fall slightly out of this time period.

— Half-blood (vs full-blood)/half-caste/mulatto/Mestizo

Background: the terms ‘half-blood’ and ‘full-blood’ arose in connection with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories about race. At the time, European scientific thought dictated that blood was the carrier of hierarchical characteristics, whereby one type of blood was superior to others. The term ‘half-blood’ was mostly used for biracial or multiracial people, and is comparable to words like ‘mulatto’ and ‘Mestizo’. The term ‘mulatto’ was used from the seventeenth century to refer to the first generation of children with one parent of colour and one white parent. ‘Mestizo’ arose from Spanish colonization and comes from the Latin word *mixtus*, or ‘mixed’, which has a similar meaning. These terms are now considered highly offensive.

Suggestions: In English, the terms ‘biracial’ and ‘multiracial’ are used. The term ‘mixed race’ is now no longer preferable.

— N-word/Negro

Background: The word ‘Negro’ comes from the Latin *niger*, meaning ‘black’. The term started being used around 1442 by Spanish and Portuguese colonizers to describe the Bantu people they saw in Southern Africa. The term was then later used to describe enslaved people and was associated with racial pseudoscientific theories in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the twentieth century, the term was used to describe Black people in a negative, stereotyping context. On the other hand, it also played a role in anticolonial resistance and in increasing Black empowerment. Nowadays, it is regarded as a highly offensive term.

The N-word, a derivative of the word ‘Negro’, was used primarily in the United States by slave traders and slave holders to describe enslaved people. Although it has now been reclaimed within the Black community as an act of empowerment, it is considered a highly offensive term in all other contexts.

Suggestions: Both of these terms should be strictly avoided in current English usage. Where the term ‘Negro’ arises in quotations in a historical context, it must be placed within quotation marks and the context made clear. The N-word, however, should be replaced with ‘N-word’ in every instance. Where these terms are used in texts, consider adding a content warning or paraphrasing.

— Native

Background: The term native is used to describe plants and animals that emerged from a certain place. In addition, it is used in proper nouns to describe certain Indigenous populations, such as Native Americans. However, it should not be used as a stand-alone noun, such as ‘natives’, as this is historically derogatory. Describing a population or practice as ‘native’ can also be considered as othering. Instead, the term ‘Indigenous’ can be used to describe people who have historically lived in a certain place.

Suggestions: the term ‘native’ can be used to describe plant and animal types specific to a certain place, or in proper nouns to describe identities, such as Native American. In all other cases, it is best to use the term ‘Indigenous’, for example ‘the Indigenous population’ or ‘Indigenous practices’.

— Oriental/Eastern/Orientalism

Background: ‘Orient’ comes from the Latin *oriens*, meaning the East. Originally, the word ‘Oriental’ was used in Europe to describe people or objects stemming from Asia, as the same applies to the concept ‘Eastern’. Both terms are very generalizing, as they refer to a region that comprises the entirety of Eastern Europe and Asia. The countries in this region are very diverse, as are their residents.

The concept of ‘Orientalism’ is used to refer to a nineteenth-century European artistic current, in which European artists imitated or depicted North African, Middle-Eastern and Asian scenes. Orientalist art is inherently misleading, as it pretends to paint an authentic and objective picture of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia, while actually playing on European fantasies of eroticism, mystery and adventure.

Suggestion: Try to be as specific as possible. When describing a depiction of a woman wearing Japanese clothing, do not write ‘She is wearing Oriental clothing’, but ‘She is wearing Japanese clothing’. The term ‘Orientalism’ may be used to refer to the artistic movement. Try to be as specific as possible when using the term.

— Primitive/primitivism

Background: This term was (and is) applied to cultures considered to be simple, 'uncivilized' and not of this time, and to certain groups of people that 'lacked' European characteristics, such as a certain extent of so-called progressive thinking and rationality. The term 'primitive' was and is used for 'non-Western' art. It implies a hierarchy among the various international art traditions, with the European one as the highest ideal. 'Primitive' art is, by definition, considered to be subordinate to the art made in Europe. The term implies connotations such as under-developed, naive, intuitive and childlike, while European art is posited in contrast as being rational, developed, complex and mature.

At the same time, the trend of 'primitivism' entered the visual arts at the end of the nineteenth/start of the twentieth century. Primitivist artists valued cultures and places that they associated with the romance of a simpler way of life that, they reasoned, formed a contrast to the more 'advanced' but also decadent existence in industrialized European cities. The assumption was that 'primitive' cultures and art were less alienated from nature and intuition. Primitivists therefore used artistic tropes and motifs that they deemed 'primitive'; a phenomenon that would now be recognized as cultural appropriation.

The term 'primitivism' is debated, as the cultural appropriation largely occurred in a context in which the cultures concerned were oppressed by European colonizers. Due to the skewed power dynamics, 'primitivism' did not involve any equal or mutual cultural exchange. 'Primitive' cultures were exploited and also often misinterpreted.

Suggestion: The term 'primitive' can be used in a historic or descriptive context. In this case, add quotation marks. The term 'primitivism' can also be used to refer to the artistic movement. When using the term, be aware of the debate surrounding it. Try to reflect this in the text by, for example, providing context for the term. See also the chapter on rural life.

— Race

Background: Race is a debated term that refers to the categorization of humans based on physical characteristics, such as skin colour. Racial thought divides people into groups on the basis of the colour of their skin, with a racist hierarchy in terms of disposition, skills and even behaviour and development. The term 'race' was first used in the English language in the sixteenth century, but became widely used in the eighteenth century, when it served to sort and rank the various peoples of the English colonies.

Racial thought became part and parcel of colonialism as it was used to reduce some humans, mainly people of African descent, to chattel status, thus justifying their enslavement. In colonial ideologies, white Europeans were deemed to stand at the top of the racial hierarchy.

Although there is no biological reasoning behind race, racial thought has generated societal consequences, such as discrimination, violence, prejudice and inequality. Racism is an expression of discrimination and prejudice, based on the fabricated assumption of the superiority of one group above another.

Suggestions: There is no alternative for this term. Some people place the term between quotation marks to acknowledge its controversy. Racism can be used as a term, as it acknowledges the discriminatory practices that are based on racial thought.

— Sensual

Background: In the context of colonialism, the use of the word 'sensual' to typify a woman of colour is problematic, because it is stereotyping and reduces the woman to an object of desire. Colonial travel literature contains all kinds of erotic fantasies about women of colour, and the term 'sensual' is often used in this literature.

Suggestion: Try to be aware of the colonial background of the depiction of women of colour, and ideally avoid terms such as 'sensual'. See also the explanation on the 'male gaze', in the chapter on gender.

— Skin colour

Background: The term 'skin colour' is sometimes used to refer to a colour of paint or pencil/crayon used to depict someone's skin. However, there is no such thing as a single or default skin colour.

Suggestions: When describing a colour used to paint or depict skin, or a colour that can be seen as a skin colour, it is best to describe the colour or hue itself and avoid the term 'skin colour'.

— Slave

Background: The term 'slave' disregards a person's humanity and reduces them to nothing more than someone else's property. Nobody identifies as a slave. Rather, someone is forced into slavery through the violence and duress of another person.

Suggestions: 'enslaved person' or 'people forced into slavery'.

— Tropics/tropical

Background: The words 'tropics' and 'tropical' are essentially geographical and climatological terms. 'The tropics' is used to describe the regions of the Earth surrounding the Equator. The climate in this region is generally warm and humid, and is termed 'tropical'. The use of these terms to describe this climate is not problematic. However, the use of these terms to typify a person, a group of people or a specific place is not recommended. Like the terms 'Eastern' and 'Oriental', the term 'tropical' reduces someone to a generality, and throws a great diversity of people into the same pot. It does not tell us much more than that someone is 'not white' or 'not European'.

Suggestions: As with other generalized, reductive terms, it is recommended to be as specific as possible. So, do not write: 'She was born in the tropics', but: 'She was born in Martinique'. Instead of: 'Martinique is a tropical island', it is recommended to write: 'Martinique is a Caribbean island'.

— Western

Background: The term ‘Western’ represents a mental and physical separation of the world, in which people, cultures, religions and regions are hierarchically divided. As in every ranking order, the underlying differences are highlighted. The term is often used to indicate the opposition with ‘non-Western’. See also the terms ‘developed’ vs ‘undeveloped’ and ‘First World’ vs ‘Third World’, as explained above.

Suggestion: Be as specific as possible when it comes to countries and populations. For example, instead of writing ‘Western’, consider the specific lens being used here. Is it a European lens or North American lens? Consider alternative options to ‘Western’ that do not imply a hierarchy, such as ‘Global North’. Instead of non-Western, state the country or population being referred to, instead of defining it by what it is not.

— Wild/savage

Background: These terms literally mean fierce, feral, ferocious, untamed and asocial. They often crop up in the Van Gogh Museum in connection with Paul Gauguin. Gauguin profiled himself using the French word *sauvage*, to refer to his unpolished appearance and painting style. When quoting Gauguin, these terms can be included, but in current language use, they have a derogatory connotation. They reduce humans to something almost animal-like. In the time of colonialism, this made it easier to legitimize the mistreatment of colonized and enslaved people.

Suggestions: Only use these terms in a historic context. In all other cases, try to be as specific as possible when describing people or populations. Do not write: ‘Before the French colonized Martinique, it was an island of savages’, but: ‘Before the French colonized Martinique, the island was inhabited by the Taino people.’

Gender

Introduction

Our language use is often unconsciously shaped by gender stereotypes. Although the titles of ‘artist’ and ‘painter’ are gender-neutral, writers often add the adjective ‘female’ for clarity; ‘female artist’ or ‘female painter’. While this is not problematic per se, it underlines the masculine role as the default, and female participation as an ‘exception to the rule’. This information is unnecessary, as we would not write ‘the male artist’ or ‘the painter, who was a man’. In such cases, it is better to leave this information out. At the same time, by expressly mentioning the role of women where this is an important detail, women’s participation within the art world becomes more visible. In doing so, however, it is important that we do not confirm the position of women as outliers.

Another factor to pay attention to is intersectional language use concerning gender. The term ’intersectional’ refers to the idea that people may face multiple, overlapping oppressions as a result of different facets of their identity. For example, women of colour and men of colour have historically been referred to differently from white women or men; for instance, through the use of diminishing terms like ‘girl’ or ‘boy’ in place of ‘woman’ or ‘man’.

In addition, our language is changing to be more inclusive of non-binary and transgender people (i.e. people who identify outside the binary options of man or woman, or whose gender identity does not conform to their assigned sex). Traditional language use can inadvertently exclude non-binary and trans people. The museum strives for inclusion and diversity, which can easily be conveyed through language. For that reason, it is preferable to address visitors as ‘Dear visitors’, instead of as ‘Dear ladies and gentlemen’. To address a letter or email, write ‘Dear reader’ instead of ‘Dear Sir/Madam’. The principle here is that where the person’s gender is unknown or irrelevant, or where it concerns a group of people, inclusive alternatives can be used.

Context for the Van Gogh Museum

It is important to realize that a masculine perspective is still often the unremarked-upon standard, and is even celebrated in the Van Gogh Museum’s collection (99% of which comprises works by male artists). The words and formulations used are often inadvertently tainted by internalized, ‘traditional’ notions of what is typically masculine or feminine. In addition, authors habitually write from an art-historical perspective when clarifying what an artist living in a particular context and period intended to portray with their work. In doing so, the masculine, nineteenth-century

perspective is often adopted in the choice of words of present-day writers. In this sense, Van Gogh is also a product of his time. Authors should reflect on the potential dissonance from today's understanding of gender relations and difference.

In addition to the question of a masculine-centric perspective on the collection, the collection also contains a number of artworks painted from the so-called 'male gaze': male artists who depicted (naked) women as passive objects of lust and desire. The heterosexual male perspective of women results in the stereotyping of women in these works.

It is good to state how the museum's collection, and Van Gogh's conceptions, were shaped by typical nineteenth-century ideas and (heterosexual) notions, in particular those held by upper-class white men.

Practical examples

Degas, *Breakfast after the Bath*, c. 1894
Private collection

Excerpt from an old wall text:
'Degas depicted robust women, like this somewhat awkwardly stooping nude, in swiftly drawn lines. They are decidedly not classic beauties, but this was precisely what appealed to Van Gogh.'

Rewritten suggestion:
'Degas depicted this nude in swiftly drawn lines, as if by a fleeting glance that was captured very directly. By not idealizing the woman, he created the illusion that the depiction was a snapshot of real life. This appealed to Van Gogh.'

Rewritten suggestion, with an explanation of the context:
'One could call Degas's perspective of this naked woman voyeuristic. We peek at an intimate moment as if we are spectators, while the woman is drying herself. Through this choice, Degas aimed to create a sense of reality in the depiction, instead of idealism; an idea that aligned with the time period.'

Gustave Boulanger, *Phryne*, 1850
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Excerpt from an old wall text:
'This voluptuous nude represents the classical courtesan Phryne. The sensual woman with Oriental features gazes out at us brazenly. French artist Gustave Boulanger had worked in Algeria for many years prior to painting this picture. For some artists an exotic setting served as an excuse for rendering this kind of explicit nude.'

Rewritten suggestion:
'Gustave Boulanger spent a long time working in Algeria. Like many other artists of his time, he observed the country and its inhabitants through a Western European and colonial lens. From that perspective, it was justifiable to paint explicit nudes, such as this woman, and to place them in an "exotic" setting. As the observer, one can now conclude that this is the perspective of a heterosexual man who turned the body of this naked woman into an object of desire.'

Another rewritten suggestion:
'This nude represents the classical courtesan Phryne. Before the French artist Gustave Boulanger made this painting, he spent a long time working in Algeria. For some artists, an "exotic" setting served as an excuse for rendering this kind of nude. Unfortunately, we do not know who the model was. She may have been a professional painter's model.'

See the chapter on colonialism for more information about the term 'exotic'.

Excerpts from museum texts for the exhibition *Easy Virtue. Prostitution in French Art 1850–1910* (2016), in which the context is particularly suggestive and stereotyping:
'The fringes of society were also part of this modern theme. Prostitution, which was ubiquitous in the French capital, proved to be a fascinating subject for artists.'

In this excerpt, a link is made between sex workers and the fringes of society; a negative connotation.

'Unregistered prostitutes could be imprisoned without trial, so they did their best to be unrecognizable as such. As a result, it was frequently difficult to distinguish between respectable women and prostitutes on the streets of Paris.'

In this museum text, 'respectable women' and sex workers are posed as opposites, which can be seen as stigmatizing.

Moreover, the term 'prostitute' in itself can be seen as stigmatizing. On that matter, see the recommendation in the list of terms ('sex worker').

Tips for language use

— Contextualize artworks and quotations and potentially add a contemporary perspective.
— Make women visible and state their role; in this way, their presence is active rather than passive.
— Acknowledge that nineteenth-century ideas still persist to this day, if only because of the need to rely on historical sources.

When re-reading a text and checking gender-related terms, ask the following questions:

— If you have mentioned a person's sex or gender, question whether this is necessary information or whether it can be left out. A tip for doing so is to switch the gender: would you write 'male director'? Most likely not. In which case, it is not necessary to write 'female director'.
— Are stereotypes used in the text, or is information mentioned that contradicts or contrasts with generally held expectations? For example: 'the working mother' or 'the respectable prostitute'. Consider whether this is necessary.
— Would the same information and description be provided when writing about someone of a different gender? For example, it is often noted if women are married or mothers, even if this information is not relevant. Always consider why certain information is provided. If it does not add anything, or if it would not be provided when writing about a man, then leave it out.
— Check the use of titles and forms of address (first name and surname, or one of the two). Is the same format used for both men and women?
For example: 'Etel Adnan and Vincent van Gogh'; not 'Etel and Van Gogh'.
Or: 'Hendrik Willem Mesdag and Sientje Mesdag'; not 'Mesdag and Sientje'.
Or: 'Dr Koen van Straaten and Dr Elise van de Berg'; not 'Dr Koen van Straaten and Elise van de Berg'. There is a tendency to address men with their title, first and last names, and women only with their first name.
— Are words including 'man' or 'men' used to refer to people who may not be men? For instance, it is preferable to use 'firefighter' instead of 'fireman'.
— Use the neutral variant for professions for men, women and non-binary people, such as 'chair' instead of 'chairman/woman' or 'actor' instead of 'actress'.
— Where possible, make women visible through language. For example: 'Bredberg painted this self-portrait when she lived as an artist in Paris.' In doing so, however, be careful to leave out unnecessary descriptions of a person's gender and make sure to check which pronouns the person uses.

When composing this checklist, we made use of the article 'Gender-Inclusive Language' by the University of North Carolina and *De Incomplete Stijlgids* by WOMEN Inc. (2019). See also the Further reading section at the end of this style guide.

Terms

— Fallen woman

Background: A ‘fallen woman’ is a euphemism for a woman who has ruined her reputation by having sex with someone other than her legal partner. It is also a coded term for a sex worker. Nowadays, this typical nineteenth-century expression is outdated.

Suggestion: Only use this term where relevant to the context of a specific artwork, and place it in quotation marks. Explain that it is an outdated term that now has a negative connotation.

— Femme fatale/seductress (vs womanizer)

Background: These terms refer to an archetype that arises in art and literature, portrayed as a woman who uses her beauty and sexuality to seduce men and plunge them into ruin.

Suggestion: Avoid these terms as far as possible, as they conjure a sexist archetype. The terms can be used in a historic or descriptive context. In that case, use quotation marks.

— Girl/boy vs woman/man

Background: The term ‘girl’ has historically also been applied to adult women, and ‘boy’ to adult men. Calling adult women ‘girls’ diminishes their status and equality to adult men. Especially in a derogatory, racialized context, the terms ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ have been used as a tool to diminish the maturity and independence of Black and POC adults by their oppressors.

Suggestions: Make sure to use the terms ‘woman’/‘women’ and ‘man’/‘men’ when talking about female or male identifying adults. In addition, check whether it is necessary to mention gender, or whether gender-neutral options should be used if the person being described is non-binary or transgender.

— Male/female

Background: The term ‘female’ is also often used unconsciously to denote that, contrary to expectation, a certain position is being carried out by a woman. For example, ‘female director’. Adding the adjective ‘male’ is much less common.

Suggestion: Try to limit the use of ‘male’ or ‘female’ as an adjective where it is not necessary to clarify the person’s gender, as its use applies gender-specific characteristics to a person. Where the person’s gender is important to the narrative, their identity can be referred to in other ways, e.g. ‘Bredberg painted this self-portrait when she lived as an artist in Paris’, or ‘as a woman, Bredberg …’.

— Prostitute/courtesan/loose woman/whore

Background: These terms refer (mainly) to women who, as a profession or to earn money, carry out sexual acts for payment. The word ‘prostitute’, like ‘courtesan’, stems from the French language and roughly translates as ‘someone who is made available for sex’.

Suggestion: ‘Prostitute’ and ‘courtesan’ are appropriate terms within a nineteenth-century context. However, if using the term in a contemporary context, choose the alternative ‘sex worker’ and replace ‘prostitution’ with ‘sex work’. Sex workers provide a sexual or erotic service; their bodies are not passively ‘made available’. In addition, the term ‘sex worker’ is gender-neutral.

— Shameless/impure/challenging/sensual

Background: These terms are not problematic in themselves; they only become so when used in a certain context. Who decides what is shameless, impure, challenging or sensual? Often, the use of these words goes hand-in-hand with the heterosexual male gaze, focused on (depictions of) women and judgements of these women.

Suggestion: Be careful about using such terms that contain a value judgement; pay attention to the context in which they are used and why. Consider whose perspective or narrative is being expressed.

— Virginal

Background: This term is often used to refer to something that is pristine, for instance a white sheet of paper with no marks or a layer of snow that nobody has yet stepped on. The term can also be seen as unequal and sexist, as ‘virgin’ is often associated with women and not with men, and certain value judgements accompany it.

Suggestion: Avoid the use of this term. There are plenty of other words to choose from, such as: immaculate, untouched, pristine, neat, clear. Be careful: only use these descriptors when talking about objects (the immaculate sheet of paper, the pristine canvas), and not for people, as the terms can then be seen as expressing a value judgement and objectifying a person’s body or appearance (e.g. the ‘pristine’ woman).

— Whore’s prison (Saint-Lazare)

Background: Saint-Lazare was a women’s prison in nineteenth-century Paris in which many sex workers were imprisoned, as sex work was illegal. It was commonly referred to as the ‘whore’s prison’.

Suggestion: Do not use this expression. Explain what it was, and instead use ‘Saint-Lazare prison’, ‘women’s prison’ or ‘prison for women’.

Mental health

Introduction

One in four people worldwide will experience mental health issues such as depression or anxiety at some point in their lives. Although mental health issues are thus very prevalent, they are still stigmatized, associated with negative stereotypes and misunderstood. It is therefore important to handle this topic with care and to approach it from the perspective of people experiencing psychological difficulties.

In addition to consciously handling words that refer to mental health, it is also important to appreciate that the topic in itself can be sensitive or even confrontational for people experiencing certain difficulties. So, do not handle it too lightly or without thought. Try to put yourself in the shoes of those experiencing mental health difficulties who see, read or hear your words. How will it affect them?

Mental health issues should not be taboo. They are very common human experiences. They can be addressed, but it is important to remain matter-of-fact and to avoid getting carried away with negative depictions.

Only refer to a person's mental state when relevant to the narrative, and preferably in 'person-first' language: i.e. the person comes first, not their illness. There are two accepted ways of writing about a person's mental health status, abilities or disabilities in English, namely:

— Identity-first language (e.g. 'He was a schizophrenic artist')
— Person-first language (e.g. 'He was an artist with/who had schizophrenia')

Some people prefer identity-first language, as it is also common to use such language when writing about other identities, e.g. LGBTQ+ person, Black person, Asian person, Dutch person, and so on. However, other people prefer person-first language when it comes to ability and mental health, as they wish to be seen as a whole person regardless of their ability or mental health. At the Van Gogh Museum, we have chosen to consistently apply person-first language.

One type of language that should be avoided is victimizing language, e.g. 'An artist who suffers from schizophrenia'.

Avoid us/them contrasts: people experiencing mental health issues are not another 'type' of person, but just individuals like anyone else. Do not use terms associated with mental health issues to paint negative pictures of people, matters or events, such as 'crazy lady' or 'hysterical lady' when describing a woman who is angry, or 'lunatic' for someone who is acting boldly or strangely, or 'depressing art'.

Context for the Van Gogh Museum

In the nineteenth century, it was thought that artists, as creative spirits, had an oversensitive nervous system. Van Gogh also thought that artists were more susceptible to psychological illnesses than others. This assumption still prevails, in the misunderstanding that there is a connection between psychological illnesses and special, misunderstood talent.

During a psychological crisis on 23 December 1888, Vincent van Gogh cut off his left ear and, when the crises or 'attacks' kept returning, voluntarily admitted himself to (what would now be called) a mental health institution. In the institution, he experienced repeated 'attacks', that were diagnosed by his physicians as a form of epilepsy. There has been much speculation about the cause of the 'attacks', but the final conclusion is that it can no longer be determined. However, it is likely that his condition during several of the 'attacks' would now be considered as psychosis: he experienced auditory and possibly also visual hallucinations, violent nightmares and delusions that led to serious disturbances, as a result of which he sometimes posed a danger to himself. During and after a crisis, he could not or could hardly work, but he picked it up once again as soon as his condition permitted. This says a lot about his willpower and drive.

After his death, Van Gogh became known as the archetype of the 'crazy genius' artist, who was able to channel so many emotions through his work precisely because of his mental illness. This image is false: rather, Van Gogh was the talented painter that he was despite his psychological illnesses. It is important to continue to debunk this myth.

Practical example

Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1889
National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo

In a press release about the painting on the left, the Van Gogh Museum wrote:

'... unlike those two latter works, the Oslo self-portrait firmly depicts someone who is mentally ill. Van Gogh portrayed himself with his head slightly bowed and his body turned somewhat away from the viewer. His timid, sideways glance is easily recognizable and is often found in patients suffering from depression and psychosis.'

The final sentence is particularly stereotyping: people who experience mental health issues do not look a certain, recognizable way, although this is typically depicted in films or books, for instance.

Terms

The *Samen Sterk zonder Stigma foundation* (‘Strong together, without stigma’) has published valuable advice on this topic, which has largely been adopted here.

— Asylum/psychiatric institution/mental hospital

Background: In 1889, Van Gogh voluntarily admitted himself to the *Maison de santé* in Saint-Rémy: a private institution focused on treating *aliénés* (‘lunatics’). Considering that Van Gogh never received treatment from a psychiatrist (see also the terms doctor/physician/psychiatrist), one could say that he was therefore also never in a psychiatric institution. Still, the institution in Saint-Rémy was focused on treating people with mental health issues and continues to do so.

Suggestion: When writing about Van Gogh’s stay in Saint-Rémy, it is preferable to write in terms of an ‘institution’ or ‘psychiatric institution’, because the term ‘institution’ is more neutral than ‘asylum’ and adding ‘psychiatric’ makes it clear that people with mental health issues stayed there. In Arles, Van Gogh stayed in a general (city) hospital.

Advert for the *Maison de santé* in Saint-Rémy
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Tralbaut archive)

— Breakdown/crisis/attack

Background: As Van Gogh was never diagnosed and the exact nature of his mental illness is unknown, his repeated ‘episodes’ are often referred to as ‘mental breakdowns’ or ‘crises’. He himself often termed them ‘attacks’. In texts and catalogues, the terms ‘nervous breakdown’ or ‘attack’ are also used, but these are very old-fashioned.

Suggestion: ’Mental health crisis’ is now the most accepted general term for crises that occur as a result of various mental health issues, to describe how a certain emotional state imposes itself on someone unintentionally but unstoppably. Van Gogh used the term ‘attack’ in this context. ‘Attack’ can be used in the compound noun ‘panic attack’, when describing an anxiety-related attack.

The word ‘episode(s)’ has a strong medical connotation linked with specific diagnoses, e.g. epileptic, schizophrenic or depressive episode. If the specific diagnosis is unknown, it is therefore better to avoid this term. It is also preferable to avoid ‘nervous breakdown’. This term refers too strongly to a (temporary or otherwise) weakness of character, that can be blamed on the person.

— Crazy/lunatic/mad/insane/deranged

Background: The above-mentioned words were once very usual terms to use, but are now regarded as offensive. Van Gogh used some of these terms in his letters to describe his condition.

Suggestion: Do not use these words, unless they are part of a quote that is essential to the narrative. In that case, only use them when quoting the source and place them in context.

— Doctor/physician/psychiatrist

Background: In Van Gogh's time, it was mainly physicians or doctors who treated him at the mental health institution in Saint-Rémy and at the hospital in Arles, as psychiatry did not yet exist as a specialism. So, they were not psychiatrists as we understand them today. A psychiatrist is a specialist in the area of mental health.

Suggestion: Depending on the (historical) context, use 'physician', 'doctor' or 'psychiatrist'.

— Mental illness/mental problems (also: mental disease/nervous disorder)

Background: 'Mental illness' is an umbrella term for many different psychological conditions that affect how someone acts, thinks, feels or experiences the world around them. Mental illnesses are also known as mental disorders or conditions or mental health issues and vary enormously in their symptoms and severity.

Suggestion: The terms 'mental health issue' and 'mental illness' are recommended for general use. This is also because in many cases, the specific diagnosis is not known. For that reason, it is preferable to avoid terms like 'disorder' or 'condition', which suggest a certain diagnosis. The same goes for 'psychiatric' or 'psychological', which suggest a medical connotation and diagnosis.

— Patient/psychiatric patient

Background: Characterizing people experiencing mental health issues as 'ill' or as 'patients' would indicate that there is something wrong with them, or that they need medical help, while this is not always the case. On the other hand, it is acknowledged that mental illnesses are illnesses like any other, and that no distinction should be made between physical and mental health issues. Mental health issues are very diverse, as are the people who experience them, and so opinions on these terms also differ.

Suggestion: Only use the term 'psychiatric patient' in very limited cases. A person is only a 'psychiatric patient' when physically in front of a psychiatrist for a consultation or treatment. In every other context, this term is not appropriate. Being a patient is not a part of one's identity. Van Gogh was a patient at the hospital in Arles and at the institution in Saint-Rémy. He was

admitted there for treatment, voluntarily or forced. It is better to write that someone is experiencing mental health issues or mental illness, or receiving care for mental health issues or mental illness.

— Psychosis

Background: 'Psychosis' is a general term used to describe symptoms of certain mental illnesses, including hallucinations, delusions and the loss of a sense of reality. Be careful when applying this word to Van Gogh, as not every crisis he experienced involved psychosis. It is likely that his first crisis in Arles (when he cut off his ear) and his first crisis in Saint-Rémy did involve psychosis. For Van Gogh, his psychoses were often followed by depression, such as after his first crisis in Saint-Rémy.

Suggestion: Only use the term 'psychosis' where it applies. Instead of describing someone as 'psychotic', describe them as 'someone experiencing psychosis'.

— Self-harm/self-injury/self-mutilation (in the context of Van Gogh cutting off his ear)

Suggestion: 'Self-harm' is the preferred term. It is preferable to avoid 'self-mutilation' due to the negative connotation, which can make it appear that mutilation is the aim of the act.

— Suicide/committing suicide

Background: The World Health Organization recommends avoiding language use that sensationalizes or normalizes suicide. So, do not describe a suicide attempt as 'successful' or 'failed'. Some people find the word 'commit'/'committing', in combination with suicide, to imply criminal activity, while others find it a neutral term.

Suggestion: 'Suicide' is the preferred term. Instead of writing 'committed suicide', use 'died by suicide'. 'Taking or ending one's life' can also be used. 'Killing oneself' and 'self-inflicted death' are problematic terms. They imply an active decision, while many people who take their own lives or die by suicide do not do so as a result of free choice but as the consequence of mental health issues. In publications mentioning suicide, consider including a reference to *Stichting 113 Zelfmoordpreventie* (the Dutch suicide prevention helpline) or to https://findahelpline.com.

Acknowledgements

In composing this style guide, the Van Gogh Museum adopted the advice of various organizations and experts.

The authors would like to thank:

— Emi Howard, translator
— Kate Bell, copy-editor
— Prof. Dr Eliza Steinbock, Chair in Transgender Studies, Art and Cultural Activism, Director of the Centre for Gender and Diversity, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University
— Dr Rose Paquet, International Museum and Cultural Heritage Consultant and Public Scholar; Co-Founder and Co-Director of The Incluseum
— Remi Poindexter, doctoral candidate at The Graduate Center, CUNY, whose research focuses on images of the French Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
— *Terminologiewerkgroep Rijksmuseum* (Rijksmuseum terminology working group)
— The *Sporen van slavernij en koloniaal verleden* ('Traces of slavery and the colonial past') project research by the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency
— Ghyslaine Tromp and the Beeldbrekers team at the Van Gogh Museum
— Kees Dijkman and Judith de Laat from the *Samen Sterk zonder Stigma foundation* ('Strong together, without stigma')
— Sander Heithuis and Karlijn Straver from WOMEN Inc.
— Justin Waerts, art and heritage specialist (including in the area of post-colonialism)
— *Digitaal Dekoloniseren 2021* ('Digital Decolonization 2021') heritage lab, Reinwardt Academy and the *Digitaal Erfgoed* ('Digital Heritage') network

Further reading

Colonialism

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— *Inclusive* Language Guide: Race & Ethnicity, Sheridan College, Ontario
— *Style Guide*, Washington University, St Louis
— *Words Matter. An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, National Museum of World Cultures, Amsterdam 2018
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Gender

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‘… it’s as interesting and as difficult to say a thing well as to paint a thing.’

Vincent van Gogh to Emile Bernard, Arles, 19 April 1888