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# New ways of looking

## Adapting practices for a culturally diverse population

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The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam sets out to make the life and work of Vincent van Gogh and his time accessible to as many people as possible in the hope of inspiring them. It focuses both on those who already have an interest in Van Gogh and are aware of the value that art offers them (the millions of Van Gogh fans worldwide), and those who have not grown up with the same opportunities to discover how culture can inspire a better understanding of themselves, others and the world around them.

Vincent van Gogh's immense fame, colourful work and compelling life story make him the ideal figure to lower the threshold for cultural participation. The Van Gogh Museum's organisation-wide strategic education plan concentrates on four groups to this end:

- *Youth (schools and families)*  
 The museum believes that every child should be able to discover Van Gogh – and culture more broadly – regardless of their background or home situation. To this end, it has developed a coherent

offering for families and schools at the museum, via outreach and online.

- *Young Amsterdam residents*

The Van Gogh Museum wants to be accessible to all the people of Amsterdam. Since 2004, it has organised a programme of cross-media events on Friday evenings that specifically target local people aged 18-30.

- *Disabled people*

The museum believes that disability should in no way prevent people from visiting the museum. Hence, it offers accessible content for visually or hearing-impaired visitors and adaptations have been made to the building, facilities and services.

- *Vulnerable elderly people*

The ageing population means that an increasing number of older people are at risk of social exclusion. Our *Elderly meet Van Gogh* outreach programme is intended to get elderly people active and, through Van Gogh, to help them discover what they know and are capable of.



Workshop material: cut out images from works by Gauguin and Laval. Photo: Randy Da-Costa

### Young Amsterdam residents

The 18-30 age group is Amsterdam's largest, yet one that is traditionally less likely to visit museums. The Van Gogh Museum has been learning how to reach and engage with culturally-minded young local people through its *Vincent on Friday* events – a programme centred on co-creation, which has been running since 2004. We recognise that a constant effort is required to maintain the participation of this target group and it is part of our mission to invest systematically in this public of the future. In doing so, we tended to approach our young Amsterdam residents as a homogeneous group, which we sought to inspire through a cross-media programme of events. We gradually realised, however, that the group is much more diverse than we have reached so far. The growing group<sup>1</sup> of young citizens with a migrant background<sup>2</sup> does not find its way readily

to traditional cultural institutions like the Van Gogh Museum, and the museum does not know them well enough to lower the threshold.<sup>3</sup> A gulf threatens to develop between the Van Gogh Museum and a rapidly growing group that will soon account for a third of the city's population.

To address this issue, the Van Gogh Museum launched *Van Gogh Connects* in 2017: a four-year learning programme, in which the museum is working with the target group and the *Impact Centre Erasmus* (ICE, Erasmus University Rotterdam) on an impact study to determine how we can become and remain more relevant to young Amsterdam residents with a migrant background. We focus to this end on the four largest groups: young people with Surinamese, Turkish, Antillean or Moroccan roots. The programme is based on pilots which use an integrated approach to test ways of promoting inclusion through our Education & Interpretation, Marketing Communications, Hospitality and HRM departments.

We have learned from other participation projects that you need to give the target group a permanent voice. This takes the form within *Van Gogh Connects* of a 'Think Tank' made up of 24 Amsterdam students and young professionals with non-Western migrant roots between the ages of eighteen and thirty. Our collaboration with them is not limited to thinking and talking: we also involve them in the development and implementation of new activities. The Think Tank's chief goals are to:

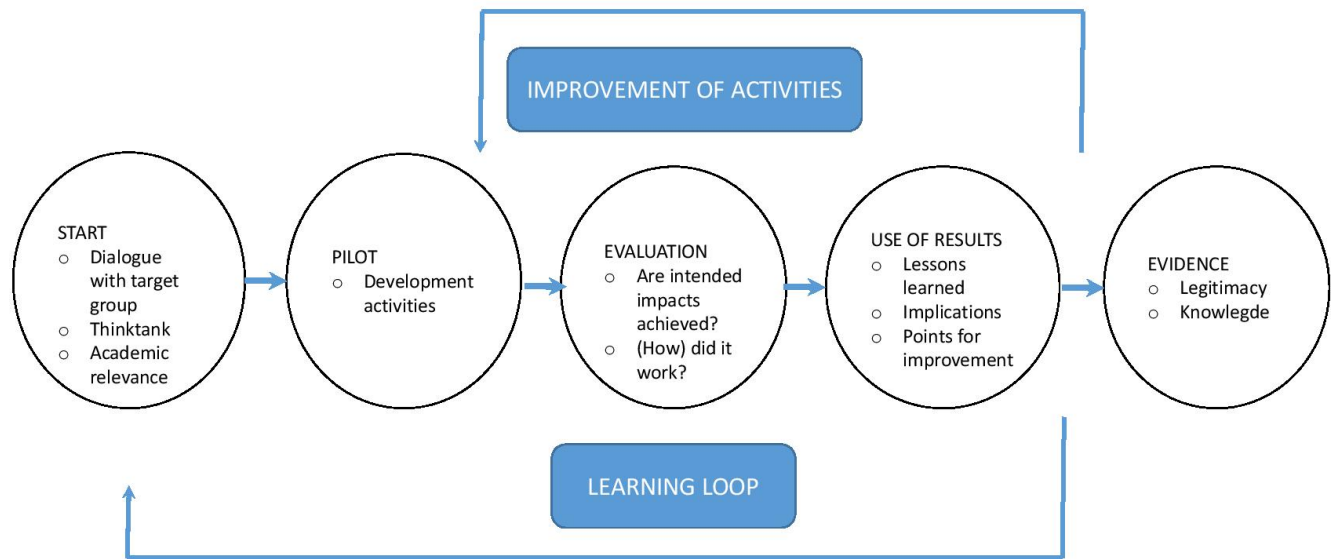


Figure 1. *Van Gogh Connects* iterative process. Source: Van Gogh Museum

- create a dialogue between the target group and the museum;
- develop relations with key figures;
- establish a free space for collaboration with the target group (governance change) within the Van Gogh Museum organisation;
- set up experiments and activities with them to identify relevance.

The exhibition *Gauguin & Laval in Martinique*, which opened in the autumn of 2018, presented a good opportunity to look beyond Vincent van Gogh with our Think Tank: to examine artworks with ‘exotic’ themes produced in a colonial context. There was some initial hesitancy on our part, because at first

sight paintings like Gauguin’s *Mango Trees, Martinique* (1887) from the Van Gogh Museum’s own collection, did not seem especially problematic.

### Fresh view

The exhibition focused on a journey that two 19<sup>th</sup> century artist friends made to the island of Martinique, a French colony located in the Caribbean, and on the artworks they produced there. Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) and Charles Laval (1862–1894) had tired of decadent metropolitan life and went off in search of an unspoiled, more ‘primitive’ world and new subject matter with which to break through into the Paris art world. Although their stay on the island was short, the experience

proved extremely important to their further artistic development.

In the paintings and drawings that Gauguin and Laval made of Martinique, the island invariably features as an exotic and uncomplicated paradise. Their colourful, idyllic images of the local nature and inhabitants are subjective and selective and fail to show the harsh reality of everyday life in the French colony. We were confronted with this conclusion during the preparations for the exhibition. Gauguin and Laval's artworks are part of the tradition in Western painting of depicting the Caribbean as a paradise of sandy beaches and swaying palm trees<sup>4</sup> – a cliché image that still applies today. Their paintings are otherwise populated mainly by black women, who stroll around the landscape, languid and relaxed.

The reality was different: slavery had been abolished barely 40 years earlier when Gauguin and Laval arrived in Martinique in 1887 and the old power structures remained in place. The more onerous work was done by women of African origin, who were widely described in the travel literature of the time as a tourist attraction 'likely to impress the artistic observer'.<sup>5</sup> They included the *porteuses*, who walked barefoot for many kilometres between the plantations and the markets in town carrying heavy loads of fruit or other produce on their heads. Gauguin viewed this primarily as picturesque, his exoticising gaze evident from this quotation:



*Martinique, Sur la route*, 1899. Photo: André Salles.  
Collection Société de Géographie



Paul Gauguin, *The Mango Trees, Martinique, 1887*.  
Collection Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent  
van Gogh Foundation)

*'The shapes and forms of the people are most appealing to me. Every day there is a constant coming and going of negro women, dressed up in coloured clothes, with graceful movements of infinite variety. [...] Their gestures are very distinctive, and the hands play a great role in harmony with the swaying of the hips.'*<sup>6</sup>

How were we to raise these issues concerning the images in the drawings and paintings without overlooking their beauty? Museums have set out traditionally to present art and the artist's intentions objectively, providing no more than an art-historical context for the exhibited works. In this instance, however, we felt it necessary also to inform museum visitors about the historical and sociocultural context

of Martinique and its inhabitants. We made it clear in our information texts that Gauguin and Laval's gaze was a subjective Western one and that there was much it did *not* show. We stated what they had left out of their pictures. These were children of their time and, as Frenchman, they felt entirely comfortable in the French colony. Shortly after arriving, Gauguin wrote revealingly in a letter:

*'We are at present lodging in a negro hut, and it is paradise. Below us is a sea fringed with coco trees, above are all sorts of fruit trees. [...] The only work is supervising some negroes who gather the fruit and vegetables, without any cultivation'.*<sup>7</sup>

This colonial background is significant in current Dutch society too. We continue to experience its consequences, as the Netherlands also had numerous colonies, including Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles in the Caribbean region. Paintings like *The Mango Trees* are not therefore 'frozen in time', but are relevant to contemporary audiences and the starting point for a conversation.

### **Use of language in the exhibition**

The way language was used at the time presented us with another problem: how were we to approach words like 'negro' or 'negress' (*nègre* and *négresse*) which Gauguin used in his letters? Words that came entirely naturally to him in 1887, but which are no longer acceptable today. The Research Centre for Material Culture of the Nationaal Museum voor Wereldculturen (National Museum of World Cultures)



recently published *Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*.<sup>8</sup> Their aim was not so much to compile a list of 'correct' and 'incorrect' words as to create an awareness of the connotations of certain terms. The guide sketches the historical background and potential sensitivity of certain words and offers suggestions as to usage. For the word 'negro', for instance, it advises: 'This term is not recommended for use in a contemporary context. The term can be used in a descriptive or historical context, in which case we suggest the use of quotation marks'.<sup>9</sup> Since the artist's letters are historical sources, we therefore retained the word 'negro', but qualified our choice of words with the statement: 'Some of the letters by Gauguin and Laval quoted in the exhibition contain terms with a racist, colonial, and disparaging basis. We are fully aware of this, and disassociate ourselves from the use of these words.'

There turned out to be other problematic words, however, that we had not anticipated from our Eurocentric perspective: words such as 'tropical' or 'exotic'. *Words Matter* offers the following background to 'exotic': 'used for people it has the connotation of being different from the norm (usually people of colour)',<sup>10</sup> with the suggestion that the word is appropriate when applied to plants or animals, but contentious as a description of people. It was often not easy to explain the 'why' of a 'sensitive' word and there was a great deal of discussion with staff members, for whom awareness of thinking in terms of 'us' and 'the other' had yet to permeate fully.

We set out through our information texts, a disclaimer in the gallery, and an openness to multiple perspectives in our guided tours, for instance, to ensure that visitors to the museum would be able to form their own views and to think – and speak – critically about these artworks. In this way, the exhibition and the issues it embodied, such as colonialism, language and representation, proved to be an effective pilot project for *Van Gogh Connects* and the Think Tank.

### **Bringing about a dialogue**

The entire situation was, however, still new for us. How could you engage in a constructive dialogue with Think Tank people you barely knew yet? What kind of participation and scope would the museum be willing to grant the collaboration? And how were we to make 'relevance' measurable? An awkward meeting in the board room at the Van Gogh Museum in April 2018 illustrates that these things do not happen by themselves and that the first steps can be difficult. Two black Think Tank members sat across the table from five eager white Van Gogh Museum staff members – two curators and three educators. 'No', said the young woman in response to a question from one of the educators, a touch of irritation in her voice, 'I don't identify with this painting. No one in my family carries stuff round on their head like that.' The question, 'do you identify with this painting?' related to the previously mentioned *Mango Trees* by Paul Gauguin. People with a Surinamese and Antillean background had told us earlier that they don't feel part of our

museum, because they can't recognise themselves in the art, literally, by the absence of black people represented. Now we had black people represented in paintings and drawings, and we wondered if that would be something of interest. But as a preliminary question, it was too open and too personal, we subsequently realised. It places considerable pressure on the other person, especially where there is an imbalance in terms of both numbers and prior knowledge. Even if you have confidence in your new partners, with whom you've been planning to work 'on paper' for some time already, the relationship still needs to be developed in practice.

Although things got off to an uncomfortable start, this was nevertheless an important point in the collaboration with the target group: mutual questioning and discussion are necessary in order to understand the institution's contemporary relevance. The fact that the museum wants to reach and inspire as many people as possible means it has to provide scope for other perspectives. Creating the right, safe space for this and forging relationships of a more individual character are essential in this regard. The Think Tank members, educators and curators therefore met seven times between May and July 2018 to discuss education and marketing.<sup>11</sup> During these meetings, people became more open and understanding, showing vulnerability on both sides. The allocation of roles was clear: the educators set the framework, within which adequate scope was allowed for programme



Visiting the exhibition *Gauguin & Laval in Martinique*.  
Photo: Randy Da-Costa

development by the Think Tank members. The latter considered three basic principles to be important: 1) Focus on all young Amsterdam residents and not only those with Surinamese, Turkish, Antillean or Moroccan backgrounds; 2) Offer interactive workshops; 3) Work with local partners to fill the evening with dance, spoken word and other performances. This resulted in a new offering for young adults with the name *Wrong Connection* (*Verkeerd Verbonden*) – three informative and informal Friday evening sessions on colonialism, language and colour, and representation.

A diverse group of participants attended the events, two thirds of them having migrant roots. The Think Tank was also given an active role in *Wrong Connection*. One of its members performed a musical number about Martinique each week,





Group discussions during *Wrong Connection*.  
Photo: Randy Da-Costa

another presented the sessions and another made the promo videos for social media. The curators provided information about the exhibition at each meeting. (online link after-movie (Dutch only): <https://www.facebook.com/vincentopvrijdag/videos/1202938426513460/>)

The three sold-out evenings provided an alternative narrative for *Gauguin & Laval in Martinique* – the exhibition viewed through the eyes of a total of 150 young, critical and diverse Amsterdam residents. It comprised a mixture of alternative titles, audio tour clips and self-made collages, derived from the main interpretative tools of an exhibition: text labels, audio guide and the art itself. Gauguin's *Mango Trees*, for instance, was renamed *Queens of Martinique*. All the alternative versions were made and compiled by the participants during the workshops, which functioned



Making new images during a workshop.  
Photo: Randy Da-Costa

as a vehicle for in-depth discussions on art and society. The young people's involvement obliged them to look closely at art, which sparked conversations about who gets to decide what constitutes heritage, the role of the artist and the meaning that we as visitors give to all this. There was a good deal of discussion about the Martinican *porteuses* and the position of black people in current society. The target group's stories, their personal visions, were added to the exhibition set-up at a concluding event, as we believe that multiple perspectives – the integration of many voices and streams of discourse <sup>12</sup> – are one of the most important elements of inclusive practices.

## Conclusions

An exhibition that did not appear at first to offer many cues for a contemporary debate actually



Weekly music performance for *Wrong Connection*.  
Photo: Randy Da-Costa

brought us a great deal, not only in terms of visitors but also institutionally. As a museum, we must be able to address a rapidly changing society, even though the pursuit of greater inclusion can be uncomfortable for museum staff. To ensure maximum support, as many colleagues as possible have been informed and involved through both *Van Gogh Connects* and the exhibition project team. But we still have a long way to go. This pilot exposed that there are different views internally as to what the role of a museum should be. Some staff members find it hard to reconcile a museum's societal role with its traditional function as an institution with art as its central focus. Even at Education & Interpretation – the department that initiated the programme – it still took some effort to find the right approach and the right words, especially in view of the highly sensitive subjects



Adding alternative text labels to the exhibition.  
Photo: Les Adu

concerned. We don't have the answers and it is important to let your partners and visitors know this. We are learning together.

We recognise that this specific exhibition made it possible to discuss themes such as colonialism in a way that is not the case with every exhibition. But we did notice that visitors appreciate the opportunity to use art and active forms of engagement to discuss social issues and art, and to do so in the museum itself. Art becomes more relevant if you actively engage with it and share new perspectives with one another.

The question, of course, is whether the *Wrong Connection* discussion evenings have contributed to lasting relevance for young adults with a migrant background. The research performed by the Impact Centre Erasmus (ICE), which is supervising the four-

year programme, found that 61% of the respondents who attended one of the *Wrong Connection* evenings viewed the Van Gogh Museum differently than they did before and 67% would like to visit the museum more often because of this initiative. That is a fine result. Visitors further stated their respect for the museum and said that they were comfortable there, but only to a lesser degree did they feel part of the museum or represented (Figure 2: purple and beige rows [Dutch only]). There is a challenge here for the museum. We could possibly improve these aspects by creating a more permanent offering. The methods applied do contribute, at any rate, to looking closely at art and realising that everyone does so from their own perspective. Vincent van Gogh would have welcomed this too, as he very much had his 'own way of looking'<sup>13</sup> at the world around him, which continues to inspire us to see things differently.

### With thanks to

Ghanima Kowssoleea (Project Assistant *Van Gogh Connects*), who helped our department get 'woke'<sup>14</sup>, set up *Wrong Connection* together with Roos Wijnen (Programme Manager *Vincent on Friday*). Maite van Dijk (Senior Curator) and Joost van der Hoeven (Junior Curator), who studied and identified the issues in the work of Gauguin and Laval and were willing to engage in a discussion about it. Marjelle Oosterling-Vermeulen of the Impact Centre Erasmus (ICE), Fonds 21. And the members of our Think Tank, for their openness and commitment. English translation: Ted Alkins

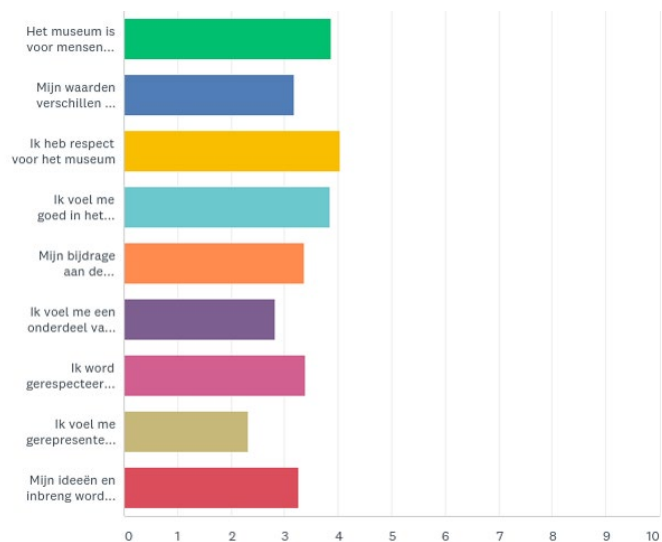


Figure 2. Source: ICE/VGM's own data collection, November 2018

## Notes

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1. By 2035, 36.7% of Amsterdam residents will be of non-Western origin. Source: Gemeente Amsterdam (Onderzoek, Informatie en Statistiek)
2. The Dutch 'Cultural Diversity Code' still refers to 'people of Western and non-Western origin' (*westerse en niet-westerse allochtonen*). We prefer the term 'Amsterdam/Dutch citizens of non-Dutch origin', which also applies to children of parents of non-Dutch origin. See <http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/overheid-schraapt-allochtoon-per-direct-uit-vocabulaire~a4406224/>
3. A substantial proportion of the arts sector seems to relate to a particular section of society: its public, viewers and buyers are primarily native white Dutch people. The partners and personnel it works with also display little diversity in terms of cultural background <http://codeculturelediversiteit.com/de-code/>
4. M. Van Dijk and J. van der Hoeven (2018), *Gauguin and Laval in Martinique* (exhibition catalogue). Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, pp.46–52
5. Hearn, L. (2001), *Two Years in the French West Indies*, Oxford (first published 1890), Signal Books edition, p.78
6. Paul Gauguin to Emile Schuffenecker, July 1887.
7. Paul Gauguin to Mette Gauguin, 20 June 1887.
8. <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/publications/words-matter>
9. Modest, W. & Lelijveld, R. (editors), 2018. *Words Matter, An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, National Museum of World Cultures, p.129
10. Ibid., p.107
11. A researcher from Erasmus University (Impact Centre) analysed the minutes and video recordings of all the meetings.
12. Anila, S. (2017), 'Inclusion Requires Fracturing' in *Journal of Museum Education*, 42:2, pp.108–119
13. 'I think that you'll certainly see in the painting that I have my own way of looking'. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh. Nuenen, 2 May 1885.
14. The term (fashionable slang) refers to social awareness, taught to us by Ghanima.