

Golden Age Reconsidered

At the Amsterdam Museum, we will no longer use the term 'Golden Age' as a synonym for the period of the 17th century. The Amsterdam Museum will consequently be changing the name of its semi-permanent exhibition in its annexe at Hermitage Amsterdam from 'Dutchmen of the Golden Age' to 'Portrait Gallery of the 17th Century'.

The phrase 'Golden Age' occupies an important place in Western historiography – one that is strongly linked to national pride. However positive aspects associated with the term like prosperity, peace, luxury and innocence reflect only part of the historical reality of this period. This era, in which Amsterdam held sway over various overseas territories that had been occupied by the Dutch, was also marked by poverty, war, forced labour and human trafficking.

In addition, the phrase contributes to a situation in which the history of the Dutch 17th century is exclusively seen from the perspective of those in power. After all, who determines that a specific period in our past should be called 'golden', when so many of our ancestors did not share in this wealth and prosperity or fell victim to exploitation, murder or slavery as a result of others' thirst for power and gain?

The Amsterdam Museum wants to provide room for those stories from the 17th century that are not yet being told, in the hope that we can become relevant for a larger group of people. For this reason, the museum will no longer be using the term 'Golden Age' without further context to denote the period of the 17th century.

Three years ago, the Amsterdam Museum initiated a long-term research programme called *New Narratives*, headed by curator Imara Limon. Working together with people in the city, we are exploring how we can share a wider range of perspectives as a museum, and become more inclusive. Which in turn can make us welcoming and relevant for a far larger group of people than we currently reach. Via exhibitions, guided tours, expert meetings, collaborations with creative makers and scientific research, we are critically examining our approach, collections, stories and presentations about Amsterdam and its citizens. Among other districts, we are active in Nieuw-West and Zuidoost via participatory projects like 'Women of Nieuw-West', as well as working closely together with the LGBTQI+ communities for our monthly Queer History Talks and programming during the annual Amsterdam Pride.

The Amsterdam Museum is working to establish itself as a new location for dialogue, encounters, openness and acknowledgement of the limitations of the old institutional concept of the museum. And this includes a re-evaluation of the associated language. The publication *Words Matter* (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen), presented in 2018, features an incomplete list of words that deserve an alternative (e.g. the term 'enslaved individual' rather than 'slave', to indicate that this resulted from an active practice). As far as we are concerned, the term 'Golden Age' should also be included on this list.

Only by providing ample room for awkward conversations and voices that have been marginalised for too long can we continue to grow towards an open, critical and self-critical museum that removes barriers – both visible and invisible. For example, we are currently examining what needs to be done to make the Amsterdam Museum a truly inclusive place that belongs to everyone. In an article published in the *NRC Handelsblad* of 23 August, Melle Daamen and Clayde Menso point out in no uncertain terms that so far the cultural sector has been resistant to true change. This inertia once again became painfully clear during a conference in Kyoto organised by the international council of museums ICOM. The members would be voting on a new and ambitious definition of the nature of a museum, but

this vote was postponed after heated debate, effectively ensuring that the conventional definition formulated in 1946 – one largely focused on stewardship and conservation – remains in place.

The Amsterdam Museum embraces the idea that underlies this postponed new definition and sets the gear. Two outcomes of this are our decision to replace the term 'Golden Age' with the more descriptive term '17th century', as well as our move to organise the photo exhibition 'Dutch Masters Re-Viewed', curated by Jörgen Tjon A Fong, which will be opening at the end of this month. These initiatives will soon be followed by other changes, both in front of and behind the scenes. At our various locations, this will allow us to engage in more intensive conversation with Amsterdam's citizens and visitors. These interactions will focus on who they are, were and are becoming in a dynamic and highly diverse city that faces a number of tough challenges in this new millennium.

On behalf of the Amsterdam Museum

Judikje Kiers (Director)

Imara Limon (Curator)

Margriet Schavemaker (Artistic Director)

Jörgen Tjon A Fong (guest curator)

The Amsterdam Museum will be changing the name of its semi-permanent exhibition 'Dutchmen of the Golden Age' in the Amsterdam Wing of Hermitage Amsterdam to 'Portrait Gallery of the 17th Century'. The museum will be replacing the phrase 'Golden Age' in all its communications at all its locations. In addition, the Amsterdam Museum will be organising a symposium on 29 September for professionals in the field and the general public regarding which stories from the 17th century should be recounted, by whom, and how to approach this as inclusively as possible. On the same day, the museum will be opening the photo exhibition 'Dutch Masters Re-Viewed', about 13 people of colour who lived in or visited Amsterdam in the 17th and 18th centuries (selected by guest curator Jörgen Tjon A Fong). This exhibition is the first in a series of new perspectives presented by contemporary creators in the context of Black Achievement Month.