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## The Amsterdam Museum Drops the Term 'Golden Age,' Arguing That It Whitewashes the Inequity of the Period

The term doesn't account for the "poverty, war, forced labor, and human trafficking" that occurred during the era, the museum's curator says.

**Taylor Dafoe**, September 13, 2019



An exterior view of the Amsterdam Museum. Courtesy of the Amsterdam Museum.

As museums around the globe wrestle with how best to capture complex histories, the Amsterdam Museum has taken a decisive step: The institution announced today that it would no longer use the term “Golden Age” to refer to the 17th century.

For decades, the term has been widely employed throughout the Netherlands to describe the era in which the country was a leading economic and military power. (During that time, it also produced some of the world’s most renowned art by such figures as Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Frans Hals.) However, the museum now contends that this phrase wrongly glosses over the more negative realities of the time.

“The Western Golden Age occupies an important place in Western historiography that is strongly linked to national pride, but positive associations with the term such as prosperity, peace, opulence, and innocence do not cover the charge of historical reality in this period,” says the museum’s 17th-century curator Tom van der Molen in a statement. “The term ignores the many negative sides of the 17th century such as poverty, war, forced labor, and human trafficking.”

“Every generation and every person must be able to form his or her own story about history,” Van der Molen continues. “The dialogue about that needs space, the name ‘Golden Age’ limits that space.”



A gallery in the Amsterdam Museum. Courtesy of the Amsterdam Museum.

In the coming months, the museum will remove all appearances of the term in its galleries. It will also change the name of its permanent “Dutchmen of the Golden Age” exhibition at the Hermitage Museum—an Amsterdam-based branch of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia—to “Group Portraits From the 17th Century.”

The renaming effort is part of a larger campaign at the Amsterdam museum to become more inclusive. Later this month, the institution will host a symposium for museum professionals and community members about the way it represents the nation’s history in the 17th century. That same day, the museum will open a new photography exhibition positioned as a response to “Group Portraits From the 17th Century,” in which Dutch people of color are shown in historical settings.

These moves are part of a wave of museums reconsidering the way they have presented their collections for decades. Last year, for example, the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto renamed the Canadian artist Emily Carr’s 1929 painting *Indian Church* as *Church at Yuquot Village* to acknowledge the Indigenous community that lived where the church was located.

“These are important steps in a long process,” Judikje Kiers, the Amsterdam Museum’s director, said in the statement. “But we are not there yet.”