

## On the Verge of Insanity (Amsterdam, 14–15 Sep 16)

Amsterdam, Sep 14–15, 2016

Laura Prins

The Van Gogh Museum organises the symposium  
'On the Verge of Insanity: Van Gogh and his Illness'

The mythology of the "mad genius" artist has been a major topic for centuries. Nowhere has this topic been more present than in the literature on Vincent van Gogh. In relation to the summer exhibition 'On the Verge of Insanity', the Van Gogh Museum organises a symposium dedicated to Van Gogh's illness, thereby discussing the underlying questions of the exhibition. From what illness was he suffering? Does this information contribute to knowledge on his art? Is there a relationship between madness and creativity? The most recent insights in Van Gogh's illness will be presented at this event, where some of the most persistent mythologies will be unravelled.

The symposium is divided into two sessions: one medical and one art historical. First to be discussed is the question of diagnosis. Many interpretations on Van Gogh's illness have been given, yet never has one reached an overall conclusion. Therefore, it is our intention to bridge the differences. There will be a closed expert meeting preceding the symposium, where medical specialists and Van Gogh experts will evaluate the different theories and the available sources from a contemporary perspective, by judging all their pros and cons, to find out if it is possible to reach an agreement on an all-embracing diagnosis. These outcomes will be presented at the symposium, followed by a panel discussion and questions from the audience.

In the afternoon, the focus will be on related art historical issues. Will knowledge of Van Gogh's illness help us to understand his artistic achievement? His case will be compared to Edvard Munch, the artist who was troubled with mental issues as well. Paul Gauguin was one of the few eye witnesses of Van Gogh's crisis at the end of 1888, and considering the romantic theory on relationship between madness and art, did it change his ideas on Van Gogh's artistic achievement? Furthermore, did Van Gogh play a role as the example of the "mad genius" in outsider art in the twentieth century? Collectively, these ideas will lead to a major discussion regarding the ongoing question of whether creativity is connected to mental disorder.

Scientific Committee:

Van Gogh Museum:

Louis van Tilborgh, Senior Researcher, Professor of Art History (University of Amsterdam); Teio Meedendorp, Senior Researcher; Nienke Bakker, Curator of Paintings; Laura Prins, Researcher

Medical board:

Mark Kramer, Professor of Internal Medicine, Chair of the Internal Medicine Department (VU University Medical Centre); Willem Nolen, Psychiatrist, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry, esp. Emotional Disorders (University Medical Centre Groningen); Arko Oderwald, Lecturer in Philosophy and Medical Ethics at the Department of General Practice and Elderly Care Medicine (VU University Medical Centre), Extraordinary Professor of Literature and Medicine (University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht); Willem van Tilburg, Emeritus Professor of Clinical Psychiatry (VU University Medical Centre), Psychoanalyst; Piet Voskuil, Retired Neurologist (formerly employed at the Epilepsy Centre Hans Berger Clinic)

#### Registration:

For enquiries or registration please send an email to [symposium@vangoghmuseum.nl](mailto:symposium@vangoghmuseum.nl).

Make sure to register as access is limited. You will receive a confirmation email with subscription and payment specifications as soon as possible. Once your payment has been accepted, your registration is official.

Registration fee: € 150, the first ten students to register will get free entrance. The registration fee includes admission to the Van Gogh Museum and Stedelijk Museum, lunch and refreshments, as well as an evening reception with visit to the exhibition.

#### PROGRAMME

Official language: English

[The programme is subject to change.]

Kick-Off on Wednesday evening, 14 September: Van Gogh Museum

18:30: Registration + drinks

19:30:

Welcome

Axel Rüger, Director Van Gogh Museum

Introductory lecture: On the Verge of Insanity: Van Gogh and his Illness

Louis van Tilborgh, Senior Researcher (Van Gogh Museum) and Professor of Art History (University of Amsterdam)

20:00 – 21:30:

Visit to the exhibition 'On the Verge of Insanity: Van Gogh and his Illness'

Thursday 15 September: Stedelijk Museum

08:30 – 09:00: Coffee and tea (+ registration)

Morning Programme: Diagnosing Van Gogh

Moderator: Arko Oderwald Lecturer in Philosophy and Medical Ethics at the Department of Gener-

al Practice and Elderly Care Medicine (VU University Medical Centre), Extraordinary Professor of Literature and Medicine (University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht)

09:00 – 10:30:

Introduction on the diagnostic history of Van Gogh

Laura Prins, Researcher (Van Gogh Museum)

Possible diagnoses for Van Gogh:

Epilepsy

Piet Voskuil, Retired Neurologist (formerly employed at the Epilepsy Centre Hans Berger Clinic)

Cycloid Psychosis

Werner Strik, Professor of Psychiatry and Chair (University Hospital of Psychiatry Bern)

Bipolar Disorder

Willem Nolen, Psychiatrist, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry, esp. Emotional Disorders (University Medical Centre Groningen)

Borderline Personality Disorder

Erwin van Meekeren, Psychiatrist and Publicist Meek-It.com (Independent, The Hague)

The Psychoanalytical Approach

Willem van Tilburg, Emeritus Professor of Clinical Psychiatry (VU University Medical Centre) and Psychoanalyst

Alcohol Abuse (and other possible intoxications)

Mark Kramer, Professor of Internal Medicine, and Chair of the Internal Medicine Department (VU University Medical Centre)

10:30 – 11:00: Coffee break

11:00 – 12:30:

Conclusions of the Expert Meeting: From what illness was Van Gogh suffering?

Arko Oderwald (VU University Medical Centre and University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht)

Panel discussion and questions from the audience

12:30 – 14:00: Lunch

Afternoon programme: Madness & Art

Moderator: Jeroen Stumpel Professor of Art History (University of Utrecht)

14:00 – 15:00:

Medical perspective:

Mood Disorders and Art

Kay Redfield Jamison, The Dalio Family Professor in Mood Disorders and Professor of Psychiatry  
(Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine)

Art historical perspective:

The Case of Vincent van Gogh  
Louis van Tilborgh (Van Gogh Museum)

The Case of Edvard Munch  
Hans Dieter Huber, Professor of Art History (Staatliche Akademie der bildenden Künste Stuttgart)

15:00 – 15:30: Break

15:30 – 16:30:

Psychological perspective:

Creativity and Mental Illness  
Judith Schlesinger, Psychologist, Author, and Musician

Art historical perspective:

Van Gogh through the eyes of Paul Gauguin  
Elizabeth Childs, Department Chair and Etta and Mark Steinberg Professor of Art History (Washington University in St. Louis)

The role of Van Gogh in Outsider Art  
Jos ten Berge, Assistant Professor in Art History (VU University of Amsterdam)

16:30-17:30:

Panel discussion and questions from the audience

Drinks

Reference:

CONF: On the Verge of Insanity (Amsterdam, 14-15 Sep 16). In: Arthist.net, Jun 29, 2016 (accessed Aug 8, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/13377>>.