



**The Van Gogh Museum is organising the symposium  
*On the Verge of Insanity: Van Gogh and his Illness***

**14 and 15 September 2016, Amsterdam**

The notion of the artist as 'mad genius' has been a powerful myth for centuries and nowhere more so than in the literature on Vincent van Gogh. To accompany its summer exhibition, *On the Verge of Insanity*, the Van Gogh Museum is organising a symposium dedicated to Van Gogh's illness. The event will explore the underlying questions of the exhibition: from what illness was he suffering? Does this information contribute to our knowledge of his art? Is there a relationship between madness and creativity? The most recent insights into Van Gogh's illness will be presented at the symposium, where some of the most persistent myths will be unravelled.

The symposium is divided into two sessions, one medical and the other art-historical. The issue of the diagnosis will be discussed first. Many interpretations of Van Gogh's illness have been proposed, yet none has ever achieved a satisfactory overall conclusion. It is our intention, therefore, to reconcile the differences. The symposium will be preceded by a closed expert meeting at which medical specialists and Van Gogh experts will evaluate the different theories and the available sources from a contemporary perspective. They will weigh all the arguments, to determine whether it is possible to reach an agreement on an all-embracing diagnosis. The results will be presented at the symposium, followed by a panel discussion and questions from the audience.

The focus in the afternoon 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 with that of Edvard Munch, another artist who was troubled with mental issues. Paul Gauguin was one of the few to witness Van Gogh's crisis in December 1888 at first hand. Given the romantic theory at the time of the relationship between madness and art, did this change Gauguin's view of Van Gogh's art? Did Van Gogh help shape the 'mad genius' archetype in outsider art in the twentieth century? Together, these ideas will contribute to an important discussion of the ongoing question of whether creativity is connected to mental disorder.

[www.vangoghmuseum.com/symposium](http://www.vangoghmuseum.com/symposium)

## Scientific Committee

### *Art-Historical (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 Panel*

**Mark Kramer**, Professor of Internal Medicine, Chair of the Internal Medicine Department (VU University Medical Centre, Amsterdam); **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, Amsterdam), Extraordinary Professor of Literature and Medicine (University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht); **Willem van Tilburg**, Emeritus Professor of Clinical Psychiatry (VU University Medical Centre, Amsterdam), Psychoanalyst; **Piet Voskuil**, Retired Neurologist (formerly employed at the Epilepsy Centre Hans Berger Clinic)

## Participants in the Expert Meeting (in addition to the Scientific Committee)

### *Art-Historical*

**Jos ten Berge**, Assistant Professor in Art History (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam); **Elizabeth Childs**, Department Chair and Etta and Mark Steinberg Professor of Art History (Washington University in St. Louis); **Sjraar van Heugten**, Independent Art Historian; **Cornelia Homburg**, Independent Art Historian; **Hans Dieter Huber**, Professor of Contemporary Art History, Aesthetics and Art Theory (State Academy of Arts Stuttgart); **Fred Leeman**, Independent Art Historian; **Susan Alyson Stein**, Engelhard Curator of Nineteenth-Century European Painting (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York); **Jeroen Stumpel** Professor of Art History (University of Utrecht); **Marije Vellekoop**, Head of Collections, Research and Presentation (Van Gogh Museum)

### *Medical/Psychological:*

**Arie Berghout**, Retired Internist and Chairman of the Historical Committee (The Netherlands Association of Internal Medicine); **Erik Fokke**, General Practitioner (Amsterdam) and Teacher in Medical Training of General Practitioners (VU University Medical Centre, Amsterdam); **Frank van der Heijden**, Psychiatrist and Director Residency Training (Vincent van Gogh Institute for Psychiatry, Venray); **Jan Heimans**, Emeritus Professor of Neurology (VU University Medical Centre, Amsterdam); **Kay Redfield Jamison**, The Dalio Family Professor in Mood Disorders and Professor of Psychiatry (Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore); **Erwin van Meekeren**, Psychiatrist and Publicist Meek-It.com (Independent, The Hague); **Judith Schlesinger**, Psychologist, Author, and Musician; **Werner Strik**, Professor of Psychiatry and Chair (University Hospital of Psychiatry Bern); **Jan Swinkels**, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry and Chairman of the Medical Ethical Committee (Academic Medical Center Amsterdam)

## Registration:

For enquiries or registration please send an email to [symposium@vangoghmuseum.nl](mailto:symposium@vangoghmuseum.nl). Be sure to register as access is limited. You will receive a confirmation email with subscription and payment instructions as soon as possible. Your registration is official once your payment has been accepted. Registration fee: € 150.

The fee includes admission to the Van Gogh Museum and Stedelijk Museum, lunch and refreshments, and an evening reception with visit to the exhibition.

## Programme

[Programme subject to change]

Official language: English

### 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 General 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 to Van Gogh's Diagnostic History

*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 Contemporary Art History, Aesthetics and Art Theory (State Academy of Arts 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 (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)*

16:30-17:30:

Panel discussion and questions from the audience

Drinks.