



Editorial

Language in the Rijksmuseum

In a museum, the images are not the only important aspect; the language with which the stories they depict are told is equally crucial. In exhibitions, publications, audio tours, on text boards and on the website, the Rijksmuseum wants to use today's words, without compromising the stories. The descriptions of a large part of the collection still come straight out of old inventory books. They often include terms that have not been used in newspapers and other media for years, and are sometimes couched in antiquated language that may be perceived as offensive. And some of them are presented from a Eurocentric perspective, telling the story from a purely Western standpoint.

Since December 2015, a working group has been critically evaluating the terminology used. Various of the Rijksmuseum's departments are represented in the group and there are regular consultations with curators and other museums. By moving away from stereotypes and categories as much as possible, we are trying to do justice to individuals. After all, people are much more than their skin colour or ethnicity. Advice is sought from representatives of the groups concerned, because it is important to use the nomenclature that the groups themselves prefer. Every adjustment is individually considered, however, and it is never a question of 'search and replace'. The old titles and descriptions are nevertheless being retained so that future generations will always be able to discover how objects were described over the course of time.

Terminology is not just about changing words; it is above all about an awareness of perspective. Do we talk about a colony or a colonized area? Is something a term of abuse or an honourable sobriquet? The critical assessment of the language and viewpoints used in the Rijksmuseum descriptions is an ongoing process, because language is a living thing. Terms that were commonplace decades ago are no longer acceptable today, and what is acceptable now may not be in five or ten years' time.

Terminology is equally important to *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*. The article by Lita Tirak in this issue, 'Black and Blue', caused us to scrutinize the use of the word 'black'. By capitalizing Black when referring to people in ethnic or cultural terms, or in terms of 'race', we acknowledge the fact that this term connects people of African descent around the world, in the absence of identifiable ethnicities that have been erased by the system of slavery. We also recognize that 'being black' is a position imposed by social relationships. Meanwhile, 'Black' has become an alternative to the seemingly neutral description of a 'black' skin colour, which is linked to a whole history of prejudice.

Terminology is a key ingredient in the *Slavery* exhibition (spring/summer 2021). This exhibition tells ten true stories through the voices of people who were actually involved during this important period in Dutch history. Terminology and perspective are crucial if we are to do justice to all sides involved. The Rijksmuseum therefore takes the greatest care in its choice of words. A national museum of art and history has a duty to make everyone feel that they are represented and that exhibitions are informed by the power of diversity and all-embracing language.