Past passive: Describing past actions and processes

The **past passive** has a similar structure to the present passive (see Unit 4).

To form the past passive we use: *was/were* + past participle.

*Paint **was** usually **made** by mixing colours with oils.*

We use the passive to emphasise an action rather than the person who performed the action (the agent). However, when we use the past passive, it is common to focus more on the agent performing the action, especially when talking about artwork, buildings or discoveries. We do this by using *by*.

*Many different styles **were explored** by painters.*

The past passive is more common in written language, especially in academic texts.

The negative is formed by putting the word *not* after the auxiliary verb.

*Sometimes, artworks signed by an artist **were not painted** entirely by them, but with the help of assistants.*

➡ See grammar box on page 53.

REMEMBER

We use the verb *be* as the auxiliary in all passive tenses. In the past passive, we use:

• *was* for singular subjects.

*The changing light during the day **was captured** by Monet.*

• *were* for plural subjects.

*Different colours **were favoured** by different artists.*

Complete the sentences with the past passive of the verb in brackets.

Example: paintings **weren't** always **displayed** in museums. (not display)

1. The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford _____ in the late 1600. (establish)

2. Before museums, most artworks _____ in private homes and palaces. (show)

3. Originally, they _____ to develop new styles. (not encourage)

4. Their work _____ by rich people. (buy)

Rewrite the sentences in the past passive so that the meaning is the same.

Example:

Artists mixed colours on a palette.

Colours were mixed on the palette. (by artists)

1. Assistants helped many artists in their studios.

2. People painted cave paintings.

3. Da Vinci sketched out his inventions.

4. The researchers recorded the data.