2012 Vienna Congress
The Decorative
Conservation and the Applied Arts

Edvard Munch's Aula frieze
– conservation and change in public attitudes



Fig. 1. a) Grayish stains from a dirty wash cloth. b) Spilled drops of interior paint from paintwork above the frieze. c) Water tide-lines. d) Buckets in the attic to collect rainwater from the roof. Illustration: Karen Mengshoel

By Tine Frøysaker, Karen Mengshoel and Hanne Moltubakk Kempton

Between 1909 and 1916 Edvard Munch created eleven monumental canvas paintings for the assembly hall (The Aula) of the University of Oslo. Made especially to decorate the large architectural niches in the Aula interior,[1] they were the first major public commission (c. 220 m²) following Norway's independence from Sweden in 1905. Furthermore, this commission holds particular prestige since the paintings are among Europe's most radical experiments in monumental art during the early 1900s (Berman, 2011). They are in fact the only monumentally scaled Expressionist murals in existence in Europe (Berman, Pettersen and Ydstie, 2011). Despite their size, though, Munch himself stated that they "are executed in the same way as all my other easel paintings that are shown in galleries" (Tøjner, 2003).

These works have been the subject to a five year study within the Munch Aula Paintings Project (MAP),[2] which has revealed that the paintings have a long treatment history (Frøysaker, 2007). At first, Munch's canvases were attached to wooden stretchers, but due to the risks of bombs during World War II they were cut down and evacuated, which left the canvases without tacking edges. Prior to being remounted in the Aula in 1946, the paintings were marouflaged. In addition, they also have endured several cleaning campaigns, but not all were necessarily appropriate for paintings. Instead, these works have been perceived and treated as parts of an architectural environment, rather than objects of fine art (Fig. 1).

Some past users (Fig. 2a) and building contractors[3] seem to have neglected that Munch's paintings were present in the hall. There are many plausible explanations for this. One may be that the paintings, due to their relatively matte appearance, are often thought to be frescoes. Also, for the past sixty years the paintings had no decorative frames, which made it difficult to distinguish painted canvas from plastered wall. Another reason is that the majority of the visitors to the Aula visit for reasons other than viewing Munch's paintings, such as attending concerts or other events that regularly take place in the Aula. For them, the paintings are, in fact, decorations.

These attitudes have lead to harmful situations for the paintings, which again have caused damage. It was thus evident to MAP that preventive conservation had to include measures to change the general attitude toward the Aula paintings. Because they are an integral part of the building, rather than easel paintings, MAP's preventive conservation strategy has more in common with the preservation of interior decorations. It was therefore important for MAP to be present at the building meetings for the renovation from the beginning of the planning phase, especially since the whole of the Aula room was to be renovated. This has raised awareness of the values of the paintings, and it has resulted in custom-made systems for central heating, ventilation, smoke detection, fire extinguishing and evacuation that will contribute to the safe-guarding of the frieze (Mengshoel et al., 2012).

The conservation of Munch's Aula paintings also depends on the everyday maintenance of the Aula room and of the building as a whole. Some of the damages on the paintings are the result of inattentiveness of previous staff and users of the room. The present staff members, who work in the Aula on a day-to-day basis, are now aware of the artistic value of the Aula frieze, and take pride in their role as guards of this national treasure.

As a part of MAP, a documentary for the Norwegian broadcasting corporation (NRK) was made, and broadcast the evening before the reopening of the Aula in June 2011 (Fig. 2b). MAP has also held several presentations, published articles and given interviews about the conservation of the Aula paintings. These efforts have resulted in public attention to the frieze, and interest in its preservation. However, positive publicity and good intentions are not always enough to improve circumstances in a building that is in constant use and which must undergo renovation as well. A few months after the reopening in 2011 the renovation of the exterior of the Aula started, which has involved removal of plaster from the exterior walls. The dust and debris from this process can be alkaline, abrasive and potentially harmful to the paintings. The renovation is still ongoing and because the building is not sealed, airborne particles may enter. This illustrates how MAP's efforts to influence the decisions affecting the Aula frieze are a continuous process. This work does not end with the completion of the conservation project. Once renovation is finished the condition and display of the paintings have to be re-assessed.

Acknowledgements
Many thanks to Noëlle Streeton (UiO, IAKH) for editing, to the rest of the institute's MAP-team: Mirjam Liu and Katrine S. Scharffenberg and to UiO for funding.



Fig. 2. a) The Aula stage decorated with flowers and trees in 1955.
b) The reopening of the Aula, June 2011. Illustration: Karen Mengshoel.

References

Berman, P.C., Pettersen, P. and Ydstie, I. 2011. Introduction. In: *Munch's Laboratory. The Path to the Aula.* Oslo: The Munch-Museum, pp. 17-21.

Berman, P.C. 2011. From Munch's laboratory. In: *Munch's Laboratory. The Path to the Aula.* Oslo: The Munch-Museum, pp. 42-71.

Frøysaker, T. 2007. The paintings of Edvard Munch in the Assembly Hall of Oslo University. Their treatment history and the Aula project.. *Restauro*, 4: 246-257.

Mengshoel, K., Liu, M., Moltubakk Kempton, H. and Frøysaker, T. 2012. Moving monumental Munch. From listed building to temporary studio – and back. Accepted for *IIC Nordic group – NKF's XIX International Conference, Preprints.* London: Archetype Publications Ltd.

Tøjner, P.E. 2003. *Munch. In His Own Words.* Munich: Prestel Verlag.

Notes

[1] The paintings share the same heights of c. 4.5 m, and their widths vary from c. 1.6 m to c. 11.6 m.
[2] http://www.hf.uio.no/iakh/english/research/projects/aula-project/index.html
[3] For instance by cleaning Munch's frieze prior to sanding the floor.

UiO : Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History
University of Oslo