

Audio guide for the University Aula

Munch adding colour to the University's history

Welcome! You are now in the ceremonial hall of the University of Oslo – the Aula.

Let's start with the story of how Norway got its own university, and its own Aula. Let's stay here, in the pillared hall, and turn back time by 200 years. Norway and Denmark are being governed as a single nation. Horse-drawn carts bump along on the cobbled streets outside. Thanks to new laws on education, the population of Norway is in the process of learning to read and write. The winds of enlightenment and nation-building are blowing all across Europe. This has raised the question of whether Norway should have its own university, so that aspiring Norwegian academics do not have to go all the way to Copenhagen to study. On the 2nd of September 1811, King Frederik VI of Denmark and Norway said yes to a Norwegian university. In 1837 it was decided that the university should be located here, at the top end of Karl Johans gate – or Slotsveien, as it was called back then. The new square with the university buildings was called “University Square”, and the parliament building “the Storting” is not far away. The idea was to draw the city closer to the new palace. Perhaps you caught a glimpse of the Royal Palace, at the end of Karl Johan, on your way in here today?

It had been decided that Norway was finally going to get its own university, but who should be given the task of designing the building? At the Royal College of Drawing, which was one of the forerunners of today's Oslo National Academy of the Arts, one student, Christian Henrich Grosch, had already made quite a name for himself. After a period in Copenhagen, where he earned a degree in architecture, he returned home to Norway as one of only a handful of fully qualified architects. He was thus a natural choice to design the new Norwegian university. However, he was not left entirely to his own devices. Grosch was sent to Berlin to share his drawings and ideas with the renowned architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Schinkel had to approve Grosch's designs. The monumental staircase you walked up to get here is very much Schinkel's work. It is in fact almost identical to the staircase in the “Altes Museum” in Berlin, which was designed by Schinkel in 1825. The main staircase was to be open and harmonious, with typically neo-classical Greek-style columns. The inspiration from Ancient Greece is partly rooted in the idea that the Greek style symbolises the ideals of enlightenment and democracy. This was very much something the university buildings were supposed to express: these are buildings for the Norwegian people. Construction began in 1841 and was completed in 1852.

The construction and financing of the Aula Wing

The main staircase that you walked through on the way in here, was finished in the nineteenth century, based on Grosch and Schinkel's designs – as were the two wings. Grosch and Schinkel's original drawings also included space to extend the building back towards the rear garden, where you are now, later. It was decided to build this extension in connection with the centennial anniversary of the University, in 1911. The University needed a ceremonial hall, an Aula.

A unique feature of the Aula was that the funding to build it came from a number of private donors. This further underlines the ideal that this was to be a ceremonial hall for the people. There were several Norwegian–Americans with close ties to Norway who wanted to make a donation to the University. It was the University's first rector, Waldemar Brøgger, who suggested using these donations as the start-up capital for the Aula.

The Aula could become a new venue for the University and for the people of the city! The building was also supposed to have a social function – it was to be a place where art and knowledge would together contribute to the general cultural education of the people. It was now almost 100 years since King Frederik VI had agreed to Norway getting its own university, and it was therefore a very fitting occasion to build the Aula. The architects Holger Sinding-Larsen, who was the University's building inspector, and Harald Bødtker, an expert on the Greek style, were commissioned to be involved in the process. The Aula was to be inaugurated on the 2nd of September 1911, on the 100th anniversary of the University of Oslo.

The design of the Aula wing

If you look at the 8.5-metre-high bronze door you came through, it leads towards the entrance and the pillared hall, where you are currently standing. This hall was originally intended to serve as both an examination venue and a cloakroom. Maybe you left your jacket there? There has been a cloakroom here for over 100 years.

If you take a closer look at the pillars, you will see that they are slightly wider at the bottom, than at the top. This is typical of Doric columns. The pillared hall has two rows of marble Doric columns, inspired by the temples of Antiquity. The architects Sinding-Larsen and Bødtker drew heavily on Greek temple architecture, to lend the room solemnity. This was a space to be revered and respected – and perhaps even a little awe-inspiring.

High windows along the lateral wall let in light, and the room is dominated by three large crystal chandeliers suspended from the ceiling, made by the French crystal manufacturer Baccarat, which has been manufacturing chandeliers since the 1700s. The chandeliers were gifted to the University by the descendants of the businessman Thorvald Meyer. Like lodestars, they guide the visitor in towards the Aula. On top of the Doric columns, you also see geometric figures painted in red and gold – these ornaments are inspired by Egypt. The glitzy and festive expression of the pillared hall creates a perfect contrast to the cool dignity of the Aula.

The Foyer and the Aula

If we now move towards the red drapes, towards the Aula, we see that this entry, like the one you came in through, is very wide. As you go through this big entry, you enter a foyer, with a gallery above. The ceiling here is quite low, and you might have noticed that it is a little darker here than inside the Aula. The foyer thus functions as a calm and suspense-building transitional area. This is a technique borrowed from classical Greek temple architecture – a low-ceilinged entrance that enables the main room to unfold in all its magnificence. In contrast to this low, dark foyer, with its heavy Doric columns that carry the gallery, the Aula is open, bright and spacious. Now let's move further into the room.

If you look around, you'll notice that the room doesn't actually have any windows. The ceiling consists of panes of frosted glass, with electric lamps behind it, which mimic daylight. This design concept provides light for the audience, literally - in addition to the metaphorical enlightenment the building was intended to provide. After all it is the University's ceremonial hall!