

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. This building has been – and continues to be – important for Norway. Over the next half hour, you will learn about the history of the building, with a focus on the magnificent paintings by Edvard Munch that hang here.

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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

Imagine you are entering this room on the day of the grand opening of the Aula, 2 September 1911 – Edvard Munch's paintings are not yet hanging here. We'll return to the story of how

the paintings ended up here in a bit. But in 1911, the ceremonial hall was dominated by the large expanses of white marble. Back then, the walls were decorated with yellow silk wallpaper hung where the paintings now hang.

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!

As mentioned before, if you had been here at the official opening in 1911, you wouldn't have seen any of Munch's paintings. We will soon go into more detail about each individual painting, but first, we want to tell the story of why exactly these paintings hang here today. This brings us to the "Aula controversy". It had been decided from the very outset that paintings would decorate the large walls of the Aula. But why was it Munch who ended up being trusted with this task? And why weren't the paintings here for the grand opening?

### **The Aula controversy**

Let's rewind to 1909. It has been decided that the University of Oslo is going to be extended with a new, large ceremonial hall – an Aula. Some of the donations for this new monumental building from, among others, Norwegian–Americans were earmarked for the artistic decoration, and the question was what should hang on the walls inside this large ceremonial hall. It was decided to hold an "art competition". This was after all a very prestigious assignment. This competition was to be the first major Norwegian art commission since Norway had become an independent nation.

An art committee was appointed, consisting of representatives from the University and the art world. However, the committee was very divided. The members cannot agree on what the Aula art should represent, or which artists are best suited for such an important commission. The committee eventually manages to agree on a number of artists that they would like to invite to submit proposals.

This is the beginning of what posterity has called the "Aula controversy". The assignment, which was commissioned by the University of Oslo, was for the selected artists to create works of art that would match and complement the architecture's standards of culture and tradition. The committee wanted the art to go with the neo-classical building, with its traditional Greek features. However, not all the artists followed these instructions, and some proposed art with a more modern expression. This led to a conflict between the traditionalists and the modernists. In the first round, five entries were rejected.

After several changes within the committee, with members coming and going, in 1911 the committee managed to decide to arrange a closed competition for only two artists: Emanuel Vigeland, who was Gustav Vigeland's brother, and Edvard Munch. These two artists would get to do a trial hanging of their proposed work, here in the Aula. But once again, the committee was unable to reach agreement. The problem was that these two artists represented the two extremes of the traditional and modernity – which was the very source of the dispute within the committee. Munch represented modernity. He broke conventions, was bold in his brushstrokes and used colours that did not depict the subjects realistically. Vigeland represented tradition, and painted his subjects much more realistically. The committee's verdicts after the trial hangings illustrate the distance between the proposals, and show that Munch, in particular, violated the expected norms for public art in his drafts. They claimed

that Munch was using the Aula as an experiment. Vigeland followed the requirement that the art should go with the interior and architecture of the room. Once again, the committee was unable to reach a decision.

Now Munch took matters into his own hands. He was desperate to win this competition. He had just returned from a clinic in Copenhagen, where he had undergone several months of treatment for alcoholism and a nervous breakdown. He wanted to renew his identity in his home country, and these paintings were at the core of this. Munch was assisted by a number of close friends, including Jens Thiis, the then director of the National Gallery. With the help of a number of German art dealers, they promoted the paintings to the public at exhibitions in Norway and abroad. People were able to see the paintings for themselves and make up their own minds. And they loved what they saw! Backed by broad public support, in 1914 the committee finally decided that Munch would be awarded the assignment.

In 1916, the paintings were hung here, and these paintings, which you can see all around you, are to this day the only Munch paintings that are still hanging in their original site – where Edvard Munch himself wanted them to hang.

## **The paintings**

*“I wanted the decorations to form a complete and independent world of ideas, and I wanted their visual expression to be both distinctively Norwegian and universally human. While the three main paintings [“The Sun”, “History”, and “Alma Mater”] are intended to appear as imposing as a massive flower arrangement, the others, however, are meant to invoke an airy and light transition, framing the room and its style”.*

If you look around you now, here in this room, these 11 paintings are hanging exactly where Munch himself wanted them to hang, and in the order he wanted them to hang. On the far wall behind the stage, we find the monumental main motif “The Sun”. This is one of the three main large paintings in here. The main picture hanging on the right-hand wall is called “Alma Mater”, and the main painting hanging on the wall to the left is called “The History”.

Let’s start with “The Sun”. Munch has painted countless sketches of this motif, but the one hanging here in front of you is the original. For Munch, the Sun was a powerful symbol of all living things. The Sun is depicted as a majestic luminous sphere, painted in the expressionist style, in brilliant, glowing shades of white, green, purple and red. Munch painted what he saw: *«I saw the sun rise over the cliffs – I painted the sun”.* He combines the universal Sun motif with rocks and bushes, site-specific and realistic depictions of the Norwegian coastline, found in the southern Norwegian town of Kragerø – a firm summer favourite.

The rays and energy from the Sun spill over into the paintings on either side of it. This is also how Munch perceived this primordial light: the Sun is the source of the energy from which all life springs; it puts everything else in context. The Sun provides light and allows us to see things clearly. The Sun lights up the room. This is why this motif fits so well here in the Aula – a key room at the University of Oslo. “The Sun” symbolises the University’s core mission of public enlightenment.

If you now look straight at “The Sun”, you will see that there are three paintings between this and “The History” on the left: “Awakening Men in Lightstream” facing the stage, “Women turned towards the Sun”, facing out towards the room, and “New Rays”. We will return to

“New Rays” later. First, let’s take a closer look at the painting facing the stage: “Awakening Men in Lightstream”.

Here Munch has painted three figures in a sequence from sleeping in the dark to standing bathed in sunlight. The way the picture is painted, with dissonant colours and rivulets of diluted paint, was highly unconventional at the time. Munch deliberately incorporated these kinds of “accidents” to suggest spontaneity. In “Women turned towards the Sun”, the painting immediately to the left facing outwards to the room, Munch again uses bold brushstrokes. The painting is dominated by pale shades of purple, green, blue and orange. In contrast to the Sun, these paintings were to appear paler and lighter, to form a frame around “The Sun”.

If we now look at the paintings on the right-hand side of “The Sun”, we find “Geniuses in lightstream”, facing inward towards the stage and “Men turned towards the Sun” facing outwards to the rest of the room.

The painting facing the stage, “Geniuses in lightstream”, continues the glowing rays of the Sun. At the bottom of the picture is a green figure that resembles a Roman river god and accompanied by a multitude of genii, guardian spirits from Roman mythology. Munch has thus been inspired by Italian Baroque paintings. “Men turned towards the Sun”, the painting facing out towards the hall, is also painted in pale shades of blue and green, and is a mirror image of the painting we just looked at: “Women turned towards the Sun”. Both paintings reflect the visual culture associated with popular movements for better health and hygiene in the 1910s, when sunlight was believed to have healing properties.

Together, these five images – “The Sun” in the centre, with “Awakening Men in Lightstream” and “Women turned towards the Sun” on the left, and “Geniuses in lightstream” and “Men turned towards the Sun” on the right, form a single multi-panel piece in the hall. The rays from “The Sun” in the centre spread out across these other paintings. We can also imagine that the Sun’s rays also shine over the other paintings, which we will now move on to.

Let’s move onto the huge painting “The History”, with the old man, and the young boy. Munch himself said that “The History”: “*shows a remote and historically resonant Norwegian landscape. In it, an old man from the fjords, having struggled for many years, now sits absorbed in rich memories, telling them to a fascinated little boy*”. The old man is wearing a red cap, which has been a symbol of freedom since ancient times. He is dressed in patched clothing and resembles a fisherman. In this way, he symbolises Norway’s history: a free country of hard-working people. History as an academic discipline is often symbolised by a classical figure taken from the elite. By contrast, Munch has chosen to focus on “the people’s history”, represented by an old worker and a young boy. The picture thus represents a vernacular approach to academic study and political nation-building in the nineteenth century, in which Munch’s uncle, the historian Peter Andreas Munch, was an important pioneer.

Opposite “The History”, to the right of “The Sun”, we find the third main painting: “Alma Mater”. “Alma Mater” represents the University itself. The name of the painting “Alma Mater” refers to the oldest university in the world: the University of Bologna, originally called *Alma Mater Studiorum*. In terms of artistic symbolism, the woman in the painting, Alma Mater, can be compared to Christianity’s “Maria Lactans” – the nursing Madonna. This is a well-known motif in art history, and Munch references it here, but rather than a religious motif, here it symbolises knowledge and wisdom that are passed on down through the generations. «*Alma Mater is still alma mater, but can also mean Mother Earth... it's an image*

*of the outer limits of science... She offers the milk of scholarship*". Through these associations, the local peasant woman, wearing a red jacket, a white collar, and a blue skirt, the colours of the Norwegian flag, against a lush green landscape, has been made universal and timeless. Paired with "The History", which is directly opposite, Munch portrays academia as one big intergenerational family.

The last four pictures hang immediately to the right and left of both "The History" and "Alma Mater", if you are looking straight at them.

If you now look at "Alma Mater", you will notice that the painting to the left is of two women picking apples. The painting is called "Harvesting Women" and represents the discipline of botany specifically, but also the other earth sciences. It also references the Bible story of Eve, transforming it from a cautionary tale of the fall of mankind into a story of the modern harvest from the tree of knowledge. In Munch's own words: *"germinating energy – the fruit of wisdom is enjoyed"*.

To the right of "Alma Mater" hangs a painting Munch called "The Source". The painting depicts two figures standing by a waterfall flowing down a mountainside. They are drinking from the mythical water – the fount of wisdom. At the same time, water and hydropower are two of Norway's main natural resources. Munch based this painting on sketches he had made of the spectacular coastal scenery of Western Norway.

If you now turn to face "The History", the painting hanging immediately to its right is called "New Rays". This painting symbolises the academic discipline of physics. "New Rays" depicts a couple, bathed in crystal clear rays of light, symbolising physics as an academic discipline. In his notes, Munch writes about this motif: *"The couple is infused with light – It travels into the bodies – and in and out of the crystal... – there is light that travels like x-rays"*.

To the left of "The History" is the painting "Chemistry". This depiction of chemistry as an academic discipline, merges the empirical with the esoteric. Munch wrote that *"Chemistry represents the hidden energies – the workplace of fire and warmth. A naked man and woman are making protoplasmic new life in a glass flask..."*, which Munch described as: *"... a moment pointing to the future"*.

## **Conclusion**

The 11 paintings you have learned a little about now, collectively known as the Aula decorations, became very important to Munch, and remained so for the rest of his artistic career. It is a great honour and responsibility for the University of Oslo to own and take care of these 11 beautiful paintings. In addition, the paintings hang in a historic building, drawn by prominent architects of their era. Sponsored by multiple donors, we will continue to write Norwegian university history here, in the University Aula.

This marks the end of the tour. We hope you have found it enlightening, in line with the architecture and art. If you have any questions or would like to know more about anything, don't hesitate to ask one of the hosts! They know a lot about the room and the art in it, and are very happy to share their knowledge. Until next time!