

## **Munch adding colour to the University's history**

### **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!