

Book Review: Public Paintings by Edvard Munch and his Contemporaries: Change and



Public paintings by
Edvard Munch
and his contemporaries

CHANGE AND CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

Edited by Tine Frøysaker with Noëlle Streeton, Hartmut Kutzke,
Françoise Hanssen-Bauer and Biljana Topalova-Casadięo

"Public Paintings by Edvard Munch and his Contemporaries: Change and Conservation Challenges"

Edited by Tine Frøysaker, Noëlle L.W. Streeton, Harmut Kutzke, Françoise Hanssen-Bauer, Biljana Topalova-Casadiago

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Review by Michael Duffy, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

"Public Paintings by Edvard Munch and his Contemporaries: Change and Conservation Challenges" originates from a 2013 conference hosted by the University of Oslo (UiO) Department of Archeology, Conservation and History (IAKH) which convened conservators, conservation scientists, archeologists, artists, and scholars of Edvard Munch (Norwegian, 1863-1944). Highlighting examples spanning the artist's entire oeuvre including monumental early commissions, this publication is the most comprehensive technical study of this pioneer of modern art to date. Several recent monographic exhibitions have highlighted Munch's paintings and graphic work. The largest retrospective ever, held at the Albertina in Vienna (2003), was followed by exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2006), the Centre Pompidou, Paris (2011), Tate Modern, London (2012), and most recently at The Met Breuer, New York (2017). With the publication of "Public Paintings," Munch, who is so widely recognized for his arresting images, can be comprehended and appreciated on a material and technical level.

"Public Paintings" was edited by a team headed up by T. Frøysaker who provides a succinct forward to this well-illustrated publication organized in five parts and supplemented by three appendices. Some of the contributors will be recognized from their previous publications on Munch (recent comprehensive studies include B. Topalova-Casadiago, "Technical Aspects of Edvard Munch's Paintings," in *Edvard Munch: Complete Paintings*, vol. 2, 1898-1908. Technical aspects of Edvard Munch's paintings, ed. G. Woll (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), 425-57; and B. Singer, T. Aslaksby, B. Topalova-Casadiago, and E. S. Tveit, "Investigation of Materials Used by Edvard Munch," *Studies in Conservation* 55, no. 4 (January 2010): 274-292. A valuable resource can also be accessed online at <http://munchmuseet.no/en/konservering-2>).

U. Plahter and L. E. Plahter's introduction gives a historic overview of Munch technical studies including case studies of *The Sick Child* (1886) and *The Scream* (1893). Using the latest technical investigation methods, including hyperspectral and multispectral imaging with micro-invasive sampling to augment the results of earlier studies from the 1970s-1990s, they describe the most recent efforts to catalogue Munch's methods and materials. Other topics covered include the development of compositions, his reuse of canvas, and early photo documentation.

The consequence of Munch's use of titanium white pigments and cadmium-based yellows is analyzed here and in subsequent contributions. Munch's habit of painting en plein air and using outdoor studio spaces is discussed in relation to the 'kill or cure' theory; can some paintings' appearances be ascribed to Munch's intentional exposure of his paintings to the elements, or are they the consequence of general neglect / material degradation? The authors of *Public Paintings* argue for the latter.

The core of the publication consists of 5 parts:

1. Munch's early paintings in major Norwegian collections
2. Munch's monumental Aula paintings at the University of Oslo and one of the artist's many outdoor studios
3. Munch's Aula drafts and paint tubes at the Munch Museum
4. Conservation of Munch's paintings in the United States, Germany, Denmark, and Norway
5. Munch and his contemporaries

And concludes with "Platform for further discussions."

Each part has a balance of material and technical observations which together give a comprehensive understanding of Munch's working methods, informing display and treatment strategies. While clearly intended for a specialized audience, *Public Paintings* will appeal to scholars of Munch and modern art in general. The inclusion of a section focused on the archeology of Munch's summer studio and dwelling in Hvitsten also provides the unique contribution of a living artist's point of view on a major past artist's studio practice.

In the first five essays of part 1, authors J. Wardius, T. E. Aslaksby, J. Y. Hardeberg, and B. Topalova-Casadiago, et al. discuss preservation issues surrounding some of Munch's most well-known paintings from 1893-1895, including *The Scream*. Topics covered include considering a painting's state of preservation in relation to the effects of travelling. Hyperspectral and scanning multispectral images are illustrated and chart the development of Munch's compositions. These contributions are fascinating especially as they outline the artist's working methods and compositional approaches in addition to providing information on Munch's choice of materials. Part 1 concludes in an essay by F. Jong focusing on the treatment challenges posed by one painting.

Parts 2 and 3 focus on the commission of the large-scale Aula (Assembly Hall) paintings at the University of Oslo. Their history, composition, and preservation are explored in depth by authors K. S. Scharffenberg, T. Frøysaker, P. Pettersen, L. C. Aasen, E. G. Sandbakken, J. J. Boon, and M. P. Colombini, et al. Discussions of the works' genesis and making are combined with materials analysis and practical concerns around the display and preservation of these monumental canvases installed in a public space. Inserted here (in poster presentation style) are two fascinating studies by B. K. Fonstelian and V. Vegem of archeological methods used to document the artist's outdoor studio. Part 3 concludes with a comprehensive study of Munch's oil paints by H. Kutzke and B. Topalova-Casadiago.

Included in part 4 is an updated case study by S. Penn and M. Tucker (see also: *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 93, no. 393-4 (Summer 2005).) on a work originally commissioned for a private home that was re-formatted, and another essay by R. Poggendorf focusing on a work that the artist apparently revisited. K. Korbela's essay includes four case studies. These elucidations of Munch's painting practice and alterations in the context of treatment strategies is explored in depth here and is one of the highlights of this publication. M. Stein and J. Rød's contribution on Munch's use of varnish is essential reading for conservators considering any treatment involving the removal or application of varnishes.

In Part 5 the subject expands to artists in addition to Munch where investigations have shown affinities for similar materials and techniques. Such comparative studies are interesting in the context of Munch's relationship to other artists' practices, but the reader may wonder why the editors decided to include this material when there is already so much comprehensive information presented. The essays on Petar Lubarda and Jean-Paul Riopelle, while important contributions to the understanding of these artists' working methods, seem out of context in this publication.

B. Ormsby, T. Frøysaker, and B. Topalova-Casadiago provide a timely conclusion to this publication marking the sesquicentennial anniversary of the artist's birthday in "Munch 150: reflections and challenges." They summarize overall themes including the essential contribution of heritage scientists, conservators, curators, and scholars with the aim of advancing collaboration and disseminating knowledge on Munch's oeuvre. With its comprehensive content and these concluding themes in mind, "Public Paintings by Edvard Munch and his Contemporaries: Change and Conservation Challenges" is essential reading for scholars of Munch and modern art, as well as a model for monographic technical investigations.