The Scream (1893). Materials, technique, condition, treatment

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The Scream by Edvard Munch has become a universal icon, a metaphor of man’s existential loneliness and angst. Apart from a lithograph made in 1895, the motif exists in four different versions, all on cardboard; two belonging to The Munch Museum, Oslo (crayon, 1893, Woll 332 and tempera/oil, 1910, Woll 896), one in private ownership (pastel, 1895, Woll 373), and the 1893 painted version (tempera/crayon/oil, Woll 333), belonging to The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo (NMK).

Being so widely known and appreciated one could easily imagine that the painting from 1893 (Woll 333), on display at The National Gallery (now part of NMK) since 1910, should have suffered from physical overexposure, repeated loans and conservation treatment. But the fact that the motif did not gain pop-status until the 1970s’ may have helped The Scream to avoid these hazards.

While most of the other Munch paintings were cleaned and varnished on arrival at the museum, The Scream was left practically untouched. The fragile surface, caused by the artist’s rough handling, poor storage and transport conditions, plus the use of unstable mixed media must have discouraged conservatory intervention. Thus the painting has lived a life of comparative ease, hanging on exhibition walls for more than a century and being exposed to the steadily falling light and dust of a town based gallery. – This idyllic peace was dramatically broken in 1994 when it was stolen, but recovered practically unhurt after some weeks. Since then it has spent a nearly hermetic life behind security glass.

Recent analyses have defined more closely the physical constituents of The Scream, shedding light on Munch’s use of materials, the way he applied them and to which artistic end. A painted sketch on the back of the support adds to our insight. The combined knowledge hopefully makes us understand the nature of observed damages and points at measures preventing or halting ongoing degradation processes. Dust, dirt and deteriorating paint have obviously changed the painting’s appearance over the years, as has the darkened cardboard support, shining through in parts of the painting. In view of its fragile condition and the risk of creating a colouristic unbalance, cleaning does not seem the obvious choice. Local consolidation of flaking paint also presents a challenge due to possible darkening of powdery pigments.

The Scream (Woll 333), its pigments, binding media and support have been analysed using diverse optical microscopy and photographic techniques, Polarized Light Microscopy (PLM), Fourier Transform Infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), Scanning Electron Microscope - Energy-Dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (SEM-EDX) and Gas Chromatography–Mass Spectrometry (GC-MS). In 2012 the painting was subjected to 3D and hyper spectral imaging using newly designed cameras and software. The latter technology enables the capture of exact colour measurement at 160 different wavelengths in the visible spectrum, of every spot in the high-definition recorded image.