Artist’s technique and / or environmental influences: developing a preservation strategy for two problematic paintings by Edvard Munch

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Of five paintings by Edvard Munch (Woll 183, 255, 820, 1095, 1130) in the collection of the Statens Museum for Kunst (SMK) in Copenhagen, two (Woll 1095 and 1130) suffer from complex structural problems. Local crack patterns, flaking and paint loss have been a constant issue, even after repeated selective consolidation. As treatments have thus been of limited success in the long term, there has been a need to identify the causes of this recurrent problem in order to develop a strategy to ensure the paintings’ stability in the future.

As part of the investigation, all five SMK paintings have been examined in detail, visually and by multispectral imaging techniques. Results have been compared to published reference material from research into other works by Munch. Previous condition and conservation reports have been evaluated with an emphasis on conservation materials and techniques in view of the paint layer’s current condition. Storage and exhibition records of all five paintings were compared with travel and climate data where available. The differences / dissimilarities between the two unstable paintings and the remaining three were highlighted and the problematic paintings classified with reference to Munch’s oeuvre and in comparison to other versions of the same motif.

A focal point of subsequent interdisciplinary research will be the identification of materials in the paintings, such as pigments, fillers, extenders and binding media by spectroscopic techniques. This approach will help to validate an assessment of the structural problems in Munch’s two paintings, as compared to the three unproblematic ones. Analysis of the chemical composition and layer stratigraphies will form a basis for the evaluation of the paint layers with regard to the changes in their structural and optical appearance. Also, it will help to suggest the extent to which their condition is a result of Munch’s technique and / or environmental impact.

In a wider perspective, the clarification of structures in the two deteriorated paintings will not only help to substantiate the presumptions about their physical and chemical deterioration, but will also complement the existing body of research into Munch’s oeuvre for an understanding of degradation processes in his paintings.

The results of the ongoing research will also be presented more extensively in a diploma thesis in September 2013.