The Preservation of Edvard Munch's Murals

Edvard Munch's mural paintings in the Auditorium of Oslo University are in a bad way. In the period leading up to the university's bicentenary in 2011 the paintings are therefore to be studied and treated.

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The Auditorium Murals

Most Norwegians have some relationship to Edvard Munch's paintings in the University Hall, and the eleven motifs, among them The Sun, Alma Mater and History, occupy a central position in Munch's production. The grand new hall, known as the Aula, was completed in 1909, but it would take seven years before Munch's paintings were in place in the eleven spaces provided. After a period of tendering, Munch's designs had been selected above other artists including Emmanuel Vigeland.

The paintings have decorated the walls of the auditorium ever since they were put up in 1916, with a gap during the World War II when the canvases were cut from the wall, rolled up and transported to Kongsberg where they were hidden away in the silver mines. The explosion and fire in 1945 means that we have to be thankful that they were evacuated in time. Now, in 2009, the paintings have been moved out of the auditorium once again, this time because both the building and the paintings are in need of care. The largest paintings were too big to be carried through the doors, so the building authorities opened up a slit in the rear wall to enable them to be hoisted out of the room with a crane. The paintings were lowered onto an articulated lorry in specially made cases, so as to be safely transported to new housing.

The Conservation Degree Course at the University of Oslo is responsible for the conservation of the paintings. Work began in January 2009, and the paintings are to be finished for the Grand University Jubilee when the doors of the auditorium will open to the public once more.

Conservation and preservation

Before the treatment of the paintings started in January, they had already been carefully investigated from scaffolding inside the auditorium. Archival research was also undertaken to try to ascertain everything that had been done to the paintings in the past. It was discovered that the paintings had an extensive history of previous interference and treatments. Knowledge about these makes it easier to understand the paintings and ascertain their present condition.

The paintings are painted on canvas that had been fixed onto large stretchers, from which they were cut down during the war. When the paintings were returned to the auditorium they were rolled out and glued to plywood boards with a substantial wooden trellis work on the back. This wooden grid has caused thermal darkening of the surface of the paintings, i.e. the dust particles in the air have attached themselves to the surface where it was coldest. The areas of the painting surface that lie over the trellis has a lower temperature than the rest of the surface, something that has led to dust depositing itself in a grid pattern on the paintings.

The rest of the surfaces are also very dirty, despite having been cleaned up to six times during their lifetime of 70 years. Cleaning paintings is always risky and may lead to damage and wear. Cleaning every 10-15 years is a very high frequency, and not desirable for the fragile surfaces of Munch's paintings.

The frequent cleaning has different causes, but all are related to the inappropriate internal environment in the auditorium. The building
has a high level of air circulation of indoor air and badly filtered outdoor air. This leads to large temperature swings caused by the seasons and variations in the weather. Additionally the position of the auditorium in the centre of Oslo leads to high concentrations of polluting particles in the indoor air. This climate leads to rapid depositing of dust on the paintings.

Since the auditorium is a public building which is in frequent use, the approach to the work’s conservation has, necessarily to be different to works held in a museum or gallery. It is therefore important to find compromises between use and preservation of the paintings. The auditorium is, for instance, world known for its acoustic qualities, which means that any major structural changes have to be evaluated closely in cooperation with an acoustics expert, to ensure there are no changes to the acoustic. The auditorium is used by the public and must therefore have an indoor climate which is comfortable for people, without being detrimental to the paintings. In the past, the furniture in the hall has always been made from very dust-producing materials. Now, taking account of health, comfort and the preservation of the paintings, new and more suitable materials will be used. When the buildings are renovated in the period leading up to 2011, the climate will also be improved, with the sustainable and long-term preservation of Munch auditorium paintings in mind.

Technical Research
In addition to treating the paintings, the conservation project gives a unique opportunity to inves-
The largest paintings were too big for the main door, and had to be hoisted out through a slot in the wall.

Photo: Karen Mengshoel

The three authors work as painting conservators on the Auditorium project. They all have MAs in painting conservation from University of Oslo. Mirjam Liu has additionally worked as a scientific assistant on the project from 2007 to 2009.

The conservation of the auditorium paintings is the most ambitious project the conservation course at Oslo University has undertaken, and involves both staff and MA students. The project is large scale, and has also garnered international attention.

tigate the paintings thoroughly. This will offer an increased insight into the painting techniques and materials Munch used in a period of his life that hitherto has been poorly researched. Knowledge of how the works were painted has a value in itself, but also lays the foundations for the choice of conservation methods. Technical investigations of materials always start with by using the naked eye and loupes of different magnification. Other techniques are then employed, like infrared photography, x-ray photography and ultraviolet light. With a hand held x-ray fluorescence device it is possible to investigate the pigment in the paint without taking physical samples. All these techniques will contribute to giving a unique overview of how the paintings were created and the changes that have occurred over time.