

Icons

– *Ida* is a beautiful object. Fossils are natural works of art, says Jørn Hurum, Associate Professor at the Natural History Museum in Oslo. This year you can view this little primate together with Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream* at the Munch Museum.

TEXT ARVE RØD

Hurum meets us shortly before the opening of the new exhibition *Through Nature* in an office that appears exactly as one would expect of a world renowned palaeontologist: filled with bones and dinosaur parts from floor to ceiling. We tread carefully in between a couple of prehistoric skeletons and take a seat on the sofa to talk about petrified history and perspectives in «buried time».

– *What will this exhibition be like, seen from the perspective of the Natural History Museum?*

– I can only talk about the fossils, but I see obvious correlations to Munch's pictures: the landscape formations, flowers and so on. The botanists and geologists here are also contributing items, and I imagine there will be a number of colourful things from that corner as well, says Hurum.

– We are contributing fossils from southern Germany, among other things, which in fact come from the same place as the lithographic stones that Munch used. This place has few, but extremely well preserved fossils. It is called «the Lagoon of Death» due to the extreme salt content the lake had – everything that was washed into it died immediately. And then there is *Ida*, of course.

– *Right, what can she tell us when it comes to Munch?*

– First of all she will contribute her celebrity status, and that is nothing to scoff at. Museums need celebrities. *Ida* will be displayed together with *The Scream*, and in this way we connect the two greatest icons – the most widely reproduced images from each of the museums. *Ida* is our *Scream* or our *Madonna*, if you will; something that creates an interest and understanding for what we are all about, says Hurum, and continues:

– I was convinced that we would be creating a trademark right from the start. I saw it already in the first board meeting presentation, before we acquired *Ida* – I was clear that we had to have our one object, our trademark. When we finally acquired her for the museum, we could have conducted our presentation of her in obscure scientific journals, but that is no way to create icons. The half-moon shape she has is iconic, something that makes her easily recognisable. I can tell you a story that illustrates this quite well. A researcher was passing through security control at Gardermoen Airport with a copy made from a mould of *Ida*. When the guards saw the copy passing through the X-ray machine, one of them said: «Oh, is that *Ida*?» It is the only fossil in the world that can be recognised by a security guard in an airport.

– *What does Ida mean now, for research? Is she the missing link?*

– Most people agree that she is closer to a lemur than a monkey.

Nevertheless, we do not have any other fossils in our group – what we call primates – that are as old or as intact as *Ida*. We know little about what happened during diversification between monkeys and lemurs. The point is that she is recognisable as an early primate. And we stem from primitive primates, regardless of whether *Ida* belongs on a different evolutionary branch. With *Ida* we can take a step backwards in time, and multiply the history of mankind by ten – all the way back to the beginning of the large group that is called primates. This is a new thought for very many. We shift our understanding of our own evolution back into «buried time».

– *Doesn't this make Ida interesting as a philosophical object as well? It contributes an existential dimension, which can be compared to Munch's depiction of a modern trauma.*

– What our work entails when it comes down to it is to find out who we are and where we come from. That is the whole foundation for the natural sciences, and this is what those of us who work at the Department of Humanities at the University of Oslo, talk about as well, basically. But we normally work with such small fragments that we don't always see the whole picture. We don't take the time to lift our gaze to see the existential aspect of it.

– *Fossil facts open up to philosophical ruminations?*

– That dimension was there even when I was a boy and became interested in this subject, says Hurum.

– Fossils are witnesses of time, which we cannot interview; but we can position them in a large puzzle that we can call the history of life. *Ida* is a small piece of a puzzle that we will never be finished with. But if you can contribute a few pieces, that's very good.



Fossils are natural works of art, says Jørn Hurum. Photo © Behzad Farazollahi



Ida. Photo © Per Aas, The Natural History Museum, Oslo