

# Through Nature

**What has Munch's *Scream* to do with the amphibian fossil *Ida*? Or his lithograph series *Alpha and Omega* with a tableau of stuffed animals? Such seemingly improbable encounters between Munch's art and natural history form the basis of this exhibition project.**

The museum's largest project in 2014 is *Through Nature*. The composite project includes a large exhibition at the Munch Museum and in the Botanical Garden among other things. It is the first time the Munch Museum has collaborated with the Natural History Museum in Tøyen, which celebrates its 200th anniversary this year. We are very pleased and grateful for the interest and the resources they have contributed in developing the project. This applies not least to the opportunity to borrow objects from their collection for the exhibition in the Munch Museum. Together we have also created a «Munch trail» in the Botanical Garden. Their organic collections therefore also form part of the project.

The idea for the exhibition originated in a desire to explore Munch's art in a natural history perspective. Ordinarily art history and other disciplines within the humanities form the basis of the Munch Museum's work with Munch's art. This time we view his works in relation to disciplines such as geology, palaeontology, cosmology, zoology and botany. To be specific, we include fossils, minerals, stuffed animals or animals in glass jars, together with scientific books, illustrations and plates in the exhibition.

Munch's imagery was marked by the biological theories and natural science breakthroughs of his time. He was relatively informed in this field, about everything from August Strindberg's highly speculative theories, to the German zoologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel's «recapitulation theory». And of course the most obvious: Darwin's theory of evolution. Munch applied these elements rather freely, as inspiration for his personal philosophy of life. They were expressed in terminology that he used, such as «metabolism» and «crystallisation», and many of his motifs are interwoven with these ideas.

The idea for the exhibition *Through Nature* can be found in condensed form in a work such as the monumental *The Researches* in the Munch Museum's auditorium. In the centre of the picture a full-bodied woman sits with a child at her breast. She is life itself, surrounded by children and adolescents who are actively exploring the nature surrounding them, in a large and open coastal landscape. Munch expresses in a grand way something fundamental about the place of human beings in the universe, and their curiosity and search for knowledge about the world. Another seminal picture in the exhibition is *Metabolism*, which depicts a naked couple standing on either side of a tree, a reference to Adam and Eve. The motif is encased in a carved wooden frame, whose images depict a human skull and an animal skull buried in the earth amongst the roots of the tree – life and death interwoven.

At the Munch Museum *Through Nature* consists of six sections, the first of which is called «Humans». The central element here is

the display of Munch's painting *The Scream* together with the fossil *Ida*. With its 47 million years, the latter is the world's oldest known primate skeleton, which caused a sensation when it was presented in the press in 2009. *Ida* has been the subject of comprehensive scientific examinations and discussion, just as *The Scream* has been in its way. Both are in addition icons of pop culture with universal appeal. With the inclusion of *Ida*, Darwin's theories about life and human development are conclusively brought into the exhibition.

The next section «Life» delves more deeply into Munch's idea about «metabolism», together with his repeated use of a tree as a central motif. In connection with the motifs *Madonna* and *Jealousy*, biological and evolutionary aspects are accentuated. The central topic of the section called «The Universe» is Munch's intense depiction of the sun. With its cosmological perspectives it also deals with light and radiation as fundamental natural phenomena. Among other things, the white sunlight encompasses the colour spectrum that we can see in a rainbow. As opposed to colour as an optical phenomenon, the exhibition also deals with colour as a physical substance. The pigments that Munch used in his paintings make up a form of natural history themselves, given their source in various minerals.

The zoological element is brought into the exhibition in relation to Munch's series of lithographs entitled *Alpha and Omega*, a satirical animal and human fable. This work is exhibited together with a whole tableau of stuffed animals and animals in glass jars. What we encounter here is the wild and chaotic form of nature, if you will. The next section is entitled «The Garden» and has to do rather with the cultivation of nature. In this room we find many of Munch's motifs from Ekely, which he painted again and again – fruit trees in bloom, the ploughing of fields, the elm forest, women in the garden, and so on. Thereafter comes a separate room devoted to «The Seasons», which follows the cyclical transitions in nature. In keeping with the seasons we will exhibit Munch's motifs depicting spring, summer, autumn and winter in sequence.

Period: 26 April – 4 January 2015

Place: The Munch Museum and the Natural History Museum, including the Botanical Garden

Curator: Jon-Ove Steihaug with a working group consisting of Ute Kuhlemann Falck, Mie Mustad, Petra Pettersen, Sivert Thue, Lars Toft-Eriksen and Gerd Woll

In connection with *Through Nature* lectures and seminars will be arranged that will elucidate the various themes of the exhibition. For additional information about the programme and dates see [www.munchmuseet.no](http://www.munchmuseet.no)

Metabolism. Life and Death (detail), oil on canvas, 1898-99



*Nothing is small nothing is great – Inside us are [whole] worlds. Small things are a part of the large the large things a part of the small. – A drop of blood [is] a universe with a sun at the centre and planets. The ocean a drop a small part of a [great] body – God is in us and we are in god. Primordial light is everywhere and goes where there is life – everything is motion and light – Crystals are born and formed like children in a mother's womb. Even in the hardest stone the flame of life blazes Death is the beginning of life – of a new crystallisation*

Edvard Munch, *The Tree of Life*, sketchbook, dated 1930–1935

