

# With Magnifying Glass and Microscope

In *Through Nature* the fossil *Ida*, a stuffed bear, amphibians, pearl shells and minerals are exhibited together with original works by Munch. What challenges does this pose for the conservators?

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*Through Nature* is a collaboration between the Natural History Museum and the Munch Museum. While the Natural History Museum will create a Munch trail in the Botanical Garden and recreate the vegetable garden Munch had at Ekely, the Munch Museum will borrow a number of objects from the Natural History Museum's collections and show them together with original works by Munch.

Mie Mustad, painting conservator at the Munch Museum, says that the combining of these objects in an art exhibition poses new challenges for the conservators.

– We are borrowing stuffed animals for the exhibition – among them a large bear and a lion, amphibians preserved in jars of alcohol, insects, fossils and minerals – materials that are quite different from what we normally work with here at the museum. And that is where I come in. My task is to make sure that the objects we introduce into the museum are not a threat to our works of art. That the stuffed animals do not have insects hidden in the fur, for example, and that they are not treated with chemicals that are dangerous to touch. I will secure the objects and see to it that the requirements of the lender are met.

Mustad informs me that the job of the painting and paper conservators at the Munch Museum is to ensure that the works in the collection will have as long a life span as possible. Before a work by Munch is exhibited, its condition is always thoroughly evaluated.

– We scrutinise the surface with a magnifying glass and a microscope, centimetre by centimetre. We are looking for unstable loose layers of paint and previous conservation interventions, and are on the lookout for changes that may have to be treated.

Light is the worst culprit when it comes to wear and tear on the pictures. The longer the exposure to light, the more stressful for the artwork. All transport and handling also represent a threat that should be kept to a minimum.

– *Through Nature* will have a long duration, from April 2014 and well into 2015. The works in the exhibition will be exposed to light for a very long time. In one of the rooms, where the theme is related to the seasons, we will replace works for each of the seasons. This is a good thing for works that should not be exposed for the entire duration of the exhibition.

But in *Through Nature* the works are also exposed to other threats. – For instance, amphibians and other species preserved in alcohol are exhibited in a glass display case together with Munch's graphic works. We know that the Natural History Museum refills the alcohol every year due to evaporation over time. So in order to secure the

graphic works, I have to find out if the released gases can cause damage to our works, and decide where the display case should be placed. Although the graphic art is protected behind glass and frames, as a precautionary method we may have to air out the display cases regularly throughout the duration of the exhibition.

The reason the animals are on loan is that they are related to the contents of the works in the exhibition.

– The series of graphic works entitled *Alpha and Omega* is built on a fable that Munch wrote based on the story of Creation. *Alpha and Omega*, the first human beings, are living in Paradise. They have everything they need, and live in harmony. Eventually things go wrong though. Omega enters into erotic relationships with several animals, and children gradually appear as a result of these couplings. In the exhibition we can see the effect this has on Alpha. We display the series together with frogs, stuffed birds, a bear and amphibians – all of which point to the animals in the fable and bring them to life.

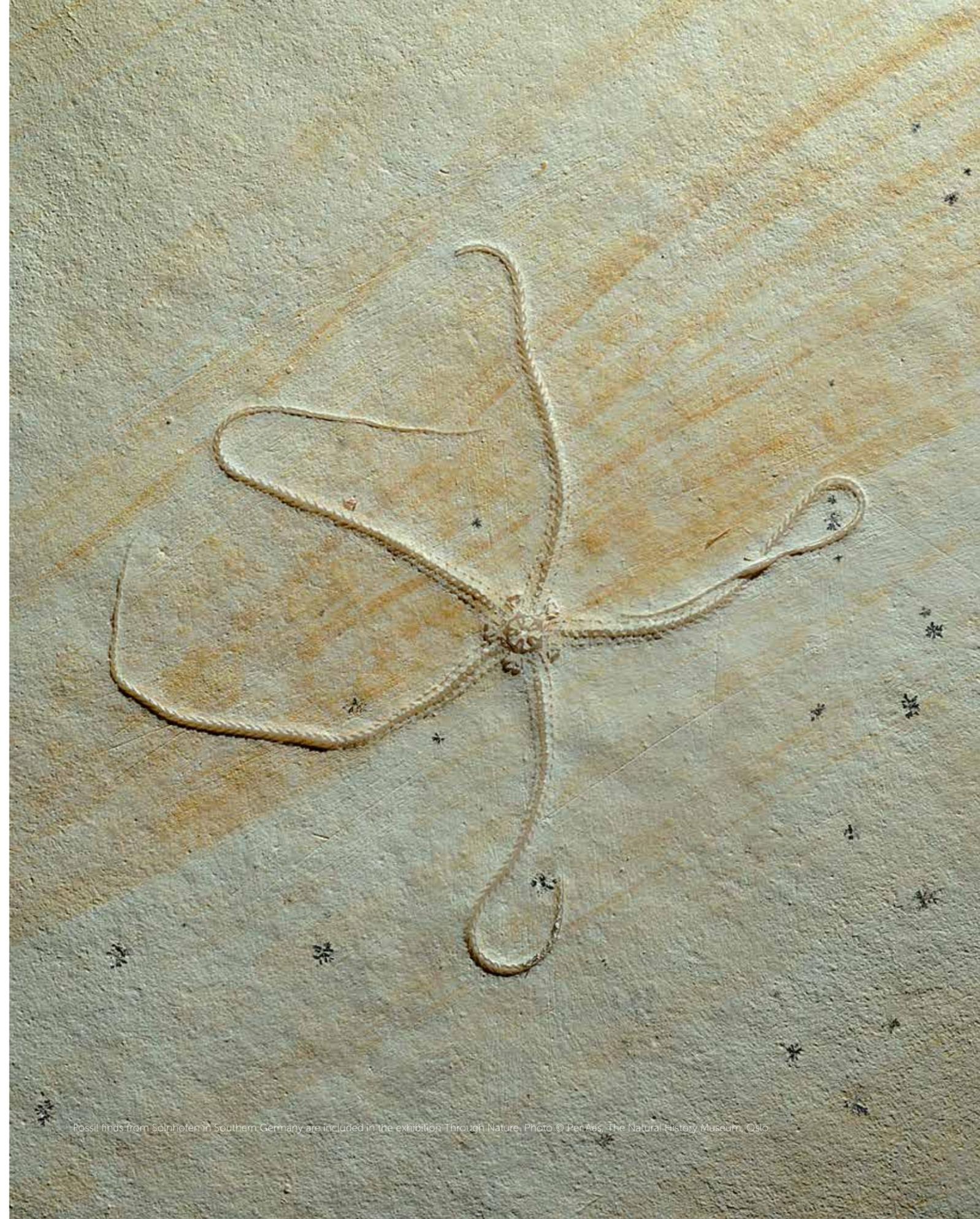
The objects on loan from the Natural History Museum also have an educational purpose. In two areas of the exhibition the public can see the materials that Munch used in the execution of his works, among them colour pigments.

– The Natural History Museum has a fantastic collection of minerals and crystals. We are borrowing objects from this collection and can show the public the origins of a selection of pigments.

– We can do something as obvious as to link the rather depressed looking woman in *Female Head with Long Face* with a green pigment («green with envy»). Or something as outlandish as choosing a painting where there is only one spot of yellow, and then display which pigment it is!



Mie Mustad is the conservator in charge of the exhibition *Through Nature*. Photo © Behzad Farazollahi



Fossil finds from Solnhofen in Southern Germany are included in the exhibition *Through Nature*. Photo © Per Aas, The Natural History Museum, Oslo