

The Politics of Munch (Oslo, 1–2 Oct 26)

MUNCH Museum, Oslo, Oct 1–02, 2026

Deadline: Mar 16, 2026

Gustav Jørgen Pedersen, MUNCH

This conference invites scholars from any discipline to challenge the notion of Munch as a non-political artist and to explore the broader socio-political dimensions of his work and life, in the past and today.

Historians have throughout the years agreed that Edvard Munch (1863–1944) is not characterized as an artist of political engagement. When Munch formulated his artistic project as one concerned with “living people who breathe, and feel, and suffer and love,” this position stood in opposition not only to the modest genre painting of his time but also to his inspirators Christian Krohg’s politically engaged Naturalism and Hans Jæger’s anarchism. Munch’s work seems to be apolitical, preoccupied with existential issues, grand emotions and psychological struggles, and has been predominantly understood through the lens of biography. Munch himself never took clear political positions, and he never voiced allegiance to any political party. Nor does his artworks promote specific political causes. During the Nazi occupation of Norway, he refused to be instrumentalized by both the occupying powers and the resistance. In his actions, statements, and artistic practice, Munch predominantly seems not to take political stance.

Nevertheless, Munch lived in times of great social and cultural changes. Social unrest, political upheaval, revolutions, and wars dominate the history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Within the arts, the avant-gardes took a clear stance on several of the direst political issues of their times. Over the past thirty years Munch’s art and biography have been subjected to a range of sociohistorical and critical interpretations, including gender studies, feminist readings, and ideology critique. Nevertheless, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of the political dimensions of Munch’s life, work, reception, and legacy.

In our time of political polarization and increasing tension, it is crucial to broaden our understanding of the political dimensions of our shared cultural histories. This includes examining how specific narratives and perspectives have been overlooked or written out, as well as the aesthetic, material and ideological foundations of the social memories that frame and shape contemporary political imaginaries.

To respond to these needs, this conference is organized in connection with the exhibition “Edvard Munch and the Chocolate Factory” at MUNCH (22 May 2026 – 11 October 2026). The exhibition situates Munch’s frieze originally made for the women’s canteen at the Freia Chocolate Factory (1923) within a context of social issues such as the struggle for women’s rights, child labor, and colonialism.

Taking the exhibition as its point of departure, the conference invites scholars from many disciplines to challenge the notion of Munch as a nonpolitical artist and to explore the broader socio-political dimensions of his work and life, in the past and today.

Possible topics may include:

- The political avant-garde and socially engaged art in Munch's lifetime
- Mural painting and narrative friezes, propaganda vs the decorative
- Nation building and nationalism
- Politization of art and degenerate art
- Vitalism and the political body
- The biography and mythography of Munch as means of ideology
- Cultural radicalism, anarchism and bohemianism
- Individualism, atheism, the death of God and the modern self
- Alienation, social estrangement and social outcasts
- Sexual and gender politics/theory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
- Medicine, disease, health, and body politics
- Notions of the unconscious, psychoanalysis and politics
- Political economy, class and industrialization
- The social and political contexts of the two World Wars and the interwar period
- Postcolonial studies and critical race theory
- Power, ideology, and representation
- Identity politics

We welcome papers that engage with Munch in both historical and contemporary perspectives.

We also invite contributions from art theory, critical theory, and philosophy that develop concepts and frameworks for understanding the relationship between art and politics, including – but not limited to – dissensus (Rancière), deconstruction or subalternity (Spivak), difference (Pollock), cultural hegemony (Gramsci), temporalities of modernism (Kapur), metapolitics (Badiou), and hyperpolitics (Jäger). All submissions must, however, engage directly with Edvard Munch.

After the conference, we would like to invite contributors with highly relevant papers to participate in a forthcoming research project and/or publication on Munch and politics. The project will inform a future exhibition to be developed by MUNCH.

To participate, please submit a short abstract (300 words) to Head of Research Dr. Gustav Jørgen Pedersen by March 16, 2026. Mail: gustav.pedersen@munchmuseet.no

The conference is organized by the research group 'The Politics of Visibility' at MUNCH. The organizing committee consists of Curator Ana María Bresciani, Senior Curator Dr. Kari J. Brandtzæg, Senior Curator Dr. Lars Toft-Eriksen, and Dr. Gustav Jørgen Pedersen.

Reference:

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