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

MUNCH, Edvard Munchs plass 1, 0194 Oslo, Oct 1–02, 2026

Lars Toft-Eriksen

Scholars have throughout the years agreed that Edvard Munch (1863–1944) cannot be characterized as an artist of political engagement. When Munch described 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 sources of inspiration: Christian Krohg’s politically engaged naturalism and Hans Jæger’s anarchism. Munch’s works appear apolitical, preoccupied with existential issues, grand emotions and psychological conflicts, and have been predominantly interpreted through a biographical lens.

Munch himself never took clear political stances, nor did he ever express allegiance to any political party. Nor do 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. Across his actions, statements and artistic practice, Munch seems not to take political stance.

Munch, however, lived in times of great social and cultural changes. Social unrest, political upheaval, revolutions and wars marked the history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Within the arts, the avant-garde movements 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 the subject of a range of sociohistorical and critical interpretations, including gender studies, feminist readings and ideology critique. Despite this academic attention, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of the political dimensions of Munch’s life, work, reception and legacy.

Amid contemporary political polarization and increasing tensions, it is crucial to broaden our understanding of the political dimensions embedded within shared cultural histories. This involves examining how certain narratives and perspectives have been overlooked or omitted, as well as the aesthetic, material and ideological foundations of the social memories that frame and shape current political imaginaries.

In response to these needs, this conference has invited scholars to challenge the notion of Munch as an apolitical artist and to explore the broader socio-political dimensions of his work and life, both in the past and today. The papers presented will explore a wide range of topics, including class politics, inter-war geopolitics and nationalism, sexual and reproductive rights, anarchism and diplomacy during the Cold War.

The conference will be held in English.
Please note, you must purchase separate tickets for each day. The ticket includes coffee and lunch.

PROGRAMME

Thursday 1 October 2026

Chair: Lars Toft-Eriksen, Senior Curator, MUNCH

08:30 Registration/coffee

09:00 Caroline Ugelstad, Director of Collections, MUNCH: Opening Speech

09:15 Session One

Ana María Bresciani Arenas, Curator, MUNCH: “Cacao Promises. Edvard Munch and the Freia Frieze”

Michelle Tisdel, Resarcher II, The National Library of Norway: “Freia – A Little Piece of West-Africa”

10:30 Pause

10:45 Session Two

Gerd Woll, Senior Curator Emerita, MUNCH: “Workers as a Theme for Public Decorations”

Allison Moorehead, Professor in Art History, Queens University, Canada: “Edvard Munch's Politics of Sex and Reproduction”

Gustav Jørgen Pedersen, Head of Department, Department of Language and Culture, UiT The Artic University of Norway: “Munch and Marx: The Aesthetics and Politics of Metabolism”

12:15 Lunch

13:00 Session Three

Frode Sandvik, Curator, KODE/PhD student, The University of Oslo, Norway: “Cold War Munch”

Kristian Handberg, Assistant Professor in Art History, Copenhagen University, Denmark: “Munch Diplomacy. Exhibiting Munch and Nordic Modernism Across the Iron Curtain”

14:00 Pause

14:15 Session Four

Maike Teubner, Postdoctorial Researcher, Düsseldorf, Germany: “An Anarchist Provocation? Edvard Munch and the Politics of Art Criticism”

Sivert Thue, Curtor, MUNCH: “Edvard Munch’s Connection with ‘The Black Hand’ and a Serbian Nationalist Assassination”

15:15 End of day one

Friday 2 October 2026

Chair: Ana María Bresciani Arenas, Curator, MUNCH

09:00 Coffee

09:30 Keynote

Ara H. Merjian, Professor in Italian Studies, New York University, USA: “Politics and Persecutory Subjectivity: Munch's Marats Reconsidered”

10:30 Pause

10:45 Session Five

Patricia G. Berman, Professor in Art History, Wellesley College, USA: “Munch and the Politics of Italian Art”

Tobias Kämpf, Lecturer in Art History, University of Erlangen, Germany: “Edvard Munch and Social Reform in the German Empire (1892-1908)”

Ferdinand Mowinckel, PhD researcher in History, the European University Institute, Italy: “Munch and the United States of Europe”

12:15 Lunch

13:00 Session Six

Aurora Wilson Dyer Gough, Freelance Provenance Research Specialist: “Edvard Munch as Degenerate: The Politics of Style and the Norwegian Art Market 1937-1945 Onwards”

Jānis Kalnačs, Professor, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, and researcher, Institute of Art, Art Academy of Latvia: “Timelessness in the Time of Nazi Occupation. Edvard Munch in a Young Latvian Artist’s Collection of Essays”

14:00 Pause

14:15 Panel discussion

Angela Lampe (Senior Curator, Centre Pompidou), Ara Merjian (Professor, New York University) and Allison Morehead (Professor, Queens University) in conversation with Lars Toft-Eriksen (Senior Curator, MUNCH)

15:15 Kari J. Brandtzæg, Senior Curator, MUNCH: Summary of the conference and concluding remarks

15:30 End of day two

Reference:
CONF: The Politics of Munch (Oslo, 1-2 Oct 26). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 13, 2026 (accessed Nov 24, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/54210>.