

## EDVARD MUNCH'S PAINTINGS. COUNTING AND CLASSIFICATION AT THE MUNCH

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### *Abstract*

*The Munch Museum staff aims to answer properly and accurately when its audience asks how many paintings by Edvard Munch it holds. Counting Munch's paintings is complex because of the sort of material they comprise. An interdisciplinary working group was therefore established to examine the different types of paintings. The group also considered the requirements of the collection management system, which mirrors the tasks of the professionals in the museum. This paper presents the counting principles the group developed, gives some practical examples, and discusses problems encountered. The group defined three types of paintings: "one-sided" paintings where painting equals physical object, physical objects with paintings on recto and verso, and virtual painting groups comprising one or more physical painting fragments.*

*Keywords:* Collection management; Paintings; Fragment; Motif; Classification

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### **Introduction**

When asked how many Munch paintings it holds in its collections, the museum aims to be able to give its visitors an actual and concrete number<sup>1</sup>. To visitors this question may appear easy to answer, but to museum professionals it is not. Counting museum objects like Munch's paintings is often a complex task because deciding what to count is not necessarily straightforward. From a logistic point of view, counting the actual physical objects is important, and from an art historical point of view counting the artworks, the number of letters, the number of drawings in a sketchbook, and so on, is equally important. There is not always a one-to-one relationship between single physical objects and artworks/museum objects, e.g., a triptych painting can comprise three separate physical objects, a letter can comprise several paper sheets and an envelope, while a sketchbook can contain any number of drawings. Therefore, an analysis of the museum's collections is required to gain insight into what object types they contain, and how the object types manifest themselves, what they comprise. Next, a registration practice for the MUNCH's collection management system<sup>2</sup> must be created. It must aim to cover all the different object types and their manifestations and make it possible to carry out tasks related to the museum's operations (registration, exhibitions, loans, in-house logistics, conservation and so on) as well as to count the objects of museum's collections.

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When he died in January 1944, Edvard Munch bequeathed the City of Oslo with every art object he kept on his estate at Ekely – drawings, prints, paintings, and sculptures – as well as most of his other belongings – letters, notes, art equipment, furniture, and other household goods<sup>3</sup>. Among the artworks were, of course, many paintings, mounted and unmounted, and representing all stages of creation and all sorts of conditions. MUNCH's paintings collection is not just a neat and tidy one of only completed artworks, mounted, and framed, ready for display. It also contains objects with paintings on recto and verso as well as canvas pieces that are surviving fragments from drafted, but unfinished paintings and parts of various projects Munch was working on. This is a reminder that the Munch paintings came directly from Munch's studio, from his workshop [1-3].

To count the paintings, or more specifically to establish object type definitions and registration criteria, the museum therefore created an interdisciplinary working group. The group included a paintings conservator (Inger Grimstad), a registrar (Charlotte Bouchard-Lafond), two art historians (Ute Falck and Petra Pettersen) besides the author (Hilde Bøe), scholarly editor and curator of Munch's texts and formerly database administrator.

This paper presents the discussion leading to the counting principles that have been established so far and gives some practical examples to illustrate the principles. It also discusses some registration practice issues encountered and in need of clarification.

## **Experimental part**

### ***Analysing and defining the objects***

Counting is not possible without a definition of what constitutes the objects that are counted. Defining the objects requires a thorough analysis of the material, in this case, of what constitutes the paintings themselves. The requirements of and functionality in the collection management system must be analysed because it mirrors – or should mirror – the tasks of the museum professionals. The register in the collection management system must also correspond to the actual, physical objects in the storage spaces since this makes it possible to use the collection management system not only to count the paintings, but also to deal with all the logistic tasks like registration, exhibitions, loans, conservation and so on.

So, what is meant by the statement “this is a painting by Munch”? Media, technique and/or support material used in the definition are not included yet as it belongs to the issue of classifications. Instead, “painting” is seen as a “motif” depicted on “one or more physical objects”. The most straightforward understanding of what a painting is – one physical object equals one painting – is a too simple definition. Although the larger part of Munch's paintings is of the type “one-sided” paintings, there are also other types, for example objects with paintings on both verso and recto and groups of fragments and sketches. In the case of objects with paintings on verso and recto, the motifs on both sides are considered important and in need of individual attention<sup>4</sup>. Munch's preparatory work for the monumental decorative paintings, on the other hand, generated a corpus of fragments and sketches. Each group comprises a set of fragments which represents a planned painting that for various reasons was left in an unfinished, incomplete, and fragmented state.

Instead of physical object *motif* was considered as the defining unit. A painting is *a planned, underway, or completed motif realised on one or more physical objects*. This definition seemed reasonable, and more in line with how other types of materials in the collections are registered and counted. A letter for example, often comprises several sheets of

paper as well as an envelope (Fig. 1) while one sheet of paper in some instances can contain several letter drafts (Fig. 2).

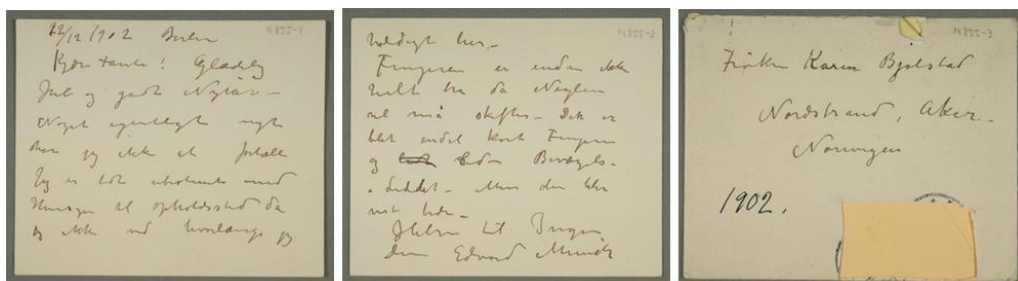


Fig. 1. MM.N.00855, letter to Karen Bjølstad, Berlin 22.12.1902. Photo © Munchmuseet

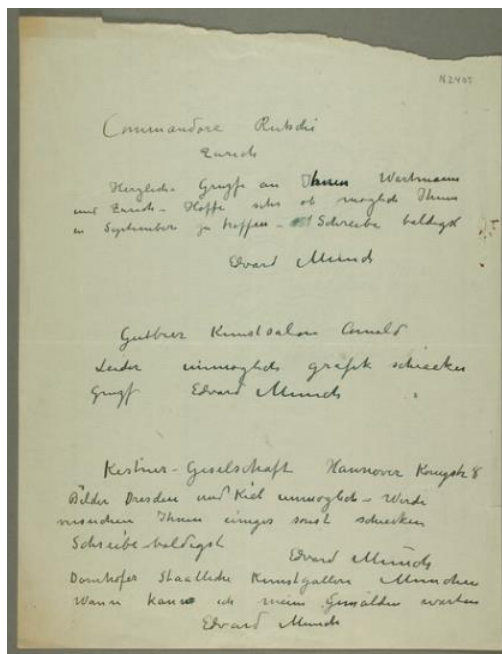


Fig. 2. MM.N.02405, drafts for four telegrams on one sheet of paper. Photo © Munchmuseet

Sometimes one physical object equals one artwork/museum object, sometimes it contains several artworks/museum objects, and sometimes an artwork/museum object is comprised of more than one physical objects, and these potential complex relationships between physical object(s) and artwork/museum object requires well-thought-out registration principles. The diversity in the materiality of Munch's art production needs a flexible registration approach to cater for the nature of the objects themselves, as just shown, as well as for the requirements of the collection management system and the tasks and expectations of the professionals in the museum. Virtual and physical object records and object locations are used to organise the objects and their records in the MUNCH's collection management system.

## Results and discussions

In the collection management system, an object with paintings on recto and verso is registered in two separate, but linked records. The recto record represents both the painting on the verso side and the physical object, and that physical object has a location. The verso record represents the painting on the verso side but does not need location as it is always located with recto. The verso is defined as a virtual record to make it possible to sort and count it separately from recto and because it does not represent the physical object. Verso still needs a separate record so that it can be linked for example, to exhibitions, to a portrayed person and last, but not least, to records with the same motif<sup>5</sup>.

The Museum System's built-in record set "physical parent – intellectual child" is not used, because it does not allow the intellectual child record to be linked to other records. The built-in record set is a hierarchy that prioritises the parent record at the expense of the child record. It is difficult not to get the impression that the record set implies that the child record is less important than the parent record. So, because it is important not to imply a hierarchical relation between recto and verso, a non-hierarchical see-also-relation has been used. Registering verso as a virtual record means rectos and versos can be sorted separately when counting them. When counting the physical objects only rectos are counted, when counting the paintings, rectos *and* versos are counted.

From the perspective of two paintings on recto and verso of the same physical object losing the linking functionality might not seem like a big loss, but with sketchbooks it really is. The numerous drawings and sketches in Munch's sketchbooks very often connect with each other and with other artworks through motif. Linking related object records to each other means to be able to trace the development of the motif and follow the creative process of the artist. The many instances of a motif should therefore be registered and linked to each other, so it is easy (or at least easier) to view and review them without having to leaf through many sketchbooks to find them. In figure 3 an example showing some of the *Alma Mater/The Researchers* related motifs is given, as they are found across Munch's paintings, prints, loose drawings, and drawings in sketchbooks. Just linking the main sketchbook records to other variants of the motifs would not give the overview needed.

Sketchbooks are registered as a group comprising main record and sub-records. The main record is for the book itself and has a location. All pages with content (usually either drawings or texts) are registered as virtual sub-records and linked to the main record. The book can be considered/counted as a physical object and the virtual sub-records containing drawings as artworks.

Groups of fragments are registered as sub-records linked to a virtual motif record. Figure 4 shows the five sub-records (MM.M.00800, MM.M.00949A, MM.M.00949B, MM.M.00949C and MM.M.00979) that together represents a planned version of *Alma Mater/The Researchers*, and which will be linked to a new virtual motif record. This registration method makes it possible to count the physical objects, that is, the sub-records, and to count the painting, the virtual motif record. The fragments have their own locations and can therefore be moved individually. They can be linked to conservation reports, and if necessary, to exhibitions and to other records in the collection management system. The virtual motif record does not have location, but it can be linked to related records, for example of the same motif.

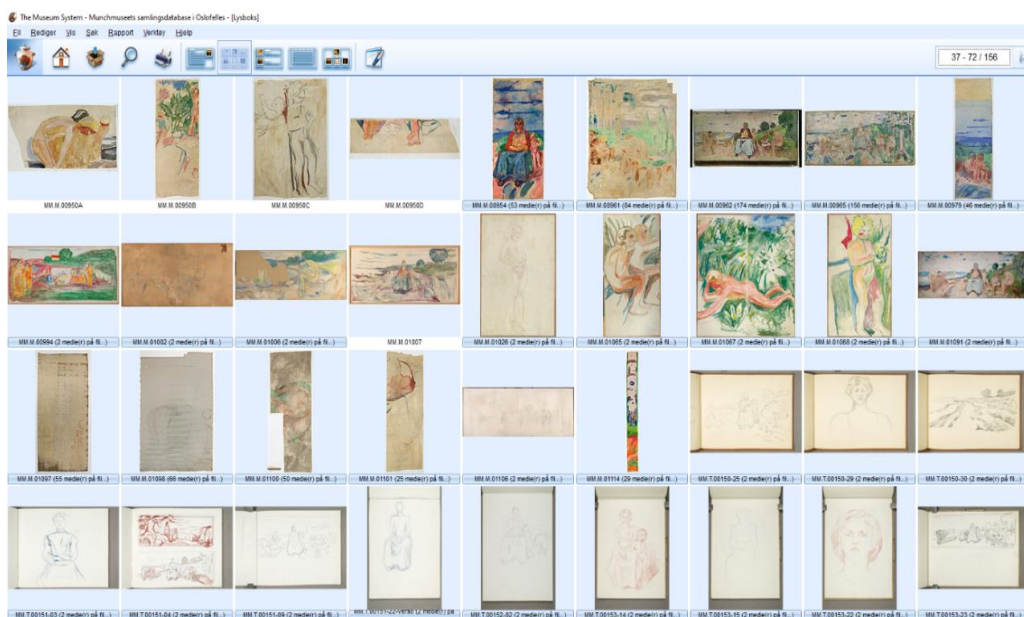


Fig. 3. Viewing related *Alma Mater/The Researchers* motifs as they are found across Munch's paintings, prints and drawings in the collection management system



Fig. 4. *Alma Mater / The Researchers*, one virtual painting, five physical fragments: MM.M.00800, MM.M.00949C (above), MM.M.00949A (below), MM.M.00979, MM.M.00949B. Photo © Munchmuseet

The practical planning and logistics concerning exhibitions, loans, conservation and art handling demands slightly different kinds of data and functionality than what art historians and education professionals need for their tasks. Setting up the collection management system to serve the different needs of the many professionals in a museum is not always easy, but it is important to ensure that staff use the system and use it correctly. An example of an issue still to be solved, is how to handle sketchbook drawings in exhibitions in the collection database. Should the book record *and* the drawing record be linked, only the book record, or only the drawing record, to the exhibition record? From the registrar's point of view, it is necessary to add the book because it is the book that is moved from the storage to the exhibition space, it is the book's location that changes. From the paper conservator's point of view, it is necessary to record how much light exposure is foreseen for the drawing. And from the curator's point of

view, it is necessary to register the exhibition as part of the drawing's exhibition history. It seems obvious that from a museum's point of view both records must be linked to the exhibition record to serve the different needs of the registrar, the conservator and the curator.

### ***Registration practice***

Working with this procedure resurfaced some issues concerning MUNCH's registration practice. There were some inconsistencies in how inventory numbers have been created. There was also a case of objects registered twice; an error that must be corrected. Some other errors have been identified in this study, and all of this will be adjusted and corrected because of this counting process. A matter of principle regarding inventory numbers and classifications also surfaced and is discussed below.

### ***Inconsequent use of letters in inventory numbers***

Sometimes letters have been added to the inventory numbers, but this has not been done in a consequent way, see for example, these numbers: MM.M.00122a and MM.M.00122b, MM.M.00459 and MM.M.00459a, MM.M.00932A and MM.M.00932B. In some cases, as for MM.M.00725a and MM.M.00725b, letters were probably added to indicate that there are motifs on both verso and recto of the same physical object. MM.M.00122a and MM.M.00122b, however, are two separate physical objects. Originally, they were paintings on opposite sides of a piece of cardboard. It is unknown if the letters were added to the inventory numbers before or after the cardboard was split<sup>6</sup>. The same is true for MM.M.00257a and MM.M.00257b and for MM.M.00927a and MM.M.00927b. In a few cases, for example, MM.M.00459 and MM.M.00459a, there is no apparent reason why the two physical objects have related inventory numbers besides the fact that they have motifs from the aula decorations<sup>7</sup> [4].

The letters were removed, new numbers were given where necessary and existing inventory number practice proposed used for other object types in MUNCH's collections. For a physical object with motifs on recto and verso adding “-recto” and “-verso” in the inventory numbers were suggested. This is the present practice for registering drawings and prints with motifs on recto and verso, so the same is used for paintings.

### ***Inventory numbers and classifications***

The prefixed letters of the inventory numbers are semantically meaningful, and they start with a department signature or a museum signature. Norwegian museums are given individual signatures by Norges Museumsforbund (the Norwegian Museum Organisation) and are encouraged to use these signatures in their inventory numbers. “MM” is a short version of MUNCH's signature, “OKK.MM”, where “MM” means the Munch Museum, while “OKK” is short for “Oslo kommunes kunstsamlinger” (The City of Oslo Art Collections) which the collections in the museum used to be part of [5].

MUNCH's signature is followed by a letter indicating classification, for example “G” for “Grafikk”, which is Norwegian for *prints*, “M” for “maleri”, which is Norwegian for *paintings*. The classification part often causes discussions about giving an artwork a new inventory number, re-registering it, if it is reclassified. The classification system has been very basic only comprising main categories like paintings, prints and drawings. Over the years new classifications have been added, first by nuancing the prints classification into the several techniques used by Munch<sup>8</sup>, and later by adding classifications not used by Munch at all when the museum began registering loan objects to track logistics as the number of exhibitions and loans have grown.

MUNCH's collection management system now allows several classifications on a single record. This means that a letter with a drawing can have ‘letter’ as main classification and ‘drawing’ as second classification. This is good, of course, since it makes it easier to find all



objects with drawings and the classification system more nuanced. While discussing how to count paintings, it became clear that the classification “painting” is too unnuanced for Munch’s paintings. As already mentioned, there are many unfinished paintings, left at any stage between under-drawing and almost completed artwork (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** MM.M.00876 Standing woman (1912–1913), black crayon on canvas. Under-drawing classified as painting. Photo © Munchmuseet

This has led to a discussion about whether some drafts really paintings are and not drawings, and vice versa. Criteria for what a painting or a drawing is, had to be formulated, and whether an object could be considered both a drawing and a painting. Having a classification like “painting draft” could gather these unfinished paintings and would help nuance the data about the collections.

There are artworks in the Munch collection that are difficult to classify because of the media, technique and/or support material used, and some might even be considered mixed media<sup>9</sup> [6]. From the work with the *catalogue raisonné* of Munch’s drawings it has become clear that for some artworks there is a need to re-classify or add classification(s). This decision stems partly from changing views among the museum professionals of how an artwork’s classification is defined, but also from the discovery of more details concerning media, technique and/or support material used in the artwork. Introducing new classifications to identify, for example, watercolour works and having the opportunity to be more precise and detailed with classifications, would help to show the variety of Munch’s use of different media and techniques. Today detailed information about this is recorded in a free text field. Using

classifications as well would help to avoid typing errors and ensure data consistency which is important for querying and for counting.

Should all the inventory numbers be changed? One matter of concern for in-house practitioners is the many references to the existing numbers in years' worth of research and literature as well as the frequent practical use of the numbers in-house<sup>10</sup>. The main argument against changing the numbers is that the objects are physically marked (stamped and/or with pencil) with the old numbers. Modern guidelines for collection management stress that one should avoid using semantically meaningful inventory numbers [7] and from experience this gives perfect sense. CIDOC's definition of object number, i.e. inventory number, states that the number "connects an object to its documentation and provides a unique identification" and does not include any requirements or recommendations for the number to include or mirror the object's properties [8].

But what to do when there is already a system that does not follow modern guidelines? This question cannot be answered fully here and now, but the first step is to clean up the existing number system and expand the set of classifications. This matter will come up again.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, three groups of paintings were defined and counted:

- "one-sided" paintings, i.e., what would usually be considered a painting, for example, a framed and mounted object with a motif painted on canvas. Each object is counted as one painting
- physical objects with motifs on recto and verso. Recto is considered physical and has location, while verso is considered virtual, but both records can be linked to other records. Each side's motif is counted as one painting
- groups of fragments where the planned motif has either, or not been realised in full. The group is considered virtual and has no location, while each fragment has its own record and location. Each group is counted as one painting. The fragments themselves are not counted as paintings

Using these criteria for the Munch paintings in MUNCH's collections a total number of 1.108 "one-sided" paintings can be found. Furthermore, there are 6 physical objects with motifs on recto and verso. They are counted as 12 paintings. Finally, 8 virtual motif groups comprising 27 fragments have been identified. They are counted as 8 paintings. The result of this counting is that the museum in total has 1.128 Munch paintings.

This work revising the museum's registration practice will continue. In the years to come the focus will be on establishing principles for defining and counting all object types in the museum's collections, but also to implement the principles as practice in the museum and as registration practice in the collection management database. This will allow the counting of every object and every artwork in MUNCH's collections.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Besides the Munch collection the museum manages the collections of Norwegian art collector Rolf Stenersen whose collection also comprise Munch artworks, and Norwegian artists Amaldus Nielsen and Ludvig O. Ravensberg, see more details at <https://www.munchmuseet.no/en/our-collection/about-the-collection-a-fragile-inheritance/>

<sup>2</sup> The Munch Museum uses the collection management system called The Museum System from Gallery Systems, see <https://www.gallerysystems.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> Munch's testament is part of The Regional State Archives in Oslo, Bomapper, Avd. III - Aker, nr. 4, see <https://emunch.no/HYBRIDPN1253.xhtml>, visited 25 October 2022, for a transcription of the testament.

<sup>4</sup> Both motifs can be related to other motifs, but to each other usually only physically. The database records must be linked to other records to document the relations between them: recto and verso are linked to each other to record their physical interdependency, a motif is linked to other versions of the same motif, when a model or portrayed person is identified, the motif is linked to the person's record in the database, if the motif is exhibited it's linked to the exhibition record, and so on.

<sup>5</sup> Linking the virtual verso record to an exhibition might, given that it does not represent the physical object, sound like a contradiction but when the motif on the verso side is exhibited, this is how the exhibition history of the motif is recorded.

<sup>6</sup> According to conservation documentation in the Munch Museum the cardboard sheet containing MM.M.00122a and MM.M.00122b was split and mounted on individual huntonite sheets sometime between 1947 and 1950.

<sup>7</sup> There seems to have existed a custom to insert a-numbers in an already established row of numbers when in need of a new number, see p. 2 in *SMN Informationsblad* no. 2 “Registrering af værker”, STATENS MUSEUMSNÆVN, 1982, <https://dms-cf-03.dimu.org/file/03347x7iayvW>, which argues and warns against this practice.

<sup>8</sup> Munch used various techniques including lithograph, hectograph, woodcut and drypoint.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Mixed media’ is only used as a classification for loan objects that comes with this classification, and not for artworks by Munch.

<sup>10</sup> Using titles is not as practical because there are often several versions of the same motif and with the same title, the painted versions of *The Death of Marat* for example are therefore commonly referred to as M4, M172 or M351.