



AiA Art News-service



# A Munch mystery



Flaten Art Museum Director and Curator Jane Becker Nelson '04 displays “Eva” in the collections storage area.

When it comes to Norwegian artists, there's arguably no one more famous than Edvard Munch. His iconic painting "The Scream" has been internationally recognized, revered, and reproduced for over a hundred years. The original artwork even set a world record artwork sale price at auction, fetching \$119,922,500 in 2012.

So, how surprising would it be to learn that a genuine Munch painting could emerge here at St. Olaf College — a painting that had, in fact, been hiding in plain sight?

"It hung on the south wall of the dining room where I had the pleasure of looking at it every time I was at the table," says President David R. Anderson '74. "It's exciting to think that we may have lived our everyday lives in the company of a painting by a master!"

*"Positive authentication will open up opportunities that I never could've imagined and will attract attention I can't even fathom right now." — Flaten Art Museum Director Jane Becker Nelson '04*

The portrait, depicting violinist Eva Mudocci, came to St. Olaf as one of more than 2,000 artworks donated by Richard Tetlie '43 following his death in 1999. Tetlie was an avid art collector who sometimes relied on gut instinct to decide whether to purchase an unauthenticated work of art. One of those paintings, thought to be by El Greco, an artist of the Spanish Renaissance, underwent scientific testing several years ago but the results proved false.

"At least three pigments — Prussian blue, barium sulfate, and titanium dioxide — were detected in samples from the painting. Those pigments were not discovered until well after El Greco's lifetime, making the painting's authenticity impossible," explains Jane Becker Nelson '04, director and curator of Flaten Art Museum (FAM).

Becker Nelson says art authentication relies on three interlocking methods of analysis: stylistic, scientific, and provenance, or chronology of ownership. "Eva" (as the possible Munch painting is called by FAM staff) has long been rumored to be an unfinished Munch, but there have always been gaps in the painting's provenance.

That changed when Mudocci scholar Rima Shore approached FAM staff with a request for access to the painting and corresponding files. Her international research revealed reliable correspondence and auction records that corroborate the

existence of this unfinished painting, filling the holes in “Eva’s” history of ownership.

With credible provenance, only stylistic and scientific analysis are still needed to provide a credible attribution. Experts from the Scientific Analysis of Fine Arts (SAFA) will come to campus in October and collect small imperceptible samples from the portrait. The samples will be compared to other known Munch paintings and, if present, a correlation will offer persuasive evidence toward a positive authentication of “Eva.”

If the outcome is positive, Becker Nelson and the SAFA analysts will seek to co-publish their findings with curators from the Munchmuseet in Oslo. The findings would also appear in a forthcoming biography of Mudocci by Shore.

“Positive authentication will open up opportunities that I never could’ve imagined and will attract attention I can’t even fathom right now,” says Becker Nelson. “If authentication is negative, the undertaking still has great pedagogical value. While SAFA analysts are on campus, they will meet with Paul Jackson’s Analytical Chemistry class and share lunch with upper level students interested in the field of technical art history.”



A close up look at an unfinished painting of Eva Mudocci, thought to be the work of Norwegian artist Edvard Munch.

For years, “Eva” was a conversation piece in the College President’s house. If it’s authenticated as a true Munch painting, research, and scholarship opportunities abound.

However, even if the painting can’t be positively connected to Munch through scientific investigation, its relationship to St. Olaf and our school’s history is undeniable.

Tetlie is a direct descendent of the founders of St. Olaf — themselves Norwegian immigrants. His father, Rev. Joseph Tetlie, was a 1909 graduate of St. Olaf and the school’s first Rhodes Scholar. His maternal grandfather is Professor Halvor T. Ytterboe. St. Olaf’s first president, Thorbjorn N. Mohn, is Tetlie’s great-uncle.

“This is really special,” says Becker Nelson. “We could be conducting an analysis around any famous artwork, but the fact that it happens to be one of the most iconic modern artists — and also a Norwegian artist — is really neat for St. Olaf’s story, I think. It has more meaning because of that.”

FAM is also excited that this academic journey through the fields art, history, and science will be shared by the whole St. Olaf community.

Oles and the public can view “Eva” in person and hear from SAFA experts discussing their process on Tuesday, October 2, from 4-5 p.m. in Viking Theater in Buntrock Commons. Results from the analysis will be shared publicly several weeks later.

“I’m excited for our students to have exposure to a small but significant sector of art history: technical art history,” says Becker Nelson. “It’s something we don’t teach, and we can’t teach here at this time, but by bringing in outside experts we’re exposing students to an important facet of museum work and introducing a profession that is truly interdisciplinary.”

## ***Event Details***

Join analysts Jennifer Mass, Ph.D. and Adam Finnefrock, Ph.D., of SAFA to learn more about technical art history and its applications.

### **Munch’s Materials: How Science Informs Art History**

Viking Theater, Buntrock Commons

Tuesday, October 2

4–5 p.m. or [on demand streaming](#)