
Edvard Munch's heartblood

MEDICINE AND ART

The 'Lifeblood' exhibition at the Munch Museum in Oslo was a reflection on the role of medicine in our lives. While the exhibition had much to appreciate, there were also a few puzzling aspects.

'Illness, madness and death were the black angels that watched over my cradle', wrote Edvard Munch (1863–1944) in an undated note about his family legacy (1, 2, p. 125). This quote offers a compelling starting point for examining the link between health and Munch's art – a theme explored in the 'Lifeblood' exhibition at the Munch Museum in Oslo, which ran from June to September 2025.

Munch's connection to medicine was multifaceted. He drew inspiration not only from his own experiences of illness and the medical world, but also from family, friends, patrons and various medical practitioners (3). Munch's father and brother were doctors, as were many of his friends, and he himself had a fascination for health and illness (4). According to the Munch Museum's website, his art reflects the profound changes in medicine that occurred during his life, and offers a unique and critical perspective on modern health care (3).

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Most critics were enthusiastic (5–8). 'An absolutely brilliant exhibition', declared the *Aftenposten* newspaper (5). 'What fun it is to see art and science side by side!' exclaimed *Vårt Land*, another newspaper (6). It is easy to share their enthusiasm, even though there was also some criticism (9).

The skeleton in the display case

A human skeleton formed part of the exhibition. It was not possible to identify the person to whom the bones belonged, but according to the information plaque, they were likely born between 1850 and 1865 and lived in Paris. In other words, they lived during the same period as Edvard Munch, according to the plaque. The skeleton had been assembled by Maison Tramond, a Paris-based company known for producing high-quality anatomical specimens. Is it acceptable to display a skeleton in this way?

A few years ago, a similar discussion took place about a naturally mummified body, referred to as *Maren i myra* (Maren in the bog), which was exhibited at the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology in Oslo [\(10\)](#). The key question is: what ethical standards should apply when human remains are exhibited without explicit consent? Should they be viewed as objects, or as beings with rights? I wonder whether the Munch Museum considered this.

To write or to copy

In another display case hung a photograph said to have been taken by Narve Skarpmoen (1868–1930), showing 'Operation and lecture at Rikshospitalet, with Professor Johansen' (Figure 1). Was there a Professor Johansen at Rikshospitalet in 1910? No, there was not [\(11\)](#).

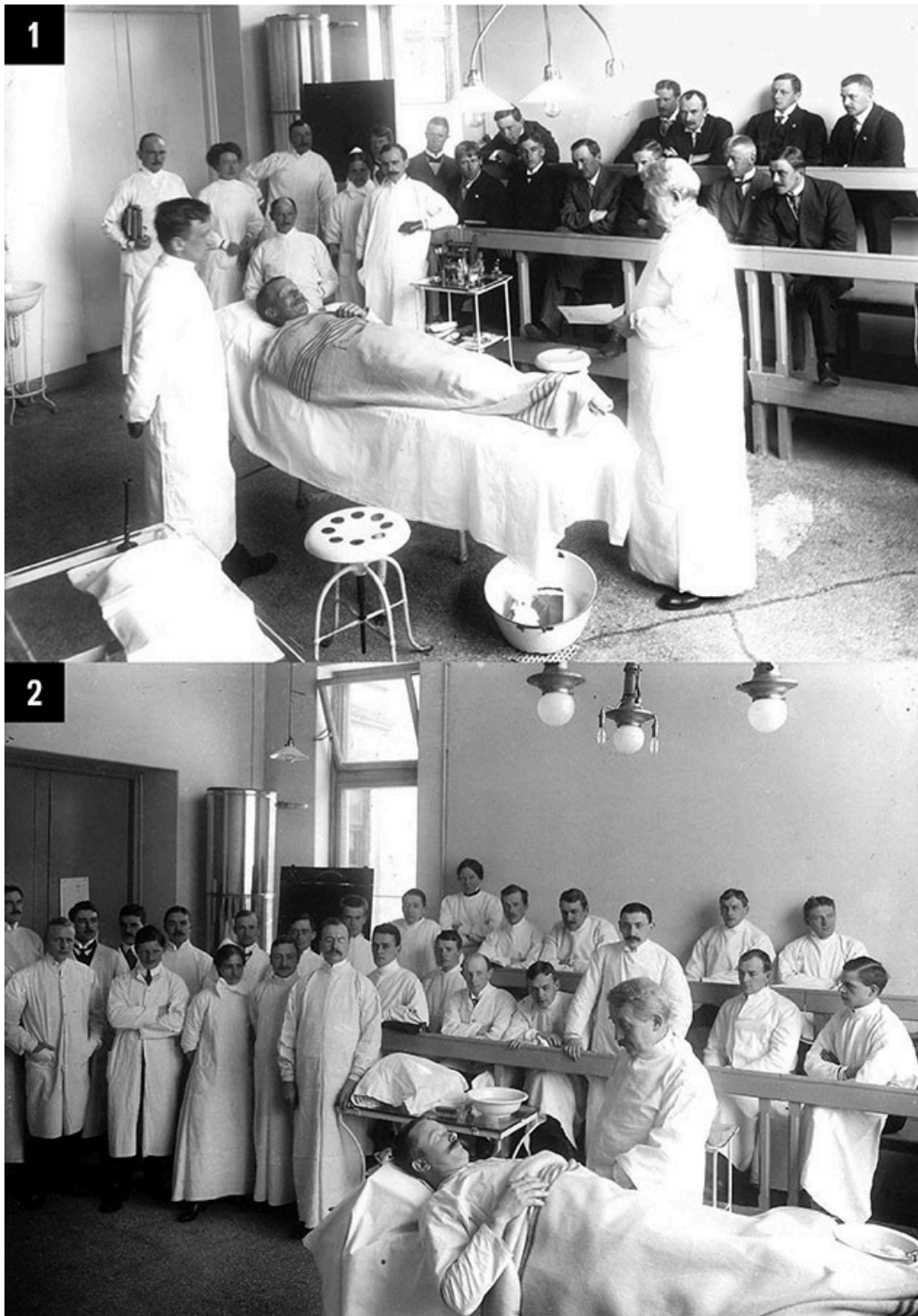


Figure 1 Professor of Surgery, Hagbarth Strøm (1854–1912), together with colleagues and students, circa 1910. The first photograph was part of the 'Lifblood' exhibition at the Munch Museum. Photo: Narve Skarpmoen/Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology/public domain. The second photograph from the Digital Museum database depicts the same scene; it is strikingly similar and appears to be from the same auditorium. Photo: Rude & Hilfling/Oslo Museum/public domain.

I pulled up the photo from the Digital Museum. It actually says: 'Rikshospitalet, Paediatric Department, with Professor Johansen, circa 1910' (12). But since it is supposed to be from the hospital's paediatric department, it is likely referring to Professor Axel Theodor Johannessen (1849–1926), Norway's first professor of paediatrics. However, it is not Johannessen who is depicted; it is Hagbarth

Strøm (1854–1912), who was a professor of surgery at Rikshospitalet. Moreover, the patient shown is a man with a mustache, which further confirms that the photo could not have been taken in the paediatric department.

The photo is strikingly similar to another photo in the Digital Museum, which appears to be from the same auditorium (Figure 1) (13). It has been published several times (14–16). However, it must have been taken at a different time – the audience is certainly different, the ceiling lights are slightly different, and it is credited to a different photographer – but could it be the same patient?

What makes the situation even more intriguing is that Axel Johannessen is featured in a dedicated chapter in the 'Lifeblood' exhibition catalogue (17, pp. 216–20). The chapter is about an incubator that Johannessen began using in 1893, which, oddly enough, has been given a prominent place in the exhibition, despite having no connection to Munch.

Electrification or electroshock therapy

Munch suffered a mental breakdown in 1908 and admitted himself to Professor Jacobson's private clinic in Copenhagen. This is a particularly interesting period, because the breakdown and his stay at the clinic became a turning point in Munch's life and artistry. He changed his lifestyle, stopped drinking and moved back to Norway. Or, as his biographer puts it: Munch transformed the breakdown into a breakthrough as a nationally recognised Norwegian genius (2, p. 141). What was it that led to such extraordinary results? Munch himself described the treatment: at first, he was bedridden for a long time, and little by little the various therapies began: cardiac massage, electrification, baths, pine needle baths, electric light baths and fresh air therapy (18).

«This reflects the contemporary belief in electricity as a treatment for a range of ailments – a rich and fascinating chapter in medical history. In the exhibition, however, this was misunderstood»

During his stay at the clinic, he was soon fully active and even made a drawing with the caption: 'Professor Jacobsen electrifies the famous painter Munch and channels male positive and female negative energy into his fragile brain' (Figure 2) (19). This reflects the contemporary belief in electricity as a treatment for a range of ailments – a rich and fascinating chapter in medical history (20). In the exhibition, however, this was misunderstood. It stated: 'The drawing shows Munch receiving electroshock therapy', but this is incorrect. Electroshock therapy was not introduced until 1938, by Cerletti and Bini, and was first used in psychiatry in Norway in 1941 (21). Such errors undermine the exhibition's credibility as a historical account.

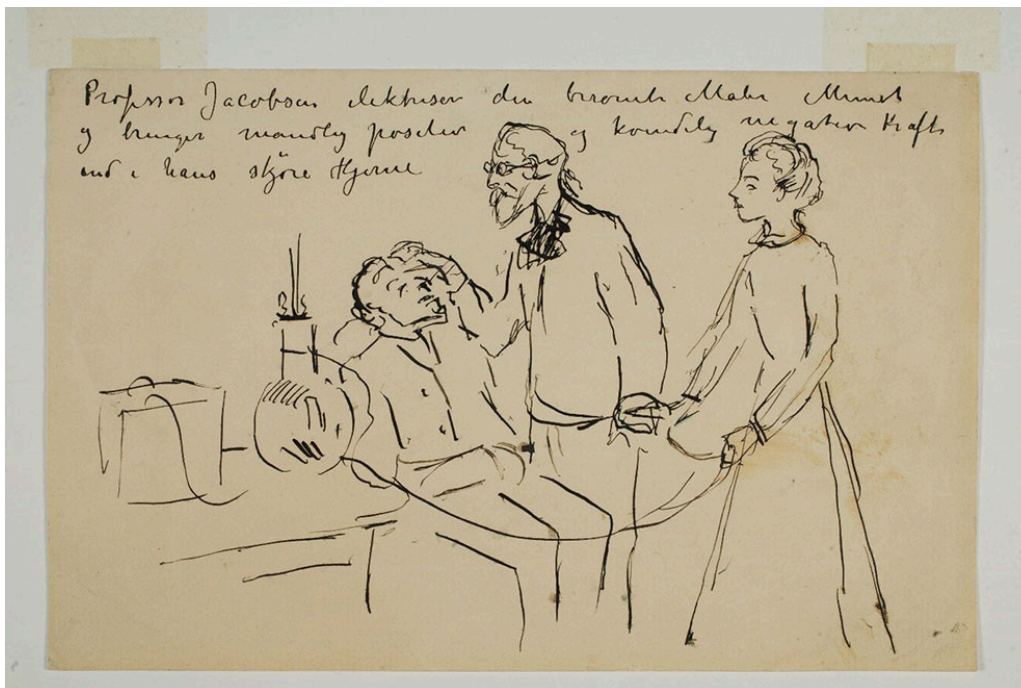


Figure 2 Munch's own depiction of a treatment session at Jacobson's private clinic, 1908–09. At the top of the drawing he wrote: 'Professor Jacobsen electrifies the famous painter Munch and channels male positive and female negative energy into his fragile brain' (19). Illustration: Munch Museum/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Exhibition catalogue

A catalogue was issued for the exhibition, both in Norwegian and English. I have only read the Norwegian version. It is beautifully produced, with solid binding, high-quality paper and excellent illustrations. But what is the connection between the exhibition and the exhibition catalogue? The catalogue insightfully references a scholarly article describing the electrical treatments that were common in the early 1900s ([17, p. 305, 22](#)). The authors of the article explicitly clarify that this was something entirely different from the convulsive therapy developed many years later.

Curiously, the catalogue in Norwegian was published more than a month after the exhibition opened ([17](#)). With 27 contributors, the quality naturally varies. Some authors indulge in their own subjective world of associations: a poor foundation for a museum communication strategy. Conversely, I would highlight Espen Stueland's interesting chapter, "'As for Edvard's vaccination" – a father's efforts to have his son vaccinated against smallpox' ([17, pp. 106–12](#)).

In my opinion, the catalogue should have been more closely tied to the exhibition. It perhaps would have also benefited from being shorter, and I find myself questioning the selection criteria for contributors and the content of their invitations.

Lifeblood or heartblood

'Lifeblood' (*Livsblod*) was the title of the exhibition, and the dictionary defines it as 'blood as the seat of vitality, a life force'. According to the museum's website, Munch himself is said to have referred to his art by this term, and I was curious about how Munch actually used the word. In the excellent resource www.emunch.no, where all his writings are transcribed, I found no trace of the word 'lifeblood'. The word 'heartblood' (*hjerterblod*), however, appears several times. All art must be created with one's heartblood, Munch writes somewhere (23). Surely there is a difference between lifeblood and heartblood? Should the exhibition title not have been 'Heartblood' instead?

«Attitudes in society were rapidly changing, and the once-popular death masks were soon to become a thing of the past»

In the more or less chronological exhibition, Munch's death mask was also on display (Figure 3). It was a powerful sight. The plaque stated that it was Munch's 'personal physician' Kristian Schreiner (1874–1957) who commissioned it. Attitudes in society were rapidly changing, and the once-popular death masks were soon to become a thing of the past. This is one of the topics I would have liked to learn more about.

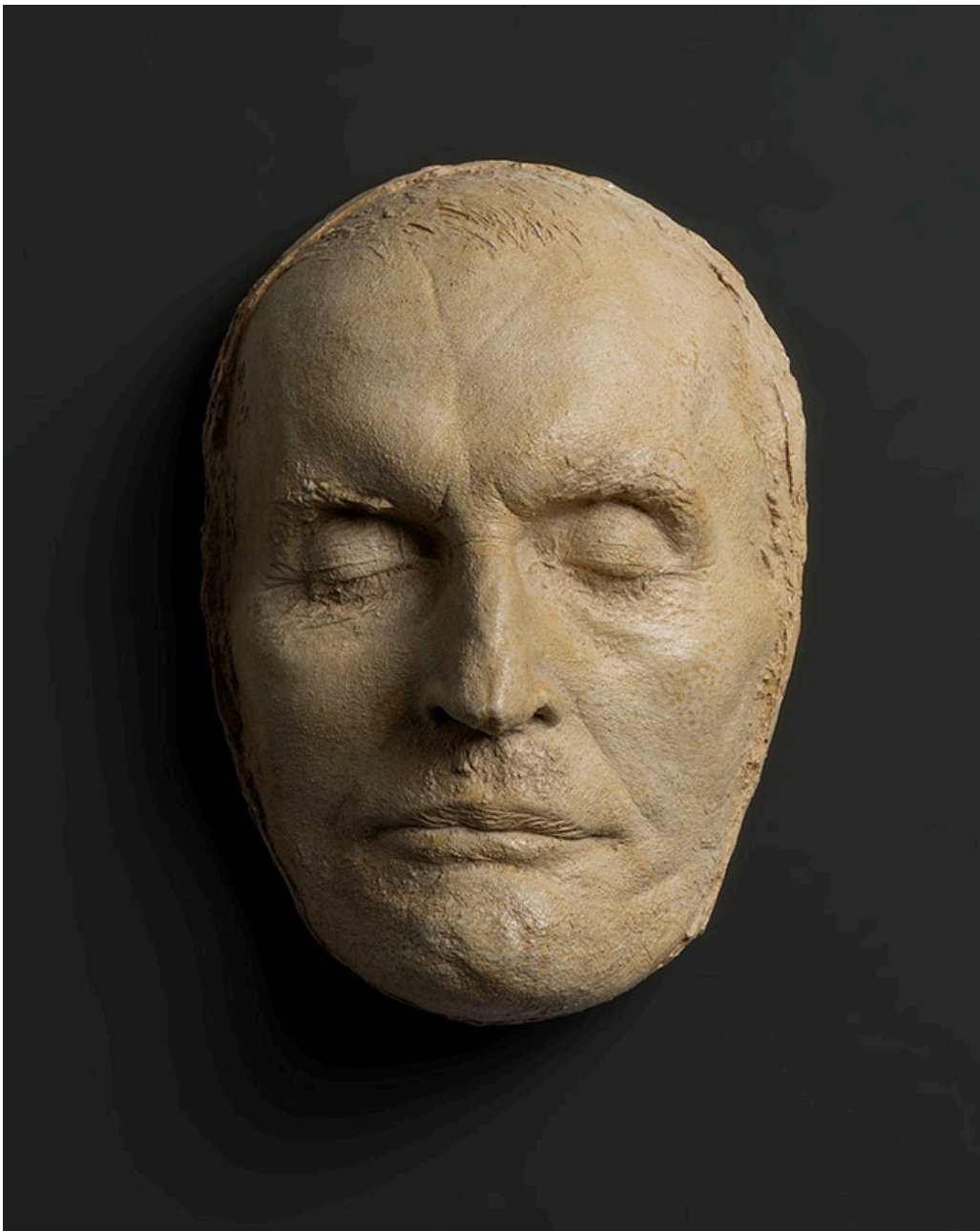


Figure 3 Munch's death mask. Photo: Ove Kvavik/Munch Museum

I visited the exhibition several times, and it was a pleasure. The idea of combining medicine, health and art is brilliant. Some aspects, particularly the display of objects that had little to do with Munch, like the incubator and his sister's silver hearing aid, felt contrived. But overall, the exhibition was a success. It is just a shame that it was only open for a mere three months. I wish all healthcare students had had the opportunity to visit it during the autumn semester.

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Publisert: 3. October 2025. *Tidsskr Nor Legeforen*. DOI: 10.4045/tidsskr.25.0504
Received 21.8.2025, first revision submitted 29.8.2025, accepted 3.9.2025.
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