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A Scandinavian Awakening: the Emergence of Science in Conservation at the National Gallery in Oslo (1956-1974)

Post-World War II Norway faced immense challenges linked to the conservation of its cultural heritage. Like most of Europe, the toll of war and invasion had resulted in the evacuation of all major museum collections to safety. The task of returning and restoring the National Gallery's entire painting collection from the Kongsberg silver mines back to the exhibition spaces was immense. However, in addition to practical challenges, the spoils of the war raised critical discussions concerning past national conservation strategies and the need for the professionalization of current conservation methods and training. The pioneers responsible for a shift towards a more scientific approach to conservation in Norway initially stemmed from Bergen's and Oslo's University medieval church art collections. A keen interest in material analysis and art technological study was further strengthened by collaborations with foreign experts and institutions. These included the visit of the Belgium scientist, Paul Coremans (1908 – 1965), to Norway in 1961 and Norway's active participation in conservation aid to the Florence flooding of 1966. By combining archival sources with oral history, it is possible to trace the gradual development and implementation of science for painting conservation at the National Gallery. Furthermore, it provides insight into a unique partnership between Norway's first female conservation scientist, Professor Unn Plahter and her late conservator husband, Leif Plahter (1929 - 2016). Their impact on the field includes the seminal cadmium yellow research on Munch's "The Scream" and the early identification of metal soap formation in a 17th-century Dutch oil paint film.