

Gustav Vigeland

A Scream from the Sofa



Gustav Vigeland, Rettsel, 1892. Foto: Armar Bjørgli

Guidelines for teachers and communicators

We recommend using these guidelines together with the exhibition brochure and all information published on the exhibition website.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 50 years of his artistic career, Gustav Vigeland put people's existence under the microscope. His life work, Vigeland Park in Oslo, Norway, neatly summarises this recurring aspiration to explore the nuances of what it means to be human. The sculpture park is both low-key and powerful with its stories of life's big and small moments.

2019 marks the 150th anniversary of Gustav Vigeland's (1869–1943) birth, and this is the background for the travelling exhibition entitled: "Gustav Vigeland. The Anxiety Stands on the Sofa". The exhibition gives the public the opportunity to experience a less well-known side of Norway's most famous sculptor. The selection of works is nevertheless representative of his oeuvre, in part because it touches on a theme that had consistently fascinated Vigeland from an early age: interpersonal relationships and our emotional life. With

the thin, elongated and almost fragile bodies, the design idiom is clearly different from what we can see in Vigeland Park. Rather than strength and vitality, his works from the 1890s highlights people's vulnerability, loneliness and feeling of alienation.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition consists of 21 sculptures: 15 in bronze and six in plaster. The majority of the bronze sculptures stem from an early phase of Vigeland's work as an artist, primarily between 1892 and 1903. Two of the bronze sculptures and six of the works in plaster are from a later period, and were created between 1917 and 1929.

Through the exhibition, visitors are invited to reflect on Vigeland's significance and relevance today, in that it examines existential themes such as loneliness, restlessness, longing and exclusion. The works blend melancholy, vulnerability and fear of rejection with

a sense of powerlessness and desperation. What are Vigeland's sculptures saying about the difficulty of being human – in our time, too? And can your encounter with them teach you something about yourself?

The exhibition is designed to create meetings and links between our own time and Vigeland's art. The communication associated with the exhibition and the design of the exhibition itself are to lay the foundations for evoking the timeless aspect of Vigeland's works. Visitors encounter three "scenes":

- living room environment
- bedroom
- kitchen table

A Vigeland sculpture is positioned in each of the scenes. This approach helps create new narratives and contexts for the sculptures. There are moods *in* the sculptures, but what we have done here is generate moods *around* the sculptures as well. How does this affect the narratives we can attach to the motif?

On three of the walls, Vigeland's sculptures are positioned in front of photographs showing urban surfaces such as asphalt, brickwork and concrete. This, too, is a move intended to juxtapose the sculptures with new contexts. The exhibition also comprises a "sculpture garden", which takes the form of a more traditional display. The intention behind the design of the exhibition has been to create a combination of "usual" ways of presenting sculptures (plinths) and unexpected forms of presentation (furniture and photo backgrounds).

Objectives of the exhibition:

- To encourage the pupils to reflect on the emotional content of Vigeland's sculptures. In what way are they about us? Do we identify with them? Why / why not?
- To encourage the pupils to think about differences and similarities between Vigeland's time and our own.
- To generate proximity to the sculptures through a variety of communication initiatives (conversation exercises, title exercise, plinth exercise, writing workshop – see the information below).
- To become more familiar with Gustav Vigeland's oeuvre.
- To receive impressions and provide expressions.

COMMUNICATION

The communication linked to the exhibition places emphasis on conversation and dialogue. The pupils are to be encouraged to reflect independently on the sculptures and their content by looking, listening and talking about the works themselves. Through a range of measures, the objective is to generate a sense of proximity to and identification with the motifs.

The sections below present suggestions for different communication ideas for use with the school groups. At the end, there is a list of hints for topics for discussion.

COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES:

SCENES FROM THE PRESENT DAY

Tell the pupils they will be visiting a rather unusual art exhibition. It is not often they will have the chance to experience old art positioned in scenes like in this exhibition. Give them a brief introduction to what is to happen, and explain that today you will be talking about emotions and art.

Bring the pupils to the first scene, featuring Gustav Vigeland's *Terror* (1892). Ask the pupil what they see; have them describe the scene. Some are likely to focus on the sculpture itself, others may mention that they have the same sofa or a similar lamp at home. It is important to let the pupils have their say early. This generates confidence that this is a place where their opinions and thoughts are both important and welcome. At the same time, it clearly signals an expectation regarding the pupils' participation.

It is then the task of the communicator to use what the pupils say as the basis for continued conversation. What might have happened here? What could the tree that is wrapped around her represent? Perhaps you, as the communicator, could present a brief analysis of the sculpture? This might give the pupils "hooks" to use in their coming encounter with the rest of the exhibition. Try to involve the pupils' experiences. Can anyone describe the feeling of being afraid? If they were to communicate it with their body, what would it look like? Would it be a scream, or a more enclosed posture?

Continue on to the next scene. Here, the pupils encounter Vigeland's *Man and woman, «The night»* (1898). Repeat the same exercise. What do they see?

This sculpture is largely about the man's internal anxiety. There is something keeping him awake, but we don't know what – most likely, he doesn't know either. He has a rather expressionless face, but nevertheless seems a little melancholy and sad. The man's sense of loneliness is amplified by the fact that Vigeland has placed him next to a woman who is clearly sleeping. She is unaware of what is happening, which seems to increase the distance between the two people. What has happened? Can the pupils make any associations? What emotions do they think the man is feeling?

In the last scene, the pupils encounter a kitchen table with two chairs. On the table stands *Man and woman, «The thinker»* (1898 or 1899). Repeat the exercise here, but with a slightly broader perspective. The pupils have now been exposed to three scenes comprising old sculptures and modern interiors. How do they relate to this type of staging? How does it affect their interpretation of the sculptures? This exercise encourages the pupils to put forward their own assessments of what they are seeing. As such, it helps raise their focus from the sculptures themselves and their emotional content.

THE SCULPTURE GARDEN

Assignment A: Title exercise – Create your own title

Gustav Vigeland seldom gave leading titles to his works of art. On the rug in the sculpture garden, there are three sculptures of man and woman motifs, all with simple titles such as “Man and woman”. This was a conscious and significant move Vigeland made to avoid locking the sculptures into a single narrative and, in contrast, to open them up to multiple interpretations and narratives.

In this exercise, the pupils are to practise looking at and interpreting the content of the sculptures. To start the process, the pupils are to pair up and talk to their partner about one of the three sculptures. Make sure that they do not all talk about the same sculpture. They then have two minutes to write down alternative titles. They can write down one or more titles. The communicator then selects some pupils to present their titles (which can be placed in a label holder on the plinth), and ask them to explain how they came up with them. After these pupils have presented their titles, go around the group and give everyone the chance to read their titles aloud. This approach will encourage them to practise seeing and interpreting art on multiple levels. Both the conversation exercise and the title writing can help expound the content of the sculptures. The pupils are given the opportunity to express their interpretation of the work.

The assignment also helps the pupils to discover something important about Vigeland’s art – namely, that he was more concerned with emotions located in the grey zones, i.e. the slightly indistinct emotions (the strong ones, which are simple to interpret, are far fewer in number). A sculpture can therefore be perceived as sad, distant, comforting and caring at the same time. This approach has been chosen because it is interesting to see what spectrum of emotions the pupils can discover in the sculptures.

Assignment B: Drama exercise – What do emotions look like?

One of the interesting aspects of Vigeland’s sculptures is the way the physical bodies relate something about the emotional life within. This manifests itself through the “movements” of the figures, the way they touch, the way the look, and the way they interact with each other.

For this exercise, use the moveable empty plinth that accompanies the exhibition. The plinth is a component that can be removed from or added to the exhibition as required. It should only be included in the exhibition when it is used for communication.

Write down a number of emotions on pieces of paper. Make sure to mix clear emotions such as anger, joy and fear with more complex emotions such as melancholy, loneliness, uncertainty, distance, etc. Pair the pupils up and have them attempt to dramatise the emotions to each other.

Then ask pupils to volunteer to stand on the plinth and dramatise emotions for the rest of the group. Encourage their fellow pupils to

express a response. Talk about the different expressions of emotion. The fact that emotions, which are abstract concepts, find expression through the body is, in itself, an interesting topic to talk about.

This exercise is a more playful method of approaching Vigeland’s sculptures. Here, the pupils are welcome to use their smartphones to take photos of each other (check that this is OK with the group or with the teacher responsible). If the venue has a Polaroid camera, this can be used to take photos of the pupils. The pupils can then take the photos home with them.

Assignment C: Conversation exercise – What has happened? And what is going to happen?

Gustav Vigeland’s sculptures show a moment frozen in time; they may present a situation or a mood. For this conversation exercise, pair the pupils up. Each pair then selects a sculpture they would like to talk about from the exhibition. Taking as their starting point the questions “What has happened?” and “What is going to happen?”, have the students think up stories based on the sculptures.

Your role as the communicator is then to select some pairs of pupils to tell their stories. This conversation exercise is designed to train the pupils in analysing and studying Vigeland’s art at the same time as using their own creativity and empathy to generate their own content.

LONGER COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

WRITING WORKSHOP

This exercise requires more planning time and more involvement from the teacher. The writing workshop can be held over a period of two hours at the exhibition venue, or take the form of an exercise the teacher completes with the pupils after the visit.

During the writing workshop, the pupils have the chance to draw inspiration from Vigeland’s art and express themselves in words. The writing exercises can be challenging because some people love to write – others do not. Set the bar low and let the pupils select their preferred format. For example, they may choose to write a poem, a letter or a short story.

CLAY WORKSHOP

This activity is a proposal for the exhibition venues that have the facilities to run a clay workshop, and it must be held in a different room from the exhibition itself. A kiln is not needed for the activity. Brown terracotta or grey, air-hardening clay are both suitable. Have the pupils make small sculptures, 10–15 cm tall.

The activity takes 90 minutes and starts with a 45-minute guided tour featuring selected communication activities. The group then has 45 minutes in the clay workshop, where the pupils are asked to create a figurative sculpture that expresses an emotion. They are free to choose whether to work on a bust or a full body figure, and they can decide for themselves which emotion or “mood” they want to communicate.

For this activity, teachers must be informed in advance to make sure the pupils bring their own boxes (an ice cream tub or lunch box, for example) with them so that they can take their sculptures home with them that same day. Encourage the teachers to stage mini-exhibitions in their classroom or at their school, using the pupils' sculptures.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SPECIFIC THEMES OR CONCEPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

LONELINESS is often a negatively charged word, but can it also be good? What is the difference between self-chosen loneliness and involuntary loneliness?

From the point of view of art history, you can discuss the difference between loneliness in the Romantic age and loneliness as expressed in Vigeland's time.

UNIVERSALLY HUMAN – what does that mean? What is meant by something being “timeless”?

ALIENATED – what does that mean? Feeling alienated often has to do with lack of affiliation. You can feel alienated both as an individual and as a group. Can the pupils cite examples of different scenarios that involve feeling alienated or excluded? Discuss, for example, moving to a different country, being different in the school playground, and dealing with issues of sexual orientation or identity. During Vigeland's time, a strong sense of alienation was often associated with the huge changes taking place in society, the rapid development of towns and cities, and technological advances. What parallels can be drawn to our own age? Can the pupils give examples of things that make them feel excluded?

EMPATHY – what does empathy mean? Why is it considered an important interpersonal quality? In what way can Vigeland's art be described as empathetic?

ART AS A FORM OF EXPRESSION – just like philosophy and the natural sciences, art seeks to answer some of the questions that fascinate us. Art is an attempt to understand and interpret the world. What are the pupils' observations with regard to this?

GENDER ROLES/IDEALS AND BODIES – in this selection of sculptures, the male figure is often the one that is suffering most; he needs comforting, is lost in his own thoughts, or is afraid of being abandoned. The bodies are thin and fragile. In contrast to physically strong men with solid, secure personalities, Vigeland's male figures here are weak, vulnerable and needy. Discuss how the body communicates messages and information about who we are, who we want to be, and so on.

NAKEDNESS – why are they naked? Vigeland's aim was to create timeless sculptures, so he did not want to bind them to a given time and place through their clothes. Discuss this and the use of nakedness in the history of art.

MYTHOLOGY (ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE) – even as a child, Vigeland was fascinated by mythology. As an adult he said that it was the universally human aspect of the myths that interested him. Relate the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and discuss its universally human message.

VULNERABILITY – what does vulnerability mean? Do you have anything to lose by being vulnerable? Do you have anything to gain? Give free rein to your imagination.

PREPARATORY AND FOLLOW-UP WORK

- Teachers are encouraged to do some preparation before the visit. Some of the following activities are best suited to follow-up work.
- Read about Gustav Vigeland
- Study pictures of his works of art – make collages with small captions for the pictures
- Drawing exercise – draw «The Monolith» or another famous work by Vigeland
- Make small sculptures in clay
- Draw up a simple timeline of Gustav Vigeland's life
- Have the teacher or pupils prepare a quiz about Vigeland's life and art
- Continue conversations about Vigeland's art
- Interview – prepare five questions for a fellow pupil who is to pretend he or she is Gustav Vigeland. What would you ask?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Tone Wikborg, *Gustav Vigeland: En biografi* [Gustav Vigeland: A biography] (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2001)
- Guri Skuggen & Trine Otte Bak Nielsen, *Billedhugger Gustav Vigelands Separat-Udstilling* [Sculptor Gustav Vigeland's Separate Exhibition] 1894 (Oslo: Vigeland Museum, 2008)
- Trine Otte Bak Nielsen (ed.), *Vigeland + Munch. Bak mytene* [Vigeland + Munch. Behind the myths] (Oslo: The Munch Museum and Mercatorfonds, 2016)

Good luck with the planning!

Any questions? Contact Communication Curator Elin-Therese Aarseth, tel. +47 98 61 47 99.

email: elin.therese.aarseth@kul.oslo.kommune.no