

## Dark Angel: The Paintings of Edvard Munch

Reviewed by Brad Hagarbome

*Edvard Munch: A Visual Language for the Inner State of the Artist's Soul*

*Museum of Modern Art, February 19- May8, 2006*

“Sickness, insanity, and death were the dark angels standing guard at my cradle and they followed me throughout my life... I was born dying,<sup>1</sup> Edvard Munch says shortly after his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. Munch was concerned with the expressive representation of emotions and personal relationships. His paintings represented societal and personal feelings of loss, illness, and human emotions, many of which are displayed in a new exhibition at the Modern Museum of Art.

“Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul” runs through May 8, 2006. This exhibit is the first retrospective devoted to Munch’s works, a world-renowned Norwegian painter, printmaker, and draftsman exhibited in an American museum in almost 30 years. The MoMA provides a survey of Munch’s paintings from 1880-1944 with 87 paintings and 50 works on paper, all illustrative of each phase of Munch’s career as he moved from Naturalism, towards an exploration of “modern existential experience,”<sup>2</sup> of Symbolism. “The Modern Life of the Artist” allows the patrons of the MoMA to visually comprehend Munch’s personal struggles and trauma with a comprehension “of the fundamental components of human existence: birth, love, and death.”<sup>3</sup> Poetically illustrating this concept of the artist, the painting, *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900) greets visitors to Munch’s exhibit at the MoMA.

Born on a farm outside what is now Oslo, Norway in 1863, Munch was the second of five children. Munch’s family descended from Norway’s cultural aristocracy, however they were economically impoverished and lived in tenement housing within the workers suburbs of Christiania, which became Oslo in 1925. Munch’s family experienced the deadly illnesses of tuberculosis and bronchitis, which affected the working class.<sup>4</sup> His mother and father

were from different worlds. His mother, Laura Bjølstad, was from a prominent shipping and timber merchant, though eventually her father lost his fortune. Whereas, the father, Christian Munch, a medical doctor for the military, was from a middle class and “belonged to a family of poets, with signs of genius and signs of degeneration...”<sup>5</sup> Both Munch’s mother and older sister died from Tuberculosis in 1868 and 1877, respectively. Dr. Munch suffered severe episodes of depression after the deaths of his wife and daughter, including a violent temper and disturbing visions of if his children’s and his own eternal damnation in hell.<sup>6</sup> It is this constant experience of hallucination, illness, rejection, and death, which shaped Munch’s character and his paintings.<sup>7</sup> Munch also suffered from chronic asthmatic bronchitis and several bouts of rheumatic fever. During his enrollment at the Kristiania Technical College, where his father wished him to receive an education, Munch after many illnesses and abundant gaps in attendance, decided in 1880: “My decision is now namely to be a painter” and debuted as a painter in his first exhibit in 1883.<sup>8</sup>

From 1884-1889, Munch traveled extensively and while visiting Paris, he was impressed by Manet. Between 1889-1892, Symbolist painters Vincent Van Gogh and especially Gauguin were of considerable influence on Munch.<sup>9</sup> In the beginning of Munch’s career as a bohemian opposing bourgeois society, his works were attacked by critics and he was unable to find a public audience, which also coincided with a renewed governmental censorship. Shortly after, he returned to a Naturalist style, with “subjectively evocative landscapes” and portraits that had a more public appeal than his earlier works. Munch’s paintings during the early years of the 1880s contained a Naturalism distinguished as a corner of nature seen through temperament,” as defined by Emile Zola and Munch’s paintings were a radicalization of Naturalism. Munch’s Naturalism emphasized the “artist’s emotional experience of the motif.”<sup>10</sup> Munch still followed the Bohemian lifestyle of drinking, smoking, and sex; all providing a personal and emotional interweaving within his paintings.

In 1889 while Munch was in Paris for the Exhibition Universelle, his father passed away and he suffered devastating depression. While in his hotel room pondering on art, love, death, and immortality during the grieving process, with the influences of French Decadent Symbolist poetry, including friend and disillusioned Danish poet, Emanuel Goldstein, facilitated Munch to transform his own views on art.<sup>11</sup> He rejects Naturalism for the subjectiveness of Symbolism. Munch’s visualization of emotion into art is

cultivated during the spring of 1890, with the works, *Night in St Cloud* and *Spring Day on Karl Johan Street* as an adaptation of emotions into works of art. Many of Munch's paintings contain more than just a visual component for underneath lies the visualization of emotions expressed by the application of colors utilizing deep blues/greens for melancholy, pain, and death and reds/oranges for passions and jealousy. *Night in St Cloud* exudes despair, sadness, melancholy, and death; conveyed through the monochrome, bluish, and violet heaviness suggestive of James Whistler while utilizing the expressive utilization of space one can see the influences of Van Gogh.<sup>12</sup> The darkness and somberness is reflective of Gauguin's influences as well. The reflective and melancholic aspects of this piece are a visual manifestation of the tension between life on the outside and the life on the inside while dealing with the death of his father as well as Munch's own melancholic disposition, while he ruminates on death. The utilization of space and coloring are representative of Munch's Symbolist style and can be seen in later paintings as *Kiss*, *Self-Portrait: The Night Wanderer*, *Anxiety*, and many more pieces, reminiscent of the underlying emotions and evoking the same in his audience. This style during the 1890s allows Munch to portray his subject in order to express the inner state of the artist, imagery for a visual language of the soul.<sup>13</sup>

In 1892, Munch, while exhibiting 50 works at the Berlin Kunstlerverein (Artists' Union) caused a scandal and the exhibit was subsequently closed after a week; though not because of the subject matter, rather it was a reaction in opposition to the method of painting.<sup>14</sup> Known as the 'Munch Affair' in newspapers, Munch was euphoric over the uproar, "I have never had such an enjoyable time - incredible that something as innocent as painting can cause such a stir," he wrote to his family at home.<sup>15</sup> Munch spent the decade while in Berlin working on themes of love, suffering, and death, which included sexual awareness: *Puberty* (1894-5), illness: *The Sick Child* (1896), which was inspired by the death of his sister, jealousy: *Jealousy* (1896-7), and madness: *The Scream* (1893).<sup>16</sup> The motif of *The Sick Child*, and especially *Death in the Sick Room* according to Munch, "... symbolizes memories of his dying mother and his own fear of death when ill as a child... I am convinced that there is hardly a painter who drained his subject to the very last drop as I did... It was not only myself sitting there — it was all my loved ones,"<sup>17</sup> surrounded by death.

"The Freize of Life," which Munch called "a poem of love, anxiety, and death...[and to] explain life and its meanings,"<sup>18</sup> shown in 1902 at the Berlin

Succession was well received and Munch's changing style is noticeable in his paintings as he moved from the somber and swirling tonalities to "staccato brush strokes of brilliant, and high-keyed colors."<sup>19</sup> The love series titled "Loves Awakening" included the following six pieces: *Red and White*, *Eye in Eye*, *Kiss* (1892), and *Madonna* (1893).<sup>20</sup> Then came "Love Blossom and Dies" series including: *Ashes*, *Vampire*, *Jealousy*, *Sphinx* and *melancholy*. The "Fear of Life" paintings were; *Anxiety*, *Red Virginia Creeper*, and *The Scream*, all initially viewed in 1893. The latter piece and his most infamous is now part of pop culture's iconoclastic imagery; though not present at the MoMA, after being stolen for the second time in 2004 and never recovered. Previously it was stolen in 1994 and recovered after 3 months. The final pieces of the series were under the title; "Death" and included the paintings; *Death Struggles*, *Death in the Sickroom*, *The Girl and Death*, and *The Dead Mother and Child*. Although the MoMA does not follow the same presentation of the 1902 viewing, it does provide an overall sampling of Munch's work presenting them in a certain aspect of comparison and contrast. Along the same wall reside *The Kiss* and *Separation*, two stunning paintings representing the dichotomous relationship of love's cycle. *The Kiss* asserts a unity and oneness as the man and woman meld into each other as they almost become one. They are enveloped in lavish and deep reds exuding passion and sexuality. Whereas, *Separation* exudes anguish and pain as the man and woman are surrounded by greens and blues of melancholy and sorrow of isolation represented by the elongated shore and stretched horizon. As we see the woman walking away, almost with her back to us, while the man faces the viewer, one can not help but to catch his gaze, forcing us to look at his hand over his heart narrowly highlighted in bright red, representing the emotions of passion, but also anger. This likely corresponds to Munch's break-up with Tulla Larsen, also a passionate and emotive person. These pieces and the series took 30 years to complete, culminating in "The Freize of Life, a visualized philosophy of sexuality, the psychology of love, the generation of life and the effects of death" all influenced Munch's paintings during the 1890s.<sup>21</sup>

Then in 1908, after a emotionally devastating breakup, which followed after being shot by Tulla, though a minor injury, Munch suffered a complete nervous breakdown, likely as a result of his personal life, excessive alcohol consumption, and nicotine poisoning he returned to Norway and entered a sanitarium.<sup>22</sup> Munch abandoned his disturbing themes, believing this to be a way of protecting his sanity.<sup>23</sup> However, Munch never truly gave up the Bohemian lifestyle, exemplified in two paintings. *Self Portrait: With a Cigarette* (1895) with a single light from the bottom of canvas creating an image of the artist above the viewer and his truly emblematic cigarette of a

Bohemian artist. Another painting, *Self Portrait: With a Bottle of Wine* (1906), shows Munch on his own terms, drinking, smoking, and likely contemplating sex and death.

During Munch's latter years, Nazism was gaining ground in Germany and his works were removed from German museums, categorized as degenerate. He refused any efforts by allies of the Third Reich to recruit him for their cause. He became ill after an explosion in a munitions depot near his home that blew out all the windows.<sup>24</sup> He died in 1944 at the age of 81, a Symbolist painter considered a precursor to the Expressionist movement.

In Munch's will, he bequeathed over 1,000 painting, around 15,400 prints, a number of plates, 5,000 watercolors, and drawings, and 6 sculptures to the Municipality of Oslo. The Munch Museet-Oslo exhibited Munch's works to the public in 1963. Almost three decades later, the MoMA exhibit facilitates our understanding of Munch's many works, often commented on as intense and disturbing, though they reflected the Symbolist's inner turbulence stemming from his mother and sister's death, his father's insanity and death, following Munch's own emotional breakdown allowing us, as patrons to view the visual imagery of an artist's soul.

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## Notes

1. Rheinhold Heller: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University

Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>

2. <http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/2006/Munch.html>

3. <http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/2006/Munch.html>

4. Marit Lande: "The Life of Edvard Munch" <<http://www.munch.museum>>

5. Marit Lande: "The Life of Edvard Munch" <<http://www.munch.museum>>

6. Rheinhold Heller: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
7. Rheinhold Heller: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
8. Rheinhold Heller: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
9. Rheinhold Heller: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
10. Arne Eggum: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
11. Rheinhold Heller: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
12. Arne Eggum: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
13. <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/history/symbolism.html>
14. Marit Lande: "The Life of Edvard Munch" <http://www.munch.museum>
15. Marit Lande: "The Life of Edvard Munch" <http://www.munch.museum>
16. Munch, Edvard" *A Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Art*. Ian Chilvers. Oxford University Press, 1998. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. St. John's University. 4 March 2006  
<http://www.oxfordreference.com>
17. Arne Eggum: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
18. Arne Eggum: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press.

- March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
19. Munch Edvard (1863 - 1944). A Biographical Dictionary of Artists, Andromeda (1995). Retrieved 05 March 2006, from xreferplus. <http://www.xreferplus.com>
  20. Munch Edvard (1863 - 1944). A Biographical Dictionary of Artists, Andromeda (1995). Retrieved 05 March 2006, from xreferplus. <http://www.xreferplus.com>
  21. Rheinhold Heller: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
  22. Rheinhold Heller: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
  23. Rheinhold Heller: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>
  24. Rheinhold Heller: "Munch, Edvard" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press. March 4, 2006. <http://www.groveart.com>