

## **Edvard Munch: A Profile**

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Although Edvard Munch (1863–1944) is best known for his “The Scream” (lithograph, 1895), he never intended viewers to study individual works. He instead wanted his work to be examined as a whole, as a dissertation on his life. He once wrote to a friend that “When they [the paintings] were brought together, suddenly a single musical note went through them and they became completely different from what they had been. A symphony resulted...” (50).

Munch devoted his life to developing his themes through several series of images that he called the “Frieze of Life” (50). He hoped one day to exhibit in parallel the various thematic threads of his life.

Turmoil pervaded much of Munch’s life. The loss of his mother and sister to tuberculosis, and his own delirious struggle with the disease, are the subject of many of Munch’s early works. These Expressionist images, with their dark, foreboding shadows, the specters that appear, change, or disappear with each reworking, and the symbolism reflect Munch’s psychological state and his attempt to cope with and respond to his suffering. He states, “I paint not what I see, but what I saw” (11). Munch worked with a memory as it germinated and grew.

Such experiences brought Munch to associate love with illness and death. The deaths of his mother and sister may have affected his relationships with other women. He claimed that his later intimate relationships with women invariably hurt him deeply and left him with a sense of betrayal or desertion.

As a result, he felt that he could not make the commitment to a family when he wanted to devote himself to his artwork. Munch’s artwork was his life-blood – depicted as such in his “Garden Sculpture I” and “Flower of Pain,” in which he is a fountain sculpture from whose side gushes the water that nourishes surrounding flowers (177). His images were his true family: At his death he owned three houses and multiple studios, of which he inhabited only a few rooms – the rest of the space was packed with his work (162).

Until the 1900s, Munch focused largely on illness, death, love (which he equated with death), loneliness, and distress. With honest introspection, he grew beyond his obsession with childhood memories to live and express a fuller life.

Neither art critics nor the public appreciated Munch’s work in his first decades of exhibiting. Although his talent had been acknowledged in The School of Design (Christiania, Norway, 1881–83), where he quickly was placed in the most advanced

classes, and, in the next two years, by the radical group of artists the Christiania Bohème, critics expected conservatism and kitsch. His works, far from being either conservative or kitschy, express raw emotion through color and line.

Munch's "The Day After" (1894-95), which depicts a woman who has passed out from excessive drinking sprawled on an unmade bed, suggested outrageous debauchery (48). The general public and the press derided Munch's work because of its realistic subject matter, as well as its often expressionistic depiction. The convention at the time was to depict only the beautiful, the world as we would like it to be.

An occasional critic was moved by Munch's art:

Among many unusual whims and just plain horrors, I believed I could see fine, delicate moods—in dark rooms filled with moonlight, on lonely paths, in noiseless Norwegian summer nights—I thought I heard quiet melancholy and strange people breathe, people who silently wander over desolate boulders along the beach like somnambulists and hide the heavy struggles in their chests. I did not laugh... (48)

Despite popular ridicule, Munch was able to exhibit his work throughout Europe and in the United States. Negative publicity encouraged people to look at what he was producing.

His first Berlin exhibition, at the Verein Berliner Künstler, so shocked most of this artists' association's members that they voted to close the show. Munch's work was so powerful as to create a permanent rift between the conservative majority and the radical minority, which broke away from the group. Munch not only found personal satisfaction in his work, but also enjoyed the commotion over his exhibitions. (49) He joined literary and artistic groups that were more progressive and receptive to his work.

In 1902, Munch met Dr. Max Linde, an art collector in Berlin who soon became his patron. In this first decade of the 20th century, a turning point in his life, Munch began to have many patrons who commissioned portraits and made purchases. The climate was becoming fertile for his work, and he was beginning to be regarded as "a man ahead of his time," an insightful and prophetic artist.

Munch gained wide acceptance and recognition, possibly because of the increasing turmoil in Europe with the coming war and because of the resulting changes in art. His expression of his own emotions became more comprehensible as techniques and modes of expression in art evolved from "realism" to "abstraction" and as the frenzy caused by the political environment grew to resemble the deep emotions Munch revealed through his work. With the advent of Fauvism, Expressionism, and, later, Dadaism and Cubism, Munch's visionary work and his strong influence on these new trends in art became

undeniable. His unique distillation of his own soul, tempered by his many influences, had been a harbinger of these movements.

Munch's artistic success and disastrous relationships took their toll: In 1908, he collapsed from exhaustion and overindulgence in alcohol. Nine months in Dr. Daniel Jacobson's Copenhagen clinic helped him to end his dependency on alcohol. (95)

During his stay at the sanatorium, Munch produced a series of 18 lithographs, "Alpha and Omega," in which he dissected his negative feelings toward women. This marked another major transition: "A strange feeling of peace came over me while I worked on that series – it was as though all pain was leaving my body" (96). His reconciliation with himself and women led to his renewed productivity. Rather than remaining mired in unresolved feelings from his childhood, Munch became interested in depicting a broader range of subjects.

Munch's work as a whole reveals a person in constant transition. No one style or type of imagery typifies his work. "The Scream," which is considered characteristic of his work, evolved in six years into a shocking image of the artist as a child realizing that his mother is dead. One image is a vibrant, hallucinatory lithograph, the other a stark and comparatively realistic etching. From these early images to his studies of workers and his final self-portraits, Munch maintained keen insight into not only his subjects but what they meant to him.