



Munch. *The Dead Mother*. 1899-1900

Edvard Munch: A Searcher for Wonder in a World Overturned

By DEBORAH WEISGALL, *The New York Times*, 2/18/01

BOSTON -- TWO years ago, an undergraduate visited the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College and asked the curator if he would be interested in mounting an exhibition of Edvard Munch. There was a family collection, the student, Anna-Elizabeth Arneberg, explained; her grandfather, Arnstein Arneberg, had been a prominent architect, the designer of Oslo's city hall and Munch's good friend. Her father, Per Arneberg, a shipping magnate, was an important collector and authority on the artist. The curator, Alston Conley, called the museum's director,

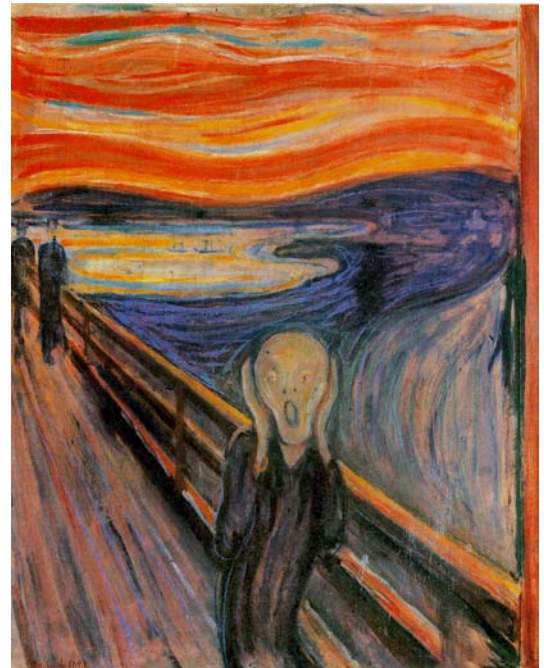
Nancy Netzer, who immediately agreed to a show and invited seven Boston College professors of history, fine arts, philosophy and theater to act as co-curators. The impressive result is "Edvard

Munch: Psyche, Symbol and Expression," an exhibition that runs through May 20. With the Arneberg collection as its core, the show presents more than 80 paintings, drawings and prints, making it the largest American exhibition of Munch's work since the National Gallery mounted one in 1978.

Munch is a big subject for a small museum. The first Scandinavian artist to achieve international recognition, he is the acknowledged father of the Expressionist movement in Germany. His art was heavily influenced by the upheavals of late-19th-century Europe: the rise of nationalism and liberalism, and the scientific discoveries that both explained the mysteries of the world and destroyed illusions of human centrality. Some of Munch's images have now become clichés. The embryonic, skeletal figure in "The Scream" appears on everything from pads to neckties; it has even morphed into a plastic blow-up toy. But by placing Munch in his historical context, the Boston College show makes it possible once again to see how Munch translated private suffering — including deaths in his family as a child — into emblems of the human condition.

Munch often produced variations of an image, refining the form to hone its emotional impact. He painted "The Scream" in 1893 and made the lithograph in this show two years later. If he sold a painting, he sometimes painted himself another version to keep the work close by. His subjects, his preoccupations — sex, death, the search for wonder in a godless world — were constant throughout his life. Given his themes, Boston College, a Jesuit institution, seems an unlikely place for such a show. Early on, Munch rejected his father's rigid Lutheran faith. Some works, like his notorious "Madonna," which he painted in 1894 and made into lithographs in 1895 and 1896, verge on blasphemy. A beautiful woman, seen from above, lies on a bed in a state of sexual ecstasy. Giant sperm, like so many tadpoles, form the border of some versions of the print, and the woman's child, a fetal skeleton, hunkers in the corner. Here love brings forth death, not redemption. As Stephen Schloesser, professor of history at Boston College, writes in the catalog: "Munch was simply unpersuaded by theism of any kind."

But Munch possessed a need to represent the invisible, and many of his works contain Christian imagery; if he transformed their



Munch. *The Scream*. 1893

symbolic significance into his own expressive language, he also wrestled with his stubborn belief in chains of continuity, in mystery. "Mystical qualities will always exist," Munch wrote. "After all, the more one discovers, the more inexplicable things there will be." Before the 20th century, that kind of thinking was called religious.

Edvard Munch was born in Norway in 1863, the son of an Army surgeon whose family history was a testament to the inefficacy of medicine. When Edvard was 5, his mother died of tuberculosis; nine years later, his sister Sophie succumbed to the disease. Another sister was institutionalized for insanity. Munch committed himself several times for treatment of alcoholism and depression and underwent electric shock therapy. Although he had drawn since childhood, he entered college in Kristiania (as Oslo was called until 1925) to study engineering.

Soon after, he transferred to art school and became involved with the Kristiania Bohemians, a group of artists and writers who mocked bourgeois society. Among other things, the Bohemians advocated the severance of family ties, outrageous behavior and free love. Munch himself had a difficult relationship with his father and an affair with Millie Thaulow, the wife of his teacher, patron and distant cousin Frits Thaulow, and was devastated when she ended it. In 1885 Munch went to Paris and in 1889 enrolled in art school there. Like his countryman Ibsen, who settled in Italy, Munch needed distance from Scandinavia to work. For the next two decades he spent most of every year in Germany, with summer trips to France and Scandinavia.

In Paris, Munch became involved with Art Nouveau and the Symbolist and Decadent movements and befriended the poet Stéphane Mallarmé. In Berlin he was part of a group, including August Strindberg, that met at a tavern called the Black Piglet. Munch made portraits of both Strindberg and Mallarmé.

The Boston College exhibition begins with a room of self-portraits. Munch imagines himself naked, his angular, handsome face tanned and impassive, his body white against the smoke and fire of hell. A lurid red ring encircles his throat: contusions from suicide by hanging? (The Kristiania Bohemians approved of suicide.) But Munch is not consumed. His eyes, thick flecks of black and white paint, glare cold and clear. He also portrays himself under the mask of a harpy's face; in 1895, he draws himself with a skeleton arm, months after the first X-rays were produced (could he have known?); in 1925, he depicts himself alone in a restaurant, his face grown gaunt, with an empty bottle of wine.

These self-portraits establish his themes: his sense of isolation, his lifelong intimacy with death and loss, his ambivalence over abandoning his father's faith, and an equally profound ambivalence toward women. Though he had many affairs, he never married. He feared transmitting his family's disposition toward illness and madness to another generation, and he referred to his paintings as his children.



Munch. Death in the Sick Room. 1894

In a sense, much of the show is a series of self-portraits, in which Munch turns his own figure into a vehicle for emotion. In his writings he made explicit the autobiographical origins of his work; in his art he becomes both subject and symbol. The drypoint "The Sick Child" and the lithograph "Death in the Sickroom" document his sister Sophie's illness. "The Scream" arose from a vision that seized him on an afternoon stroll with friends; in it he reduces himself to his inarticulate essence. That genius for reduction is central to Munch's power. It is anything but simplification. It is a quality of observation that pares away detail until all that is left is a kind of abstraction, of pure emotion, whether it's despairing hope in the "Sick Child" or anxiety in "The Scream" or sexual desire. Munch first painted "The Kiss" in 1892. A couple (the man with Munch's dark hair and profile) embrace by a window with the curtains drawn. In an 1896 lithograph of the scene (on view in the

exhibition), the couple, now naked, show themselves in the window. Only a faint line restrains their featureless faces from melting into each other.

In his images of sex and love, Munch expresses notions of the body and spirit engendered by the momentousness of his time. He struggles with the rational and irrational, the visible and the unseen. Newly powerful microscopes and X-rays harnessed light to expose private realms within the body. The magnified sperm ringed "Madonna" might render the microscope's evidence, but the mechanics of conception offered only a meager understanding of its concomitant mysteries of love and death. If Munch echoed a contemporary misogyny and rendered woman as a monster in his lithograph "Vampire (Harpy)," he also painted generous, loving portraits of individual women, including his lovers the musician Eva Moducci ("The Brooch," a lithograph) and the painter Aase Norregarrd.

In "The Voice," painted in 1903, a young woman stands enthralled in a forest by the sea, a personification of sexual awakening. This work, too, might be a displaced self-portrait. "Munch used the figure of a woman as a stand-in for painting emotional states that he was unwilling to reveal on canvas," said Claude Cernuschi, one of the show's curators. The painting shimmers with dreamy rhythms of sex on a summer night as the sun casts a columnar reflection onto the fjord. Munch is associated with darkness, but like Osvald, the painter in Ibsen's "Ghosts," he craved delight. In 1906, Munch designed sets for Max Reinhardt's production of "Ghosts." In the play's last moments, Osvald, dying, sees dawn breaking. "The sun! The sun!" he cries. For the production, Munch sketched a landscape infused with brightness; the sun glows pink and gold. (Just the year before, Albert Einstein used the speed of light as the basis for his theory of special relativity, which argued against the absolute nature of time and space.)



Munch. Madonna. 1894

Munch's large study, "The Sun," from 1912, hangs in the last room of the exhibition. He saw it as the culmination of a thread of longing— "light in time of darkness" — running through his work. Here the sun has evolved from the one sketched for "Ghosts" and the dense globe of "The Voice." Landscape is pushed to the margins. Rings of light explode over water, shooting off a terrible and joyful spectrum of centrifugal splashes. Light: speeding and wondrous. Munch searched for the junction between objective and subjective, the point where the self and the world collide, when the personal achieves the velocity of the universal. He confronted the limits, and the mystery, of knowing.

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