



Edvard Munch.

A poem of life, love and death

Vampire, 1895,
oil on canvas, 91 × 109 cm
Oslo, Munchmuseet

20 September 2022 – 22 January 2023
Musée d'Orsay

Why does *The Frieze of Life* appear to be the central theme of this exhibition?

Claire Bernardi / Estelle Begué – This project was at the very heart of Munch's career; he was convinced that his works were more meaningful if they were grouped and therefore decided to present them in a "series". He hoped that this would make his art easier to understand as his early exhibitions all caused outrage. His exhibition in Berlin in 1892 closed after a week due to negative reactions. The public found the unfinished appearance and radically inventive aesthetic of his works disconcerting. In *The Frieze of Life*, Munch organised his ideas around love and then

expanded this to include other major impulses of the soul such as anguish, existential doubt and facing the reality of death. In it, he explored all the significant stages and emotions which punctuate a lifetime. He offered his unique and personal vision of the world, in which life and death are inextricably associated and nature plays a key role in revealing and conveying emotions. Munch refined and modified his ideas over the course of his exhibitions and there is therefore no definitive version of this cycle which encompasses many of his major works, and primarily the different versions of the famous *Scream*.

Biographical highlights

1863:

12 December, Edvard Munch is born in Løten in Norway, the son of Christian Munch, a military doctor, and Laura Cathrine, born Bjølstad.

1868:

29 December, his mother dies of tuberculosis. His aunt, Karen Bjølstad, takes responsibility for raising the siblings. She is a painter, and introduces Edvard to drawing.

1877:

9 November, Edvard's elder sister Sophie dies of tuberculosis aged fifteen.

1880:

In December, Munch enrolls for several months at the Royal School of Art and Design.

Why are illness and death so prominent in Munch's work?

C.B./E.B. – Munch wrote in one of his notebooks: "Disease, insanity and death were dark angels watching over my cradle." This grim observation is a reminder of the omnipresence of these three scourges in Munch's life from infancy. His mother died of tuberculosis when he was just five years old. His elder sister Sophie died of the same disease less than ten years later, and he almost succumbed to it himself. In order to try to come to terms with these trials, his father, a deeply religious man, was

assiduous in his devotions and fostered a serious and austere atmosphere in the family home. As an adult, another of Munch's sisters, Laura, developed serious mental health issues and was institutionalised for much of the rest of her life. Munch's brother, Andrea, died suddenly of pneumonia at the age of twenty-five, shortly after getting married. This overwhelming series of family tragedies and childhood traumas led Munch to develop a clear interest in his work in recent scientific and medical discoveries of the day, which attributed a key role to heredity as a factor in the appearance of both physical and mental illness.



1883: Munch takes part in his first group exhibitions: the Norwegian Exhibition of Industry and Art and the Kristiania Autumn Salon.

1884: Munch meets the man of letters Hans Jæger and makes his first contacts in Kristiania's bohemian circles.

1885: Munch's first trip to Paris. In the early summer, he embarks on a passionate relationship with Milly Thaulow, a major figure in the Norwegian feminist

movement, and sister-in-law of the painter Frits Thaulow.

1886: The painting *The Sick Child* (1885-1886) causes a scandal at the Kristiania Autumn Salon.

Why do some motifs appear to be endlessly repeated?

C.B./E.B. – Many of Munch's contemporaries practised the art of reprising subjects, but for him this was not a formal exercise or the simple study of a motif. He viewed his work as a whole in which pieces resonated with each other. Certain specific elements were used to unify the works. He defended these echoes in the paintings making up *The Frieze of Life*, and wrote: "The sinuous line of the coast runs through the paintings, and beyond it, in perpetual motion, the ocean, and beneath the treetops, life in all its many forms unfurls with all its joys and sorrows." In tandem with decorative aspects, he sometimes reprised the actual structures of compositions, such as the very strong diagonals which enclose space in a painting and accentuate the dramatic intensity of the subjects. Lastly, Munch produced several versions of some pictures using different techniques such as painting and engraving. However, he rejected the term "copy" as each reworking had its own particular meaning. This allowed him either to capture more closely the exact feelings experienced during the specific event which inspired the motif – for example in the many versions of *The Sick Child* – or to find the most accurate vision of the message of the work, as in the sketches for the decorative scheme for the Aula (University of Oslo). In this scheme, the artist was keen to express the regenerative power of light, the hope that is born with every new day, and the dazzling experience of the awakening of knowledge. These multiple versions also allowed him to keep a record of his work in its integral form over time as collectors and museums acquired pieces.

1
The Fight against Death, 1915,
oil on canvas, 174 × 230 cm
Oslo, Munchmuseet

2
Girls on the Bridge, 1927,
oil on canvas, 100 × 90 cm
Oslo, Munchmuseet

3
Girls on the Bridge, 1918,
woodcut, 63 × 53 cm
Oslo, Munchmuseet



2



3

1889:
Munch settles in Paris. It is his main residence until 1892, but he makes frequent trips to Norway and Denmark.

1892:
In November, he has a solo exhibition at the Verein Berliner Künstler. Berlin visitors find his works deeply shocking and the exhibition closes after a week.

1893:
Munch is living in Berlin, and is part of the literary circle at the Zum Schwarzen Ferkel café. There he meets personalities such as August Strindberg and Stanislaw Przybyszewski.

1894:
Munch takes up printmaking and creates his first etchings. Over the next few years, he experiments with lithography and woodcut techniques.

1896:
He takes part in the Salon des indépendants in Paris. He creates the poster for *Peer Gynt* by Ibsen at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre and illustrations for *The Flowers of Evil* by Baudelaire.



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Prints play an important role in Munch's work. What was his approach?

C.B./E.B. – Munch learned the art of printmaking in 1894 during a stay in Berlin. He began by mastering etching and drypoint techniques, then printed his first lithographs in 1895. He turned to woodcuts in 1896. We do not know exactly why he developed a particular interest in printmaking, but he may have viewed it as an opportunity to disseminate his work more widely. He was also curious about this technique which was not common in Norway, and was keen to become a pioneer in the field. He placed a particular emphasis on his prints, which he soon presented in his exhibitions on an equal footing with his paintings.

Before long, he moved away from traditional techniques and embraced a more personal form of practice. Munch often enhanced his prints with gouache and watercolour highlights, even adding whole motifs in this way so that they became unique works. In order to mitigate the issues associated with printing in colour, he combined techniques and his printed plates were sometimes produced from a combination of wood and zinc matrices. He developed the habit of cutting out blocks of engraved wood with a saw and isolating the different elements of his compositions. This meant that he could fit them together like a jigsaw puzzle and ink the pieces in different ways. The inventiveness and freedom of practice demonstrated in his prints reflect his approach to his paintings.

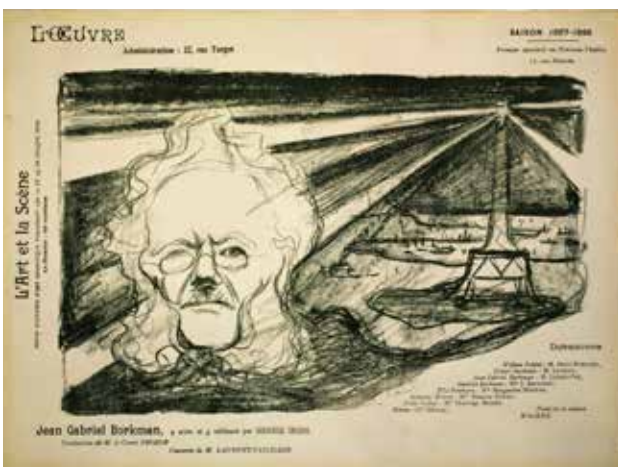
1898:
Munch publishes several illustrations for texts by Strindberg in a special issue of the German magazine *Quickborn*.

In the summer, he meets Tulla Larsen and embarks on a tortured relationship which lasts almost four years.

1902:
Munch shows a group of twenty-two paintings entitled "Presentation of several paintings of life" at the Berlin Secession exhibition. This is the first full presentation of *The Frieze of Life* cycle.

1903:
Munch exhibits *The Frieze of Life* in Leipzig in February and March.

1904:
Munch's patron, Dr Max Linde, commissions a decorative scheme for his children's bedroom in Lübeck. He rejects the paintings submitted, but continues to support the painter.



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What was Munch's relationship with the theatre scene?

C.B./E.B. – Munch was very interested in contemporary theatre and frequented a number of playwrights, especially during his stays in Berlin. He was friends with August Strindberg, and produced an engraved portrait of him. In 1896, Munch embarked on a brief collaboration with Aurélien Lugné-Poe, the director of the new Théâtre de l'Œuvre in Paris. He produced illustrated programmes for two plays, *Peer Gynt* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, whom he admired greatly. In 1906, he pursued a more extensive collaboration with the German theatre director Max Reinhardt, founder of the Kammerspiele in Berlin, a theatre which forged a new relationship between the stage and audiences. He commissioned Munch to produce elements for the sets of two other plays by Ibsen: *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler*. He embraced this task wholeheartedly and it had an immediate impact on his own work. His approach to the construction of space changed



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quite conspicuously. This is particularly clear in a series of paintings entitled *The Green Room* [*The Murderess* is part of this series], dating from 1907, straight after this collaboration. In it, Munch revisits the main elements of Reinhardt's sets as a unique space, in the form of a room from which a wall has been removed. He also places objects in the foreground of the paintings to banish the sense of distance from the spectator. For example, we can see a truncated table which seems to extend beyond the painting.

4
The Sick Child I, 1896,
lithograph, 43.2 × 57.3 cm
Oslo, Munchmuseet

5
*Theatre programme:
John Gabriel Borkman*, 1897,
lithograph, 20.7 × 31.9 cm
Oslo, Munchmuseet

6
The Murderess, 1907,
oil on canvas, 89 × 63 cm
Oslo, Munchmuseet

1906:
Theatre director Max Reinhardt commissions Munch to create sets for Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890).

1908:
In the autumn, Munch suffers a severe and sudden nervous breakdown and asks to be admitted to Dr Jacobson's clinic in Copenhagen. He remains there until the spring of 1909.

1909:
Munch begins work on the competition for a decorative scheme for Kristiania University (Aula).

1914:
The plans submitted to Kristiania University are finally accepted on 29 May after several rounds of rejections and modifications.

1916:
Munch buys the house in Ekely, near Oslo, which will be his home for the rest of his life. The decorative scheme for the Aula is finalised and inaugurated on 19 September.



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What do Munch's many self-portraits tell us about him?

C.B./E.B. – Munch practised self-portraiture throughout his career. This was an important way for the artist to mark the major milestones in his life. His youthful portraits, such as *Self-Portrait with a Cigarette*, captured an artist secure in his own talent, who was able to play with the pictorial conventions of his day and willingly present himself as a bohemian. His subsequent self-portraits highlighted his profound weaknesses and the inner doubts which plagued him. He had no qualms about presenting himself in an extremely vulnerable way in *Self-Portrait in Hell*, for example. Later, Munch depicted himself as an elderly man with great honesty, by facing old age and death unflinchingly. His self-portraits frequently included an allegorical dimension. He symbolised the difficulty of creating in *The Flower of Pain*, for example. The artist often drew inspiration for his depictions from literary texts which reflected his own interests, notably plays by Ibsen. On several occasions, he assumed the guise of John Gabriel Borkman, a character confined to his room for many years by obsessive thoughts. His self-portraits were not confined to paintings and engravings. Munch was keen on photography and regularly photographed himself among his works in a manner reminiscent of modern “selfies”. His work overall is highly autobiographical and draws inspiration from the many tragedies punctuating his life.

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Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm,
1895, lithograph, 46.7 × 32 cm
Oslo, collection Gundersen

8

Self-Portrait with Cigarette,
1895, oil on canvas,
110.5 × 85.5 cm
Oslo, Nasjonalmuseet for kunst,
arkitektur og design

1918:
Munch organises the exhibition *The Frieze of Life* at the Blomqvist gallery in Kristiania. A few months later, he publishes a booklet tracing his work on the frieze.

1937:
Eighty-two works by Munch are confiscated from German museums as they are deemed “degenerate” by the Nazis.

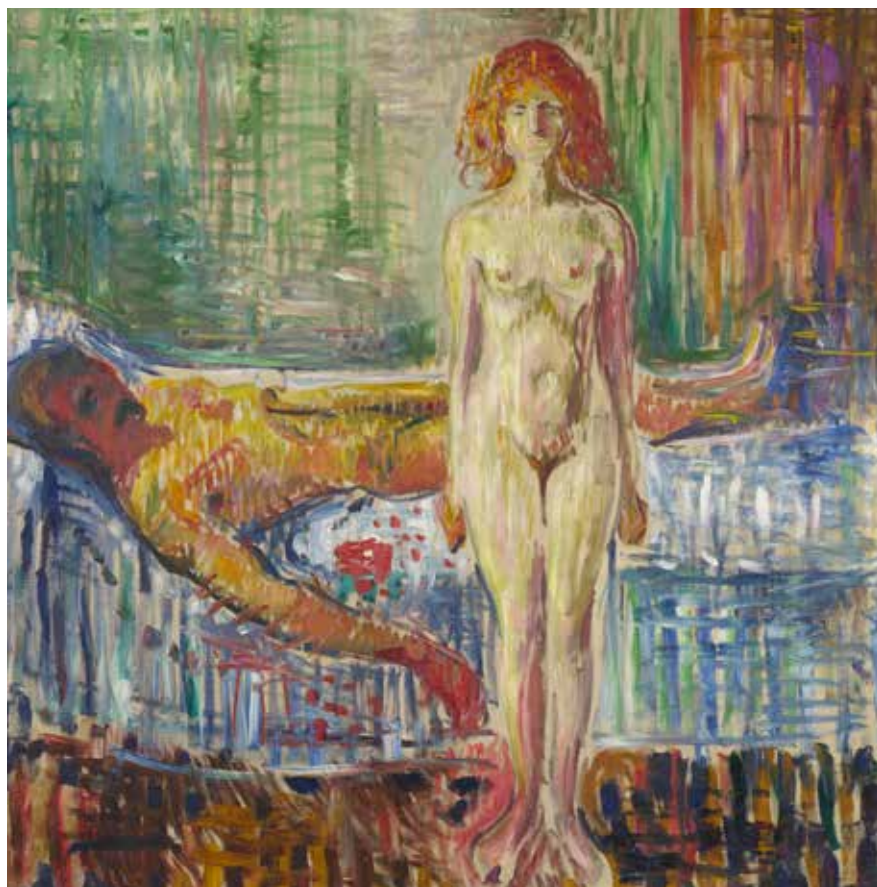
1944:
Munch passes away in Ekely on 23 January. In accordance with the will which he wrote in 1940, all his possessions, including the contents of his studio

and his manuscripts, are bequeathed to the city of Oslo.

How can Munch’s style be described?

C.B./ E.B. – In many respects, Munch is an artist who defies categorisation. His training does not link him to any specific movement. His maternal aunt, Karen Bjølstad, introduced him to painting and drawing as a child and he enrolled for several months at the Royal School of Art and Design in Oslo, but Norway did not yet have a proper art academy. He then worked under the painter Christian Krohg, who transmitted his own passion for French naturalist painters and the impressionists to him. Munch’s youthful works, and in particular those produced during his first trips to Paris, were characterised by *plein air* work, free handling of colour, and a focus on the emotions of his sitters. These latter two elements were at the heart of his

work in the early 1890s, when he turned to Symbolism. He was also interested in the principles of synthetism (synthesis between the chosen motif, the artist’s feelings, freedom of form and colour) developed by Émile Bernard and Paul Gauguin. He shared their extremely radical aesthetic approach. The psychological and dramatic intensity of his works, the use of very bright or even garish colours, and an emphasis on expressing powerful emotions which deliberately challenge the viewer, mean that Munch has often been described as a precursor of Expressionism. But far from adhering to a movement, and unconcerned by attracting followers, his work is characterised by great aesthetic freedom which expresses a unique vision of the world and life.



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The Death of Marat, 1907,
oil on canvas, 153 × 149 cm
Oslo, Munchmuseet



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Why should we avoid reducing Munch's work to *The Scream*?

C.B. / E.B. – As mentioned in the introduction, *The Scream* should not be seen as an isolated work. There are several painted and engraved versions of this motif, which belongs to *The Frieze of Life* and sits firmly at the centre of Munch's work. In more general terms, the popularity of *The Scream* can certainly be attributed to the universal nature of the theme which Munch conveys in it, and this quality can be applied to his work as a whole. Munch's constant focus was to express feelings as accurately and intensely as possible. His works, which were strongly influenced by the tragedies punctuating his own life, are all filled with elements which resonate more widely with everybody. They are sometimes presented in isolation, but this is not appropriate as they are all in dialogue with each other and their meaning lies in the relationships between them. The continuity of motifs creates a cohesion which supersedes the significant developments in the artist's style.

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Exhibition tie-ins

In person

Tours

Audioguide (French, English)
All visitors €6/ members €4

Lecture tours

(duration 90 minutes)

From 27 September 2022

to 14 January 2023

Tuesday 11.30am, 2.30pm

Wednesday, Friday Saturday

11.30am

Thursday 11.30am, 7.30pm

Adults, €6 / €4.50

(+ admission charge)

Publications

Exhibition catalogue,

Musée d'Orsay / RMN joint publication, 256 pages, €45

Les Mots de Munch,

Musée d'Orsay / RMN joint publication, 128 pages, €14.90



Exhibition tie-in events, tours and articles



Programme and bookings

musee-orsay.fr



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The Scream, 1895, lithograph, 44.5 × 25.4 cm

Oslo, collection Gundersen