

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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## LARGE RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION OF WORK OF NORWEGIAN ARTIST, EDVARD MUNCH, TO GO ON VIEW AT MUSEUM

The first definitive exhibition in the United States of the works of the late Edvard Munch will come to the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, on June 30 to occupy the entire 3rd floor through August 13. The exhibition, which includes 65 paintings and more than 50 graphic works, is being circulated to 10 major museums throughout the country by the Institute of Contemporary Art of Boston in collaboration with the Norwegian Government, which lent the bulk of the exhibition for a year's tour and appropriated public funds to defray a large share of the expenses.

Edvard Munch, who is generally regarded as one of the important sources of German expressionism, died in Norway in 1944 after an enormously productive life of 80 years. His will left all his works to the City of Oslo, and 1,008 paintings were counted in addition to watercolors, graphic works and sculptures. But heretofore he has been known in this country for the most part only by his graphic work, for little else had found its way across the ocean.

Often called the greatest Norwegian since Ibsen - whose dramas he illustrated - Munch is loved and esteemed by masses of people, in the parts of the world that know his work, as is no other modern painter except van Gogh.

The first major publication on Munch in English is the book accompanying the show written by the eminent Munch scholar Professor Frederick B. Deknatel of the Harvard University Department of Fine Arts, and published by the Museum of Modern Art. It is illustrated with 79 reproductions.

### EDVARD MUNCH:

Born in Norway in 1863, Munch was one of 5 children of a father who was a military doctor. Edvard's mother died of tuberculosis when he was 5, and the family was brought up by an aunt. The boy's health was poor, interrupting his school work, and he grew up as a frail, intelligent child with close family bonds which he retained throughout his life. When he was 14, an older sister died also of tuberculosis; and these two deaths, which greatly affected him, were the subject of a number of paintings and prints at later dates, such as "The Sick Child" (1885-86), "The Death Chamber" (1892), "By the Death Bed" (1895), etc.

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His early unhappiness would seem to have affected him throughout his life and his work, for his state of mind was always a problem to him and was frequently manifested in his art. An additional childhood problem was his father's reaction to his mother's death. He turned to religion with frightening intensity, and Edvard Munch has written: "When he punished us... he could be almost insane in his violence.... Disease and insanity were the black angels on guard at my cradle."

At the age of 17 Edvard began his artistic career at art school in Oslo. This was a period of social and political debates in Norway, begun earlier by Ibsen and Bjørnson and developed by Munch and his companions in the 1880s along more radical lines. They felt that the serious purpose of art was to provide a social weapon, to reveal truth in the battle for complete freedom for the individual. His work reflected these growing ideas, and he departed more and more from the convention of solid realistic painting, rubbed out details and, as he said, "let everything stand in masses."

Munch started exhibiting in 1883, with a largely unfavorable press. In 1889 he obtained a Government stipend to study in Paris where he worked until 1892 and gained the foundations for his painting that lasted all his life. He knew the work of the impressionists, and he saw the paintings of van Gogh and Gauguin, probably at the gallery of Théo van Gogh. He wrote at this time: "No longer should you paint interiors with men reading and women knitting. There must be living beings who breathe and feel and love and suffer. I would paint such pictures in a cycle. People would understand the sacredness of them and take off their hats as if they were in church."

This independence and the idea of pictures in a cycle led to his "Frieze of Life" which Munch worked and reworked to the end of his life with the hope that he could create it in one grand decorative scheme. Although he never had such a commission, the many canvases on this theme reveal how he tried even through his old age to express the joys and sorrows of humans for a broad public, often using familiar symbolism and a simple approach towards this end.

A turning point in Munch's career and a significant event in the history of art in Germany came as a result of an invitation from the Union of Berlin Artists to show in their 1892 exhibition. The show proved to be a center of such bitter controversy that it was closed one week after opening. The protesting minority, under the leadership of the German impressionist Max Liebermann, formed the Berlin Secession, the group later to be the first in Germany to recognize the significance of the French post-impressionists. From the time of this exhibition until 1908 Munch stayed for the most part in Germany where his paintings were being shown regularly in many cities. Here he was in a circle of advanced literary men, though few if any painters, who were well aware of what was going on in the rest of Europe. And it was here that he first found widespread acceptance of his work, though it was not until after 1900 that sales began to produce a steady income, and he still lived under economic strain until 1909.

It was during this period that Munch concluded a troubled love affair of some 3 or 4 years. While restraining the woman from shooting herself, he was shot in the left hand. This was probably the woman represented in "Marat's Death."

The broad conceptions underlying Munch's subjects were the powerlessness of the individual before the great forces of nature: love and death; and the unbridgeable gulf that separates the sexes. Thus he indicated the troubled state of his own spirit. By 1910, when he had returned to Norway and had at last achieved popular success and honors there, he was secure economically. But this was a period of great instability for him mentally. In 1908, after a 4-day drinking spree, he had a nervous collapse and entered a psychiatrist's clinic for 8 months. After this, he drank very little for the rest of his life. While at the sanatorium he did 18 lithographs in a series called "Alpha and Omega," a parable of man and woman ending in disaster. He also painted a portrait of his doctor, showing that Munch looked at his psychiatrist with as sharp an eye as that which observed him.

Aiming constantly to free himself from an overpowering dread of life, Munch proclaimed in his art a view of life in constant growth, an art characterized by a certain visionary and imaginary romanticism. He remained in Norway, with occasional trips abroad, living alone, becoming more and more indifferent to selling paintings, although the sale of prints was an important source of income especially in the 1920s. Thus his bequest of paintings to the City of Oslo, which will build a museum for them as soon as possible, was unique in its completeness. He was never freed from his inner dilemma, for he told his physician late in life: "The last part of my life has been an effort to stand up. My path has always been along an abyss."

The chief work of his maturity was a series of decorations for a new wing at the University of Oslo entitled "Life," depicting mankind and the eternal forces of nature and embodying a broad conception of education.

It was as a graphic artist that Munch probably gave fullest expression to his personality and to his artistic ability. Starting in 1894, he produced more than 714 different specimens in etching, lithography and woodcut.

In 1933, on the 70th anniversary of his birth, he received congratulations from all over Europe. In 1935 his work was included in the Munich exhibition of degenerate art, and in 1939 the German Government sold at auction in Oslo many of his paintings and graphic works. When he died of a heart attack in 1944, the Germans still occupied Norway.