

Edvard
MUNCH
LOVE · DEATH · LONELINESS

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| Press conference | 24 September 2015 10 am |
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| Venue | Propter Homines Hall |
| Curator | Dr Dr Dieter Buchhart |
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Edvard Munch. Love, Death, and Loneliness

25 September 2015 to 24 January 2016

Edvard Munch was one of the foremost protagonists of modernism. The exhibition at the Albertina, featuring around 100 of the Norwegian artist's most important works, will include icons of his art such as *The Scream*, *Madonna*, *The Kiss* and *Melancholy* as well as works exemplifying his experimental approaches to printed graphics.

Munch's paintings and graphic works number among the absolute highlights of turn-of-the-century art. The artist's life and work, full of existential crises and breaks yet guided by the utmost consistency, illustrate his intense preoccupation with loneliness, love, and death. As a forerunner and pioneer of expressionism, Munch poignantly and mercilessly described the ephemerality and indeed disappearance of the individual in the age of industrialisation.

The exhibition presents the central project of Munch's extensive oeuvre: *The Frieze of Life*. This complex of works comprises portrayals of life's diverse aspects and phases, with numerous motifs based on fertility and conception, the embryo, the tree of life, progress from childhood to youth and to attraction, the kiss, unification and subsequent separation, despair, the scream, old age, and death. Thus preoccupied, Munch developed illustrations of love, suffering, melancholy and death, that are rich in symbolism, and his manifold variations on themes such as fertility are supremely intense. Today, works from his *Frieze of Life* such as *The Scream*, *Madonna*, *The Kiss* and *Melancholy* are regarded as icons of the modern era.

As stated above, this presentation will place an additional focus on the artist's printed graphic works. What Dürer was to the Renaissance and Rembrandt was to the Baroque is embodied by Edvard Munch for the modern era: his lithographs, etchings, and woodcuts represent the unequivocal apex of 20th-century printed graphics.

With over 750 motifs and probably around 30,000 copies, printmaking played an important role in the artist's work: as early as the mid-1890s, Munch's earliest etchings and lithographs indicate his intense involvement with printing alongside his painted experiments. The artist initially chose themes that mirrored previous subjects and paintings, but thereafter went on to vary and modify them.

Munch's printing and hand-colouring experiments with hues, forms, and content pertained to all aspects of the works' production: from his accented employment of wood grain to the motifs' composition on the printing plate and the choice of paper, the application of ink, the printing process, his combining of various printing techniques, and even touch-up work on the finished prints – all of the steps in his working process speak to innovative approaches.

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Numerous unique prints testify to his tireless search as he explored experimental potentials and artistic production processes as well as themes and motifs regardless of historic genre boundaries, and as he proceeded to revolutionise the technique of the woodcut. Among the highlights of this show is the woodcut titled *Two Human Beings. The Lonely Ones*, which is the only print that Munch hand-coloured in oil paint.

The works to be shown in this exhibition come from one of the world's most important private collections of Edvard Munch's printed works. This exceptional collection contains numerous outstanding work series and variants of lithographs, etchings, and woodcuts that clearly speak to Munch's genius in the field. Two thirds of this collection - around 100 unique, high-calibre works - are to be generously made available to the Albertina for this exceptional presentation.

Curator: Dr Dr Dieter Buchhart

Kristiania Bohemia

From the early 1880s, Edvard Munch studies painting in Kristiania, Norway's young capital city, renamed to Oslo in 1925 after the country gained complete independence from Sweden. Munch is part of the so-called *Kristiania Bohemia*, a circle of artists and literati around the writer and anarchist Hans Jæger. In its banned programmatic manifesto, Jæger condemns the bourgeois lifestyle as well as any nationalism, unfolding instead a utopia of free cohabitation and social life. Jæger's aesthetic directive, "You shall write your own life," becomes the maxim of Munch's art. His early genre pieces show Bohemian life and the shady sides of bourgeois society. His portraits are highly perceptive analyses of individual inner worlds.

Throughout his life, Munch kept track of his experiences and thoughts in prose writings and poetry, taking his inspiration, apart from the *Kristiania Bohemia*, from the subjectivism of contemporary literature like that of Henrik Ibsen or his friend August Strindberg. His visual devices – deformation, the making-visible of technique, and dramaturgic condensation of motifs – are what Munch learns in Paris from the art of Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Toulouse-Lautrec.

Self-Portrait (with Skeleton Arm)

With unsparing intensity, Munch explores his own person in self-portraits throughout his lifetime. The portraits address his personal psychological condition, but also are allegories of more universal issues. *Self-Portrait (with Skeleton Arm)* is based on the type of the Symbolist self-portrait. Bodiless, Munch's face emerges from a surface dyed pitch-black with lithographic ink. Like on a memorial plate for a deceased person, Munch inscribes his name and the year on the top edge of the picture. The skeleton arm on the bottom frame also is a memento of the inevitability of death. The self-portrait is one of the earliest artistic responses to the then new discovery of Roentgen rays.

Frieze of Life

What he first depicted in portraits and genre scenes was soon condensed by Munch into universal symbols of the human condition. The innermost emotional spheres of different stages of human life are shown as timeless and independent of individual fate: the self-conscious insecurities of adolescence, loneliness and the impossibility of blissful love, the overwhelming power of sexuality, the intoxicating and ominous union of lovers in a kiss, the pain of separation, the experience of abandonment, the angst of the modern human, solitude and fear of death. Munch's art always revolves around one question: what is life?

From 1893 on, Munch starts ordering his works by theme and showing in nearly every exhibition a new version of a body of work which, in retrospect, he entitles *Frieze of Life* in 1918. Almost at the same time when Sigmund Freud develops psychoanalysis Munch explores the abysmal depths of the self in *Frieze of Life*.

Moonlight

“When we're standing like this – my eyes looking into your big eyes – in the pale moonlight – there are delicate hands weaving invisible threads.”

This literary note reflects Munch's first erotic experience with Milly Thaulow, a married woman, three years older than he, with whom he had a secret affair since 1885. The setting of this masterpiece entitled *Moonlight* presumably is in Åsgårdstrand where the two met. Just a few highly expressive motifs are used to create an erotic atmosphere: the gentle moonlight, the face desirously turned toward the viewer, the steady phallic reflection of the moonlight on the water, the woman's ambivalent posture between self-presentation and expectation.

The woman stands close to the viewer. The column of moonlight and the lit-up face are the luminous obverse sides of heavy figurative shadows. The mysterious, almost enveloping atmosphere under the mystic moonlight indicates with almost compelling might the place where no light gets in: the dark side of the soul.

The Symbolist Landscape

In Åsgårdstrand on the Kristiania Fjord, Munch first comes to experience nature as the mirror of the soul. In 1889 he gets a house in the seaside resort, for the next twenty years his summer refuge from the noise of the city. From there, the gaze ranges over the fjord.

After Munch has seen Symbolist art in Paris, he makes landscape the mystical projection surface of human moods and emotions.

Munch also integrates the natural grain of the wood panel in his landscapes. In different color variants, he changes lighting moods and with them the atmosphere of the landscapes. His seaside landscapes become symbols of isolation and solitude.

Stretching out across most *Frieze of Life* pictures is the curving line of the fjord, symbolizing Munch's view of the inevitable loneliness of the modern individual.

Madonna

Munch's *Madonna* combines two archetypal nineteenth-century art figures – *femme fatale* and *femme fragile* – in a single person. This mixed type is constituted through an interplay of stillness and movement, revealing and concealing, of the erotic, ecstatic reclining posture and a standing one, which makes the woman appear as something between dancer, mermaid, and Ophelia drowning.

What is shown is a woman giving herself over in the moment of conception. The skeletal embryo and the sperms on the frame indicate that even in the moment that life is created death is certain and inevitable. As a pseudo-religious icon of the Mary, Mother of Jesus, the picture also invokes a otherworldly context.

Munch always relates the subjects of love and life to death, pointing to the diametrical relation between the sexual act and death in the circle of life.

The subject was varied by Munch in several other works. For the artist, the open hair, like the sea, symbolizes unbridled sexuality and eroticism and the dangerous dependence of human will on the forces of Nature. "Surging behind almost all pictures of the *Frieze of Life* is the ever-rolling sea." (Edvard Munch)

Attraction

Munch's *Frieze of Life* begins with the alluring of the male. In *Attraction*, the woman's hair literally pulls him close to her. This reaches its climax in the union of the sexes in *The Kiss*. And yet, what Munch always bears in mind is that love must inevitably fail: "Like a star rising from the dark and meeting another star that flashes up for a moment only to disappear again in the dark, so man and woman meet each other. They are gliding along together. They light up in love, a brief flame—and disappear again in different directions." (Edvard Munch)

In the twilight, the man and the woman are brought close to the viewer. They face each other. Above them the dome of the sky. But unlike in a romantic starry night, the phallic reflection of the full moon – also readable as a symbol of the Passion – forces itself between the lovers. The woman's hair stands not only for her erotic attraction; it also ensnares the man. Somewhere between seeing and not seeing, the man's and the woman's shadowy and vague eyes portend that the relationship of the sexes is invariably doomed to fail. The pessimistic world view held by Munch sets the tone for the entire *Frieze of Life* series.

Two Human Beings. The Lonely Ones

For *Two Human Beings. The Lonely Ones*, Munch takes over almost one to one the motif of the solitary *Young Woman on the Beach*. Only now he juxtaposes the light female figure with a dark counterpart. Although the man and the woman are physically so close to one another, the inner distance between them is unbridgeable. They both remain alone in their rigid immovability.

The related subject *Two Women on the Shore* pictorializes the contrast of young and old age, virgin and widow, life and death in a similarly pessimistic and melancholic manner.

Different color versions, in part hand-colored, vary the mood of the relations between the protagonists and the surrounding landscape.

Munch uses always the same paper stencil for the moon, or sun, and its reflection, placing these motifs between the couple as a partition. The experimental combination of graphic and painterly element in one version reworked in oils shows that Munch breaks the boundaries traditionally drawn between the media of painting and printmaking. It is no coincidence therefore that many of his prints are unique copies made once by the artist in a specific color version.

The Girls on the Bridge

A group of girls are lingering on a landing bridge, waiting. The bridge is shown from different perspectives in several variants, shifting the dynamic of the picture. Also, Munch varies the number and age of the figures as well as the direction they look in. Thus they sometimes seem full of excitement and expectation, or looking for distraction at other times, lonely staring into the water or getting in eye contact with the viewer.

The female group is always in the center of the composition as a magic point of attraction, symbolizing promise and rejection, youth and awakening sexuality. Even in an everyday scene like this, the dramatically shifted landing bridge that cuts through the picture insinuates the threat that is inherent in love and attraction.

Munch does not say what or who the girls are waiting for. So the group's undetermined waiting, their expectation of the future just for the sake of it is turned into a universal allegory of youth.

Jealousy

"I know the mystic look of the jealous. It is a searching look, full of hatred and full of love." (Edvard Munch) Munch's representation of jealousy is probably based on the love triangle involving Stanisław Przybyszewski, his later wife Dagny Juel, and Edvard Munch in Berlin. The bold composition allegorizes the paralyzing feeling between fear, hate, and love. Munch even heightens the motif of the large foreground figure known from Japanese woodcuts and from the Impressionists. The weary-faced man in the black coat can only see through his inner eye what is going on behind his back.

Separation

For Munch, the erotic encounter of two people and mutual affection invariably forebode the failing of the relationship and, subsequently, breaking up: separation. The way he represents the relationship between the sexes, it is always the woman who takes the lead. While the man was ensnared and captured by the woman's hair in *Attraction*, it is she who leaves him again in *Separation*. And again, the open hair symbolizes erotic power. For the puritanical nineteenth century, flowing hair shown in public was synonymous with nudity and unbridled sexuality.

The man's face is turned toward the dark of the forest. He is introspective, what seems be mapped out for him is suffering. The woman's hair keeps him entangled with her. Munch notes, "I felt how invisible threads of her hair were still tightening around me – and then, when she disappeared across the sea I still felt it. It hurt where my heart was bleeding – because the threads would not break."

The little flower growing on the edge in one version, the "blood flower," as Munch calls it and puts it in the picture in *Jealousy*, is a symbol of the creative capability of the artist which – in the sense of Nietzsche – is flared up by his suffering from the world.

Vampire

For Munch, the theme of the vampire is ambivalent. About the demon preying on its victim he states, "The picture is a warning. It says that love goes hand in hand with death."

The work fits in with the *Frieze of Life* cycle. It also reflects Strindberg's pessimistic views of the impossibility of love, the destructiveness of sex, and the deadly menace that woman poses to man. The title *Vampire* is invented by Munch's Polish friend in Berlin, Stanisław Przybyszewski.

Munch also exhibits the picture under the title of *Love and Pain*.

The Kiss

"The whole ardor of the kiss, the terrible power of painful, languishing desire, the vanishing of self-awareness, the merging of two naked individualities: all this has been so genuinely felt here." (Stanisław Przybyszewski)

The Kiss is one of the central subjects of the *Frieze of Life*. As the culmination point of the whole theme of attraction, Munch's *Kiss* epitomizes the union of man and woman in a moment of utter devotion. But togetherness has a price: the loss of individuality. In the variants of the woodcut, the wood grain increasingly becomes the formative style element. At the highest level of their union, the couple merges into a single silhouette.

Master Prints

Munch's prints, particularly his woodcuts, are among the absolute highlights of his oeuvre. Putting the wood grain to pictorial use and doing many different color variants, Munch revolutionized the woodcut in the late nineteenth century, opening up radically new expressive possibilities which led to the flourishing of the Expressionist woodcut with Nolde, Kirchner, and Heckel. One characteristic of Munch's woodcuts is that he saws the block into pieces to put them together as color plates in different combinations like a jigsaw puzzle.

From 1986, Munch explores new possibilities of the technique in Paris in woodcuts entitled *Man's Head in Woman's Hair*, *Moonlight*, *Melancholy*, and *Angst*. He makes the wood grain visible, deliberately incorporates it in the printing, and experiments with the different effects of cold and warm colors on naturally textured surfaces. His early prints are mostly monochrome and are hand-colored only later. Dating the prints is difficult because Munch keeps printing new variants from the same woodblock over many years, reworks them, but provides no information about the total number of copies. Also, he mostly does not number the prints. His art is defined by a sense of experimentation and a step-by-step approach to a theme in different techniques.

The Late Self-Portrait

Due to his long-term alcoholism and a number of traumatic experiences in previous years Munch suffers a severe nervous breakdown in 1908. Mutilating his left hand through a self-inflicted gunshot wound in a falling out with his lover Tulla Larsen has once again made him aware of his own vulnerability. The self-portrait is created after his eight-month stay in a psychiatric clinic; the shadows of the past crisis are still visibly lingering. His face emerges from a darkness inscribed with the grain of the wood, his expression somewhere between empty and thoughtful. After his recovery and return to Norway in 1909, Munch continued his exploration of self-portrait until his old age. Due to his self-chosen retreat into his mansions on Kristiania Fjord, the elderly artist increasingly deals with loneliness and isolation.

Anxiety

No one has forsworn the visible more radically than Edvard Munch. Before him, there was hardly another artist who developed his pictorial works so much out of his own traumatic experience. This makes Munch, one of the main exponents of Symbolism, also an important precursor of Expressionism. Still today, *The Scream*, presumably Munch's most famous work, has something of the inescapability of an inner compulsion. The shapes and colors of this picture born out of absolute subjectivism crystallize personal experience into a Modernist icon: a picture of universal anxiety and fear of the unknown, of panic and horror.

Staggering on a bridge that extends out of the picture in extreme perspective is a genderless human being. Clasp long and slender hands against a skull-like head, this human lets out a desperate scream under a black-veined evening sky. Like no other picture, *The Scream* has come to be the symbol of the alienation of the human, from nature, from society, from themselves – a picture of isolation and the loss of individual identity. Like Gauguin and Van Gogh, Edvard Munch has become a protagonist of that Modernist movement that creates pictures out of radical subjectivism.

Melancholy

The love triangle between his friend, the art critic Jappe Nilssen, Christian Krohg's wife-to-be Oda Lasson, and Munch's teacher, Christian Krohg, which Munch witnesses in the summer of 1891 in Åsgårdstrand, inspired his representation of the slumped sitting figure of the devastated loser Nilssen. A variation of the same theme shows a woman sitting on the beach in a virtually allegoric posture. The compelling perspective of the figure moved up close to the viewer as well as the color symbolism, simplification and stylization were reason enough for Christian Krohg to celebrate the woodcut entitled *Melancholy* as the most significant work of Symbolism: "Munch is the only one who dares to bend nature and the human under a single mood." The curvilinear fluidization of the shoreline turns the landscape into a picture of desolation. It is against these gently vibrant landscapes of the soul that all the themes of the *Frieze of Life* unfold. They are the consistent pictorial motif that brackets the individual pictures of this vast cycle together.

The Sick Child

Pictures of illness and death were popular subjects in the second half of the nineteenth century. Translating Christian themes like the suffering and death of Christ to the privacy of the family as the pillar of bourgeois society offered the consolation of self-identification to a family living under a constant threat of sickness and death.

Edvard Munch was confronted with sickness, death, and grief from his early childhood years. When he was five years old, his mother died of tuberculosis; at thirteen, he also fell ill with the disease. Later, he graphically wrote, “A new coughing fit – a new handkerchief – blood dyeing the whole cloth – Jesus, help me, I’m dying – I must not die now.” In the following year, he witnessed the death throes of his only fifteen-year-old sister Sophie: “It was evening – Sophie was lying in bed, red-faced and hot, her eyes gleaming and flitting around the room restlessly, she was delirious – Dear sweet Edvard, take this off me, it hurts me so! Won’t you? – She looked at him, frantically. – See the visage over there? That is Death.” (Edvard Munch)

Biography of the artist

- 1863** Edvard Munch is born on December 12 in Løten, Norway. Soon after, the family moves to the capital city Kristiania (since 1925 Oslo), where Munch's father works as a doctor for the poor.
- 1868** When Munch is five years old, his mother dies of tuberculosis. A few years later, his eldest sister Sophie also succumbs to the disease. His father seeks solace in Puritan religion. The household is taken over by Munch's aunt who encourages the boy's early drawing attempts.
- 1881** Munch decides to become a painter. He drops out of the Royal Technical College and instead briefly attends the Royal School of Art and Drawing. He shares a studio with other young painters and joins the circle of the *Kristiania Bohemia* around poet and anarchist Hans Jæger. The Naturalists Christian Krohg and Frits Thaulow become his teachers.
- 1885** Back in Norway after a three-week visit to Paris, he falls in love with Milly Thaulow, a married woman, a couple of years older than he.
- 1889–1892** Munch rents a small house in Åsgårdstrand on the Kristiania Fjord. For the next twenty years to come, many of his main works are created there in the summers. Munch goes to Paris for three years. The works of the Impressionists and Pointillists, of Vincent van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Paul Gauguin have formative influence on him.
- News of the sudden death of his father in November 1889 plunges Munch into a deep emotional crisis. He moves to Saint-Cloud near Paris, where the Danish poet Emanuel Goldstein introduces him to Symbolism. Munch develops the idea of conceptualizing his work as a *Frieze of Life*: pictures and symbol figures which in their entirety cover a range of existential themes such as love, fear and death, jealousy and separation, loneliness and melancholy. He is going to continue working on the *Frieze of Life* until the end of his life.
- 1892–1897** Munch's 1892 exhibition at the Union of Berlin Artists causes a scandal, making him famous in Germany overnight. He relocates to Berlin. In his three years in Berlin and later in Paris he creates the first etchings, color lithographs, and woodcuts on the central *Frieze of Life* themes. He is close friends with August Strindberg and the Polish poet Stanisław Przybyszewski.
- 1898–1908** Back in Norway, Munch starts a relationship with Tulla Larsen, daughter of a well-off wine merchant, but refuses to marry her as would have befitted her status. During a violent falling out between them, a shot is fired from Munch's revolver that lacerates one finger of the artist's left hand.
- After that, Munch keeps relocating back and forth between Norway and Berlin. Due to his long-term alcoholism and the traumatic experiences of the past few years, he suffers a severe nervous breakdown. In 1908, he spends eight months in a psychiatric clinic in Copenhagen.

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- From 1909** Munch permanently returns to Norway where he buys several houses on the Kristiania Fjord, including the Ekely estate near the capital city which becomes his last permanent home.
- 1937** Munch's art is defamed as "degenerate" by the Nazis and removed from all German museums.
- 1944** Edvard Munch dies of pneumonia on January 23 at the age of 80.

Supporting program

ORF Long Night of Museums | An Explosion of Colour!

3 October 2015 | 6 pm to 1 am

At the Albertina, the Long Night of Museums will be given over entirely to Edvard Munch and what is probably his most famous work, *The Scream*. The installation *Explosion of Colour!* will invite guests to experiment with the intensity and tone of their own screams by translating them into colour and light, which will be projected onto the walls of the museum's entrance hall. The resulting visual spectacle will also bring to mind the dreamy northern lights of Edvard Munch's Norwegian homeland.

The Albertina's guests this evening will also be treated to Norwegian culinary and musical impressions: The frequently dark works by this master of despair will inspire a musical performance featuring that quintessentially Norwegian folk instrument, the Hardanger fiddle. And to round out the experience, there will be Norwegian snacks served outside on the bastion.

CHILDREN'S PROGRAMME

for children aged 5 to 12 | 6 pm to 8 pm

In the *Format Werk* art studio, kids will have the opportunity to experiment with printing techniques and create a Norwegian sweater pattern. Furthermore, they'll develop motifs based on feelings and moods in Munch's works.

Tickets available starting immediately at the Albertina (regular EUR 13, reduced EUR 11)

A collaborative project with CIRCUS LUMINESZENZ

Talk | The Artists and the Final Things in Life

Klaus Albrecht Schröder speaks with Robert Menasse

18 November 2015 | 6.30 pm | Albertina, Hall of the Muses

Love, death, and loneliness are central themes in the oeuvre of Edvard Munch. And it is to this influential pioneer of modernism that the Albertina is dedicating its major autumn exhibition of 2015. This presentation encompasses around 100 of the Norwegian artist's most important works, including such icons such as *The Scream*, *Madonna*, *The Kiss*, and *Melancholy*.

Starting from the themes that so moved Munch, author Robert Menasse and Albertina director Klaus Albrecht Schröder will talk about those existential issues of life and zero in on how they are currently being addressed by art and literature.

In cooperation with VIENNA ART WEEK