

MoMA EXHIBITION EXPLORES EDVARD MUNCH'S COMPELLING ARTISTIC ACHIEVEMENT, SURVEYING HIS CAREER IN ITS ENTIRETY

Major Retrospective Is the First to Be Held in An American Museum in Three Decades

Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul

February 19—May 8, 2006

The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Gallery, sixth floor

New York, February 14, 2006—*Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul* is the first retrospective devoted to the work of Edvard Munch (1863–1944)—the internationally renowned Norwegian painter, printmaker, and draftsman—to be held in an American museum in almost three decades. Featuring 87 paintings and 50 works on paper, it showcases Munch's artistic achievement in its true richness and diversity, surveying his career in its entirety, from 1880 to 1944. Beginning with the artist's early portraits and genre scenes, the exhibition charts Munch's move away from Norwegian naturalism and towards an exploration of modern existential experience. Following each phase of his career, the exhibition shows Munch's struggle to translate personal trauma into universal terms and, in the process, to comprehend the fundamental components of human existence: birth, love, and death. The exhibition is organized by Kynaston McShine, Chief Curator at Large, The Museum of Modern Art. MoMA is the only venue for the exhibition, which will be on view in The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Gallery on the sixth floor from February 19 to May 8, 2006.

Munch's primary source of inspiration was his own life, which was marked by heartbreak, physical illness, emotional instability, and the deaths of some of his closest family members. Mr. McShine says, "The narrative of Munch's life and work, rooted in the nineteenth century, somehow transforms, through his own will and force, his personal experiences into an extraordinary examination of what he terms 'the modern life of the soul'—birth, innocence, love, sexual passion, melancholy, anger, jealousy, despair, anxiety, illness, and death."

Munch was born in 1863 on a farm outside Kristiania (now Oslo). His mother died in 1869, followed by his sister Sophie, in 1877, both from tuberculosis. As a young artist in the 1880s, Munch was an eager participant in the bohemian intellectual circles of Kristiania. He was inspired by the art of the Norwegian naturalists, including his mentor, Christian Krohg, and he worked in the academic traditions of portraiture and genre painting. Munch quickly looked for more evocative aesthetic models and began to develop his unique, expressionistic style while in Paris and Berlin in the 1890s and early 1900s. In Paris, Munch was introduced to Symbolist philosophy and aesthetics and was inspired by the innovation of such artists as Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin. Later, in Berlin, he became a part of an avant-garde group involved in various

types of mysticism and the occult. Munch was an active member of a vital artistic community, and, in addition to painting and creating graphic work, he illustrated books of poetry and designed programs and sets for the stage.

Many of Munch's best-known motifs are featured in his *Frieze of Life*, a cycle of pictures made up mostly of his work from his time in Paris and Berlin. Focusing on the themes of love, angst, and death, this cycle drew largely on Munch's personal memories, including the deaths of his mother and sister, as well as his doomed love affair with Milly Thaulow, a married woman. The *Frieze of Life* was first shown at an exhibition in Berlin in 1902, with *Summer Night's Dream (The Voice)* (1893) opening the narrative. Many of his other motifs are included in this cycle, as seen in *The Kiss* (1897), *Vampire* (1893-94), and *Madonna* (1894-95).

In *Despair* (1891-92), which Munch referred to as "the first *Scream*," he depicts the experience of seeing the sky turn "a bloody red" while walking on Ljabroveien, the road between Kristiania and Nordstrand. Capturing the incident as it actually happened, the painting shows Munch's featureless alter ego leaning over a railing while his two companions continue along the path. Later, in *The Scream*, the melancholic figure of *Despair* is transformed into an amorphous creature personifying terror. In this exhibition, two lithographs of *The Scream* will be shown, both from 1895.

The exhibition includes the newly discovered *Young Girl with Three Male Heads* (c. 1898), which was long hidden behind another canvas. The painting was found in the summer of 2004 when conservators from the Kunsthalle Bremen in Germany removed *The Dead Mother* from its frame. *Young Girl with Three Male Heads*, on view for the first time in the United States, depicts an adolescent girl seated protectively with her legs and arms pressed closely together while three male heads, which represent the girl's inner fears, hover above her. The highly abstracted heads are vaguely recognizable as Munch on the left, Krohg in the center, and the Norwegian playwright Gunnar Heiberg on the right.

In *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900), the last of the artist's contributions to the *Frieze*, Munch documents the transition from burgeoning love to inevitable death by means of three female figures: a blonde innocent touching a flower; a dancing, red-haired temptress; and a mourning woman dressed in black. Death is also addressed in the monumental painting *Death in the Sick Room* (1893), which depicts Munch's dying sister amidst a crowd of mourners including himself, his father, brother, and sisters. "The mutable *Frieze of Life*, along with Munch's many other related paintings and the large body of graphic work, assure him an essential and even fundamental place in the canon of modern art," says Mr. McShine.

Prints played an essential role in Munch's oeuvre. He realized that the production of multiple impressions of his important themes enabled them to be widely disseminated, communicating his philosophy to many people. He reworked many of his paintings into graphic form—lithographs, woodcuts, and etchings—using the same motifs made famous in the *Frieze of Life*. Instead of copying the paintings, Munch derived fresh interpretations of his motifs,

transforming them into new creations. For instance, *The Sick Child* theme, which depicts the illness of his sister, was one that he obsessively reworked in paintings, etchings, and colored lithographs. He also produced graphic versions of *The Scream*, *The Kiss*, and *Madonna*, among many others.

After several years of travel and illness, many spent in and out of sanatoriums, Munch returned to Norway in 1909. By this time, he was well established and received many important commissions. He moved away from the *Frieze* and into more traditional imagery such as portraits and landscapes, including *Spring in the Elm Forest III* (1923), while never abandoning his interest in the human psyche.

While Munch's self-portraits punctuate his entire career, they feature more prominently from the early 1900s until his death. Mr. McShine says that Munch's self-portraits "afford a key avenue through his work, together making up a history of self-perception matched in completeness by few other artists outside Rembrandt." Throughout his career, Munch intimately traces his every psychological and physical shift. In his early portraits, Munch portrays himself as a worldly bohemian; in his later ones, he becomes a private, insulated modern existential man.

Munch's first *Self-Portrait* (1881-82), one of his earliest surviving paintings, was painted when he was around 18 years old. *Self-Portrait (with Skeleton Arm)* (1895) shows the artist's disembodied head floating on a black background with a skeletal arm at the bottom edge. His name at the top evokes a tombstone, yet Munch created this lithograph when he was just 31 years old. In one of Munch's most violent self-representations, *Self-Portrait in Hell* (1903), he shows himself engulfed by the flames of hell with a dark, threatening shadow behind him. In this painting, Munch seems to be sentencing himself to eternal damnation.

Self-Portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed (1940-42), his last major self-portrait, which was painted when he was in his early seventies, shows the artist in his bedroom. Behind him is his studio, with his paintings and sketches on the walls. To his left is a clock without hands, a reference to a scene from Goethe's play *Faust* in which Mephistopheles announces Faust's death with the words, "The clock has stopped"; to Munch's right, an empty bed awaits him. Munch died in 1944, having spent his final years in relative seclusion.

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PUBLICATION:

The exhibition is accompanied by a major publication on the artist that features a lavish selection of color plates; an introduction by the exhibition's curator, Kynaston McShine; essays by scholars Patricia G. Berman, Reinhold Heller, Elizabeth Prelinger, and Tina Yarborough; and in-depth

documentation of Munch's art and career. Hardcover: \$60.00. Paperback: \$40.00. The book is published by The Museum of Modern Art and sold in MoMA Stores and online at www.momastore.org. It is available to the trade through Distributed Art Publishers (D.A.P.) in the United States and Canada and through Thames & Hudson internationally.

ACOUSTIGUIDE:

A free Acoustiguide program featuring two eminent Edvard Munch scholars—Professor Patricia G. Berman of Wellesley College, and Professor Reinhold Heller of the University of Chicago—accompanies the exhibition. The audio program also features many passages written by Munch throughout his life. This tour, along with all the other MoMA Audio tours, is accessible on one listening device. It is also available for download on www.moma.org/audio and on the MoMA Audio podcast on iTunes after the exhibition opens to the public on February 19. MoMA Audio is available free of charge courtesy of Bloomberg.

PROGRAMS:

Views of Edvard Munch

On April 26 at 6:00 p.m., experts present lectures on special topics related to the exhibition. Speakers include Patricia G. Berman, Professor of Art, Wellesley College; Richard Brilliant, Professor of Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University; and Reinhold Heller, Professor and Chair, Department of Art History, University of Chicago.

Edvard Munch and His Time

From March 10 to April 19, MoMA's Department of Film and Media presents a small survey of films by and on Munch, as well as films based on the writings of Munch's equally famous fellow Scandinavian iconoclasts Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Knut Hamsun. Organized by Jytte Jensen, Curator, Department of Film and Media, with grateful acknowledgment to the Norwegian Film Institute.

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Press Contact: pressoffice@moma.org