

Edvard Munch : [brochure] the modern life of the soul : the Museum of Modern Art, February 19-May 8, 2006

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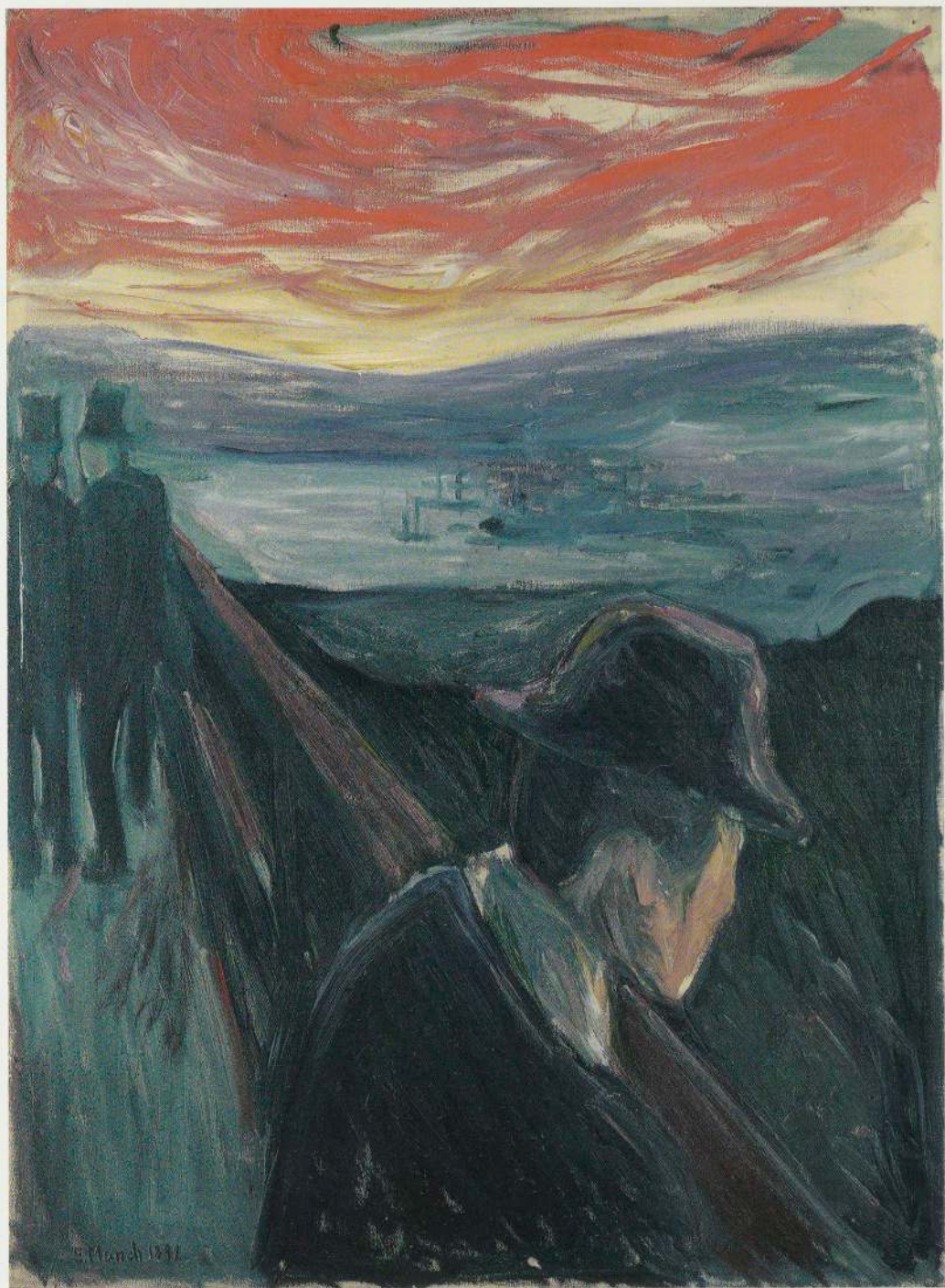
The Museum of Modern Art

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Edvard Munch THE MODERN LIFE OF THE SOUL



The Museum of Modern Art February 19–May 8, 2006

EDVARD MUNCH, the internationally renowned Norwegian painter, printmaker, and draftsman, sought to translate personal trauma into universal terms and, in the process, to comprehend the fundamental components of human existence: birth, love, and death. Munch's primary source of inspiration was his own life history, which was marked by romantic suffering, illness, and the death of some of his closest family members. But Munch was also a product of his time, inspired first by the bohemian community of his native Kristiania (now Oslo) and later by his association with the Parisian and Berlin avant-gardes. In the end, painting became a kind of religious endeavor for Munch, a means through which he hoped to "understand the meaning of life [and] help others gain an understanding of their lives."

Munch was born in 1863, on a farm outside of Kristiania. His early work, consisting primarily of family portraits, was inspired by the art of the Norwegian naturalist painters, among them his mentor Christian Krohg. However, Munch quickly began to look for more evocative aesthetic models. First in Paris and then in Berlin, in the 1890s and early 1900s, Munch developed his unique style. The paintings from this period comprise Munch's *Frieze of Life*, a cycle of pictures that includes many of his best-known motifs. The *Frieze* draws largely on Munch's personal memories, including the devastating losses of his mother, Laura Cathrine Bjørstad Munch, and favorite sister Sophie to consumption, in 1868 and 1877, respectively, as well as his doomed love affair with Milly Thaulow, a married woman. After several years of travel and illness, many spent in and out of sanatoriums, Munch returned to Norway in 1909, where he remained—barring brief trips—for the rest of his life. He sought solace in his native surroundings, turning to the Norwegian countryside and its inhabitants as subject matter for his art. However, he never abandoned his interest in the human psyche, as evidenced by a late series of penetrating self-portraits. Munch lived his final years in relative seclusion and died at his estate at Ekely, Norway, in 1944.



Karl Johan Street in Rain, 1891. Oil on canvas, 14 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (38 x 55 cm). Munch Museum, Oslo. Photo: © Munch Museum (Andersen/de Jong)

Karl Johan Street in Rain, which depicts Kristiania's main thoroughfare, was one of five paintings of this street that Munch painted during the late 1880s and early 1890s. The street served as a kind of artistic template for Munch during a period in which he was still working out his mature aesthetic and afforded him the chance to experiment with different vantage points and artistic styles. This particular painting shows Munch working in an impressionist technique, modeled on the art of Gustave Caillebotte and Edouard Manet, to which he had recently been introduced in Paris. The people in the background have been reduced to delicate strokes of paint while the blurred horse and carriage in the foreground expertly convey the sense of motion.

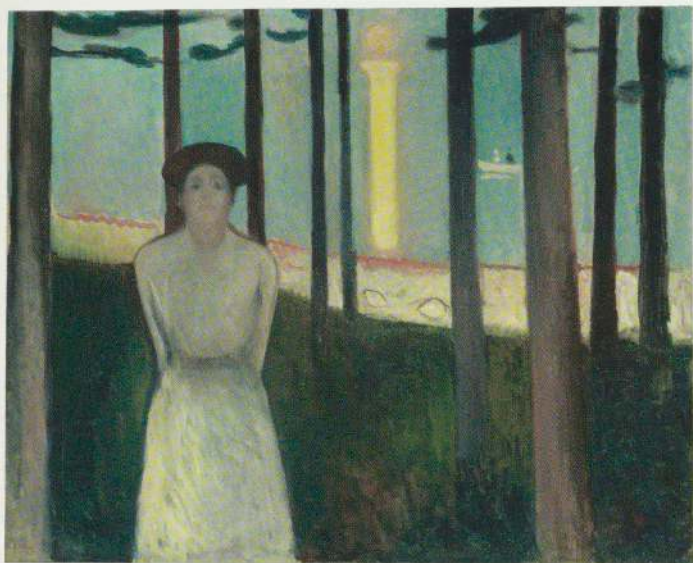
Within a year, Munch rejected this early observational approach for a psychologically resonant style

that was uniquely his own. Painted only a year after *Karl Johan Street in Rain*, *Evening on Karl Johan Street* shows the Kristiania thoroughfare in an entirely different light. The focus here is less the street itself than its ghostlike inhabitants, a catatonic mass that, dramatically cropped and viewed close-up, appears to press upon the surface of the canvas in a kind of unstoppable forward motion. Like many of his images from this period, the painting is based on Munch's personal history—specifically, on his agonized roamings through the streets of Kristiania in search of his former lover Milly Thaulow. A woman with a bonnet and brooch in the immediate foreground vaguely evokes the artist's written descriptions of his lover, while a man in a top hat to her left may be her husband. Alone on the street is a fragile, shadowy figure, his back turned, typically taken for Munch himself. There is, above all, a terrifying unreality to the scene that is heightened by the contrasting color scheme of deep violets and acid yellows, and by the figures' masklike faces. With this work, Munch officially abandoned the security of external reality for the anxiety of internal exploration.

Evening on Karl Johan Street would ultimately form part of Munch's *Frieze of Life*, a somewhat changeable series of works developed in the 1890s that progresses, roughly, from the dawn of love through love's maturity, jealousy, and anxiety to death. At Munch's 1902 *Frieze of Life* exhibition in Berlin, *Summer Night's Dream (The Voice)* opened the narrative. Munch painted *Summer Night's Dream* in the summer of 1893, in the coastal town of Åsgårdstrand; it depicts the nearby Borre forest, famous for its Viking graves.



Evening on Karl Johan Street, 1892. Oil on canvas, 33 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 47 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (85.5 x 121 cm). Bergen Art Museum, Rasmus Meyers Collection. Photo: Geir S. Johannessen, Fotograf Henriksen a.s.



Summer Night's Dream (The Voice), 1893. Oil on canvas, 34 7/8 x 42 1/2" (87.9 x 108 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Ernest Wadsworth Longfellow Fund, 59.301. Photo: © 2006, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The painting has been described as a puberty motif, that is, as an image of the burgeoning love and sexual arousal that precedes love's consummation. The woman's innocent demeanor and diaphanous white dress contrast with her dark, penetrating eyes to create a mood of erotic tension, while the tall, dark pine trees and golden shaft of moonlight contribute to the seductive atmosphere. Munch observed in a related text: "Standing like this—and my eyes looking into your large eyes—in the pale moonlight—do you know—then fine hands tie invisible threads—which are wound around my heart—leading from my eyes—through your large, dark eyes—into your heart—your eyes are so large now—They are so close to me—They are like two huge dark skies."



Towards the Forest I, 1897. Woodcut, comp.: 20 7/8 x 25 3/8" (51.9 x 65.1 cm). Munch Museum, Oslo. Photo: © Munch Museum (Andersen/de Jong)

Munch's text touches on a theme that is crucial to his work in general: namely, humanity's inseparability from the mysteries of nature. *Mermaid* and the tender print *Towards the Forest I* offer variations on this theme. Munch's first decorative assignment, *Mermaid* was commissioned as a trapezoidal wall panel for the home of the Norwegian art collector Axel Heiberg. While Munch never showed this painting together with the *Frieze of Life*, he undoubtedly conceived of the motif in relation to the Love paintings. Part sea creature, part human, Munch's mermaid is eroticism in nature personified. Reaching out to the Åsgårdstrand shore while her fin encircles the moon's reflection, she is both within and without this world; half real, half mirage. Sometime after the painting was removed from Heiberg's home, it was altered to a rectangle. The Philadelphia Museum of Art has since restored the painting to its original, trapezoidal format, which is preserved in The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition.

Towards the Forest I, a subject that exists in print form only, exemplifies Munch's mastery of the woodcut technique. Positioned with their backs to the viewer and arms clasped about each other's waists, Munch's man and woman are enclosed in one fluid contour, which, in certain versions, the artist has literally cut out of the surrounding landscape. In this way, Munch emphasizes the couple's solidarity in the face of the unknown. The forest stands before them, tall and dark but not impenetrable. On the contrary, as the trees blend into the ground, which, in turn, fuses with the figures' feet, man and woman appear as one with the natural world.



Mermaid, 1896. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2" x 10' 6" (103 x 320 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Partial and promised gift of Barbara B. and Theodore R. Aronson, 2003. Photo: Amelia Walchli, Philadelphia Museum of Art

Harmonious union is fleeting, however, and Munch's Åsgårdstrand motifs are frequently infused with a sense of danger. In *The Storm*, figures stand huddled together in front of Åsgårdstrand's Grand Hotel, while a ghostlike woman in white, both virginal and sacrificial in appearance, glides alone toward the water's edge. The figures hold their hands to their heads as if attempting to shut out the elements, whose force is evidenced by the woman's blowing scarf (or wisps of hair) and by the bending tree. A house looms menacingly in the background, its yellow windows aglow like watchful, predatory eyes.

The equally mysterious *Young Girl with Three Male Heads* was discovered for the first time in the summer of 2004 behind Munch's painting *The Dead Mother* (1899–1900; Kunsthalle Bremen). Museum conservators had removed *The Dead Mother* from its frame for the first time in twenty years as part of a catalogue raisonné project organized by the Munch Museum. Upon examining the back of the painting, the conservators noticed color traces on a second canvas,

previously considered to be a support canvas for *The Dead Mother*. An X-ray showed obvious traces of a multigure composition, and when the upper canvas was removed, a finished painting was revealed. Like *Summer Night's Dream (The Voice)*, the painting can be described as a puberty motif, with its adolescent protagonist seated protectively, her legs and arms pressed closely together. Gone, however, is the innocent sexual awakening suggested by *Summer Night's Dream*. Instead, the girl's inner fears and external demons materialize in the form of three male heads that leer and hover masklike before her. While highly abstract, the heads are vaguely recognizable: at left is Munch himself; at center is Munch's mentor Christian Krohg; and, at right, is the Norwegian playwright Gunnar Heiberg.

Love, anxiety, and death; these are the *Frieze's* principal themes. Indeed, as early as 1891, Munch began writing the texts that he would eventually visualize in *The Scream*, the artist's masterpiece of contemporary spiritual angst. The painting originates from an actual



The Storm, 1893. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4" x 51 1/2" (91.8 x 130.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. Irgens Larsen and acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Funds. Photo: Mali Olatunji, Department of Imaging Services, The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Young Girl with Three Male Heads, c.1898. Oil on canvas, 35 ⁷/₈ x 39 ³/₄" (90 x 100 cm). Kunsthalle Bremen-Der Kunstverein in Bremen.
Photo: Karen Blindow

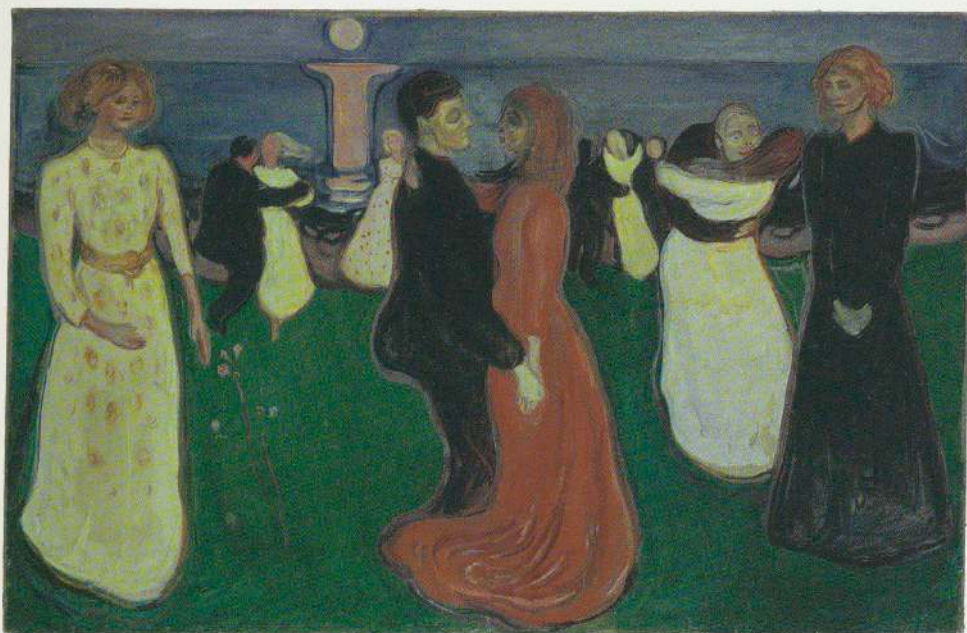
experience of Munch's that occurred some years earlier, on Ljabroveien, the road between Kristiania and Nordstrand: "I was walking along the road with two friends. The sun set. I felt a tinge of melancholy. Suddenly the sky became a bloody red. I stopped, leaned against the railing, dead tired, and I looked at the flaming clouds that hung like blood and a sword over the blue-black fjord and city. My friends walked on. I stood there, trembling with fright. And I felt a loud, unending scream piercing nature." The first painting in which Munch tried to capture this incident

was *Despair*, a work that he later referred to as "the first *Scream*." It shows the artist's featureless alter ego leaning over a railing while his two companions continue along the path. The painting is executed in somber shades of blue broken only by the flaming red of the sky. In *The Scream*, Munch turned the central figure toward the viewer, transforming a melancholic image into a confrontational one. Here the figure is no longer a man but an amorphous creature personifying terror, a figure caught up in the swirling vortex of the painting as though literally overwhelmed by an unspeakable horror.

The centrality of death in the artist's narrative is played out by the placement of his imposing *Death in the Sick Room* at the entrance to his 1893 Berlin exhibition. Like many of Munch's *Death* paintings, this work impresses by what it does not or cannot say. Hidden in a voluminous black chair with its back toward the viewer, Munch's dying sister Sophie is nearly lost amid the crowd of mourners that includes Munch's father, Dr. Christian Munch, and aunt, Karen Bjølstad, in the background, his brother Andreas at the door, and a unified group consisting of Munch and his sisters Inger (standing) and Laura (seated) in the foreground. Munch's face is blanched and featureless as he stares into the equally voided center that serves as the painting's focal point. In all versions of this painting, Munch's family members are depicted at the age they were at the time of the painting rather than the age they were when the event took place. Like



Death in the Sick Room, 1893. Oil on canvas, 53 ¹/₈ x 63" (136 x 160 cm). Munch Museum, Oslo.
Photo: © Munch Museum (Andersen/de Jong)



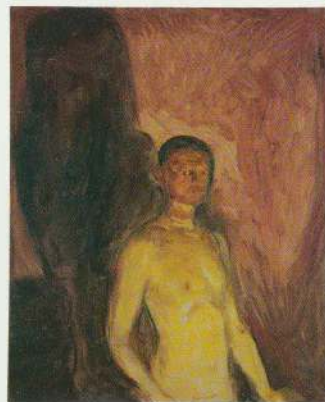
The Dance of Life, 1899–1900. Oil on canvas, 49 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 75 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (125 x 191 cm). The National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design/ National Gallery, Oslo. Photo: J. Lathion © National Gallery, Norway

characters in a reenactment, Munch's family appears to have gathered together to recreate this painful event, all the while assuming a certain distance from their grief's original urgency.

The Dance of Life, which Munch began while recuperating from influenza and alcohol abuse at a Norwegian sanatorium, was one of the artist's last contributions to the *Frieze of Life*, and also one of his most cherished. He saw the painting as encapsulating the cycle's central themes: as he put it, "the awakening of love, the dance of life, love at its peak, the fading of love, and finally death." In the painting Munch documents the transition from burgeoning love to death by means of three female figures: the golden-haired innocent reaching out to touch a sprouting flower at the left-hand side of the composition; a red-haired woman—Munch's erotic temptress—dancing in the center with a sober man, who bears Munch's features; and, at the far right, a woman dressed in the black of mourning, her hands tightly clasped against her body as if she has left the dance once and for all. In the background a crowd whirls round and round. The entire scene takes place on the Åsgårdstrand shore against the sensual glow of the Nordic summer night.

By the early 1900s Munch was finally well established as an artist, and, besieged by important commissions, he began to move away from the *Frieze* and into more traditional terrain. Portraits, landscapes, and studio pictures increasingly came to preoccupy him. Still, Munch

was unable to eradicate his internal doubts, and, in the numerous self-portraits that he produced from the early 1900s until the end of his career, his continuing restlessness is manifest. *Self-Portrait in Hell*, generally dated to the summer of 1903, is one of Munch's most violent self-representations. Here, the artist stands literally enveloped in the fires of hell, his body a sickly yellow against the bright orange flames that have consumed his head and that reach down over his chest. Behind him, a dark shadow like a thick pillar of smoke threatens to engulf him. Munch's head is a dark red, as in some of his outdoor scenes, where the red indicates the salutary effect of the sun on the human body. However, in Munch's



Self-Portrait in Hell, 1903. Oil on canvas, 32 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 26" (82 x 66 cm). Munch Museum, Oslo. Photo: © Munch Museum (Andersen/ de Jong)



Self-Portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed, 1940–42. Oil on canvas, 58 7/8 x 47 1/8" (149.5 x 120.5 cm). Munch Museum, Oslo. Photo: © Munch Museum (Andersen/de Jong)

self-portrait, vitality is reconfigured as its precise opposite: eternal damnation.

Some of Munch's finest self-portraits come from his years in Ekely, Norway, when he was alone and in failing health. In *Self-Portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed*, Munch's last major self-portrait, the artist stands pale yet resolute just inside his bedroom at Ekely. Behind him, his studio glows a bright yellow, its walls lined with his paintings and sketches. Munch places himself between his studio and his bedroom—between his public and private realms, or, between artistic immortality and human transience. The artist's tall, thin figure is echoed by the nude female figure to his left, and, at the opposite extreme, by the standing clock without hands to his right, a reference to the scene in Goethe's *Faust* in which Mephistopheles announces Faust's death with the words, "The clock has stopped." Behind and to the right of the canvas, Munch's empty bed awaits. Facing the viewer, his hands at his sides, Munch is a lonely but brave figure, aware that death is inevitable.

THIS EXHIBITION WAS ORGANIZED BY KYNASTON MCSHINE, CHIEF CURATOR AT LARGE, THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

FRONT COVER: *Despair*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 26 1/2" (92 x 67 cm). Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm. Photo: Tord Lund

MUNCH WORKS: © 2006 The Munch Museum/The Munch-Ellingsen Group/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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PUBLICATION

Edited with an Introduction by Kynaston McShine.

Essays by Patricia G. Berman, Reinhold Heller, Elizabeth Prelinger, and Tina Yarborough.

Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul explores Munch's artistic achievement in all its richness and diversity, surveying his career in its entire developmental range from 1880 to 1944. The comprehensive volume features a lavish selection of color plates, an introduction by Kynaston McShine, Chief Curator at Large at The Museum of Modern Art, and essays by Munch scholars Patricia G. Berman, Reinhold Heller, Elizabeth Prelinger, and Tina Yarborough, as well as in-depth documentation of Munch's art and career. Placing Munch in his historical context, this book reveals Munch's unique response to the modern existential condition. 9 x 12"; 256 pages; 250 illustrations: 207 in color; 43 in black and white; 455. Hardcover \$60; members \$54; 456. Paperback \$40; members \$36.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

VIEWS OF EDVARD MUNCH

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 26, 6:00 P.M., TITUS THEATER 2

Scholars discuss topics related to the exhibition *Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul*. Speakers include Patricia G. Berman, Professor of Art, Wellesley College; Richard Brilliant, Professor Emeritus of Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University; and Reinhold Heller, Professor and Chair, Department of Art History, University of Chicago.

Tickets are \$10, \$8 for members, \$5 for students and seniors, and can be purchased in the Main Lobby of the Museum, and at the Film and Media Desk. Tickets are also available online at www.moma.org/thinkmodern

MoMA AUDIO: SPECIAL EXHIBITIONS

Scholars Patricia G. Berman and Reinhold Heller discuss paintings and prints in *Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul*. Excerpts from the artist's journals complement their presentation.

The exhibition is made possible by Debra and Leon Black.

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