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The Masterworks of EDVARD MUNCH

Introduction by John Elderfield

Commentaries by Arne Eggum

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART · NEW YORK

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Self-Portrait. 1886
Oil on canvas. 33 x 24.5 cm (13 x 9⅝ in)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo

Self-Portrait, 1886, as I see it, is a portrait of the creator of the famous *The Sick Child.* It is the portrait of an artist who *knows* that he has come into a domain that is wholly his own. Technically speaking, it is in its way just as interesting as *The Sick Child.* The face was modeled with a spatula in the same way that a sculptor works with a clay model. To highlight the most expressive parts of the face, Munch scraped away the paint around it all the way down to the canvas. The structure and color of the canvas play a part in the general impression of the picture. Munch made the background around the head look blurred and utilized a technique involving washing the areas with a diluent. From a coloristic viewpoint the picture is concentrated and extremely expressive through the play of subdued red and green hues. The green in the eyes and the red in his lips and around his right eye have been extremely well placed from a coloristic point of view. Thus Munch, in his own portrait, stressed the sickliness that he created in *The Sick Child,* but the sickliness in the portrait borders on artistic oversensitivity. In this painting Munch laid himself bare in a way that seems to imply an artistic program. When he painted this self-portrait, he still had impressions of the Louvre and of Rembrandt in his retina. There is reason to believe that the negative reception accorded *The Sick Child* made Munch fail to pursue this expressive aspect of his talent during the following years.

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Inger on the Beach. 1889
Oil on canvas. 126.4 x 161.7 cm (49¾ x 63¾ in)
Rasmus Meyers Samlinger

The scene is from Åsgårdstrand, where Munch rented a house for the first time this summer. His sister Inger is sitting on some rocks not far from the house Munch later bought in 1898. With this picture, painted between nine and eleven o'clock at night, Munch captured the light summer night over the fjord by Åsgårdstrand. This motif was to be a recurring theme in his art. The picture of Inger on the beach was exhibited for the first time at the Autumn Exhibition in 1889 under the title *Evening*, and was met by a review as negative as the one given to *Sick Child* only three years earlier. It is apparent from Munch's diaries that during his visit to Paris in 1885 he was already influenced by the art of Puvis de Chavannes. But it was not until *Inger on the Beach* that he let himself be inspired to paint a canvas with homogeneous pale surfaces shimmering with color and with a musical mood. The slumped, seated female figure is, in itself, quite lacking in expression; the quality of soul we read into her is caused by the essential quality of the landscape around her, which becomes an image of her mood.

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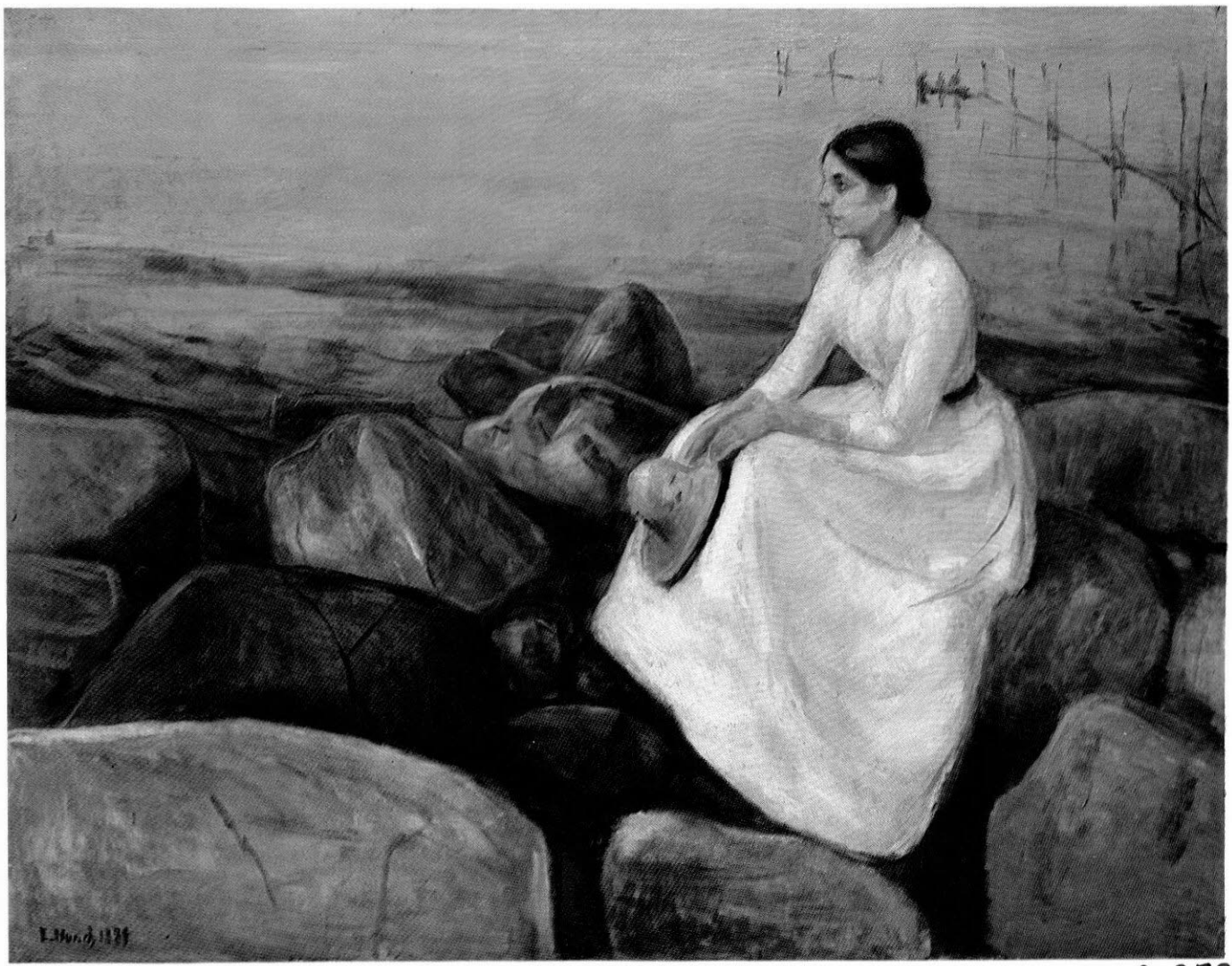

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Night in Saint-Cloud. 1890
Oil on canvas. 64 x 54 cm (25¼ x 21¼ in)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo

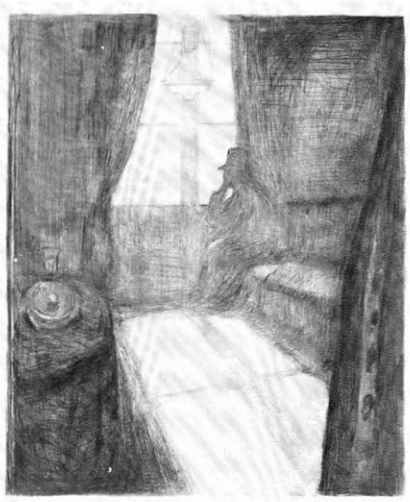

Fig. 1. **Moonlight.** 1895. Drypoint and aquatint. 35.2 x 26.7 cm (13⅞ x 10½ in). Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund

The setting is Munch's room in Saint-Cloud, outside Paris, with its view over the Seine. He stayed there in the winter of 1890 to escape the epidemic in the city. As a model for the slumped figure by the window, Munch used the Danish amateur poet Emanuel Goldstein. The picture is traditionally conceived of as an expression of the artist's own mood, caused by the news of his father's death. In the otherwise empty room, the window frame's shadow falls like a double cross over the floor and gives immediate associations of death. The picture has a strongly reflective and melancholy character, which is partially caused by the tension between the life outside and the silence inside. The seated figure's thoughts seem to lie far away in time and space, but they are present as pictures of recollection, and their mood marks his immediate surroundings. In several of the sketches contained in Munch's illustrated literary diary which I have dated 1888-90, he developed a pictorial idiom that shows the artist slumped and reflective. The reality outside stands as a contrast to his inner world. *Night in Saint-Cloud* is the first Munch picture where death is presented as a mentally vacated space. He repeated the motif in two additional paintings and in an etching [fig. 1].

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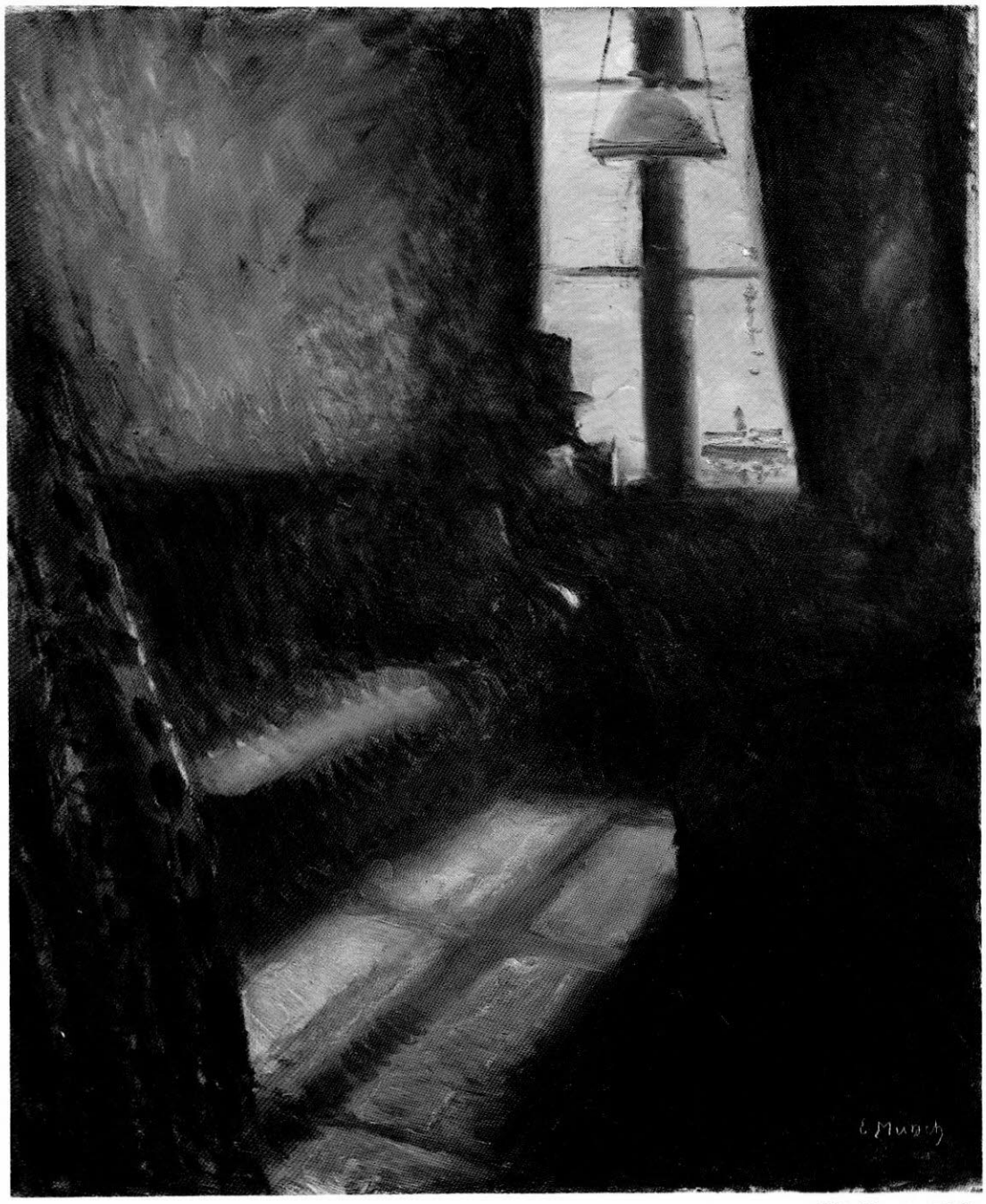

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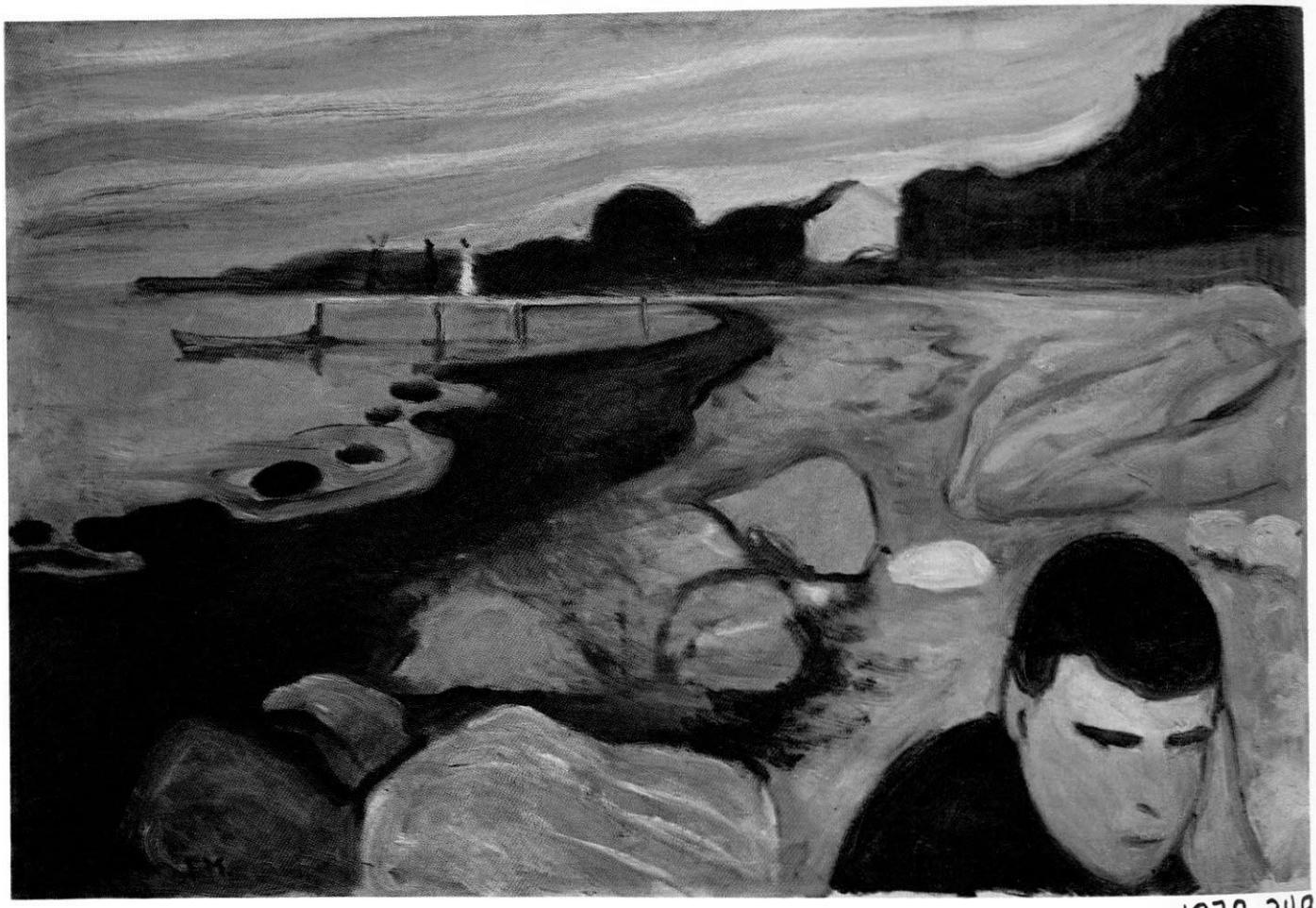
Melancholy, Yellow Boat. 1891-92
Oil on canvas. 65.5 x 96 cm (25¾ x 37¾ in)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo



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Evening on Karl Johan Street. 1892
Oil on canvas. 84.5 x 121 cm (33¼ x 47⅝ in)
Rasmus Meyers Samlinger

The action takes place on Karl Johan Street with the Parliament in the background. The first drafts of the motif are in the illustrated diary, which I have dated 1888-90. The text in the diary shows that the basic experience behind the picture is Munch's restless search after "Mrs. Heiberg," the woman who was his first unsatisfying love. The lonely figure to the right is traditionally read as an image of the artist himself. The text also explains why the intensely illuminated yellow windows have such a strong pictorial function. When Munch himself was overwhelmed by anxiety, he stared up at these windows to have something to fix his eyes on other than the stream of people moving by. The picture was first exhibited at Munch's one-man show in the Tostrup building in 1892, and the reviews characterized it as insane. Ingrid Langaard has seen in the motif a reflection of the mass psychology of the middle class that brushed aside Munch's art. For me, the rich associations of the masks also call up a pall of death and disaster. Besides reflecting the Pont-Aven school's criteria of style, the picture gives us a sense that Ensor's art must have been of great significance to Munch. *Evening on Karl Johan Street* can also be seen as Munch's answer to Ensor's *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889,* 1888. In a lithograph that Munch made of *Evening on Karl Johan Street,* probably in 1895, there is a border with masks under the main motif. This shows further associations with Ensor's mask art. The lithograph, known in only one edition, was not discovered until a couple of years ago in a private collection in Bergen.

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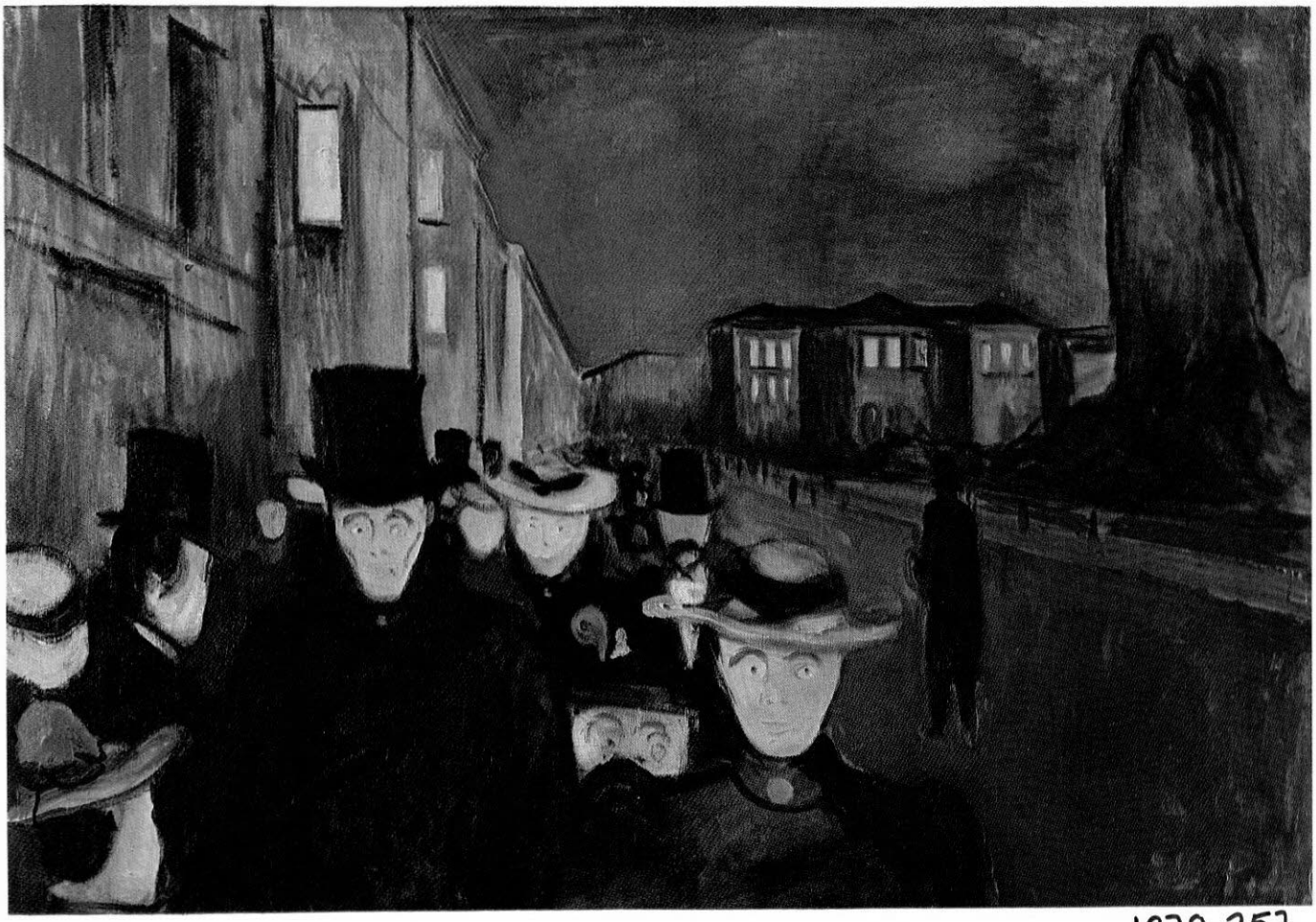

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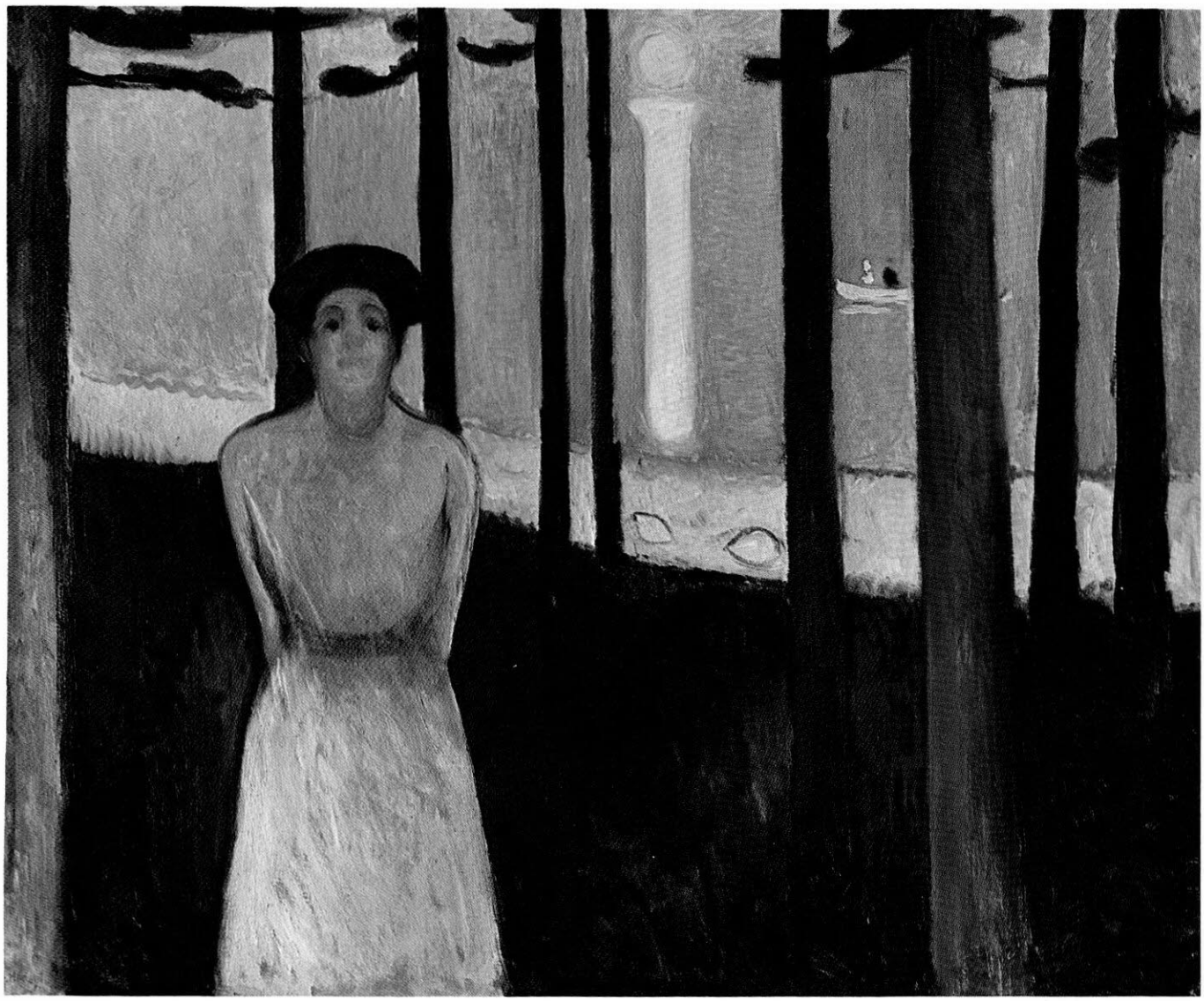
The Voice. 1893
Oil on canvas. 87.6 x 107.9 cm (34½ x 42¼ in)
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Ernest Wadsworth Longfellow Fund



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Starry Night. 1893
Oil on canvas. 135 x 140 cm (53⅛ x 55⅛ in)
Private Norwegian Collection

With certain qualifications, *Starry Night* is one of the few pure landscapes in Munch's art from the 1890s. We recognize the place as Åsgårdstrand, and the linden tree is the same one that appears in a series of motifs. A wary mood, filled with premonitions, is communicated through the blue velvet night sky illuminated by the golden-red stars. The tendency to synthesize large surfaces and sweeping lines has been given a monumental articulation in *Starry Night.* Munch expressed himself by means of a very sophisticated use of line. The soft, undulating line of the beach continues subtly in the contour of the group of trees. The white fence, which shoots diagonally into the picture space, seems to increase the feeling of space without defining it in a precise way. The basic observation of nature is an element of Munch's independent style in relation to contemporary French avant-garde art. Munch depicted a place he saw and was familiar with. At the Berlin Secession of 1902, Munch exhibited the motif as the first picture in the group "The Seed of Love." The vaguely erotic charge of the picture is in keeping with this, as is the motif, since the shadow on the fence suggests a tryst. In the lithograph *Attraction I.* for instance, the shadow from the couple is captured on the same fence. Munch made two other versions of the same motif, these also without the couple in the foreground, but with the shadow preserved on the fence.

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The Scream. 1893
Oil on cardboard. 91 x 73.5 cm (35 1/2 x 28 7/8 in)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo. Gift of Olaf Schou



Fig. 5. **The Shriek.** 1895, signed 1896. Lithograph. 35.4 x 25.4 cm (14 x 10 in). Matthew T. Mellon Fund

The Scream is known as Edvard Munch's most central work of art, and it is considered to be a powerful expression of the anxiety-ridden existence of modern man. The painting achieves its strong impact partially by the intensive use of the rhythmic wavy lines and contrasting straight band, so characteristic of Art Nouveau. The road with the railing, which shoots diagonally toward the left, creates a powerful slant of perspective into the pictorial space, while the soft, curved forms of the landscape give a sense of a precipice in the picture. The strange foreground figure is rendered as a concrete form, even as it personifies a general experience of anguish. Munch described the basic experience behind the picture as follows:

I walked one evening on a road—on the one side was the town and the fjord below me. I was tired and ill—I stood looking out across the fjord—the sun was setting—the clouds were colored red—like blood—I felt as though a scream went through nature—I thought I heard a scream.—I painted this picture—painted the clouds like real blood. The colors were screaming—

The author Przybyszewski puts the picture in the context of Symbolist theories of color:

For the new trend, the sound brings about color. A sound can magically conjure up an entire life in an infinite perspective. A color can become a concert, and a visual impression can arouse terrifying orgies from the psyche.

In Munch's handwriting in the upper red area of the painting is written:

Can only have been painted by a madman.

Munch painted the picture in several versions, and he also did it as a lithograph [fig. 5].

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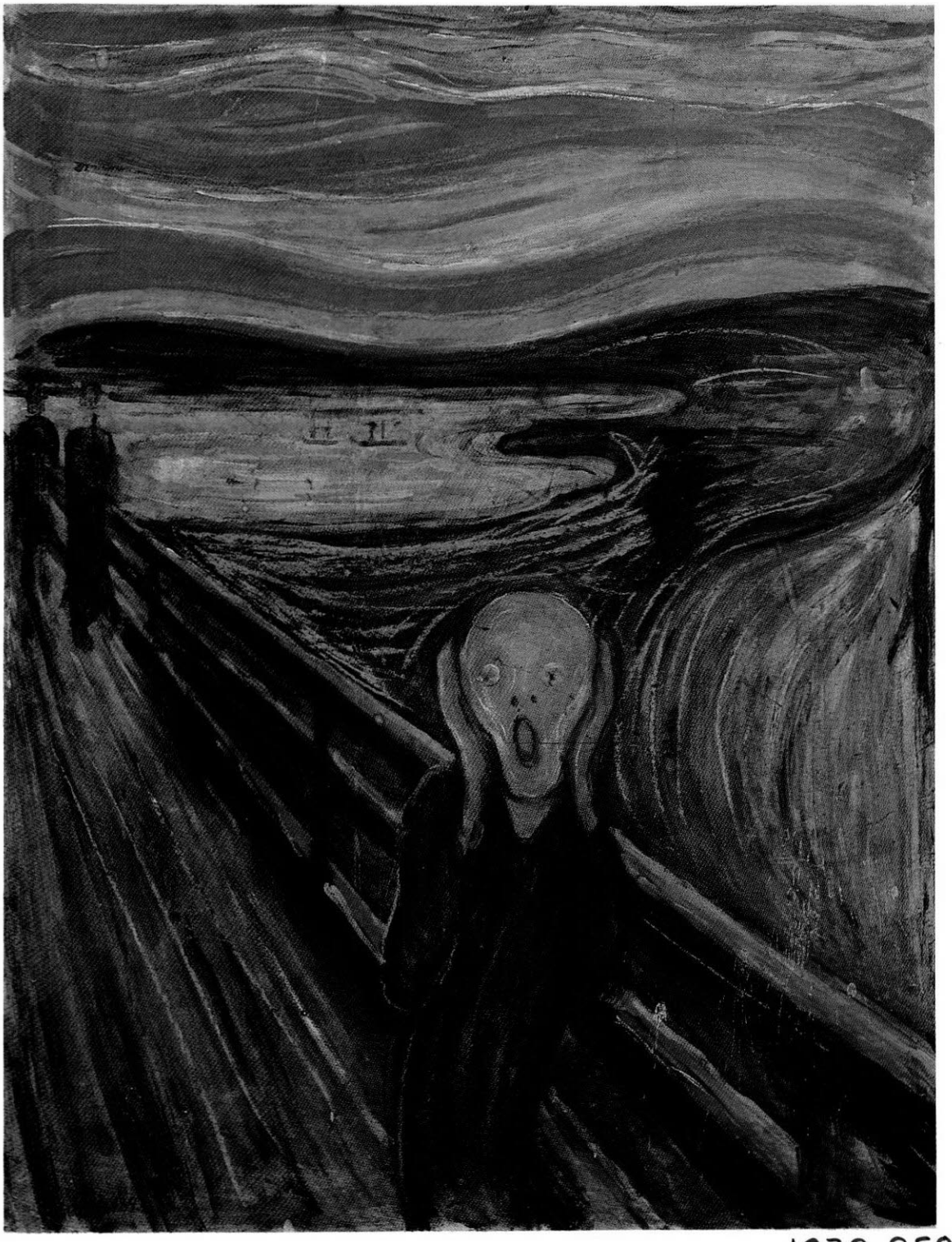

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Anxiety. 1894 36 3/8
Oil on canvas. 9~~5~~ x 73 cm (~~3~~7 x 28¾ in)
Munch-Museet, Oslo

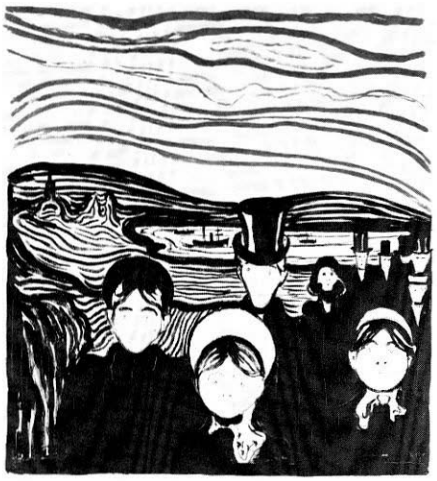

Fig. 6. **Anxiety.** 1896. Lithograph, printed in color. 41.6 x 39.1 cm (16⅜ x 15⅜ in). Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund



Fig. 7. **Anxiety.** 1896, signed 1897. Woodcut, printed in color. 45.7 x 37.6 cm (18 x 14¾ in). Purchase

The painting can be analyzed as a synthesis of two earlier angst motifs, *Evening on Karl Johan Street* and *The Scream* or *Despair.* The landscapes in *The Scream* and *Anxiety* both depict the inner part of the Christiania fjord, and the figures in *Anxiety* for the most part are taken from the Karl Johan picture. But the bearded man on the left in *Anxiety,* who resembles Stanislaw Przybyszewski, was not depicted in *Evening on Karl Johan Street. Anxiety* may have been executed in Berlin, where Munch painted portraits of Przybyszewski. Furthermore, Munch may have had reasons for depicting Przybyszewski in *Anxiety,* if it is true that only after reading Przybyszewski's novel *Requiem Mass* did Munch find the final articulation for the pictorial motif of *The Scream.* The woman, possibly "Mrs. Heiberg," who was Munch's first love, is depicted with a bonnet-shaped or halo-shaped hat, while the man in a top hat—"Mr. Heiberg"(?)—is just about unchanged from the Karl Johan picture. His features are preserved in the lithograph and woodcut of the same motif [figs. 6, 7]. In the graphic versions, however, Przybyszewski is no longer depicted, and the man in the top hat stands among three women with bonnet-shaped hats. In Munch's literary notes, he constantly sees "Mrs. Heiberg" in the women passing by. Among French critics in the nineties, the title was considered superfluous. They felt that anxiety characterized so many of Munch's most important pictures that the title should not be reserved for only one of them.

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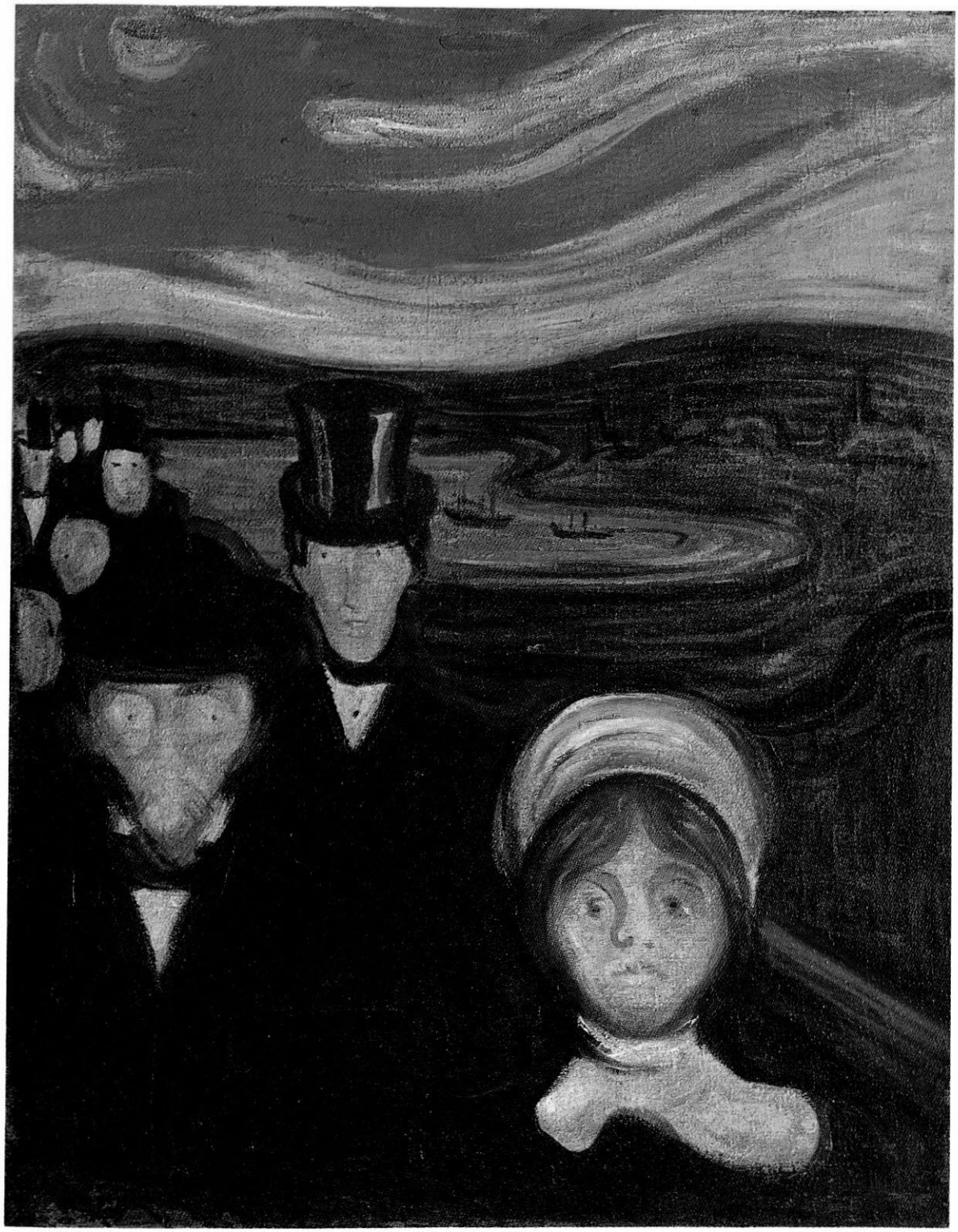

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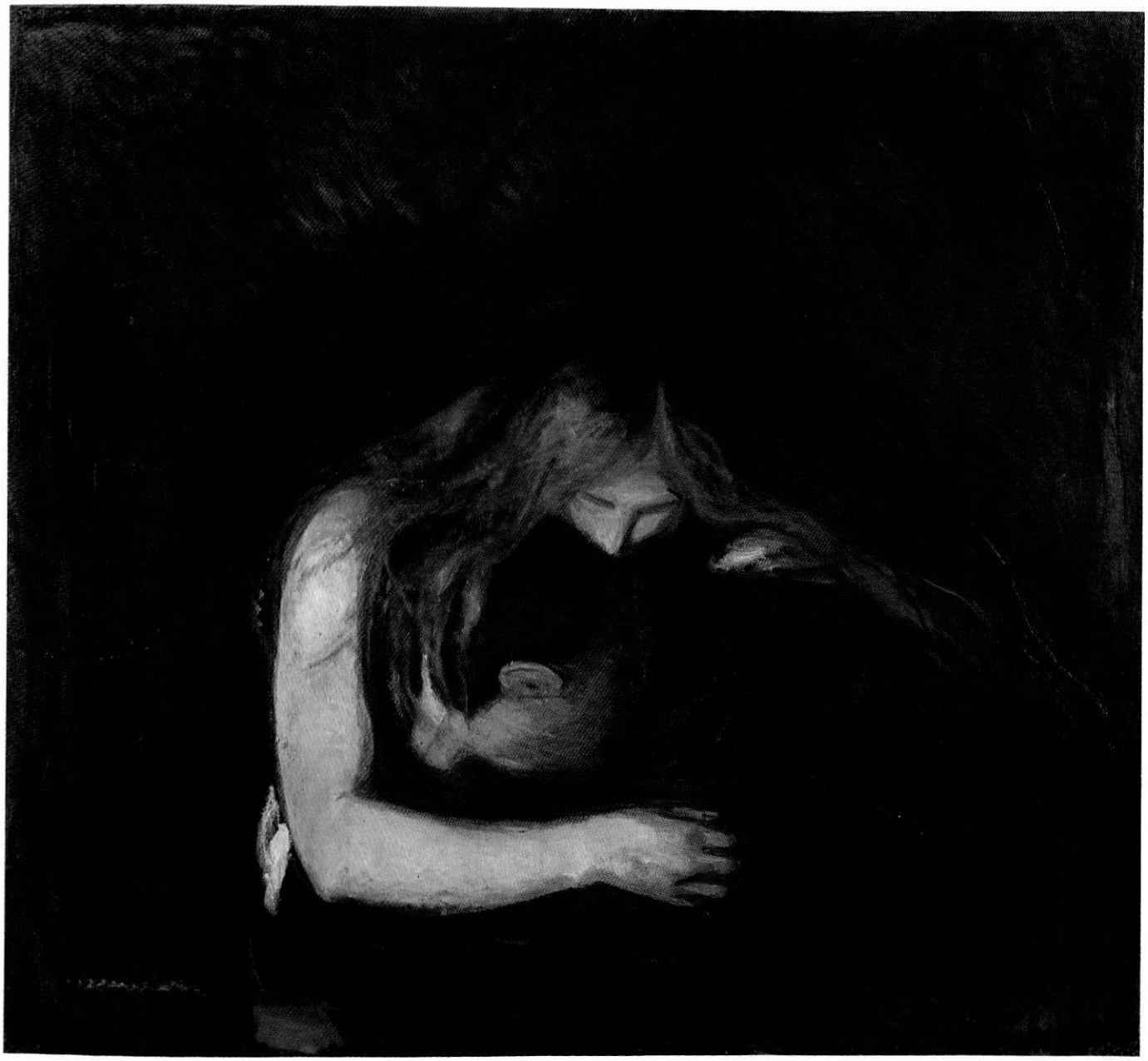
Vampire. 1894
Oil on canvas. 100 x 110 cm (39 5/8 x 43 3/4 in)
Private Collection



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Ashes. 1894
Oil and tempera on canvas. 120.2 x 143.4 cm (47 3/4 x 55 1/2 in)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo



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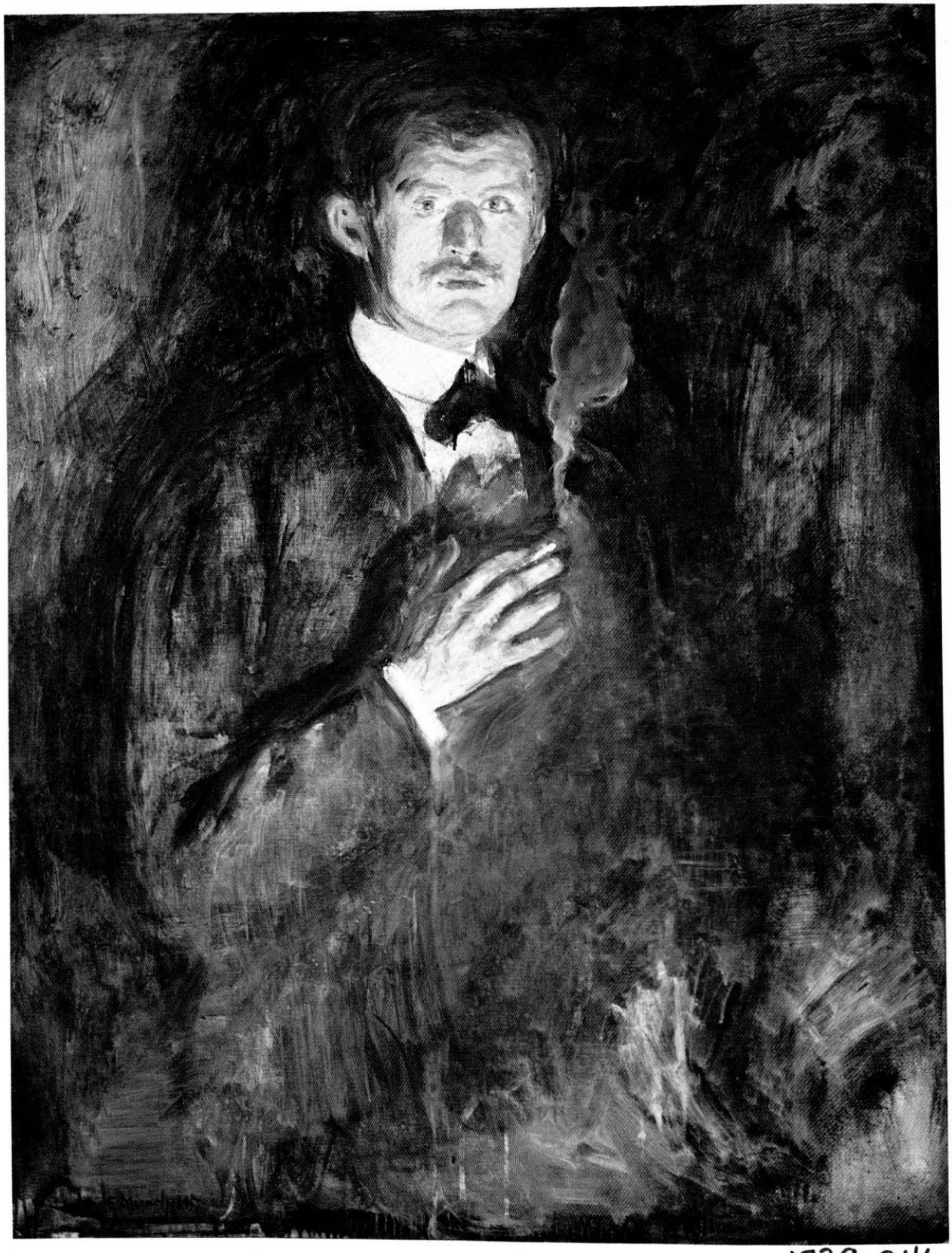
Self-Portrait with Cigarette. 1894-95
Oil on canvas. 100.5 x 85.5 cm (43 3/4 x 33 5/8 in)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo



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Madonna. 1894-95 ~~28 3/4~~
Oil on canvas. ~~[illegible] 110 cm (53 1/2 x 43 3/8 in.)~~ 92.5 x 73. (37 1/2 x 28 3/4")
Munch-Museet, Oslo



Fig. 10. **Madonna.** 1895-1902. Lithograph, printed in color. 60.5 x 44.5 cm (23¾ x 17½ in). The William B. Jaffe and Evelyn A. J. Hall Collection

The first time *Madonna* was exhibited, it was probably furnished with a frame with painted or carved spermatozoa and embryos, as can be seen on the lithograph of the same title [fig. 10]. The frame was later removed and has been lost. Munch must have executed several versions of the motif simultaneously and called the motifs alternately *Loving Woman* and *Madonna.* The pseudo-sacred *Madonna* has been given widely different interpretations by various critics. Some emphasize the purely orgiastic element in the motif; others see the mysteries of birth. Still others, especially Munch himself, emphasize the aspect of death. In "The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil," an album in which Munch collected some of his most important motifs, he accompanied *Madonna* with the following text:

> The pause when the entire world halted in its orbit. Your face embodies all the world's beauty. Your lips, crimson red like the coming fruit, glide apart as in pain. The smile of a corpse. Now life and death join hands. The chain is joined that ties the thousands of past generations to the thousands of generations to come.

Munch executed the motif in a series of painted versions and repeated it in a lithograph. There exists a closely related etched motif, which perhaps refers back to a now lost version.

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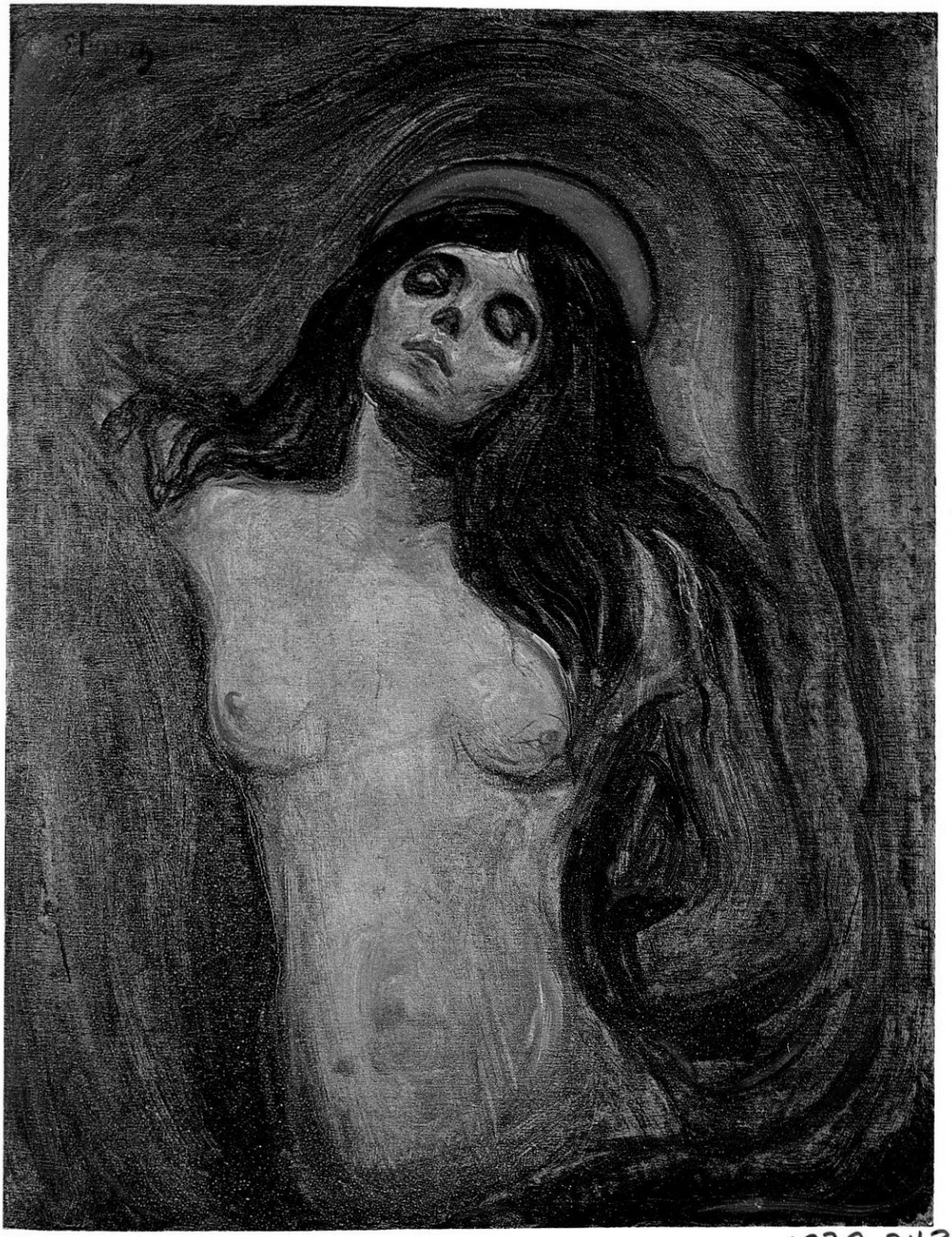

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Puberty. 1894-95
Oil on canvas. 151 x 110 cm (59⅝ x 43⅜ in)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo

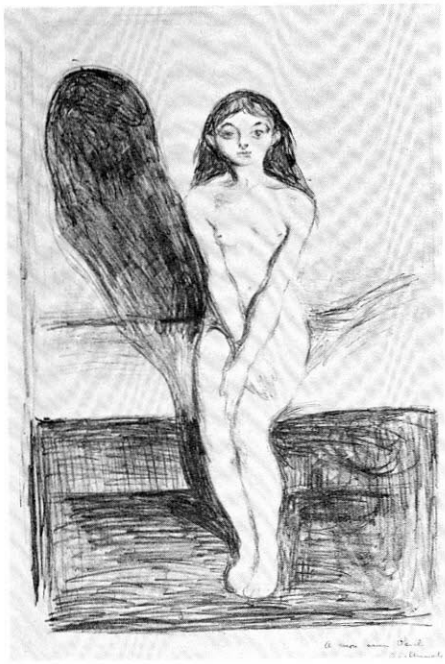

Fig. 11. **The Young Model.** 1894. Lithograph. 41 x 27.2 cm (16⅛ x 10¾ in). The William B. Jaffe and Evelyn A. J. Hall Collection

Munch stated that he had executed exactly the same motif in the mid-1880s, and that this earlier version had been lost in a studio fire. He emphasized that he did not imitate the etching of Félicien Rops, *Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan* from 1886, which superficially has the same motif. Munch was, furthermore, supposed to have used a model when he painted the motif in Berlin. The obtrusive, "naturalistic" details in the upper part of the girl's body reflect decisive intentions in Munch's art in the 1880s. On the other hand, the articulation points toward a direct observation of the model. The threatening shadow that rises over the girl can be seen as a phallic form which alludes to the girl's experience of changes in her own body. But the shadow can also be seen as a shadow of death. The coupling of death and sexuality is not unusual in Munch's art. The motif itself is almost frozen into the picture by the severe contrast between the horizontal line of the bed and girl placed in the middle of the picture. Besides this version, an earlier and a much later painted version are in the Munch Museum. The motif was also done as a lithograph [fig. 11] and as an etching.

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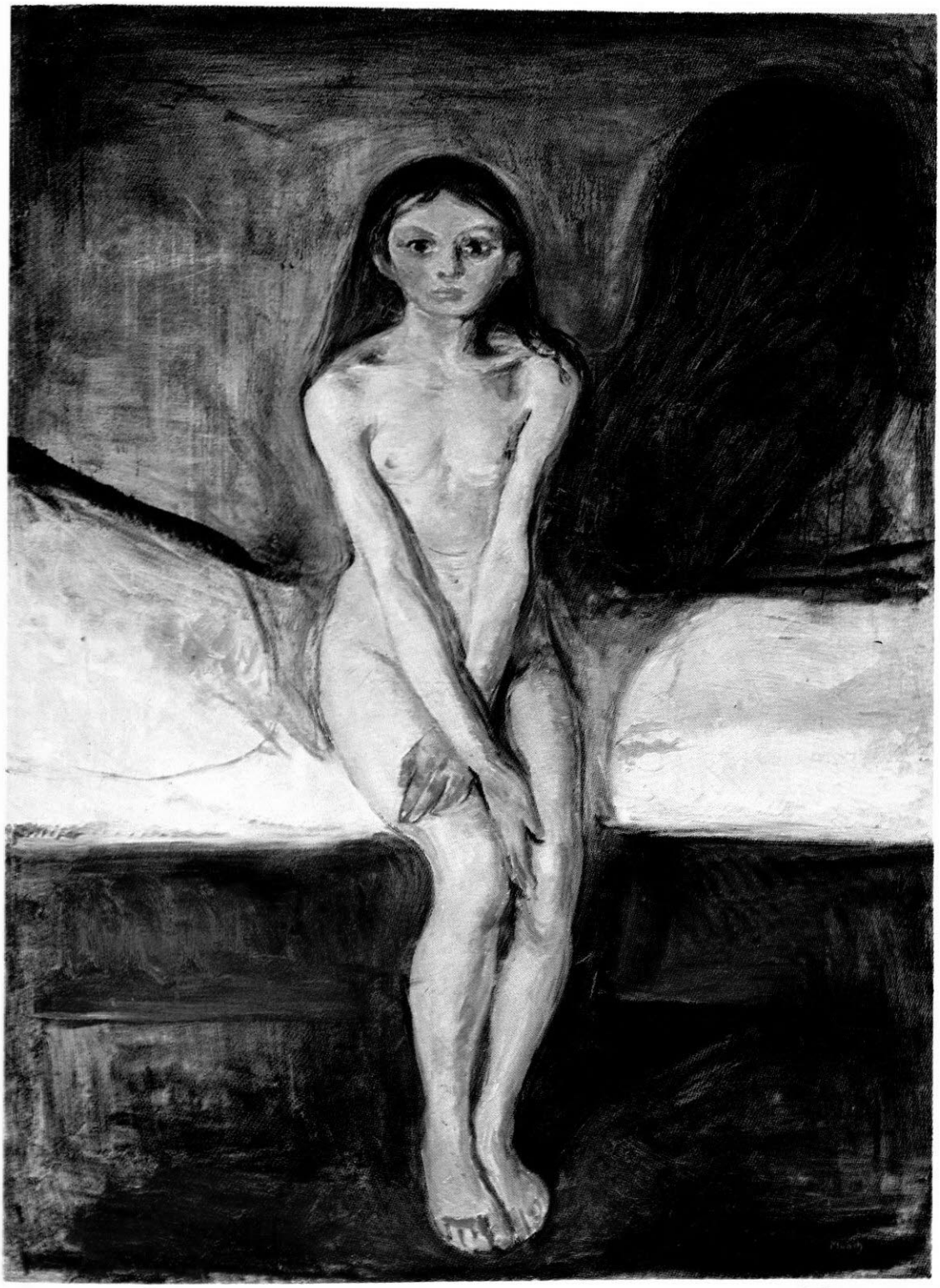

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Death in the Sickroom. 1895
Oil on canvas. 150 x 167.5 cm (59⅛ x 66 in)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo. Gift of Olaf Schou

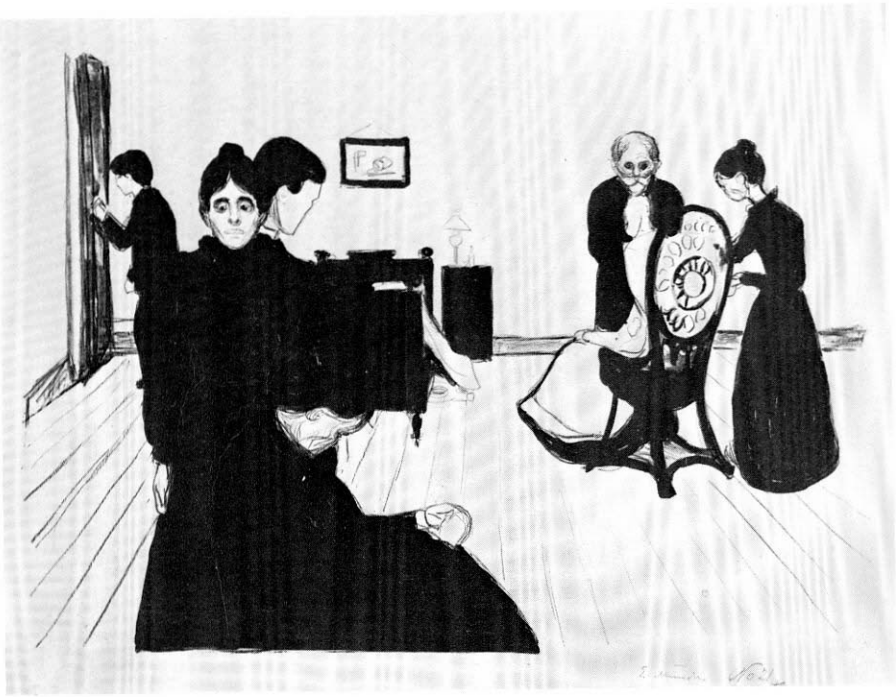

Fig. 12. **The Death Chamber.** 1896. Lithograph. 38.7 x 55 cm (15¼ x 21⅝ in). Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (by exchange)

Munch took up the motif in Berlin in 1893, probably with the clear purpose of painting pictures of formative childhood experiences. In the naked picture space, we see Munch and his family present at the death of his sister Sophie. She is sitting in a chair, with her back turned toward the viewer, but not visible to us. In this way, Munch depicted death as an absence or an emotional void that lives on in the survivors as a feeling of privation. A deathlike silence is conveyed by simple and synthesizing artistic means. Munch used simple, suggestive color contrasts; the actors have masked faces, and the action takes place on a sloping stage floor. The picture presents an image of recollection; the family is portrayed at the age they were when Munch painted the picture, and not at the age they were when the experience took place. In terms of style, the painting is one of the pictures that mark Munch's unique position within the Synthetist and Symbolist movements with the most simplicity and immediacy. The picture can be analyzed from a series of prototypes which range from Degas's and van Gogh's interiors to Gauguin's and Ensor's masked figures. Contemporary critics in the 1890s suggested that Maeterlinck's plays must have been Munch's source of inspiration. After Munch had completed the first drafts of *Death in the Sickroom,* he got an offer to illustrate one of Maeterlinck's plays. In the same way as Munch, though in a somewhat more cerebral fashion, Maeterlinck also depicted death as a psychic presence among the survivors. Besides the large versions in the Munch Museum and in the National Gallery, the Munch Museum also has a series of studies and sketches of the motif, which was also repeated in a lithograph [fig. 12].

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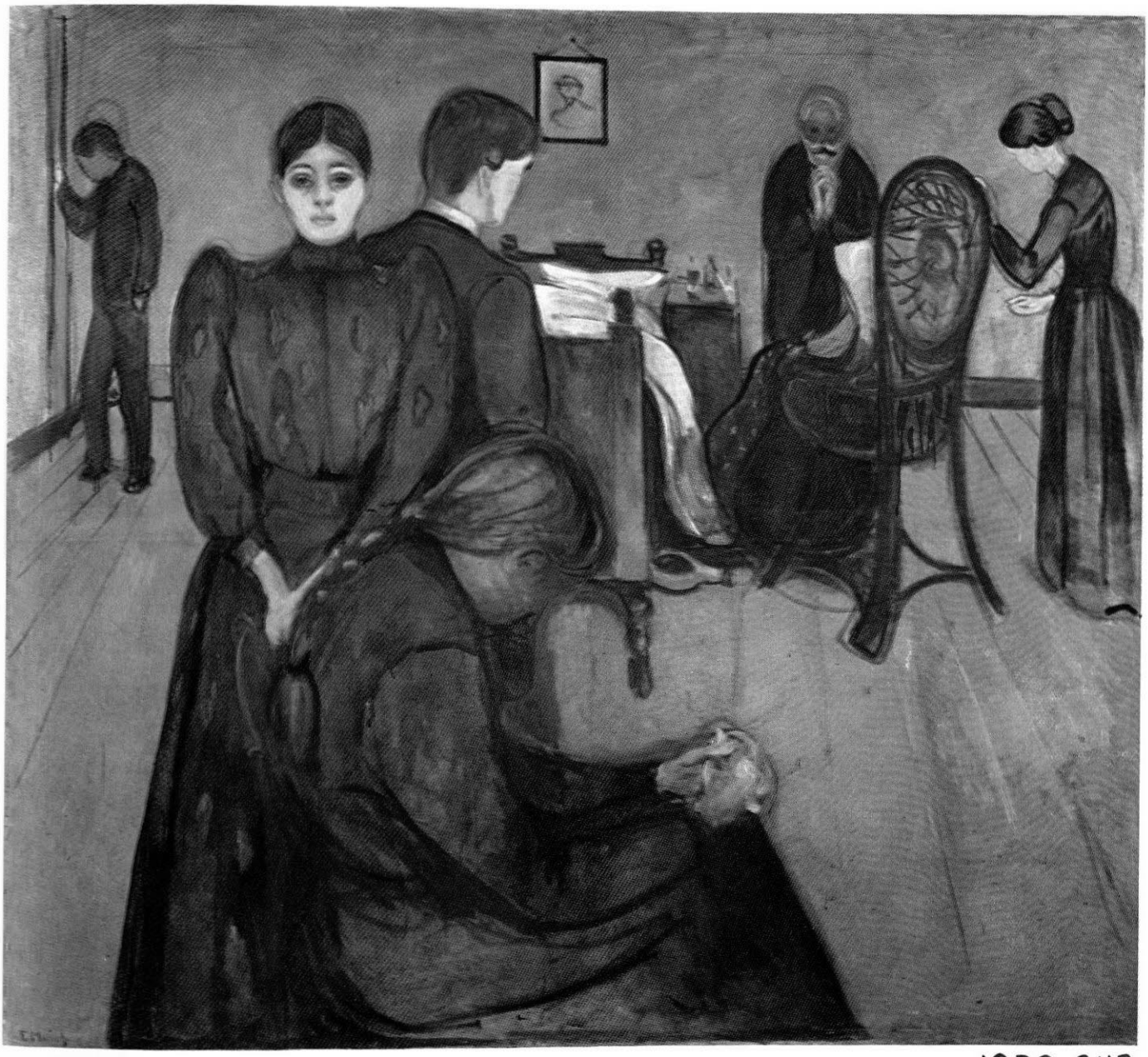

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By the Deathbed, Fever. 1895 ~~125~~ 121.8 47 5/8
Oil on canvas. 90 x ~~125~~ cm (35½ x ~~49¼~~ in)
Rasmus Meyers Samlinger

By the Deathbed is a subject that goes back to the memory of his sister Sophie's death. She is lying in the bed with folded hands, and to the right stands her family, except Edvard Munch. We do not see the dying one, but through the eyes of the artist we see what she sees and dimly sense what she senses. The identification with the dying one here borders on the pathological. By using simple pictorial effects, Munch is forcing us, as an audience, to participate in his sister's death. There exists a series of studies and sketches of the motif, and he also executed a lithographic version. In a monumental version from about 1915, he repeated the pictorial structure, but it is possible that he here presented himself as the sick one in the bed.

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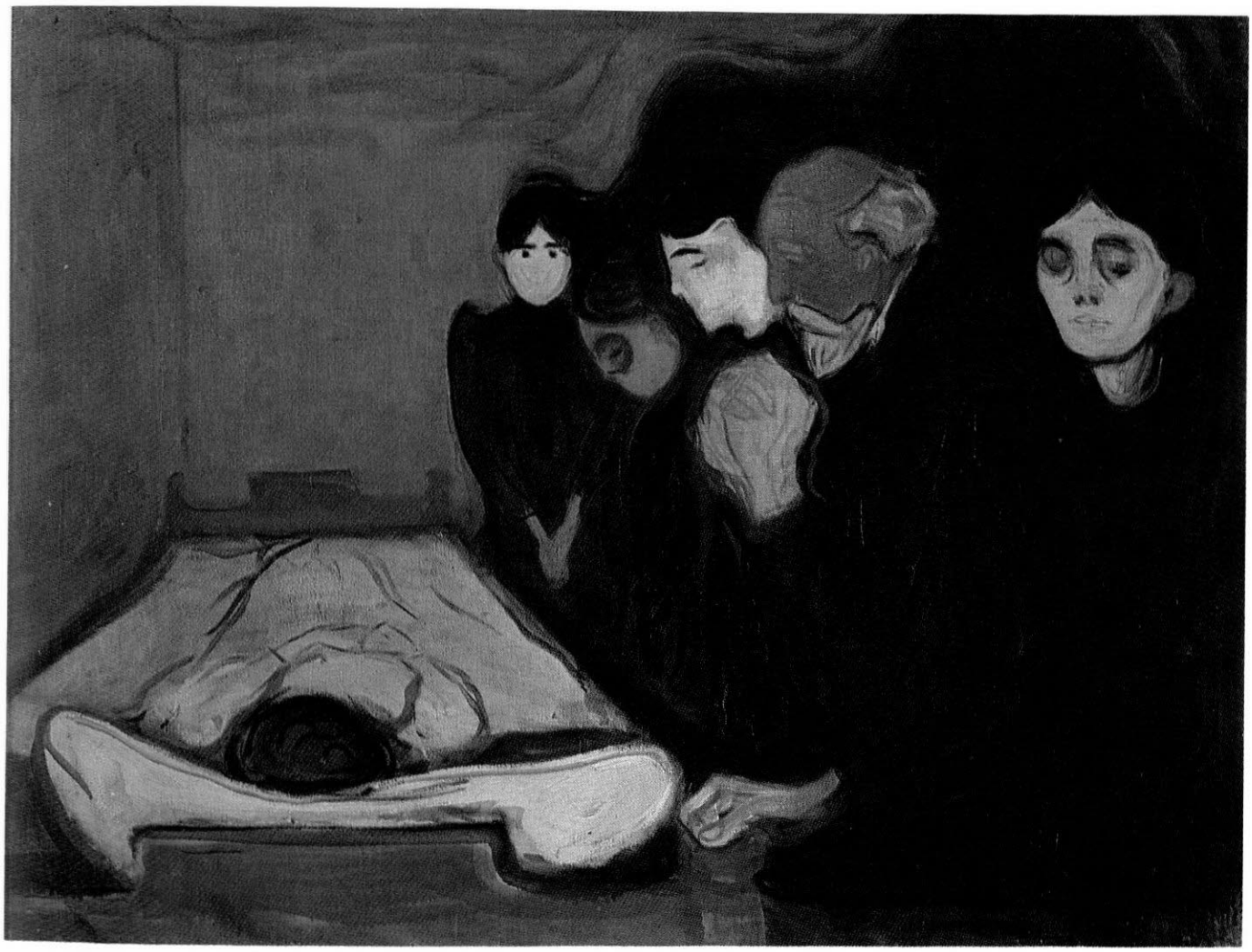

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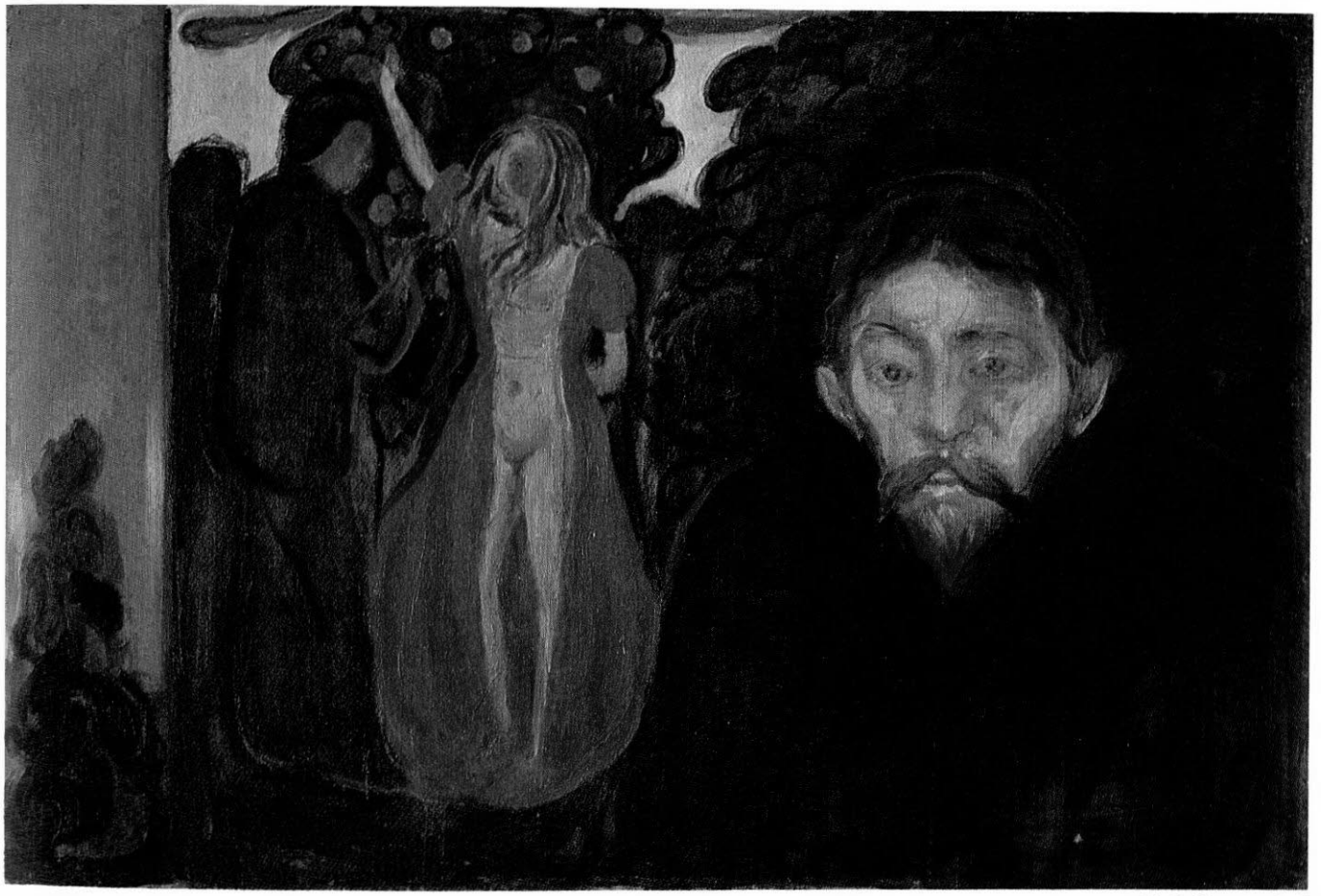
Jealousy. 1895 99.5
Oil on canvas. 67.3 x 100 cm (26 1/4 x 39 3/8 in)
Rasmus Meyers Samlinger



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The Red Vine. 1900
Oil on canvas. 119.5 x 121 cm (47 x 47⅝ in)
Munch-Museet, Oslo

The picture shows a tendency toward the use of stronger color which characterized Munch's art at the turn of the century. At the Berlin Secession in 1902, Munch included the painting in the group of angst pictures, so it must be included among the original "Life Frieze" motifs. The man in the foreground has features resembling Stanislaw Przybyszewski's, while the house in the background must be the Kiøsterud building, which we recognize from so many of Munch's motifs from Åsgårdstrand. The red ivy appears to be not merely organically but also biologically alive. It grows up around the house like beings in a macabre dance. In contrast to the ivy, the house itself gives the impression of being an empty, blown shell. The windows have the same function as those in *Evening on Karl Johan Street* and *The Storm,* in that they are also "eyes" that draw our eyes toward them. It is as though the house contains a tragedy that the man in the foreground has in his mind's eye. The bare tree trunk with its cut-off stump to the left of the house suggests images of death. The picture has been interpreted as a version of *Jealousy.* Munch again used this pictorial structure in the paintings *The Murderer* from 1910 and *The Murderer in the Avenue* from 1919.

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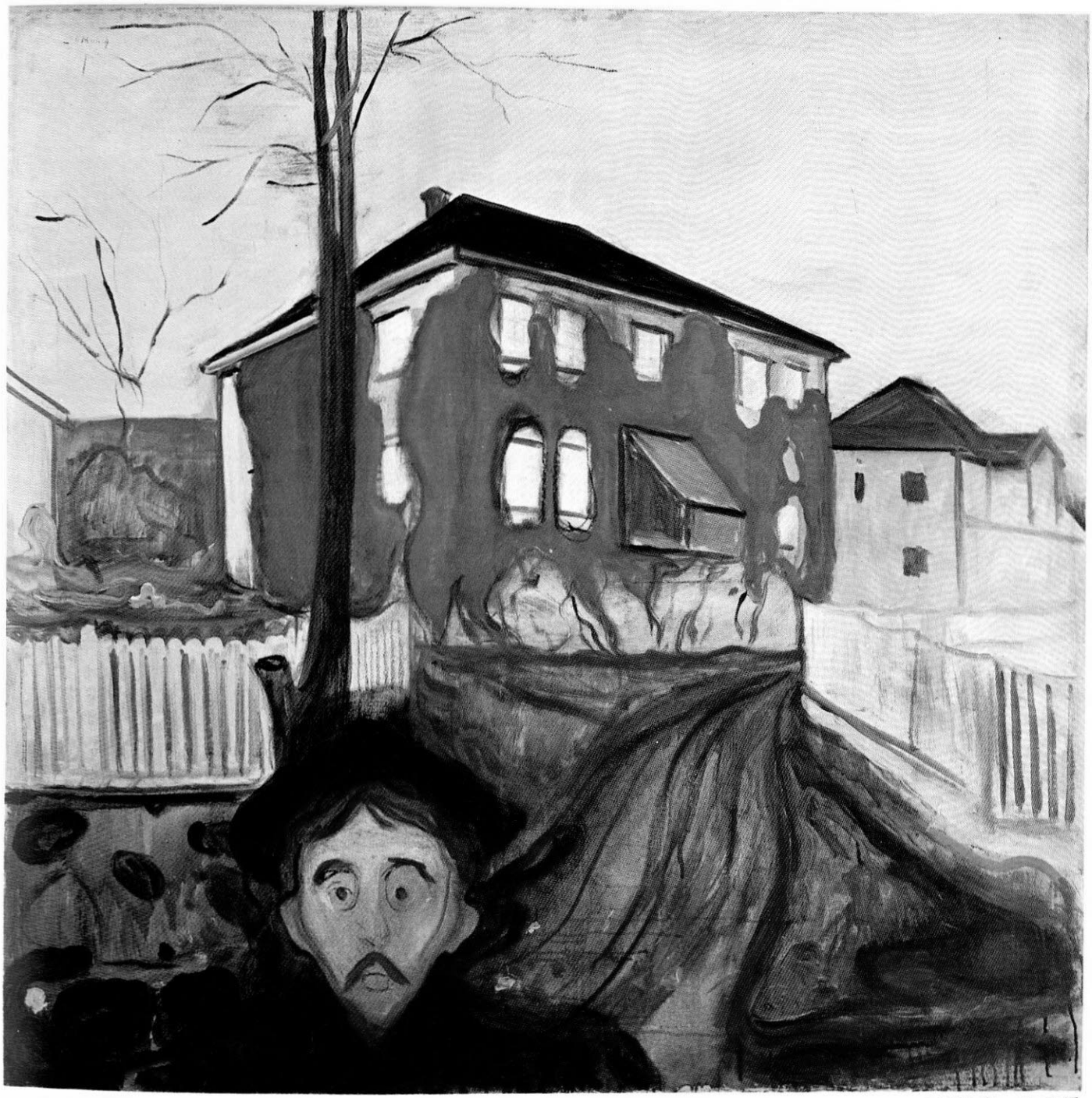

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Girls on the Pier. 1900
Oil on canvas. 136 x 125.5 cm (53 5/8 x 49 3/8 in)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo. Gift of Olaf Schou



Fig. 15. **Three Girls on the Bridge.** 1918–20. Woodcut and lithograph, printed in color. 50.1 x 43.3 cm (19¾ x 17 in). Purchase

The picture is among Munch's most harmonious and lyrical motifs. Its original title was *Summer Night,* and we see, indeed, the sun shining over the houses to the left. On the bridge that leads out to the steamship pier at Åsgårdstrand, some girls stand staring down into the water where the tree is reflected. The tree and the shadow can be seen as a phallic symbol, and this explains the girls' sensations. It is again a matter of a puberty motif, crystallized in the fine erotic charge of the summer night. The delicate, French-inspired coloring of the picture is enlivened by the yellow full moon and the white, green, and red dresses of the girls. From this popular motif, Munch executed a series of painted versions, and he made several prints—among others, one [fig. 15] which is a combination lithograph and woodcut.

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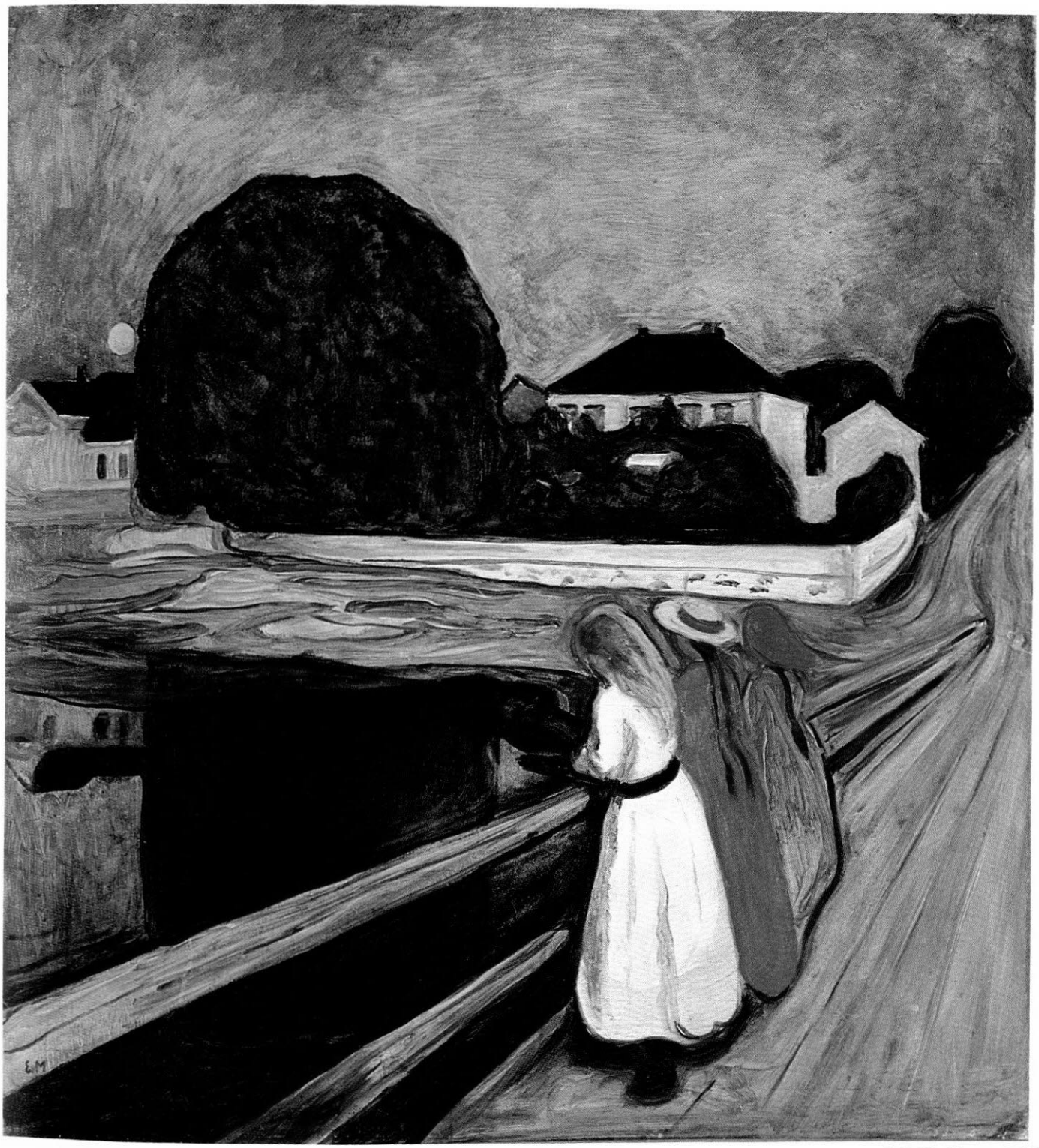

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Train Smoke. 1900
Oil on canvas. 84 x 109 cm (33⅛ x 43¾ in)
Munch-Museet, Oslo

The picture shows the view from Munch's rooms at Hammer's Boarding-house in Ljan, overlooking the Oslo fjord with islands, sailboats, and heavy gray rain clouds. The middle ground is filled with smoke from a train on its way toward Christiania. Twisted pine trees form ornamental figures in the foreground and correlate rhythmically with the train smoke and the spruce trees in the background. The sea and the sky are painted in the same grayish violet. In depicting the clouds, Munch returned to a technique with which he had experimented in the first version of *The Sick Child* from 1886. He let part of the color run in a controlled way in the sky to form a pattern, probably to indicate the onset of rainy weather. In *Train Smoke* there is, furthermore, a built-in contrast between the ornamental elements in the foreground and the naturalistic character of the background. Munch later painted another version of the motif.

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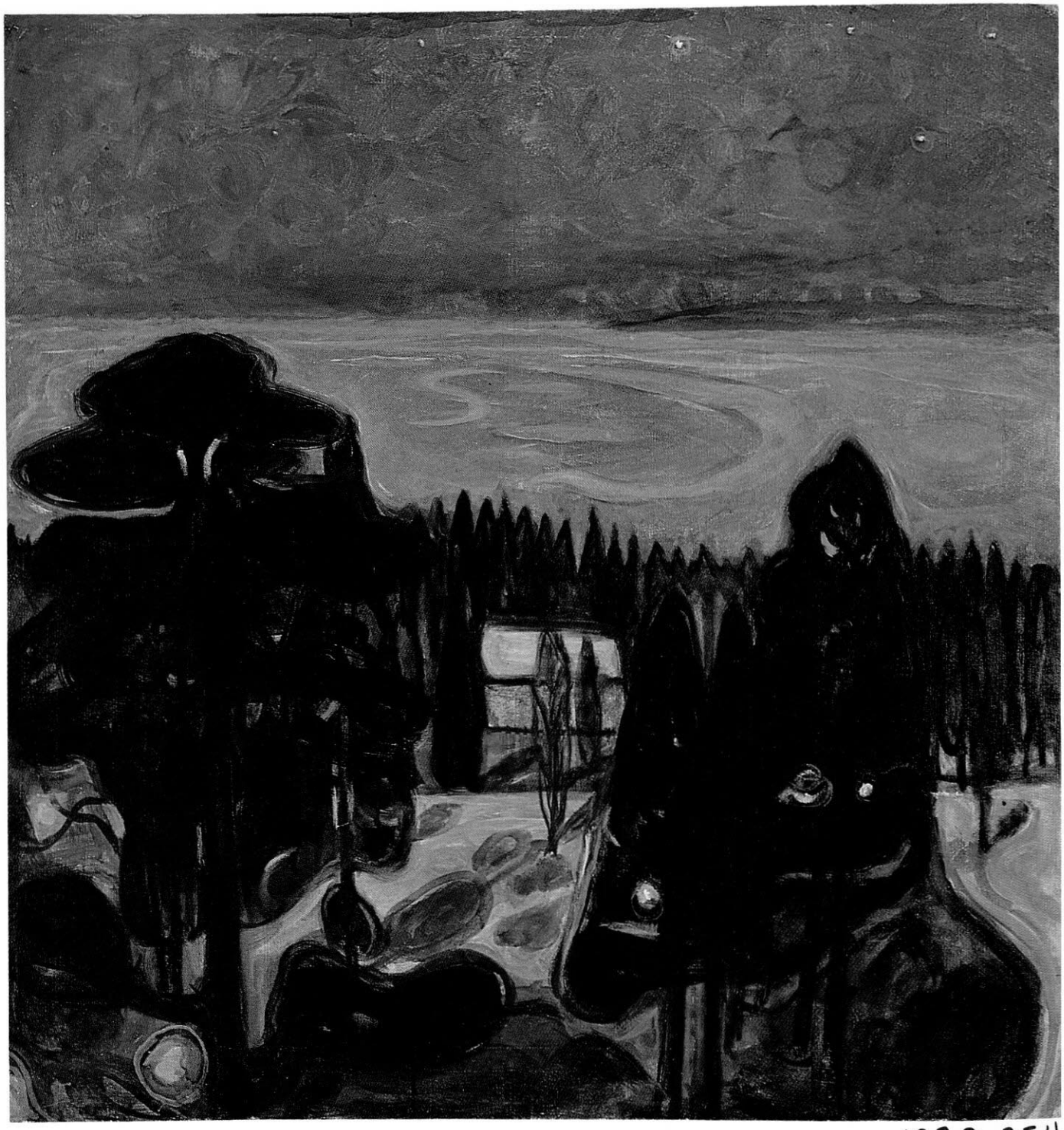
Winter Night. 1901
Oil on canvas. 115.5 x 110.5 cm (45½ x 43¾ in)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo



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