

## Museums

# The complete story of the painter of ‘The Scream’

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By Jason Edward Kaufman

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Utter the name Edvard Munch and chances are you’ll elicit a two-word rejoinder: “The Scream.”

The Norwegian artist’s ghostlike figure, clasping his hands to his temples and gaping in terror, is possibly the most renowned icon of modern art, more readily identifiable to the general public than any other picture, including van Gogh’s “Bedroom” and Picasso’s “Guernica.” The cartoonish expression of horror and anxiety has spawned posters, kitchen magnets, even life-size inflatable dolls, and countless parodies that place “The Scream” atop the art world’s “most caricatured” list, alongside Mona Lisa.

But there’s a lot more to Munch. And now, to mark the sesquicentennial of the celebrated artist’s birth, the largest ever retrospective of his paintings has opened here, in the city where he died in 1944.

The media has made the picture a bold-faced name. Two of the four versions that Munch made (between 1893 and 1910) were stolen from Norwegian museums in 1994 and 2004, and although each was soon recovered, the incidents served as fodder for extended media frenzies. In case anyone on Earth had yet to hear of “The Scream,” last year a third version, the only one in private hands, sold at Sotheby’s in New York for nearly \$120 million — the most ever paid for a single artwork at auction.

Notwithstanding its familiarity, most people misinterpret the picture as a

representation of a lunatic screaming in despair. In fact, the artist recorded in his diary that it evokes his experience of hearing “a scream passing through nature” while on a hilltop stroll above Oslo (then called Christiania). (The record-breaking picture — a pastel on cardboard — has a wooden frame on which the artist inscribed a verse about the incident.)

Despite the extraordinary status of “The Scream,” most Americans know next to nothing about its creator. We haven’t hosted a comprehensive painting retrospective because most of his important works remain in Oslo, where they serve as engines of tourism that are rarely lent. There have been excellent exhibits of his prints and drawings — the National Gallery of Art, which has an extensive collection, is showing a 150th-birthday selection through July 28 — but surveys of his paintings, including the 2006 show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, invariably lack key masterpieces and offer only partial overviews.

Which is one reason the “Munch 150” jubilee in Oslo is a landmark event. The centerpiece retrospective (through Oct. 13) assembles an unprecedented 250 key paintings. They are displayed in two venues, with the earlier period winding through the grand galleries of the National Museum and the post-1903 pictures filling the entire Munch Museum. In addition, two major decorative series that Munch painted, in the Oslo University auditorium and the Freia Chocolate Factory employee cafeteria, are accessible during the exhibition, as is the studio the artist built on his estate in Ekely, an affluent suburb of Oslo. This is literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study in depth one of the great artists of the early modern period.

Munch’s angst-ridden expressionism is considered Scandinavia’s answer to van Gogh. But while van Gogh’s reputation has flourished in association with modernist France, then the center of the Western art world, Munch

remains an enigma of the frozen north. Van Gogh's psychotic ear-severing and subsequent suicide are among the best-known incidents in art history, but Munch's biography, though plagued by illness and psychological drama, has not received the "Lust for Life" treatment.

"Sickness, insanity and death were the black angels that guarded my cradle," he wrote, and not without cause. His mother died when he was 5; his beloved older sister succumbed to tuberculosis when he was 14; his father, a religiously overbearing physician who struggled to support his large family, died a decade later; and another sister was institutionalized. The artist himself suffered from depression and alcoholism and was in and out of sanatoriums.

A midlife brawl with his lover ended with the tip of his left middle finger shot off. The melee inspired paintings in which Munch portrays himself splayed Christlike on a bloodied bed as his lover stands by in the role of murderess. What actually happened remains uncertain, but Munch, whose fear of women verged on misogyny, blamed it on the "femme fatale."

Munch's miseries certainly fed his work — his tortured childhood, unease with society and troubled relationships became recurring themes — but the retrospective complicates the canonical equation of his personal life with his art. Autobiography dissolves into more universal expressions of the human condition, and the invention of symbolic figures and scenarios that convey psychic pain is key to his enduring greatness.

In "The Frieze of Life" series — a 1902 version of which is reconstructed in a remarkable room at the National Museum — more than 20 paintings narrate what Munch called "the modern life of the soul." It is not a pleasant journey. Scenes of yearning, courtship and love yield to betrayal, jealousy, alienation, sickness and death, often related to the artist's

experiences.

The “Death in the Sickroom” is regarded as a representation of the Munch family’s vigil over his dying sister. The “Dance of Life” and “Melancholy” take place on the banks of the fjord at Asgardstrand where Munch kept a cottage and studio. “Evening on Karl Johan” suggests the artist’s anomie in the urban center.

Other masterpieces in the cycle, such as “The Kiss,” the nude Madonna with her head thrown back in pained ecstasy and “The Vampire” who devours a man as she kisses his neck, are construed as outtakes from the artist’s love life. And “The Scream,” as we have noted, is a veiled self-portrait.

But the characters are not true portraits, the settings are non-specific, and the emotions they convey, though personal, are familiar to everyone.

“My whole art was rooted in the contemplation of disease; without fear and illness my life would have been without a rudder,” Munch later wrote. But the retrospective also reveals an artist who rhapsodized the Norwegian landscape and agrarian life. The great monumental paintings at the university feature a beaming sun, a nurturing alma mater, and a patient teacher in bucolic settings. And there are remarkable portraits, including Ibsen as a grizzled ghoul and Nietzsche as a heroic superman.

By the last room, with the poignant self-portrait “Between the Clock and the Bed,” painted shortly before Munch’s death from pneumonia in 1944, “The Scream” seems like a distant echo.

The superlative retrospective coincides with recent news that the Norwegian government has approved plans to construct a new Munch museum on the waterfront, adjacent to the architecturally astounding

Norwegian National Opera. Plans also are underway for a new National Gallery, in which Munch will have pride of place. And the man who sold “The Scream,” shipping scion Petter Olsen, whose father was a friend and patron of the artist, intends to open his own museum on a fjord-side compound south of Oslo where he is restoring a cottage in which Munch lived and worked in the latter half of his life. Meanwhile, the jubilee tributes continue throughout the year, in Oslo and in other towns across Norway.

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### **“Munch 150”**

On view at the Oslo National Gallery and Munch Museum, also in Oslo, through Oct. 13. For more information on the exhibition and Munch anniversary programs across Norway, visit [www.munch150.no](http://www.munch150.no).

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