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## DRIPS, SCRATCHES, AND STROKES

### *The New Language of Expressionism from Edvard Munch to Willem de Kooning*

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WHETHER ON ODDLY-SHAPED PILLOWS, SHRIEKING DOLLS, OR BASIC COFFEE MUGS, THE EMACIATED PROTAGONIST WITH GAPING MOUTH AND THE SWIRLING LANDSCAPE OF EDVARD MUNCH'S *THE SCREAM* IS ONE OF TODAY'S MOST WIDESPREAD IMAGES. THOUGH MUNCH DIED JUST AS ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM WAS BEING BORN, HIS EMPHASIS ON THE HIGHLY PERSONAL AND THE UNCONSCIOUS THROUGH ABSTRACTION, BRUSHWORK, AND INTENSELY EVOCATIVE COLORS LINK HIM CLOSELY TO THIS IMPORTANT AMERICAN ART MOVEMENT. THROUGH THE SPECIFIC COMPARISON OF THE *OEUVRE* OF MUNCH AND THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST WILLEM DE KOONING, THIS ESSAY WILL EXAMINE HOW AND WHY THE NORWEGIAN PAINTER BECAME KNOWN AS THE "FATHER OF EXPRESSIONISM" IN THE HISTORY OF ART. *THE SCREAM* IS NOT CENTRAL TO THIS DISCUSSION, BUT INSTEAD WILL BE LOOKED AT IN CONJUNCTION WITH OTHER EARLY PAINTINGS AND PRINTS, SUCH AS *THE SICK CHILD* AND *THE KISS*. THESE WORKS AND OTHERS REVEAL MUNCH'S ARTISTIC PHILOSOPHY AND TECHNIQUE AND ALLOW US TO DRAW BROADER CONNECTIONS TO FUTURE MOVEMENTS, NEO-DADAISM AND EXPRESSIONISM AMONG THEM.

Norway, 1893: one of the most repeated, exploited, and recognized images in the history of Western art is born.<sup>i</sup> The *Scream* (figure 1) by Edvard Munch (1863-1944)<sup>ii</sup> is familiar and identifiable today, yet, when first exhibited the painting shocked most audiences, spurring harsh criticism from art critics and viewers alike. Munch had clearly defied traditional views of painting. More than half a century later across the Atlantic, Dutch-born Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning proclaimed, “Every so often a painter has to destroy painting. Cézanne did it and then Picasso did it again with Cubism. Then Pollock did it—he busted

given to the following works by Munch: *The Sick Child* (1885-6), *The Scream* (1893), and *The Kiss* (1898). In the process, surprising connections to the works of Arshile Gorky and Jackson Pollock will be discussed.

Munch transcended the artistic conventions of his time and began to formulate ideas that would lay the groundwork for Expressionism in art. Norwegian painters of the late nineteenth century gravitated toward Naturalism, Realism, and Impressionism, drawing inspiration from the external world and relying on observation in their creation of art.<sup>v</sup>

*“Every so often a painter has to destroy painting.  
Cézanne did it and then Picasso did it again . . . Then  
Pollock did it—he busted our idea of a picture all to hell.  
Then there could be new pictures again.”*

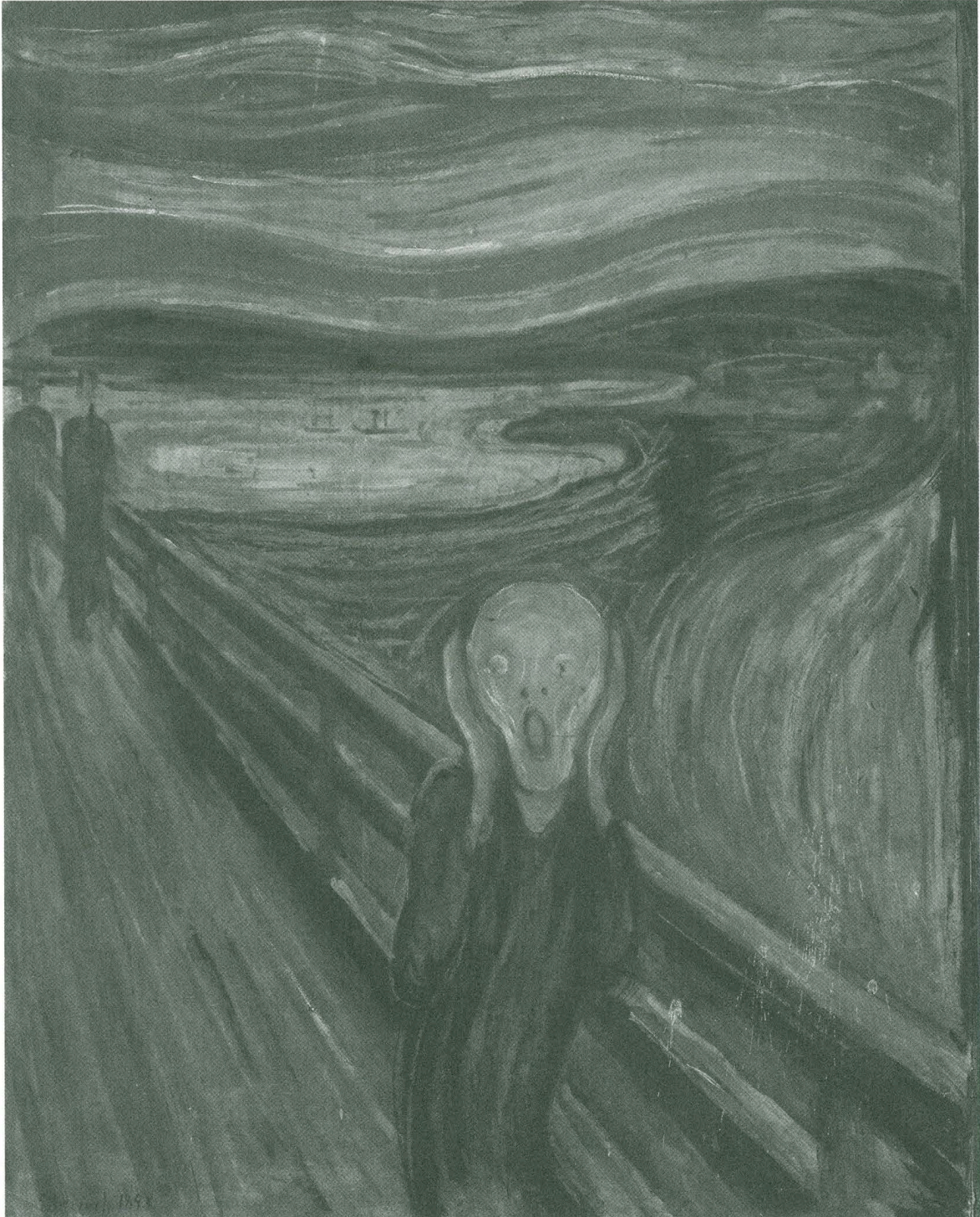
our idea of a picture all to hell. Then there could be new pictures again.”<sup>iii</sup> After a closer look at the Scandinavian master’s *oeuvre*, it is not only tempting but highly appropriate to squeeze Munch between Cézanne and Picasso in this list of “destroyers.” De Kooning’s word choice above is provocative, indeed; while “destruction” implies violence and annihilation in most contexts, de Kooning applies it to art, designating it a harbinger of renaissance, a sort of *tabula rasa* for the artist, a chance to redefine the artistic vocabulary and revolutionize painting.

Edvard Munch’s “proto-expressionist formal vocabulary”<sup>iv</sup>—his exploitation of line, color, and form to convey subjectivity—and his enlistment of the unconscious in the artistic process foreshadowed major twentieth-century artistic movements, such as Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. This essay will relate Munch’s work method, technique, and themes to those of de Kooning in order to examine Munch’s broader relationship to Abstract Expressionism. Particular attention will be

Landscapes were especially popular. The landscape painting might encompass Naturalist themes, but Munch would instead portray it as reflection of inner feeling and the soul. Munch received formal education in the arts in Oslo and even obtained several grants to study in France, the latter of which would forever alter his outlook on painting. In *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, Robert Rosenblum comments on Munch’s experiences abroad: “Like Van Gogh, Munch changed drastically the surface appearance of his painting by absorbing the newest artistic vocabularies that he could study during his frequent sojourns in France,” adding that, like Van Gogh, “Munch could almost always mold this foreign vocabulary to his own emotional needs.”<sup>vi</sup> Indeed, the thirst to express his moods and emotions became Munch’s dominating motivation.

The Munch household was one of repressed anguish; in fact, Edvard Munch commented about his childhood, “I was born dying.”<sup>vii</sup> Both Munch’s mother and sister died of

FIGURE 1. EDVARD MUNCH, *THE SCREAM* (1893).



tuberculosis within a decade of one another. Munch suffered from bouts of life-threatening bronchitis at a young age. The patriarch of the family, Dr. Christian Munch, fell into severe depression as a result of his helplessness in the face of the disease and, being a Christian fundamentalist, attributed the illness as a form of punishment from God. These experiences would doubtless haunt Edvard Munch for the rest of his life and career. Hence, while in France, Munch became extremely receptive to experimental artistic forms and methods, most likely searching for a way to exorcise the traumatizing memories of his childhood.

Regardless of the true reason for Munch's attraction to works by Van Gogh and Gauguin, it is evident that Munch began to reform his artistic philosophy and to develop Expressionist aesthetic vocabulary and ideas. In *Expressionism: Art and Idea*, Donald Gordon outlines the "ground rules" of Expressionism as dictated in 1937 by The Ten, one of the first publicly recognized Expressionist art groups in the United States:

1. The attempt to reduce the interpretation of nature or life in general to the rawest emotional elements.
2. A complete and utter dependence on pigment as an expressive agency rather than an imitative or descriptive one.
3. An intensity of vision which tries to catch the throb of life, necessarily doing violence to external facts to lay bare internal facts.<sup>viii</sup>

Gordon adds that Expressionism was first and foremost a familial revolution because "it was a protest by adolescents against [the] ignorance, intolerance, and materialism of their parents and teachers."<sup>ix</sup> He cites Munch, who came from a conservative background, as a prime example of those liberated by Expressionist art and culture.

How did Munch then relate to the Expressionist ideals enumerated above? On New Year's Eve in the year 1889, Munch articulated his artistic aspirations in the so-called

St. Cloud Manifesto: "No longer would interiors, people who only read and knit, be painted. There should rather be living people breathing and feeling, suffering and loving. I felt I have to do this. It would be so simple. The flesh would take on form and the colours come to life."<sup>x</sup> This vision rejects the goal of the Naturalists and the Impressionists to paint objectively, that is, directly from nature. Instead of painting what he sees, the artist should paint what he *saw* in that specific moment, allowing it to be molded by his mind and soul. "It is true that a chair can be just as interesting as a man," Munch explained, "but the chair must be seen by a man. In one way or another, he must have had an emotional reaction to it and the painter must cause the viewer to react in the same way."<sup>xi</sup> The external is subordinated to the internal, and the internal, in turn, is projected onto nature. His insistence that the audience be moved by the picture suggests that his "subjective psychological experiences" can be raised to the level of "universal statements analyzing the soul of modern man."<sup>xii</sup>

In his *oeuvre*, Munch aspired to express the first impression or moment of an experience. One of Munch's intellectual companions, Swedish playwright, sculptor, and painter August Strindberg, may have encouraged Munch to pursue this agenda more fervently. In his essay, "The New Arts, or the Role of Chance in Artistic Creation" from 1894, he wrote:

*Now freed from the trouble of finding the right colours, the soul of the painter enjoys the freedom to elicit shapes, and as his hand manipulates the spatula at random, still retaining nature's model in mind without seeking to copy it, the result reveals itself as a charming combination of the conscious and the unconscious.<sup>xiii</sup>*

The juxtaposition of the words "manipulates" and "at random" is peculiar because it foreshadows the remarkable paradox so apparent in paintings by the best known Abstract Expressionist, Jackson Pollock. The idea of "randomness" is more complicated than it seems and rather difficult to achieve. While the artist relinquishes control,

allowing his conscience, not his intellect, to guide him, he still manages to “manipulate” or control the composition of the piece. The “alloverness”—the fact that the viewer’s eye travels all over the painting without settling on any single focal point, a term coined by art critic Clement Greenberg—of Pollock’s larger paintings and the seemingly spontaneous curves and sinews of the poured paint, to which the mainstream audience often responds, “Anyone could do that!” illustrates the contradiction.

Several of Munch’s paintings, among them *The Madonna* and *The Scream*, contain drips, a result of the runny, thin quality of the paint Munch employed. Heller explores this detail in his thorough discussion of *The Scream*: “Like the visible retention of changes in other paintings by him, these drips are intended to leave the impression that the artist created during a fit of passion, almost unconsciously, instinctively and directly without prior thought or study.”<sup>xiv</sup> This idea of the passion, instinct, and the unconscious—all removed from the cerebral realm—prefigures the Surrealists.

In his essay, Strindberg also introduces the term “art automatique,”<sup>xv</sup> the same term used thirty years later by the “Pope” of Surrealism, André Breton, and other Surrealist artists like Max Ernst. The spontaneous technique of writing, drawing, and painting extended into Jackson Pollock’s vocabulary and was monumentally reconfigured to “destroy painting” only decades later. While it is intriguing to associate the drips on Munch’s canvases with those of Pollock’s, one must take care to distinguish the working methods of the two artists. While Munch propped the canvas or board vertically so the thin paint ran down it as he worked (it was not necessarily splattered), Pollock placed the canvas on the floor and enlisted gravity to create his poured paintings. Apart from drips or pours, however, the sinuous, impulsive line imbued with blood-red hues in Munch’s fjord sky demonstrates his use of color and line to evoke emotion.

In Munch’s case, the artist finds inspiration in introspec-

tion, and the sensations conjured up by this reflection cause him to manipulate the medium, thereby distorting the features of nature, until he has fully conveyed what the original psychological experience inspired in him. Nearly ten years after the death of his sister Sophie, Munch painted *The Sick Child* (figure 2), a clear departure point for his mature works. He was continually disturbed by the memory of her suffering, perhaps by the horrific image of the coughing up of blood, and would even paint several versions of this work at later stages of his life. He commented, “When I saw the sick child for the first time—the pale head with the vividly red hair against the white pillow—it gave



FIGURE 2. EDVARD MUNCH, *THE SICK CHILD* (1885-6).

me an impression which disappeared while I was working.”<sup>xvi</sup> Munch later “discovered that my own eyelashes had contributed to the impression of the picture—I therefore painted them as hints of shadows across the picture.”<sup>xvii</sup> After painting the figures and periphery of this key work, Munch scratched and scored the surface, destroying the polished look that had characterized a “finished” work in Western art for centuries. In this sense, one can see where de Kooning got his idea of “destroying” painting.



FIGURE 3. WILLEM DE KOONING, *WOMAN I* (1950-2).

On the one hand, the violation of the canvas renders the work raw and immediate. On the other hand, it expresses Munch's frustration or failure in seizing the initial feeling of the original experience. John Boulton Smith expounds on this issue, quoting Munch within, "In the course of a year I scratched it out countless times—I wanted to catch the first impression—but gradually I tired out and the colours became grey', an effect exacerbated by the careless treatment the work received later, being left outdoors to gain a 'patina' as might a sculpture."<sup>xviii</sup> Exposing the work to the elements might not have been unintentional on Munch's part. This "weathering" may have added expressive value to Munch's work, just as Munch deliberately exposed the grain of the wood or the bare canvas beneath the paint to intensify the evocative powers of the painting or print as a whole.

The deliberate distancing of the artist from the total control of his work foreshadows twentieth-century composer John

Cage and his musical composition "Four Minutes and Thirty-Three Seconds" (1952), in which Cage instructed the performers to *not* play their instruments. The result consisted not of pure silence, of course, but of the sounds of the environment (e.g. an audience member coughing, a truck passing by the venue outside, the faint hum of the central air, etc.).<sup>xix</sup> Around this time Robert Rauschenberg created his *White Canvases*. The viewer, part of the environment, would influence the work of art in this case by standing in front of the blank canvas, thereby projecting his or her shadow onto it. The unpredictability of how the environment could impact the work reflects Strindberg's fascination with the unconscious and spontaneous. While Munch's immediate influence can be felt more strongly in Abstract Expressionism, the circulation of these neo-Dadaist ideas hark back to some of the most influential figures in Munch's career, namely Strindberg and his ideas in the "Role of Chance in Artistic Creation".

Munch's frustration with *The Sick Child* and his consequent reworking of the painting through deliberate damage to the canvas recalls Willem de Kooning's tendencies in the *Woman Series*. *Woman I* (figure 3), executed over two years in six documented stages, also witnessed a type of gradual obliteration. In de Kooning's painting, however, the destruction did not involve scraping the surface, but rather abstracting the figure in a tornado of agitated brushstrokes. In his discussion of Abstract Expressionists, Donald Gordon explains that the "gestural activity of *Woman I*, if taken literally, records the countless hours, days, and months of rapid but wholly tiring arm and hand movements, movements which bespeak aesthetic tension, artistic frustration, and motor conflict."<sup>xx</sup> This citation brings to mind the idea of the work of art as a process rather than a finished product, exhibited in the working method and *oeuvre* of both Munch and de Kooning.

American critic Harold Rosenberg created the term "Action Painting" in 1952. Just as Munch subordinated external reality to internal subjectivity in his works, Rosenberg's theory argued that the aesthetic product is always subordinate

to the event of painting. Thus, the act of painting is also an existential affirmation for the artist, blurring “every distinction between art and life.”<sup>xxi</sup> Rosenberg’s favorite Action Painters included Pollock, Gorky, and de Kooning. The pouring of paint across a large surface in Pollock, the scumbling of the wax crayon in Gorky,<sup>xxii</sup> the innumerable campaigns in de Kooning, and finally the scratching and scouring of the canvas in Munch are all labor-intensive processes through which the artist manipulates his medium not only to make his mark, but to also transmit the essentials of his unconscious at the moment of inspiration.

Munch’s repertoire embodied and foresaw recurring Expressionist themes and techniques, but what did it share with the “abstract” nature of Abstract Expressionism? Munch’s use of symbols and his eclectic portrayal of figures adhered to the path towards abstraction. Nearing abstraction is yet another way to interpret de Kooning’s idea of the destruction of painting since Western art, unlike Islamic art, which has a strong tradition of geometric and floral motifs, has for centuries been so invested in figural

representation. Both Munch and de Kooning diminished the figure-ground relationship in their works. They achieved this effect by flattening forms, expanding solid areas of color, and almost completely eliminating modulation. They reduced the sense of illusion so the figures are simplified and distorted, thus less lifelike. The works were no longer descriptive of what the artist sees, but rather a sign of their subjective vision.

*The Kyss* (figure 4) of 1897-1902 exemplifies Munch’s embrace of abstraction. Interestingly enough, Strindberg described the pictures with misogynistic overtones: “The fusion of two beings, the smaller of which, shaped like a carp, seems on the point of devouring the larger as is the habit of vermin, microbes, vampires, or women.”<sup>xxiii</sup> The figures constitute a black and white blob; this form even predates Picasso’s biomorphic forms. The complete “fusion” of the faces summons the psychological melting together and the loss of individuality of two beings engaged in an erotic act. In a different version of the same year, the grain of the wood with nails visible reinforces the flatness of the figures; moreover, its curvilinear pattern echoes the gentle wave that forms the figures. Perhaps Munch saw the rings in the wood in this particular woodcut as a symbol for infinity, a reflection that he took love extremely seriously. He might have also associated the shape with the never-ending cycle of love and death that he witnessed and himself experienced throughout his childhood and adolescence.

FIGURE 4. EDVARD MUNCH, *KISS IV* (1897-1902).



De Kooning’s *Woman I* is arguably less abstracted than the figures in Munch’s comparable image. De Kooning represented the looming eyes and the large, swelling breasts of the female figure, reminiscent of ancient goddesses of fertility, with simple ovals; the skirt, with swabs of red and ochre; and the legs, with flesh-toned rectangles. The gestural commotion around the torso is evocative of de Kooning’s *pentimenti*<sup>xxiv</sup>; the need for abstraction attained via multiple campaigns attests to the “utter dependence on pigment as an expressive agency” and to the fact that the process of creating, destroying, and recreating reveals something fundamental about the artist.



Although Munch abstracted the figures in *The Kiss* to a considerable degree, the human power of projection would almost immediately create for us the image of a man and woman embracing, even if we had never seen the work in alternative media. In this sense, Abstract Expressionism is misleading. The degree to which Expressionists can reveal the inner workings of their soul through pure abstraction—if there even is such a thing—has been tested. Mark Rothko oscillated between Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting by replacing the human figure first with symbols, then with colored shapes, which seem to float off the canvas.<sup>xxv</sup>

De Kooning, on the other hand, felt uncomfortable with completely abandoning figuration. Even his most renowned works *Attic* and *Excavation* recall human form in their fleshy tones, limb-like linear forms, and faint references to women's breasts and buttocks. For this reason, British art critic and curator David Sylvester observes that de Kooning's work "reflects a total commitment to an ongoing dialectic between figuration and abstraction."<sup>xxvi</sup> Despite his significant experimentation with abstraction, de Kooning himself admitted that "even abstract shapes must have a likeness."<sup>xxvii</sup>

In 2001, the Arken Museum of Modern Art in Denmark and the Munch Museum in Oslo organized *Echoes of the Scream*, a stimulating exhibition that compared Munch to artists of the second half of the twentieth century, among them Jasper Johns and Francis Bacon. The curator Holger Reenberg encapsulated the overarching theme of the exhibit in the following quote:

*The artists in Echoes of the Scream all evince a striving towards Man, however removed or absent the figure of man may seem. When the artist Jasper Johns (1930) says of his abstract pictures that they are meant to suggest physical presence and closeness, he is in effect describing many of the works included in the exhibition—an exhibition very much about the question of how to liberate oneself from figurative painting without surrendering the story of man.*<sup>xxviii</sup>

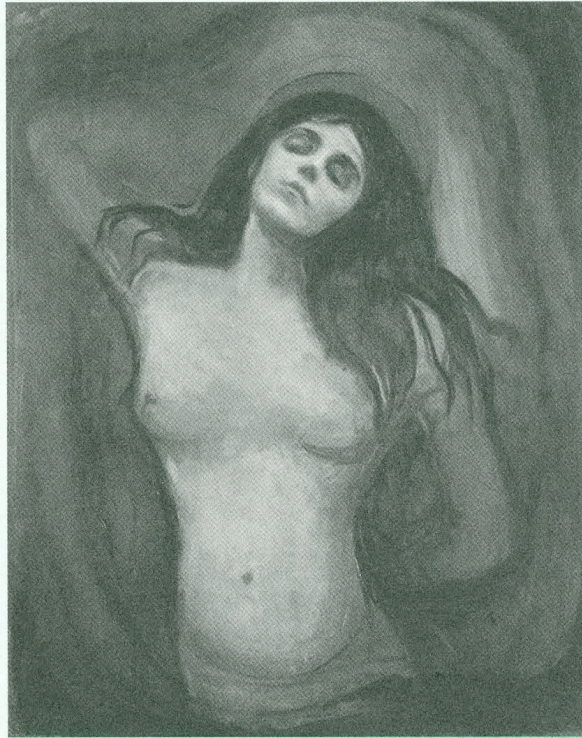


FIGURE 5. EDVARD MUNCH, MADONNA (1894).

Since many Abstract Expressionists found the complete avoidance of figuration challenging and seemed to return to the figure in one way or another, it can be devised that Munch's frequent depiction of figures does not distance him from said movement, but instead intensifies his connection to it.

Apart from figural depiction, another interesting relationship between the two artists' *oeuvre* is the environment in which the figure is placed. The sharp angle formed by the bridge barrier in *The Scream*, *Despair*, and *Angst*, among others, creates an antagonism between figure and setting. This is also the line that divides the "twisting torso" and the "art nouveau curvature of the landscape"<sup>xxix</sup> and symbolically alienates the artist as he hears the infamous shriek pierce through nature. Munch has painted not a landscape but a "soulcape"<sup>xxx</sup> and "inscape," an idea theorized by Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Christian Gether

wrote in *Echoes of the Scream*, “Here we no longer find the ideal, geometric space of the Renaissance, symbolising God’s perfect Creation and occasioning utopian dreams—instead we find a whirling vortex of colours and shapes, breaking and straining against each other in a dystopian vision of horror.”<sup>xxxii</sup> He highlighted defining features of our century such as electricity, nuclear power, and mass consumerism in order to illustrate how *The Scream*’s easily comprehensible themes of fear, suffering, and isolation reverberate in our era.

The vortex to which Christian Gether referred is also present in de Kooning. The jagged, agitated brushwork that envelopes *Woman I* without concealing or revealing makes up the “no-environment” of many of de Kooning’s *Woman* paintings. The eroticism and overwhelming physical presence of the woman echos Munch’s *Madonna* (figure 5). The Madonna has her arms behind her back,

thrusting her chest forward. The neutral yet incredibly sensual facial features reflect the importance of the unconscious in erotic and religious experiences alike. Indeed, the vortex of swirling colors that extend at the tips of the Madonna’s hair and surround her immaculate body, create a “sense of liquid space, a type of fluid environment.”<sup>xxxii</sup> This attribute, while still implying some depth of space, places the figure in an ambiguous setting. Here the early portraits of seated men by Arshile Gorky and de Kooning come to mind. The painting of *The Hands* (figure 6) by Munch shares the no-environment, the vortex, and even the color scheme of *Woman I*. In de Kooning, restless smears of heavy impasto replace the truncated hands reaching for the naked figure in Munch’s *Hands*. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, de Kooning continued this trend by blurring the distinction between the human figure and nature in such works as *Woman in Landscape III*.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

In all these ways, Munch and de Kooning can be united across the century-old history of Expressionism. Such a connection allows the art historian to discover even more relationships among Munch and other modern artists. In particular, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, and Francis Bacon share many formal and thematic aspects with Edvard Munch. One of the recurring ideas in the work of all these artists is unmistakably the role of the unconscious and the enlistment of randomness, spontaneity, and chance in artistic creation. Certainly the duality of a work of art as both process and product reveals the importance of the self to the artist and hints at the many philosophers and theorists whose writings paralleled and perhaps inspired these creative minds and talented hands, whether it be Søren Kierkegaard or Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lastly, one cannot ignore the overlapping sensations and moods evoked by these works. Fear, hopelessness, isolation, even revelation and irony, constitute the universal emotions that these works help us clarify for ourselves.

In 1953, Austrian Expressionist Oskar Kokoschka, inevitably influenced by Munch, wrote the following words:



*Edvard Munch, too, has turned to ashes; but as long as he lived he wore no blindfold. He kept his eyes wide open, his gaze reached into our time of transition, into our most intimate self where fear lodges in our hearts. I ask: can anyone ask for a better public? Does not his art show the solution of the problem of life to the many who today believe in a third world war as in an inevitable catastrophe? . . . He knew that he had breathed a new spirit into the language of pictograms which is older than all spoken or written language.*<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Kokoschka's reference to a blindfold stresses the indifference and impersonality of the modern society scarred by the horrors of war; in fact, for modern audiences the war imbued Munch's art with so much significance and relevance. Munch "wore no blindfold" because he was not intimidated by the inner world. He yearned to look inside himself and contemplate what he found, no matter how dreadful or uninviting. Through hundreds of pages of writing, Munch constantly reflected on his moods, often provoked by the emotive Norwegian landscape, and channeled his fear and anxiety into countless paintings and prints. Perhaps the "solution to the problem of life" is to exercise our creativity and thus reflect more deeply on our external and internal realities. Kokoschka's view of Munch as the creator of a new artistic language, echoed by the many art critics who have dubbed Munch the "Father of Expressionism," appropriately parallels de Kooning's comment on the destruction of painting that served as the departure point for this fascinating discussion.

#### ENDNOTES

- i. Artists Rights Society
- ii. Edvard Munch bestowed 1,000 paintings, 15,400 etchings, lithographs, and woodcuts, 4,500 watercolors and drawings, and six sculptures to his hometown of Oslo, Norway upon his death in 1944. Clark (13)
- iii. Quoted in Gordon (198)
- iv. Heller, *Edvard Munch: The Scream, 1972* (43)
- v. Heller, "Munch, Edvard", 2007
- vi. Rosenblum (104)
- vii. Heller (2007)
- viii. Gordon (195)
- ix. *Ibid* (27)

- x. Clark (12)
- xi. Heller (1972) (23)
- xii. *Ibid.* (39)
- xiii. Strindberg (103)
- xiv. Heller, 1972 (52)
- xv. Strindberg (106)
- xvi. Munch (147)
- xvii. *Ibid.* (147)
- xviii. Smith (42)
- xix. Kostelanetz (69-70)
- xx. Gordon (203-4)
- xxi. Carpenter
- xxii. Messinger (55)
- xxiii. Quoted in Clark (7)
- xxiv. An underlying image in a painting, as an earlier painting, part of a painting, or original draft, that shows through, usually when the top layer of paint has become transparent with age.
- xxv. Clearwater
- xxvi. Sylvester (29)
- xxvii. Prather (93)
- xxviii. Reenberg (36)
- xxix. Heller, 1972 (90)
- xxx. *Ibid.* (96)
- xxxi. Gether (16)
- xxxii. Heller (1972)(53)
- xxxiii. Grunenberg (3)
- xxxiv. Kokoschka (17)

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