Description book for 10 key objects

Edvard Munch
love and angst

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About this book

This book contains a description of ten works from the exhibition. An image of each work is on the facing page.

You will find a numbered gallery plan on the next page, showing you where to find each of the ten works as you explore the exhibition. The book also includes an introduction to each of the seven sections of the exhibition.

When you have finished with this book please return it to the holder at the exhibition exit.

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Edvard Munch love and angst

book pick-up area

1. Self-portrait with Skeleton Arm, 1895
2. Kristiania Bohemians II, 1895
3. Summer Night: the Voice, 1894
4. Separation II, 1896
5. Self-portrait with Tulla Larsen, about 1905
6. The Scream, 1895
7. Angst, 1896
8. Dead Mother and Child, 1901
9. Henrik Ibsen at the Grand Café, Kristiania, 1902
10. The Girls on the Bridge, 1918

book drop-off area
Edvard Munch love and angst

Gallery map

book pick-up

book drop-off

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
Introduction to Munch: love and angst

Edvard Munch (1863–1944) is a famous pioneer of modern art, best known for The Scream. During the first ten years of his career he concentrated on painting, before starting to produce innovative prints that established his reputation. Munch’s idiosyncratic expression of raw human emotion reflects many of the anxieties and hotly debated issues of his times, yet his art resonates powerfully to this day.

This exhibition focuses on Munch’s most creative period of printmaking, between the 1890s and the end of the First World War in 1918.

At the heart of Munch’s achievement was a suite of paintings that he called the Frieze of Life. These haunting images of love, jealousy, anxiety and death were not initially conceived as a single cycle, but gradually developed into one, as Munch expanded his ideas. He saw works on certain themes as his ‘children’ – when he sold one, he created another to replace it. The prints displayed along the curving back wall of the gallery all relate to the Frieze of Life, as well as to their own section of the exhibition.
Edvard Munch love and angst
Self-portrait with Skeleton Arm, 1895

Lithograph, black and white, 45 x 32 cm.
British Museum

In this self-portrait, Munch represents his face with detailed realism, while his arm is that of a skeleton.

Munch’s white face looks straight ahead against a stark black background. His features are captured in confident, sweeping lines: straight dark hair combed flat; eyes gazing into the distance; prominent ears; straight nose; and a moustache over full lips.

From the neck downwards, his body is engulfed in darkness – except for his left arm. This runs along the bottom edge of the print, as if separate from his body. Instead of being a living arm, the arm consists of bare white bones.

This self-portrait is one of the earliest prints Munch made. The skeleton arm is a conscious memento mori: a reference to his own mortality. The theme haunts much of his work, influenced by the traumatic experience of the death of his mother Laura when he was only five, and of his older sister Sophie when he was thirteen.
Introduction to Bohemians and free love

Munch was born in 1863 into a deeply religious, middle class family, with whom he had a close bond all his life.

To his father’s dismay, Munch was much influenced by a radical group of bohemian writers, poets and artists in Kristiania, who openly criticised society and advocated free love. In his many visits to Paris and Berlin, Munch was attracted to similar companions, whose work pushed against the boundaries of art, literature and philosophy.

Munch began to develop a visual language in his prints that was a radical departure from the slick society portraits and grand Scandinavian landscapes fashionable at the time.
Edvard Munch love and angst
Kristiania Bohemians II, 1895

Etching, open bite and drypoint, black and white, 27.6 x 37.6 cm.
Munch Museum, Oslo

Six men are seated at a rectangular table, set with wine and glasses. The table is shown end-on, with the near end cut off by the bottom of the etching: this makes the figures appear very close, as if the viewer is seated at the head of the table. At the far end, looking towards us, stands a woman, hands on hips. Between the figures, cigarette smoke swirls in stylised loops.

The print recalls the writers and artists who met at the Grand Café in Kristiania during the mid-1880s and discussed the problems of society and the merits of free love. The woman is Oda Engelhardt, and the men include both her first and second husbands. At the bottom left, in profile, is Munch himself, his eye a dark hollow in his white, mask-like face. Several of the other men appear older, with bald heads and moustaches, and are dressed in formal bow ties and dinner jackets.

The figures and table are worked in vigorous lines, with visible cross-hatching, creating a mood of turbulent emotion.
3 Summer Night: the Voice, 1894

Etching and drypoint, black and white with hand colouring, 25 x 32.5 cm
Munch Museum, Oslo

In the centre of the image a young woman stands among trees, whose slender trunks form vertical bars around her. She is shown to hip level, hands behind her, head tilted back, looking out at the viewer. She wears a plain white dress and a round-brimmed hat.

Behind the figure, about a third of the way up the image, is a shoreline; above it is shimmering water. High up to the left the moon hovers; below, a column of light is reflected in the water. The reflection of the moon in water, with its elongated shape, is one of Munch’s recurring phallic symbols.

There are occasional patches of colour: a smudge of turquoise to the upper left; a wash of green to the upper right; and the brilliant yellow of the moon and its reflection.

This work recalls Munch’s first tortured love affair with a married woman, Milly Thaulow, during summer visits to the coastal village of Åsgårdstrand. It was one of the first prints that Munch included in his Frieze of Life.
Introduction to Love in torment

Many of Munch’s most innovative works reveal his obsession with and fear of female power and a sense of suffocation. He had many affairs but fled from marriage and commitment.

Munch admitted in later life that his ideas were directly inspired by the pattern of love, infidelity and despair experienced by his friends in Kristiania, whose loose-living chaotic lifestyle was exacerbated by excessive amounts of alcohol. His images of passion and jealousy recall the emotions surrounding their affairs, and reflect memories of his own turbulent first relationship with Milly Thaulow.

In Munch’s Frieze of Life, this is the dark side of the bohemian dream.
Edvard Munch love and angst
Edvard Munch love and angst

4 Separation II, 1896

Lithograph, greenish-brown, yellow, light blue and brownish red, 44.1 x 62 cm
Munch Museum, Oslo

Munch often sets his figures against the shoreline of Åsgårdstrand to express different states of emotion. In this head and shoulders portrait of a man and a woman, the figures are set against a dark hillside to the left and a light blue sea to the right. Between the figures, the sinuous line of the shore snakes upwards, separating them.

On the left, the man is looking downwards, with lowered eyelids. His black hair covers his head like a cap and his face is coloured a brownish red. On the right, the young woman is turned away from him, her right profile towards us, looking out to sea. Her long wavy hair blows backwards, across the man’s shoulder. Both face and hair are coloured yellow.

Munch reflected on this composition in later life: ‘I symbolised the connection between the separated couple with the help of the long wavy hair… The long hair is a kind of telephone wire.’
Edvard Munch love and angst
5 Self-portrait with Tulla Larsen, about 1905

Oil on canvas, 64 x 45.5 cm
Munch Museum, Oslo

This is a vividly coloured head and shoulders portrait of a man, on the left, and a woman, on the right. A smaller, indistinct male figure looms in the background. The background – including the smaller figure – is a lurid green, which leaches onto the woman’s hair and face.

The canvas has been divided vertically into two parts, between the man and the woman.

The man – Munch himself – is shown in three-quarter profile, turning his brooding gaze on the woman. He has dark brown hair and a moustache, and wears a dark jacket, white shirt and red necktie. The woman faces forward, looking out directly and unsmilingly. She has loose flowing red wavy hair, green eyes, and a narrow face with pointed chin. The smaller figure in the background has a mask-like face, and wears similar clothes to Munch.

Munch became engaged to Tulla Larsen in 1898. He cut the painting in two when the relationship ended.
Introduction to Anguish and isolation

For Munch, separation and isolation led to a state of anguish. Munch depicted this most famously in his painting The Scream, which first appeared in an exhibition in Berlin in 1893 as the focus of a section called ‘Life Anxiety’.

Two years later, Munch made a lithograph based on the painting, with the title ‘Scream’, followed by the words ‘I felt a large scream pass through nature’ printed in German below. It was central to establishing his international reputation. A reproduction was made with a French translation that appeared in the Paris art journal La Revue Blanche in 1895, followed by an English version, published in New York, in 1896.’

The Scream became a central element in Munch’s Frieze of Life.
Edvard Munch love and angst
In this print, a figure stands facing us on a bridge against a background of swirling water and clouds.

The figure is centrally placed in the lower half of the composition. It is facing towards us, its hands cupped around its skull-like head, its eyes staring and its mouth open in a scream. Behind the figure, the railings of the bridge form a strong diagonal line from the bottom right corner to the middle left edge of the print. At the left, two men in black coats and hats are walking away. In the upper half of the image, water and clouds are formed of undulating bands that emphasise the sense of unease.

Munch wrote in his diary on 22 January 1892: ‘I was walking along the road with two friends – the sun was setting – suddenly the sky turned blood red – I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence – there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city – my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety – and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature.’
Edvard Munch love and angst
Angst, 1896

Woodcut, printed in black and reddish-orange from one block, 45.7 x 27.5 cm
Munch Museum, Oslo

In the lower half of this print, a crowd of pale, mask-like faces looms towards us out of the darkness. They are dressed for outdoors, the men in top hats, and the women in hats and bonnets. Behind them, pale wavy lines suggest water. In the upper half of the print, contrasting with the black and white of the scene below, flowing bands of reddish orange and white suggest a turbulent sky.

The print relates to an 1892 painting, *Evening on Karl Johan*, which recorded the main social event of the day in Kristiania – an afternoon promenade down the town’s central street, when the bourgeoisie greeted each other in their finery. Here, Munch has transposed the scene to the shoreline setting of *The Scream*.

In an undated note, Munch scribbled: ‘why do people’s faces glide past me like a stream, restlessly, incessantly, seeking a destination. I see their hollow eyes – skulls behind the pale masks…’
Introduction to Sickness and death

Munch remained haunted all his life by the death of his favourite sister Sophie from tuberculosis when he was 13. He channelled this emotional experience into the creation of one of his most famous works, The Sick Child.

In a time of rapid industrialisation and urban poverty, tuberculosis was a constant threat. Munch witnessed at first hand his God-fearing father, the devoted doctor of Kristiania’s slums, frequently resorting to prayer in his efforts to save lives.

From childhood Munch suffered from ill health himself. He believed that tuberculosis and mental illness were family legacies. But as he scribbled in a notebook, ‘I would not cast off my illness, because there’s much in my art that I owe to it.’
Dead Mother and Child, 1901

Etching, drypoint and open bite, black and white, 32.4 x 50 cm
Munch Museum, Oslo

A child faces us, his hands clasped to his face in distress, in front of his mother’s deathbed. The mother lies with her head at the left of the image. Her thin, angular face is shown in right profile, eyes closed. The child stands in front of the bed, towards the right, facing outwards. His face is a mask of grief, eyes staring, brow creased, cheeks flushed. His hands, clasped into fists, are raised to the sides of his face. The child’s dark, wavy hair is parted in the centre and he wears a blouse with a frilled, lacy collar. The print ends just below the child’s hips.

The emotional impact of death is represented in an unadorned linear technique to emphasise anguish. The child is the artist himself, reliving the death of his own mother when he was only five, and clasping his head in a gesture taken from *The Scream*.
Introduction to Stage and performance

Munch’s friendship with Strindberg and other contemporary playwrights, such as the Norwegians Henrik Ibsen and Gunnar Heiberg, gave him an early interest in the theatre.

The artist felt a particular affinity with Ibsen’s plays, which shocked bourgeois society with their uncompromising analysis of social and moral conventions by addressing adultery, hypocrisy, inherited syphilis and madness. As Munch put it, ‘Ibsen threw a huge log into the anthill’.

The plays of the Scandinavian dramatists formed a fundamental part of a new experimental theatre in Paris, staged mainly by the private subscription theatres, the Théâtre Libre and the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. New forms of theatre demanded new forms of art. Many well-known contemporary artists were invited to design stage sets and programmes, including Toulouse-Lautrec, Edouard Vuillard and Munch himself.
Edvard Munch love and angst
Henrik Ibsen at the Grand Café, Kristiania, 1902

Lithograph, black and white, 43.4 x 59.6 cm
Munch Museum, Oslo

In this portrait of the playwright Henrik Ibsen, Munch has presented Ibsen’s disembodied head against a black backdrop that resembles a theatre curtain. Ibsen is facing towards us, in the left half of the composition. He has a prominent nose and craggy brows beneath a high, domed forehead. The face is framed by thick white hair: hair extends outwards from the temples and upwards from the crown of the head, while bushy sideburns outline the cheekbones and jaw. This makes the whole head stand out starkly from the black drape behind.

To the right of the image, the curtain has been partially drawn back to reveal a view of the street outside, with pedestrians bustling to and fro under umbrellas.

Munch first met Ibsen in Kristiania in 1893, where the elderly playwright had returned to live after many years of self-imposed exile. Munch gave Ibsen a guided tour of his exhibition in Kristiania in 1895.
Introduction to Homecoming

Munch remained emotionally attached to his family and homeland all his life. Every summer he visited Åsgårdstrand, a village south of Kristiania, and from 1889 rented a small house there that he later owned. He once wrote of Åsgårdstrand, ‘To walk around here is like walking among my pictures.’

Munch suffered a nervous breakdown in 1908 aggravated by anxiety and acute alcoholism and was admitted to a clinic in Copenhagen. In 1909 he returned to Norway. The episode marked a change in the style of his art and he focused more on Norwegian landscape and daily life.

In later years, by now a famous artist, Munch continued to travel, but not as frequently. In 1916 he bought Ekely, an estate on the outskirts of Kristiania, where he lived until his death in 1944, aged 80.
Edvard Munch love and angst
The Girls on the Bridge, 1918

Woodcut in blue, with zincograph from three plates in yellow, red and green, 49.5 x 42.3 cm

Munch Museum, Oslo

In this colourful print, three young women are standing on a bridge. The women are centrally placed in the lower half of the image. They rest their hands on the rail of the bridge, which extends from the bottom right corner of the image to half way up the left edge, in strong diagonal lines. The women stand close together, their right sides and backs towards us, and their faces turned away towards the water. They wear long dresses, with hair flowing down their backs; the woman in the centre wears a straw hat, and her dress is red; the rest of the print is predominantly blue and white. In the upper half of the image are houses and trees under a sky composed of blue and white vertical stripes.

Munch first painted this scene of Åsgårdstrand in the summer of 1901. He painted several versions between 1901 and 1935 and produced five prints in different techniques.
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