

ART ANALYSIS: *THE SCREAM* BY EDVARD MUNCH (1863- 1944)

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The Reflection of Emotion



The “*Scream*” is one of the most noticeable and exploited artworks. The *Scream* was painted by **Edvard Munch** in 1893 in expressionism style (maybe the first) and is recognized for revolving colors, bright sky, and mostly for the mysterious subject. The subject in this painting appears as a genderless alien-looking being with mouth and eyes wide open, screaming from a deep pain. I ask myself, why this person is screaming. I want to know, this person’s pain is physical, psychological, or both. I am also curious to know why Munch painted this painting. What he was trying to explicate.

At the end of 19th century, when **Freud**, a psychiatrist, was practicing unconsciousness and the effects of childhood events on the causing of the future shaped personality, Munch, a young Norwegian artist, began to express his distress and emotional suffering through his artistic work. A revolution that changed the style of painting forever. Later on known as Expressionism.

The *Scream* was a part of series known as Frieze of Life, including three different themes. Love, Anxiety and Death. *Scream* was the last work of the Love theme, since he believed despair is ultimate outcome of love.

“Everybody knows, but everybody doesn’t know Munch” said Kynaston McShine who organized an exhibition of Munch works in Museum of Modern Art in New York. “They all have the idea that they know Munch, but they really don’t” he continued.

Two major painful events in Munch’s life, going all the way back to his childhood, shaped his anxiety and fears personality. He was just 5 years old when his mother died from tuberculosis. At the age of 13 he lost his favorite sister, Sophie whom replaced his mother. To complete his tragic life, his father began suffering with psychotic depression. All these tragic events, brought him a horrifying vision of death associated with pain, despair and paranoia. As he wrote in his diary “My fear of life is necessary to me, as my illness. Without anxiety and illness, I am a ship without a rudder... My sufferings are part of myself and my art. They are distinguishable from me, and their destruction would destroy my art”.

His father was a religious military doctor, who’s emphasizes on the next world, along with entertaining his children with vivid ghost and American writer Edgar Allen Poe stories, reinforced and magnified Edvard’s fear of death. In the aim of his inherited mental illness and insanity, companion with his bohemian friends exposed him to modernist and their believes in free love, the sense of loss, hopelessness, and heaven, in conflict with the lack of his father’s faith and his childhood training, caused him feel guilty. Perhaps it was the source of his anguish.

Edvard Munch never married and called his paintings his children. To describe him Karen Rosenberg, an art columnist of The New York Times, wrote “a single, mentally ill artist at the

dawn of 20th century”. Munch tried to indicate all the emotion of despair of his personal life in his art work instead of technical skill or beauty that was a traditional style and aim of art. He strongly believed a painter should not only print or copy the external reality, but has to record the impact of the scene had on the artist with his own sensibility as he had experienced.

From 1,008 paintings, 4,443 drawings and 15,391 prints that authorities found after his death, mostly were self-portraiture! This is like we are seeing a visual autobiography of a narcissistic artist.

We all know Mona Lisa as an icon for renaissance, *The Scream* is an icon of modern time. Two oil paintings, two pastels and numerous printing of the image of the “Soul Painting” as Munch referred to The Scream, indicates how Munch was eager to show his emotion of that anguishing moment.

How the idea of The Scream was born? So what’s the story behind The Scream? According to Munch’s diaries, the idea and inspiration for The Scream was what he experienced in his real life, which Munch later adapted into *The Scream* painting in 1893 and finally, in 1895, in a poem.

"I was walking down the road with two friends when the sun set; suddenly, the sky turned as red as blood. I stopped and leaned against the fence, feeling unspeakably tired. Tongues of fire and blood stretched over the bluish black fjord. My friends went on walking, while I lagged behind, shivering with fear. Then I heard the enormous infinite scream of nature." Edvard Munch

What Munch was describing, seemed a relaxing evening walk with some friends that turned to a horrifying experience as anxiety crisis moment for him. He was struggling with a panic attack and terrified, while his friend walking enjoyably away. No one knew what he was going through. He felt horrifying alone. In “**The Scream**” he is shedding out his soul, daily struggling with his anguish and fears onto the canvas and expressed them in the shapes and colors. However, it is a captured of human emotion, that all of us experienced in our life.

How Munch used his brush for landscaping on the *scream*, maybe was under influence of Van Gogh and his famous painting “Starry Night”. The vibrated red and orange sky falling into swirling dark blue water, express his anxiety and paranoia. The moment of despair situation with no hope, showed by the person in foreground. A person with open mouth seems to be screaming. But at the end of his poem Munch mentioned: “Then I heard the enormous infinite scream of nature.” Maybe that’s why the open mouth also covering his ears.

So where is the source of this Scream? By studying the location, it appeared there was a slaughter house nearby. Maybe the “scream of nature” (as also expressed in his poem) was

coming from the dying animals. Also there was a mental hospital, which his younger sister was hospitalized there. Maybe the *scream* was from feeling of his mentally ill sister.

Who is the person in foreground screaming? The gender of the person is unknown. Could be a man or a woman. Is it Munch or his ill sister? It could be anyone when it comes to screaming!

“**The scream**” is a timeless image of living under emotionally suffering in the modern world.

Citing and Quotes:

The New York Times, “That Open Mouth and Its Silent Voice” By Karen Rosenberg

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/26/arts/design/edvard-munch-the-scream-at-museum-of-modern-art.html>

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