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INTRODUCTION

“For in these pictures the painter gives his costliest possession – he gives his soul – his sorrow, his joy – he gives his heart's blood. He gives the person – not the object. These pictures will – they must be able to grip more strongly – first the few – then more – then everyone.”

Edvard Munch, 1891

In over seventy paintings and countless drawings, watercolours and graphic images of himself, Edvard Munch (1863–1944) used his own inner conflicts as the wellspring for his art. Through the use of double portraits and by including himself in many of his figurative paintings, he drew together his own views on life and death, love and loss, sexuality and pain in the wider context of his work. While we may see him as a man of intense personal feeling, he was also a man of his times, responsive to the many changes in attitudes to religion, society, sexual relations and individual psychology that were challenging the established order. Scandinavian playwrights like Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) and August Strindberg (1849–1912) were examining sexual and marital relationships. Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), Munch’s favourite author, explored the abnormal psychology and suffering of his characters. The early publications of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) began to unravel the role of the subconscious, and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) proposed a vision of the world without God. In that sense the journey of this exhibition is as much the artist’s subjective reaction to these changes as it is the record of his own self-examination. In finding ways to express such complex feelings he developed a pictorial language of great power and flexibility.

MUNCH AND NORWAY

Munch was born on 12 December 1863 and was the second of five children. His mother died from tuberculosis when he was five years old, and the children were brought up by their mother’s sister. His father, a doctor in the army medical corps, was deeply religious and reacted to his wife’s death by retreating into seclusion and allowing his beliefs to take on a frightening intensity. Munch later told his own doctor: ‘I learned early about the misery and dangers of life, and about the afterlife, about the eternal punishment which awaited the children of sin in Hell.’ The death of his older sister Sophie, again from tuberculosis, made a profound impression on the fourteen-year-old Edvard, increasing his sense of insecurity with regard to his own fragile health.
It was Munch’s father’s wish that he study engineering at the Technical College in Oslo but his poor health interrupted his attendance and, in 1880, he gave up engineering in order to study art. Norway was a poor, peasant country and the capital, Kristiania (re-named Oslo in 1925), only a small town with a population in 1885 of 135,000. There was no full-scale Art Academy and Munch studied at the Royal School of Drawing, becoming a full-time student in the Autumn of 1881. Norwegian artists tended to go abroad for their studies, mainly to Germany where they received a classical academic training. From the late 1870s, attention had switched to France and a growing interest in more naturalistic styles. In 1882, Munch met the painter Christian Krogh (1852–1925) who had been to Paris and absorbed the ideas of artists like Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), Edouard Manet (1832–1883) and the Impressionists. Munch and fellow students who shared a studio were supervised by Krogh and absorbed his dictum that painters should give a ‘picture of their time.’ Comparing his first self-portrait of 1882 (cat. 1) which, in its careful modelling of the features of the face, has a rather tight, formal approach to capturing a likeness, with his second of some nine months later (cat. 2), we already find a much looser handling of paint, the pose more casual, the lighting used to greater interpretative effect.

Like other young artists of the time, Munch painted interiors, figure studies and landscapes that fitted within the new naturalistic approach, observing outward appearances in a relaxed easy manner. But in The Sick Child (fig. 1, 1885), an exploration of the death of his sister, he draws on his own personal history and feelings. The face of the young girl, propped up against the pillow, seems to radiate an inner light. The paint, thinly applied, built up, scratched away, reworked, has a nervous intensity. The claustrophobic space shuts out the world in a moment of private grief as the hands of child and aunt melt together in a hopeless embrace.

‘With The Sick Child I took a new direction – it was a breakthrough in my art. Most of what I have done since then had its origin in that picture.’ Like many of his major works he would repaint The Sick Child a number of times, even as late as 1927. Something of the feeling of this painting can be seen in his third self-portrait, of 1886 (cat. 3) where the paint is scratched away, breaking the fragile surface of the skin. The downward gaze suggests an interior contemplation and the blood-red signature (the first self-portrait he signed), picks up the red of the lips and eyelids.

The Sick Child was shown in the autumn exhibition in Kristiania in 1886 under the title ‘Study’. It was not well received and Munch described the shouts and laughter of the gathered spectators. The sense of being an outsider was already established through his contact with the Bohemian movement in Kristiania led by Hans Jaeger (1854–1910), who had spent sixty days in detention for publishing a blasphemous and immoral book. Jaeger attacked the middle-class values of religion, property and marriage, advocating the release of women from suffocating family restrictions, and supporting free love. The first of the Bohemian Nine Commandments was, ‘you shall write your own life’, a demand that Munch would respond to, but not in the prevailing style of Norwegian naturalism.

PARIS

Munch had made a short visit to Paris in 1886, but between 1889 and 1892, with the help of government grants, he was able to spend a large part of each year absorbing current French artistic developments. As well as the established Impressionists, Munch could see the work of Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) and artists influenced by him, such as the newly formed Nabi group, all searching for a more subjective inner vision expressed in increasingly non-naturalistic styles. He could draw on the expressive power of Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) and the strange, Symbolist graphic work of Odilon Redon (1840–1916). His friendship with the Danish poet Emanuel Goldstein introduced him to French decadent and Symbolist poetry. But the sudden death of his father in November 1889, shortly after he arrived in Paris, turned Munch towards introspection, and a period of intense reflection radically changed his approach to painting.

In the St Cloud diaries, the artist explores his own problems and anxieties, dwelling on the recurring theme of illness, mortality and family loss. He deals with his own sexual initiation and rejection through his affair in 1885 with a married woman, Milly Thaulow, to whom he refers as ‘Mrs Heiberg’. From the back of a drawing of a couple in bed

Fig. 1
The Sick Child, 1885–86
Oil on canvas
119.5 x 118.5 cm
Nasjonalmuseet for Kunst/Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo
Photo: © Nasjonalgalleriet/J. Lathion
© Munch Museum/Munch – Ellingsen Group, BONO, Oslo, DACS, London 2005
together, entitled *Man and Woman*, comes the famous quotation: ‘No more interiors should be painted, no people reading and women knitting. They should be living people who breathe, feel, suffer and love.’ Through these pictures ‘people should understand the sacred, awesome truth involved, and they should remove their hats as in a church.’

The subjects of these pictures would come from Munch’s own personal experience and the means of expression can be seen in the development of his most famous painting, *The Scream* (1893). In 1892, wishing to express the sense of anxiety that had overwhelmed him while walking at sunset with two friends on the outskirts of Kristiania, he painted *Despair* (cat. 19). In the picture, Munch is seen leaning over a railing which moves diagonally back towards the left to where his friends have walked on. Above him is the blood-red sky, with the blue of the fjord in the distance and below, the green of the hillside, all clearly defined and separated. It is questionable whether the picture fully expresses his diary entry. ‘I stopped and leant against the railing deadly tired – looking out across flaming clouds that hung like blood and sword over the deep blue fjord and town – My friends walked on – I stood there trembling with anxiety and I felt a great, infinite scream through nature.’ In *The Scream* (cat. 20, lithographic version), he replaces his own figure with an image based on a Peruvian mummy seen in a Parisian ethnographic museum, a smaller, sexless creature facing the viewer, hands raised to a skull like face in an attempt to blank out a rising tide of anxiety. The accentuation of the diagonal increases the distance between figure and friends, emphasising the sense of loneliness, while the sweeping curves of the landscape and the more defined lines in the red sky, now reflected also on the bridge, unify the whole landscape into a throbbing intensity, which echoes through the curve of the fragile body.

Cat 5. In this self-portrait Munch confronts his own sexuality and the vital but, for him, dominating power of Woman. Above his face hangs a female mask, whose bright red cheeks and lips are full of erotic suggestion. The strongly outlined eyes contrast strikingly with Munch’s pale, expressionless, but almost yearning gaze. Set against the dominant red background, his head is enveloped by wispy strokes of black that seem to draw him into an embrace, an embrace that his sensual red lips suggest would not be unwelcome. Yet the damaged skin and yellow colouring of cheeks and forehead speak also of a sense of corruption and loss of vitality. It is an ambiguous image, as are many of Munch’s portrayals of men and women.

‘He does not paint the image of nature itself but the image in his memory, not scenery directly and at first hand, as it stands there in the outer world, but its subjective likeness, which for longer or shorter periods of time is etched and burnt into his retina and into his soul and constantly springs out of the darkness in garish colours under his eyelids as soon as he shuts his eyes.’

Ola Hansson, 1893
How would you relate the triangular motifs on his collar and neck to the triangular shapes of the mask?

By using white is he suggesting some sense of defensive purity?

In her catalogue essay, Iris Müller-Westermann links Self-Portrait with a Female Mask to two other works which use a similar formula of face combined with an ‘object’ above or below. In Vision (cat. 4, 1892), a head, loosely modelled on Munch, emerges from murky blue and green water. Above him, a white swan glides past, and clouds are reflected in the pure blue of the water. Munch wrote of the swan as ‘Woman’ and the head as ‘I’. In a pencil sketch of the subject, the man’s body can be seen surrounded by unpleasant underwater creatures. It is as though the head is a channel for all the difficult experiences that might be encountered in life, while the swan is representative of purity and innocence. The two make no contact, the swan is afraid of the man’s experience; innocence must keep its illusions.

In Self-portrait with Skeleton Arm (cat. 6, 1895), the artist’s distant, withdrawn face is placed on a black background. Below, a skeleton arm blocks off the bottom of the print, and above, Munch’s name and the date assert the creative authorship. It’s a contemplation of death, but also of the survival of the innermost thoughts of the artist. In linking these works we have a sense of the past and lost innocence, of the present with its conflicting sexuality, and of the future when all of us face death. These themes of life, love and death would preoccupy Munch for a large part of his working life and are essential components of what would become The Frieze of Life, a series of related paintings in which he both explored his feelings and expressed his personal philosophy.

**MUNCH’S SYMBOLISM**

From the mid-1880s through to 1900 Symbolist artists were at the forefront of the avant-garde in most European countries. In reaction to realism, artists sought to present a more subjective, suggestive view of the mystery of the human situation by drawing their imagery from many literary and visual sources – mythology, medievalism, the different world religions, mysticism, spiritualism and their fantastical imaginations. What distinguishes Munch is the far more personal quality of the visual imagery he uses for his paintings. The Norwegian seascape with its cool blue sea, the flat, curving beach and vertical pine trees bathed in the dusk-like summer light became an important symbolic element in many of his paintings. The reflected column of moonlight on water has an erotic allure, while the shadow suggests both a difficult past and future. Hair can both envelop and strangle, or provide a sought-for connection. The sweeping diagonal or an uncertain perspective creates psychological tension. Colour becomes an indicator of purity, sexuality, corruption or death.

Cat. 16. In this painting, Munch incorporates three images of woman: the virginal swan-like creature standing aloof on the curving shoreline, her gaze directed at the open sea; in the centre, a naked woman, with arms thrust behind her flame red hair, displaying a powerful sexuality; and standing next to her, a pale-faced, black-haired figure who seems to retreat into the background. Separated by a tree stands Munch, his black robe covered with the ‘flower of pain’, a symbol he used for ‘creative’ suffering. By including the name Sphinx in the title Munch makes reference both to the mythological figure, half woman, half beast, who devoured those victims unable to answer a famous riddle about the three ages of man, and to the contemporary meaning of Sphinx as a femme fatale. Munch’s own interpretation of the picture would change. He told Henrik Ibsen in 1895: ‘It is the dreaming woman – the woman in love with life – and the woman as nun – who stands pale-faced behind the trees.’ In another explanation he wrote: ‘Woman with her different nature is a mystery to man – woman who is at the same time saint, whore and an unfortunate devotee.’

How has Munch connected the images of the three women?

How has he used both the landscape and its colouring to give meaning to the image?

**BERLIN**

In 1892 Munch had been invited by the Berlin Society of Artists to exhibit in the city. The exhibition opened, but within a week, after heated debate between different groups of artists, it was closed. The event caused a scandal and opened divisions between German artists that led to the founding of the Berlin Secession. Despite the furore, the exhibition travelled to other German cities before returning to Berlin, and Munch’s relative success, compared to his reception in Norway, encouraged him to stay on in Berlin.

Here Munch encountered another set of radical bohemians including the Swedish playwright August Strindberg (1849–1912), the Polish writer Stanislaw Przybyszewski (1868–1927) and other German...
Cat. 16
Woman: Sphinx, 1893–94
Oil on canvas
72.5 x 100 cms
Munch-museet, Oslo
Photo: © Munch-museet, Oslo
© Munch Museum/Munch – Ellingsen Group, BONO, NIK, DACS, London 2005
writers and critics. A beautiful Norwegian writer and musician, Dagny Juel, who later married Przybyszewski, acted as the lightening conductor for the sexual tensions and involvement that animated the group. Their views on women were more extreme and pessimistic than Munch’s, but nevertheless helped to change his attitudes to relations between men and women for the worse, crystallising his own experiences into more negative feelings about the eternal cycle of attraction, consummation and rejection.

Believing that artists should draw on inner psychological conflicts, they followed Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea that art should be created in a state of frenzy. Stanislaw Przybyszewski, a skilled pianist, felt that art should also induce frenzy, and played Chopin at their local bar, the Black Piglet, with such intensity that ‘everyone looked as if they had been electrified, some screamed, others cast themselves onto their knees, some ran around as if seized by a higher spirit (or folly).’

To escape this hot-house atmosphere, Munch would retreat in the summer to his rented cottage in Aasgaardstrand, where he confessed to feeling well, and work on the paintings that would form the section devoted to Love in The Frieze of Life.

Cat. 21

Munch was thirty-one when he painted Self-portrait with a Cigarette, while living in Berlin. It is a dramatic image, the figure slightly looking down on us, lit from below, the body merging into the loosely painted background so that only hand and face stand out with any clarity. The gaze is inward, and although Munch’s presence is close to the picture plane, it is as though he has raised his hand in a defensive gesture at our possible entry onto the scene. At the same time, with the hand placed in the middle of the canvas, over his heart, and connected by the smoke to his head, we see the relationship between thought and action, an assertion of the activity of an artist. By completely avoiding any naturalistic background Munch emphasises his own interior vision, and the importance of the artist as thinker.

Does the shadow on his chest, cast by the hand, seem rather large?

Might this refer to some sense of strain created by his art?

On a more direct level, the use of the cigarette identified Munch with a bohemian, anti-middle-class milieu. The mass production of cigarettes in the mid-1880s associated them with the lower classes, and for many
commentators they were seen as corrupting and degenerate. Compared with the masculine pipe or cigar, cigarettes would link a man to the feminine and the aesthetic.

Despite further exhibitions in Berlin, Munch did not achieve the success he craved, and in the summer of 1895 returned to Norway. A large exhibition of his Berlin paintings attracted hostile criticism, although the Norwegian state’s purchase of his Self-portrait with Cigarette helped to confirm Munch’s faith in his abilities. A novel line of attack came from a twenty-six-year-old student of medicine, Johan Schaffenberg, who claimed that Munch was corrupting Norwegian youth. In an open attack in the University Student Association, he stated that the artist’s work was related to a medical condition and he linked his subject matter to the history of illnesses in the artist’s family. Munch, who was present at this event, replied: ‘Well, now I know – I’m crazy – been crazy for five generations – that’s good to know.’ Yet it would be true to say that Munch saw illness and anxiety as an aid to creativity, releasing the constraints of the rational mind. Without them, he said, ‘I would have been like a ship without a rudder.’

At the beginning of 1896 he left Norway and settled in Paris where he again made contact with Symbolist writers, artists and musicians. His friend Strindberg wrote about his work for the avant-garde artistic magazine La Revue Blanche. For the next two years Munch worked on graphic interpretations of many of his Frieze-of-Life paintings. The need to simplify and condense his painting style for a different medium would lead to a kind of cross-fertilisation of the two media.

Cat. 26 In 1898 Munch was commissioned to illustrate the front cover of the magazine Quickborn (Well of Youth), while Strindberg was to edit the articles, even though the two had fallen out in the events leading up to Strindberg’s mental breakdown and retreat to Sweden. Munch developed the design for the cover into a woodcut, the most physically demanding of the graphic media. The subject is creativity and suffering. In order to create art, symbolised by the flower, the agonised artist allows his life blood to pour into the soil, which might be seen as earthly experience, surrounding the lower half of his body. From blood and soil comes the flower, expression of the higher reality to which his gaze is directed.

How has Munch used the position of the hands and the diagonal shape created by arms and elbows to develop his theme?

Munch has used a curious cell-like structure to modulate and shade the areas of white in both background and body. How might this relate to his idea?

Munch has used a curious cell-like structure to modulate and shade the areas of white in both background and body. How might this relate to his idea?

‘I do not believe in art if it does not arise from the creator’s urge to open his heart. All art, literature and music, must be produced with one’s heart-blood. Art is the heart-blood of a person.’

Edvard Munch, beginning of 1890s

Cat. 26
The Flower of Pain, 1898
Woodcut
460 x 325 mm
Munch-museet, Oslo
Photo: © Munch-museet, Oslo
© Munch Museum/Munch – Ellingsen Group, BONO, Oslo, DACS, London 2005

The diagonal shape formed by the arms relates this image to Munch’s painting Madonna (cat. 23, lithographic version), in which he portrayed a woman at the point of conception. Stanislaw Przybyszewski described the red headband around her black hair as ‘the halo of the coming martydom of birth.’ Woman’s creativity comes through giving birth, man’s through his artistic production, both involving pain. And for Munch they would remain separate.
PSYCHOLOGICAL CRISIS

In 1898 Munch met Tulla Larsen, the daughter of a wealthy wine merchant, who followed him as he continued his restless journeys across Europe. The degree of her affection and her determination to marry him forced Munch onto the defensive, and the relationship cooled, coming to a dramatic end in 1902. In The Dance of Life (fig. 2) he returns to the motif of three images of woman. In the centre he is dancing stiffly with his first love Milly Thaulow, dressed in red. On either side are images of Tulla Larsen, in white, reaching for the flower of love, and in black, rejected and excluded. Munch’s own sense of exclusion can be seen by his choice of the lover who previously rejected him, and the lack of abandon that animates the other couples in the composition.

Munch had a number of explanations for his inability to marry. ‘I think I am only suited to painting pictures, and I clearly realised I had to choose between love and my work.’ He felt his role as father was compromised by his dual inheritance of sickness and mental illness. ‘I have inherited two of the most terrible enemies of humanity – the legacy of consumption and mental illness – sickness and madness and death were the black angels who stood at my cradle.’ And as he demonstrated in The Dance of Life, ‘Someone who has already been burnt by love cannot love again.’

The Dance of Life took its place in The Frieze of Life (see above), which had its first major showing in Berlin in early 1902. The pictures were hung on four walls and divided into thematic headings: ‘Love awakening’, ‘Love blossoms and dies’, ‘Fear of life’, and ‘Death’. In describing the ability of the pictures to relate to each other, so that the whole became more than the sum of the parts, he wrote, ‘A musical note passed through them all. They became completely different from what they had been previously. A symphony resulted.’ After 1905, when he began to sell individual pictures, he would repaint them in order to maintain the integrity of the series, and frequently referred to his paintings as ‘my beloved children’ whose loss he regretted.

The achievement of this exhibition was blighted by the dramatic ending of his relationship with Tulla Larsen. Torn between different obligations, Munch hoped that she would leave him. At their final meeting Munch shot himself and the bullet lodged in the middle finger of his left hand. Many of his Norwegian friends took Larsen’s side, and the comparative failure of his exhibition in Kristiania once again turned Munch against Norway.

In Germany, Munch had acquired patrons who both bought his work and commissioned new paintings. His portraits of both Dr Max Linde and of his four sons, have a refreshing spontaneity that Munch attempts to carry over into his own Self-portrait with Brushes (cat. 37), where he presents us with an elegant painter of the world whose status relates to that of his patrons. Yet the agitated brushstrokes and emphasis of the red paint hovering over his heart reminds us of the inner turmoil that still preoccupied Munch and which he increasingly attempted to control with alcohol.

Cat. 51 Self-portrait with a Bottle of Wine graphically illustrates this sense of despair and disintegration. Seated at a table, the artist is trapped by the receding diagonal lines that sweep away to the back wall, forcing his head into the centre of the painting. The unstable perspective and relative sizes of the figures disorientates the viewer. What was in fact a fireplace has become a glowing red shape that frames his head and expresses his inner agitation. His body slumps with hands limply held together, and from behind his back rise two waiters facing in different directions, but almost sharing the same body, as though expressive of a divided self. The fierce complementary red and green and the warmth of yellow against pale green contribute to the overall tension. Details like the delicate way in which the white and blue of the tablecloth grasps him round the neck, and the sickly green of the glass, help to unify a composition that draws its strength from the repeated rectangular shapes of body, table, window.

How has Munch used the light from the window to paint his face? How does this contribute to what he was trying to express? What is the function of the woman seated at the back of the room?

Munch met the English violinist Eva Mudocci in Paris in early 1903. Their brief relationship was marked by considerable tenderness and trust, though once again Munch could give less than was demanded. In a series of studies of a man and woman cheek to cheek (cats 42–5), he
The camera will never compete with the brush and the palette, until such time as photographs can be taken in Heaven or Hell.

Edvard Munch in his Frieze-of-Life pamphlet of 1929

Cat. 51  
Self-portrait with a Bottle of Wine, 1906  
Oil on canvas  
110.5 x 120.5 cms  
Munch-museet, Oslo  
Photo: © Munch-museet/Sidsel de Jang  
© Munch-Museet/Munch – Sigrun Group, BONO, Oslo, DACS, London 2005
demonstrates his own resistance to the intimacy offered by the woman. The failure of another relationship may have revived Munch’s hostility to the unfortunate Tulla Larsen. In the double portrait of 1905 (cat. 39), the ghost-like figure of Larsen contrasts with Munch’s present strength, but in the background lurks his anguished former self. Munch actually cut the painting in half in a physical attempt to exorcise his obsession. In 1906 his work designing sets for Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler seems to have drawn him back to the old relationship. In the play, Hedda, the strong, frustrated woman, forces her old lover to shoot himself, and Munch now casts Larsen in the role of murderess and himself as victim.
By the autumn of 1908, over-indulgence in alcohol, chronic insomnia and a continuing sense of persecution induced a nervous breakdown and Munch admitted himself to Dr Jacobson’s psychiatric clinic in Copenhagen. Treatment included a mild form of electrical therapy, which Munch described as bringing ‘positive male and negative female energy into his fragile brain.’ The efforts of Dr Jacobson were aided by the success of exhibitions, organised by Munch’s friends, in both Copenhagen and Kristiania, and the purchase of five works by the Nasjonalgalleriet. Other works were sold to private collectors and by then Munch had both the means and self-confidence to return to Norway.

RETURN TO NORWAY
Munch’s reintegration into Norwegian life was hastened by the final acceptance of a number of his designs for the decoration of the new assembly hall in Kristiania University. Drawing their strength from the positive, eternal forces of Nature, these decorations herald a more optimistic view of life. His pictures of agricultural labourers and other workers demonstrate a vigorous physicality in his painting. In a series of portraits of friends and in his continued examination of his own features he now looked as much for external realities as inner tensions. And working with the young model Ingeborg Kaurin, he no longer deals with female archetypes but with a real woman.

Cat. 94. The year is 1916, Europe has been at war for two years, and Munch is visiting Bergen for an exhibition. He had recently bought the estate at Ekely where he would spend the rest of his life in increasing isolation. Our immediate response to this painting is that the artist has turned hastily away from the unaccustomed bustle and noise of the town square below the window of his room. Munch frequently made small pencil drawings in which he planned out the form of larger compositions, and in many cases made interesting changes in approach or point of view. In the drawing for this painting, he presents himself side on, while a curtain shields the view from the window. It’s a more static image and denies us that engagement with his right eye that occupies the centre of the canvas, the eye of the artist as viewer now turned inward. The painting recalls his comment to Tulla Larsen in 1899: ‘I just sit at my window with my painful longings and see myself surrounded by the strange, noisy awful tumult of life.’
Even though he turns away, how does his use of colour connect him to the world?
Do you feel he is making a connection between his head and the church tower?

Munch suffered from the Spanish Flu that swept Europe at the end of World War I and in the self-portraits recording his recovery, we have a sense of ageing and of physical weakness. In a series of freely brushed paintings of the artist and his model (cats 103–11), Munch once more explores the relationship between men and women. But now we are looking at a model and not a lover, and he can plot the distance that still separates the sexes with the more detached view of an observer, rather than a tormented participant.

Cat. 111. This self-portrait, called The Night Wanderer, can be related to the Bergen self-portrait in the way that Munch leans into the picture, although in the Bergen painting he is avoiding the external world, while here he is forced to confront the loneliness of his own interior world. Wandering the house at night he comes across his own image reflected in a mirror (an earlier drawing shows just that). In another sketch he confronts a giant shadow. In the painting Munch distorts the perspective in comparison with his final sketch, making it more expressive. The receding diagonal of the wall meets the opposing diagonal of the piano at a sharp angle, while the tilted floor adds to the sense of instability. The deep-set darkened eyes, in contrast to the yellow lamplight that streaks his face and hair, suggests that he would rather not have seen this walking apparition.

Might you see the picture as a mirror in which you catch sight of your own reflection?

The apparent frailty of this portrayal is corrected by a number of self-portraits of the late 1920s, which show the strong, confident painter able to face and record the world, optimistically hoping for further state commissions to decorate new buildings. In 1930 a burst vein in one of his eyes prompted a series of paintings examining the strange, optical effect caused by problems with his eye (cats 134–7). A large, black, bird-like shape filled the field of vision of the right eye and threatens the artist like a messenger of death.
APPROACH TO DEATH

In the last decade of his life Munch was preoccupied with the signs of ageing and of approaching death. ‘I have a marvellous free model every morning when I paint myself, naked and like a bag of bones in front of the mirror – they could all become biblical pictures of Lazarus, Job, Methuselah, etc.’ When faced with the similarities between the cod’s head on his plate and his own head, he pauses in a moment of recognition. In *Self-portrait at the Window* (cat. 140), the ruddy complexion and downward turn of mouth express his angry determination to keep the snow and cold from enveloping him.

**Cat 146.** In this painting Munch seems to be accepting the inevitable final conflict between life and death. He stands next to the clock whose face and hands are blank. Time has run out. Next to him is the bed in which we are born and die. The deliberate lines of red and black mark out the painter’s awareness of the struggle between life and death. Behind the opened doors a warm yellow light illuminates his pictures, but the limp hands will no longer be raised in creative endeavour. The faceless clock suggests the erasure of time, just as the lifetime experience contained in his own lifeless head will shortly be erased, but survive in the pictures that surround him.

Do the reflections on the floor at his feet create a sense of instability or, compared with the floor under the bed, do they still connect him with the real world?

CONCLUSION

Munch hated the idea of his pictures disappearing into private collections to be seen by the few. In leaving the large collection of his works to the city of Oslo he wanted to ensure that his attempts to understand human problems, not least in his unceasing examination of his own sense of identity, should be available to the many. Because he was a man, and because he suffered from particular fears and anxieties, his vision may seem one-sided, but in devoting himself to his art Munch offers us a unique insight into his and our world.

‘In my art I have tried to find an explanation for life and to discover its meaning. I also intended to help others understand life.’

Edvard Munch