Munch’s Self-portrait Between Clock and Bed

The second half of my life has been nothing but a struggle to keep myself upright. My path took me along the edge of an abyss, a bottomless pit. . . . Every so often I left the path and threw myself into the commotion of life, amongst people. But I always had to return to the path along the abyss. . . . My art was self-confession . . . in my case the fear of life is also a need. . . . Without [it] I would be a ship without a helmsman.

Edvard Munch

He Norwegian Expressionist painter Edvard Munch explored his anxiety about life and his illnesses through his art (epigraph). His best-known and most-often cited works were created between 1890 and 1908, yet he came.5 The draw and known path more years. An important part of his work in those later years was self-portraiture. From the age of 18 until his death in 1944 at age 80, Munch (1863-1944) painted nearly 70 self-portraits, 20 prints, and more than 100 watercolors, drawings, and sketches, most of them after 1900. These provide a visual autobiography of more than 6 decades of his life, yet few were exhibited during his lifetime. Seemingly, he used self-portraits as a means of self-exploration of his life and his relationships with others. His first self-portrait at the age of 18 was a realistic personal likeness, but his later ones were more revealing of his suffering and self-identification.6

The death of Munch’s 15-year-old sister Sophie from tuberculosis in 1877 was a pivotal event in his life and shaped his early work. Munch wrote that The Sick Child, his painting of Sophie during her illness, with his aunt Karen at her side, was the birthplace of all his later art. Sophie may have contracted tuberculosis from Edvard while she nursed him at home in an era when many believed that isolating people with infectious disease was stigmatizing; that he was possibly the source of her illness worried him greatly.3

Munch’s best-known work is The Scream.4 The setting is a known path with a safety rail on a hill in Ekeberg, Norway. It is near the Gaustad mental hospital and the cries of animals being killed at the slaughterhouse, which were said to be heard at that site, may have influenced him too. Munch completed four versions of The Scream between 1893 and 1910. It received worldwide attention after one version was stolen from the National Gallery in Oslo, Norway, in 1994 and when another version was stolen from the Munch Museum, on the outskirts of Oslo, in a daring daylight robbery in 2004. Both paintings were eventually recovered. The Scream is again in the news because of the private sale in May 2012 of the 1895 pastel version for $119.9 million, the highest price ever paid for a work of art at a public auction. This version, the most colorful of the four, is the only one that was not in a museum in Norway. It is on display at New York’s Museum of Modern Art through April 29, 2013.7

The Scream is part of Munch’s highly personalized Frieze of Life—A Poem about Life, Love and Death, a body of work that is the culmination of his efforts from the 19th century. The Frieze of Life is made up of sketches, paintings, pastels, and prints that reveal Munch’s reflection on the stages of life—on love, the femme fatale, anxiety, infidelity, jealousy, sexual humiliation, and separation in life and in death.9

Munch’s persistent anxiety, excessive drinking, and brawling came to a head in 1908 when he was 44 years of age. He entered the clinic of Dr Daniel Jacobson in Copenhagen where for the next eight months he was treated for alcohol detoxification and anxiety, and sought to come to terms with his past resentments. An important part of his treatment was the use of active imagination in creating his personal fable in his Alpha and Omega pictures, 22 drawings that examine his feelings of betrayal in past relationships. Their completion allowed him to work through his feelings, to see the futility of hatred, and to let go of his malice and fears. At the end of his stay at the clinic, Munch painted the realistic Self-portrait in the Clinic (1909). In it, he looks straight ahead at the viewer, rejuvenated and exuding a sense of energy and dynamism. This is in sharp contrast to his earlier, depressing Weimar Self-portrait with Bottle of Wine (1906), which was completed in the midst of an earlier crisis. The rejuvenated Munch left the clinic in 1909 and returned to Norway. Having come to terms with his inner turmoil, he turned outward and was more attuned to nature. Emblematic of his recovery was his commission to decorate the assembly hall at the University of Oslo. The central mural is a 27-ft-wide image of the sun rising over the fjord. It represents humanity striving toward light. Unlike the personal joys and sorrows depicted in the Frieze of Life, it portrays the powerful forces of eternity.6 For many years, the Nobel Peace prize was awarded in this hall, beneath Munch’s The Sun.

In the 20th century, Munch studied the new imaging technologies. He was a keen amateur photographer, experimented with the movie camera, and showed a renewed interest in theatrical decorations.1 His new interest in visual movement was accompanied by a greater fluidity in his paintings. Munch spent...
most of his last two decades in solitude at his nearly self-sufficient estate in Ekely, in the Skøyen neighborhood of Oslo. His gaunt self-portrait The Night Wanderer (Figure) illustrates the existential aloneness he chose. It reveals the haggard artist, who is clothed in a dressing gown, wandering at night. The electric light creates a yellow reflection on his face and highlights his unkempt hair. The floor seems to be tipped forward, providing no security. The room seems claustrophobic; the only furniture is the piano in the foreground. Yet despite the loneliness of this nighttime image, his companion daytime Self-portrait With Hands in Pocket done at the same time shows him in the same setting with feet placed firmly on the floor and not tense. Even though Munch rarely went out, his friends telephoned and visited him, and he continued to paint. He maintained close contact with his youngest sister Inger and his aunt Karen, providing them lifetime financial support. When his sister Laura moved from the mental hospital into supervised community living, Munch provided financial support for her and kept in contact with her until her death from cancer in 1926.5

To the end of his life, Munch continued to paint unsparring self-portraits and also prepared a series of photographs illustrating his emotional and physical state. In the early 1930s, bleeding in the vitreous humor of his right eye, his good eye, affected his vision, and he was afraid he would go blind. Ever curious, as the crot began to resolve, Munch systematically began to use enopic vision to paint what he could see within his right eye. At first, it was an empty black spot, but then, reflecting his own psychological state, it was soon transformed into a menacing bird of prey.1

Ironically, the Nazis declared Munch, who had been awarded the Goethe Medal for Art and Science by the president of Germany in 1932, a degenerate artist when they assumed power later in the 1930s. Munch’s work, like that of other modern artists such as Picasso, Paul Klee, Matisse, Van Gogh, and others, was deemed degenerate; 82 of his paintings were removed from German museums. On April 9, 1940, when Munch was 76 years of age, the Germans invaded Norway and the Nazi party assumed power. They sought Munch’s collaboration, but he refused.3 Munch secretly kept an extensive collection of his art on the second floor of his home (more than 1000 paintings and more than 4400 drawings and other works of art, his legacy to Norway). Munch lived in constant fear that the Nazis would confiscate it. Indeed, they gave him 2 weeks notice to evacuate from his home, but they never carried out the order. Seventy-one of the paintings previously taken from German museums in 1937 had been repatriated to Norway through purchase by collectors before the occupation; 11 others were never recovered. These 71 paintings, as well as The Scream, The Sick Child, and others, had to be hidden away by their owners during the Nazi occupation.

From around 1940 onward, Munch’s self-portraits focus on death. Just as he pictured all the earlier years of his life, now he focused on his mortality. In his large-format Self-portrait Between Clock and Bed (cover), Munch comes from out of a bright sunlit room and stops in the doorway of his bedroom. His arms hang limply at his sides. He stands erect, at attention, near the center, and facing forward in his bedroom between a grandfather clock and a bed. His mouth is turned downward and his eyes seem closed. The tall grandfather clock resembles a coffin. The bed, resembling a sarcophagus, is covered with an embroidered rug from his childhood home. To his left hangs one of his nude portraits, which is believed to be Kropotkina, a heroine in Dostoevsky’s story A Gentle Creature.16 For him, she represents the escape of a free spirit from humiliating poverty like the kind he experienced earlier in this life. The double doors are open behind him, showing a bright yellow room with paintings on the wall testing to his life’s work. This work is now behind him. The reflective surface of the floor offers little security. Understood symbolically, the clock with no hands or numerals and the bed, a place where people commonly die, may represent the threshold between life and death where Munch stands upright and alert, waiting for the end of his life.1,2

In Self-portrait: At Quarter Past Two in the Morning (1940-1944), Munch seems to anticipate his death. No longer is he standing and waiting. His emaciated, nearly translucent body seems to be floating out from his chair as if it is being beckoned away. His skull-like face is bathed in bright yellow, suggesting a supernatural light. The room around him is dissolving. The dark shadow behind him may represent death.1,2

Munch died in his home at Ekely in Oslo on January 23, 1944, about a month after his 80th birthday. He had told his model Birgit Prestoe “I don’t want to die suddenly without knowing it. I want that last experience too.”1(p288) And near death, he did not call on family members but sought to die alone. Knowing his wishes, his housekeeper slipped silently into the room without his knowledge to be there with him; she believed that no one should die alone. She quietly witnessed his peaceful death.3

Against Munch’s expressed wishes and those of his family, the Nazis orchestrated his funeral for propaganda purposes. His friends and family strongly objected. In the end, they made clear to the Nazi authorities that there were to be no pallbearers because family and friends did not want him to “go to his rest on the shoulders of his enemies.”5(p327) In the end, however, their protests were to no avail.3 The Nazis placed a large wreath covered with silk ribbons bearing swastikas on his coffin, thus leaving Norwegians with the final impression that Munch was a Nazi sympathizer when he was not. Despite his wishes to be buried with his parents and sister Sophie, his ashes were interred with the elite of Norway in the Court of Honor in the Cemetery of Our Saviour in Oslo. Today, Munch’s art is a great source of pride in Norway. The Munch Museum houses the extensive collection of art that was hidden on the second floor of his home before and during the Nazi occupation. His image appears on the 1000 Norwegian kroner. Plans are underway for a major celebration of his art for the 150th anniversary of his birth in 2014. It will be the largest Munch exhibition ever held in Oslo. In his declining years, Munch sought to be left alone but continued to be productive until the end of his life. To his admirers, these last works are deserving of renewed attention.

James C. Harris, MD

REFERENCES