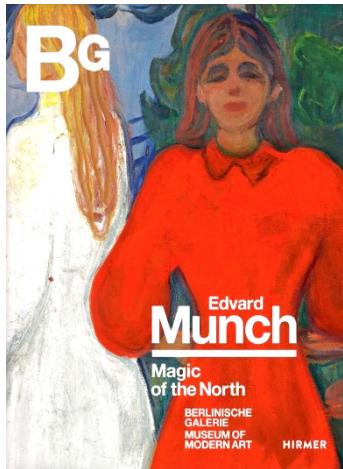


BOOK REVIEW:

**Thomas Köhler, Stefanie Heckmann, and
Janina Nentwig (eds.), *Edvard Munch. Magic
of the North*, Berlin: Berlinische Galerie,
Hirmer Publishers, 2023, 304 p.**



The catalogue of the exhibition *Edvard Munch. Magic of the North* (15.09.2023–22.01.2024), curated by the *Berlinische Galerie. Museum für Moderne Kunst* can be reviewed as a book, as it consists of several research-based texts which could function as its chapters. As such, they analyze various pivotal aspects of Munch's work and highlight the aims and structure of the exhibition. The essays are preceded by a section dedicated to the works chosen to represent Munch's oeuvre in the current exhibition, headed by brief captions, which are also reproduced throughout the display of the works in the gallery, and followed by a biography of the artist, structured around Berlin landmarks, studios, galleries and bars. Both in the exhibition and in the catalogue, Munch's works are presented in thematic clusters, which complement rather than fully reflect the concept and the topics explored in the essays.

The exhibition and the catalogue produced for this occasion aim to examine Edvard Munch's special relationship with Berlin, and to argue that his original style developed in the context and under the influence of this growing and dynamic city, to reconstruct the development of the artist's aesthetic practice, defining his style and emphasizing the originality of his work, and to evaluate the reception of his art in the capital of the Empire, highlighting the impact of Munch's work on both his contemporaries and younger artists.



In this sense, the scene is set in the catalogue by Stefanie Heckmann's text, "Edvard Munch. Magic of the North", which acts as an introduction and provides an overview of the main themes explored by the exhibition. In order to convincingly frame the artist's work, the curators opted to use the two exhibitions, organized during his lifetime, which prominently featured Edvard Munch's paintings as essential landmarks in his career, illustrating his appropriation by Berlin's artistic milieu. The first, organized by the Association of Berlin Artists, which took place between November 5th and 19th 1892 is thoroughly discussed by Sabine Meister's text, "Affair, Scandal, Fiasco? Munch's Debut in Berlin. A Backstage View" and illustrated by the paintings presented in the cluster entitled "The Dream of the North. The Munch Affair". True to its provocative title, Meister's text attempts to reconstruct the effect of the failure of his first exhibition on the later reception of Munch's work. This ill-fated exhibition is rather dramatically and persistently considered a 'scandal' which placed Munch at the centre of the controversy between conservatives and modernists, turning his case, as Meister has convincingly suggested into a battleground for ideologies and cultural politics and, in a sense, marking the beginning of Modernism in Berlin. Conservative standpoints were voiced by the representatives of the Royal Academic University of Fine Arts and by Adolf Rosenberg who wrote a devastating review in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, which led to the dismantling of the exhibition soon after its opening, while Munch's supporters included progressive intellectuals, gallerists and collectors who appreciated his work. The second is the retrospective of 1927 at Berlin's National Gallery, discussed by Dieter Scholtz, "Exceeding all Expectation. The Large Munch Retrospective at the Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 1927". This was organized by Ludwig Justi, the director of the Nationalgalerie at the *Kronprinzenpalais*. Considered the largest exhibition of Munch's work, the event seems to have sealed his acceptance by Berlin's art world, thus providing an opportunity to explain his success.

Besides these two pivotal moments, recurrent allusions to exhibitions which included and/or promoted Munch's work, present in several of the essays in this catalogue, signed by Nentwig, Fellchenfeldt and Behrmann, signal the development of processes of institutionalization within Berlin's art world, for instance, the emergence of private and independent galleries that reached well beyond the walls of the Academies of Fine Arts. In fact, Munch's initial lack of success in the capital is persuasively explained by Meister as a consequence of the modesty and lack of luster of the Berlin art world, which revolved around a small number of galleries and was dominated by the Royal Academy of Arts. In Meister's view, in the 1880s, mediocrity reigned with historical, religious and genre paintings dominating the scene. This changed only when a new generation of painters, who had been flocking to Berlin, drawn by its dynamic economic

development, brought new ideas and experimented with new styles. These new artists were showing their work in the new galleries founded by people like Paul Cassirer as suggested by Christina Fellchenfeldt's contribution, "No Simple Relationship: Edvard Munch and the Kunsthandlung Paul Cassirer", which deals with Munch's relationship with the artistic establishment. In the new context, the 'scandal' caused by the events of 1892, i.e. the quick demise of the exhibition, was astutely used by Munch as an 'advertisement' in a carefully-orchestrated act of self-promotion: in response to the rejection, he mounted an itinerant exhibition showing his work to an increasingly larger public, keen to see the paintings that had been so ruthlessly criticized by the Royal Academy. This new strategy leads one to the conclusion, suggested by several articles, although never explicitly stated, that there was a shift in the agency in promoting art and particularly new artistic trends. The intellectual and artistic authority of the Royal Academy was undermined by the artists' groups that had been recently founded, who organized exhibitions independently, in commercial galleries, openly competing with state-supported established gallerists. Thus, small curated group exhibitions, which often included foreign artists, partly replaced the canonical galleries and became a 'free' place where the works of the modern movement could be seen.

The exploration of Munch's connection to Berlin is not limited to biographical details, such as the fact that he had recurrently lived in the city for extended periods of time, while deliberately highlighting the benefits for his career of his Berlin life-style and entourage. One of the main points made by all the texts included in the catalogue is that Munch (1863-1944) evolved as an artist in the environment created by a growing and energetic city and within the comfort of groups of like-minded intellectuals, whom he interacted with socially. According to the authors of the catalogue, these were members of the intellectual bohemia who found inspiration in Friedrich Nietzsche's ideal of achieving freedom from religious, moral and social constraints. Sometimes referred to as the 'Ferkel circle', this group congregated in a bar, *Zum schwarzen Ferkel* (the Black Piglet) which is mentioned without fail in all of the articles, providing yet another example of the impact of 'café society' on intellectual debates during the last decades of the nineteenth century. It also transpires from these texts that, although outwardly bohemian, this group, which included artists (Walter Leistikow), art critics (Julius Meier), writers (Richard Dehmel, Dagny Juel), playwrights, art collectors and gallerists, like Walter Rothenman and Harry Graf Kessler, had the financial and institutional means to help support Munch's career and promote his art. Consequently, the essays in the catalogue lead one to conclude that Berlin was where Munch became a member of a coherent movement, the Berlin Secession, and of prestigious institutions, such as the Association of German Artists and the

Prussian Academy of Arts, learned new techniques like printing, etching, dry point, lithography and woodcut, dabbled in photography and conceived his most original work.

Circumscribing Munch's work to a specific movement and defining his particular style is however extremely difficult and many trends have been mentioned as possible inspiration for his oeuvre. He has been seen as belonging to and distancing himself from Naturalism and Impressionism in their Berlin guise, the Art Nouveau stemming from Paris, Vienna and Brussels, and eventually even from Symbolism, which he had initially embraced wholeheartedly. Munch had been familiar with these trends during his stay in Paris beginning with 1889, where he had studied the works of the avant-garde, including Paul Gauguin, the Nabis, a symbolist group, and Vincent van Gogh. In broad strokes, his affinity with particular artistic trends has been seen as a shift towards the Berlin Secession, slowly transforming him into an avant-garde artist. Things are by no means crystal clear, as one of Munch's supporters in Berlin, who provided opportunities for him to show his work was Paul Cassirer, who, as suggested by Christina Felchenfeldt's essay, was a staunch supporter of Impressionism. He had opened a gallery at Kantstrasse 12 in 1899 wishing to present to the public a selection of contemporary artists, provide opportunities for foreign artists to show their work and introduce Impressionism to the Berlin art world. However, the founding of his gallery is considered instrumental to the beginnings of the Secession movement.

Despite the suggestions of most authors in the catalogue, who argue that Munch was the child of the Secession, based on the inclusion of his work in the Secession exhibition of 1902 and on the invitation to officially become a member of the Berlin Secession in 1904, it seems that the movement, or rather the individuals who represented it chose Munch as a figurehead. Thus, on the one hand, Munch was turned into a prominent showpiece and stood for the Berlin Secession's engagement with the international avant-garde. On the other, perceived as having a lasting influence on the younger generation of German painters, Munch was also, perhaps more convincingly, considered a forerunner of Expressionism. However, although his influence on the next generation of Expressionists is taken for granted, authors in the catalogue are not able to unearth many contacts between Munch and the Brücke artists. Fortunately, Munch's affinity with Expressionism is more strongly substantiated by the development of his style and specific aesthetic language.

Munch's evolvement towards Expressionism is illustrated by the cluster of images placed under the heading "Breathing and Feeling, Suffering and Loving. The Frieze of Life" and quickly becomes obvious, both thematically and morphologically. Morphologically and stylistically speaking, most of the authors of the essays have commented on the shift from the mimetic depiction of objective

reality towards representations of moods, states of mind and inner experiences, that gave Munch's paintings a 'raw' and 'unfinished' quality, which often elicited criticism from more conservative members of the artistic community. These elemental emotional states are expressed by simply-constructed scenes with contradictory and complex meanings, generally using primary colours and deploying optical impressions.

One of the most interesting contributions to the catalogue and one of the most eye-opening sections of the exhibition is that dedicated to the productive alliance of printing with painting that dominated Munch's work between 1894 and 1908, illustrated by the cluster "Experimental and Virtuosoic and by Andreas Schalhorn's essay *New Content Creates a New Vessel for Itself: Munch's Printings of the Berlin Years and Their Path to the Kupferstichkabinett*" from the catalogue. The latter explores Munch's experiments in the new medium of graphic art, a less-known side of his work, and his interest in photography, although the camera was mostly used by the artist to document his exhibitions. The authors in the catalogue argue that Munch became increasingly interested in graphic work and experimented with various techniques, such as intaglio, etching, dry point, lithography and even woodcut while living in Berlin, which had become an important centre for printing. Munch's prints were often related to his own paintings and, although they were not original works, they were equal in quality and enjoyed widespread reception. They are rather striking, either through their use of colour or through stark and powerful contrasts between black and white. Although a catalogue essay does not allow an in-depth discussion of the compositions themselves, Schalhorn does comment on the differences between the paintings and the graphic art, especially in the rendition of the *Madonna and Jealousy*. In the print of the Madonna (otherwise known as *Loving Woman*, or *Woman Making Love*), unlike in the painting, the symbolist frame is part of the image, while the depiction of an embryo and several sperm make identification more likely, expressing the theme of procreation. Despite the moon-shaped Alice band in the woman's hair, reminiscent of a halo, which again subtly introduces the reference to the sacred, the print retains an explicit erotic content. In the lithograph *Jealousy*, the portrait in the foreground bears an uncanny resemblance with the writer Stanislaw Przbyszewski, while in the background a couple is depicted near a tree, the woman naked and the man clothed, alluding to the Biblical scene of Adam and Eve's transgression. This is different from the painting, where a man and a woman, both fully-clothed are depicted embracing in a doorway. From this perspective one must commend Schalhorn's astuteness in recognising the religious undertones in Munch's work, which are not remarked upon in any of the other essays.

Munch's development towards Expressionism is much better illustrated by the thematic content of his work. In this sense, attention is inevitably drawn to the *Frieze of Life*, often called a series, a group or a cycle, which was composed of several paintings, independent of, but related to one another, and better understood when viewed together. Perhaps best-defined as a visual poem about life, the paintings focus on the themes of love and death, deploying recurrent motifs like *The Kiss*, *Madonna*, *The Scream* and *Death in the Sickroom*, which the artist connected to personal experiences, such as the premature death of his mother and sister and his love affairs that ended tragically. Authors, however, have remarked that these were not simply biographical documents but rather visual expressions of emotional states of mind. The sequence brought the paintings together and turned them into a poem about life and death, portraying the beginning of a love affair, marked by erotic and sexual experiences and often its rather dismal end. Thus, the sequence became a philosophical discussion of modern man and his fate, ridden as he was with anxiety and melancholia. Although the paintings did not constitute a coherent narrative with recurrent protagonists, they traced the path of the lovers in a psychologically powerful way.

All the authors agree that Munch showed this work in various arrangements, in different spaces and in numerous places in Europe: in the foyer of the building at the Secession Exhibition of 1902, in Leipzig and Kristiania (Oslo) in 1904, in Prague in 1905, as a monumental cycle for the Auditorium of the University of Kristiania in 1909 and at the exhibition at the National Gallery in Berlin in 1927. Munch's ultimate dream was to show the *Frieze of Life* in a building constructed specifically for it, and hence in relation to the architecture. This ultimate, and, sadly, never accomplished goal turned the frieze into a perpetual work in progress, perfected over decades. The various series are different from one another in both size and painting style, leading the authors who have written about them to ask what gave Munch the idea to present them as a frieze in the first place. The explanation offered by Janina Nentwig's article in the catalogue, "Explaining Life: Edvard Munch's Frieze of Life at the Berlin Secession in 1902" is that the idea was a response to the need of presenting a dozen paintings in a previously conceived space, where their spatial layout had to be adapted to existing structural elements. This explanation is less than convincing, given the use of this manner of presentation in 1896 at the Parisian gallery of Siegfried Bing, the *Maison de L'Art Nouveau*, which suggests that the arrangement was not dictated by spatial constraints. Moreover, even in Berlin, under the title *Studies for a Series Love*, a version of the sequence was presented in 1893-1894 in two rooms that Munch had rented in a building on Unter den Linden.

Munch's *Frieze of Life* is also prominently showcased in the current exhibition, as several authors would have us believe that this innovative way of expression was a result of the artist's Berlin experience. Although this is not necessarily true, as, according to Nentwig, Munch had already shown a version of the Frieze in Paris in 1896, whilst it was also the subject of fourteen etchings presented under the title *L'Amour*. It can, however, be asserted that Berlin was the place where this manner of presentation was recurrently used, although with certain compositional differences, often adapted to specific places like the children's room decorated by Munch for Max Linde (1904), an art collector from Lübek (known as the *Linde Frieze*) or the Banquet Hall of the *Kammerspiel* in Max Reinhardt's theatre (1906-1907), now known as the *Reinhardt Frieze*, discussed in Pauline Behrmann's essay, "A Norwegian Summer Night. Munch's Frieze for the Kammerspiel of the Deutsches Theatre in Berlin". Although Munch's ideas concerning the frieze had developed before his arrival in Berlin, the city was where he first exhibited them.

The idea that Munch's originality stemmed from his experiences in Berlin is also posited by discussions of his graphic art. However, versions of the lithograph *The Scream* in black and white were published in the Parisian art journal *La Revue Blanche*, while some of the portfolios created by Munch were inspired by Toulouse Lautrec. Moreover, Munch's experiments with coloured lithographs began during his stay in Paris, under the influence of Japanese prints and Paul Gauguin's work.

The final topic addressed by the essays in the catalogue is Munch's reception within a broader social spectrum and the artist's image of himself. Munch's reception in Germany during his lifetime was problematic, as some of the authors of the texts are compelled to admit. For example, Lars Toft-Eriksen's text, "Genius of the North. Making the Image of Munch" painstakingly reconstructs the artist's image as fashioned by his contemporaries, supporters and enemies alike. Two of the sections dedicated to the works themselves "I am absolutely not a portrait painter" and "Triumph and Tragedy. 'Nordic-Germanic' or 'Degenerate'" also attempt to unravel the workings of image-making. Early in his career, Munch was praised for the Northern quality of his art, whereas later, particularly after 1933, he was 'institutionalised' as a 'Nordic', 'Germanic' artist, a label as ideologically charged as it could possibly be, while at the same time discredited as a 'degenerate' artist, whose works were removed from museums and collections and sometimes destroyed. The authors of the texts agree that some of Munch's interests, his taste for brooding landscapes, fantasies about Vikings, Old Nordic literature and contemporary authors like Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg allow for speculation about his affinities with an antimodern, nationalistic utopia of the north. This attitude was enhanced when, from 1933, art in Germany was firmly placed in the service of the state.

Some interest is also bestowed on the image that Munch fashioned for himself, as a misunderstood outsider, withdrawn from society and destined to suffer, in the context of new social projections concerning the role of the artist as a cultural figure, as a prophet and a “seer”, a visionary of sorts. In this sense, Munch’s painting of *Golgotha* (1900) is mentioned, as the artist depicts himself as the suffering Christ. Toft-Erikson also points out that there was a more pragmatic side to Munch’s strategies of self-promotion, creating a public persona instrumental to the reception of his work.

The exhibition, together with the catalogue must be commended for the originality of the concept, sensitive to social and political, not just cultural contexts and committed to decoding the inner workings of institutions promoting art and artists, while validating the aesthetic value of their work. Despite various incongruities, redundancies and occasionally confusing layout, the exhibition fulfilled its aim to present Munch’s oeuvre in German context and inextricably linked to his time in Berlin while the catalogue provides the necessary detail to better understand his work.

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