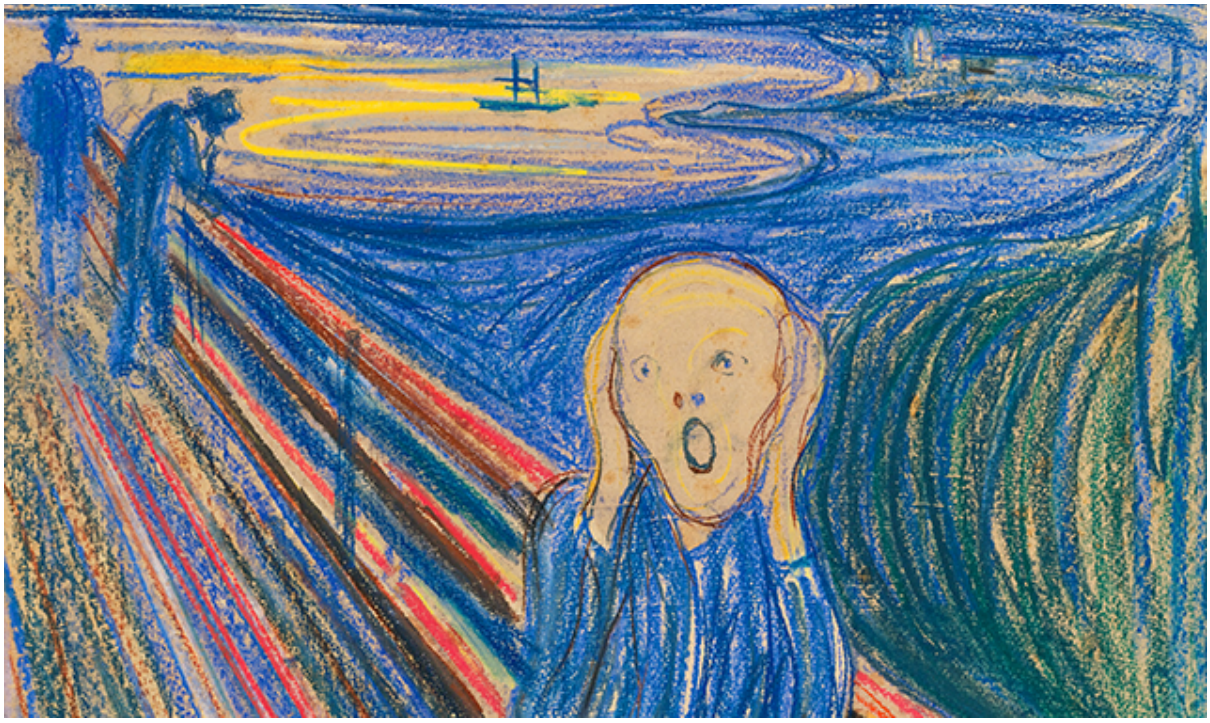
The Real (And Not at All Universal) Meaning Behind Edvard Munch's "The Scream"

by Ben Davis
25/10/12 10:21 AM EDT



Edvard Munch ,"The Scream," 1895 (detail)

Buoyed by the legend of its $120-million sale to secretive financial kingpin Leon Black and its fathomless cultural cachet, I would be surprised if MoMA's pocket-sized exhibition dedicated to Edvard Munch's "The Scream," which opened yesterday, didn't help the big institution set some attendance records. Yet visitors who pause to reflect a moment might admit to themselves that seeing the actual thing is a bit of a let down — its physical presence is no match for the placeless, sizeless mental image that it has become. Pop culture has turned what was the quintessential image of modern alienation into a hokey cliche.

In the run-up to its record-setting Sotheby's sale, pundits bent on buttressing this trophy's significance for world culture stressed its universality, how the twisted image could be a symbol for anything from "fear of leaving the oven on when we leave the house, to personal tragedy." But this kind of formulation suggests a weakness not a strength; it is a measure of how the image has lost its original power

to shock. Meanwhile, the potency of “The Scream” as a vehicle for identification is umbilically linked to the concrete history that produced it — all the messy stuff that its presentation behind bulletproof glass, in a low-lit, crowded MoMA gallery can’t help but distance it from.

The emotional chemistry of Munch's masterpiece is pure European fin-de-siècle doubt and decadence, colored by the life experiences of the sickly modernist weirdo who painted it. The details of his biography are familiar, but perhaps worth rehashing, laying stress on the push-pull of forces that informs his work. This is a man born as the world was dramatically changing, when belief was yielding to doubt and traditional sexual mores were coming apart. Munch had his feet in both worlds; that’s where all the angst comes from.

On the one hand, he came from a grim and deeply religious family. His father, a military doctor, married a woman 20 years his junior, who hailed from a once well-to-do clan that had fallen on hard times. She bore five children, of which Edvard was the second, and she died early, leaving behind a tragic letter to her family saying, “We all, who God so carefully has bound together, may meet in Heaven never to part again.” Munch’s dad became morose and fanatical; he would read this letter aloud to his clan at the dinner table, regularly, and lecture his kids on the horrors of hell that awaited them if they strayed from the righteous path. This fatalistic atmosphere definitively colored Munch’s view of the world.

On the other hand, when the family later moved to the Norwegian capital, Kristiania, Edvard found himself powerfully drawn to the local anarchist scene. The Kristiania anarchists were led by a man named Hans Jaeger, who preached free love, and against monogamy, the subjugation of women, and the family. Jaeger’s rather dramatic commandments, which his followers tried to live by, included the following: “Thou shalt write thy life; thou shalt sever thy family roots; thou shalt take thy life.” It was Jaeger who encouraged Munch to paint from his soul and resist artistic conventions, spurring his artistic breakthrough. When the bohemian guru was jailed for his anti-bourgeois beliefs, Munch gifted him a painting of a semi-nude woman to entertain him in his cell.

Which brings us back to “The Scream,” actually originally known as “The Scream of Nature.” The image is meant to illustrate a short poem fragment that Munch wrote, the text of which is also etched on the version currently on view at the MoMA: “I was

walking along the road with two of my friends. The sun set — the sky became a bloody red. And I felt a touch of melancholy — I stood still, dead tired — over the blue-black fjord and city hung blood and tongues of fire. My friends walked on — I stayed behind — trembling with fright — I felt the great scream in nature."

Notice anything about this tale? "The Scream" is often taken as an image of personal isolation or alienation. But it is significant that the scene takes place in public, not in some lonely interior (of which there are many in Munch's work). Whatever emotion is seizing the wailing central figure, it comes upon him not when he is isolated, but when he is "walking along the road with friends," represented by the strolling couple glimpsed in the painting behind him, apparently oblivious to the drama taking place in the foreground.

More importantly, as both the painting's original title and the poem suggest, the key to the image is that its terrifying epiphany is felt to be an expression issuing *through* the figure from the landscape or the cosmos itself ("I felt the great scream in nature"). This is what Munch's then-radical Expressionist styling, in which everything — sky and sea and the wailing, deformed figure itself — conveys so perfectly, depicting a universe fully animate with turbulent emotional meaning.

From a Bible-thumping background, but also drawn to the outspoken nihilism of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky (his favorite author), Munch was trained to see the universe as being filled with divine meaning, as subject to a plan — but he also could no longer fully believe in this plan. And so the universe speaks but has no voice, shrieks but makes no sound, issues forth a sense of loss that transcends any human fellowship.

It is fitting, finally, that "The Scream" takes place on a bridge, because it captures a moment of transition — the transition from a world of fixed and preordained meaning to a modern universe where man makes his own meaning, with all the attendant anxieties that go along with this fact. This sense of values held in tortured suspension, so suggestively particular to its moment in European culture, is what you have to recover if you want to unlock the painting's drama and depth, and save it from its own overbearing success.