

CRITIC'S PICK

A Less Anxious Edvard Munch

Beyond “The Scream,” there’s a side of the artist that’s long been unexplored in the U.S., as shown by “Trembling Earth” at the Clark Art Institute.

By Roberta Smith

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, reviewed from the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass.

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Edvard Munch: Trembling Earth

The exhibition of the work of the Norwegian painter and printmaker Edvard Munch at the Clark Art Institute here is fun. Serious fun. High fun, if you will. But fun nonetheless. The thrilling kind that comes from seeing a major modern painter in a new, broader, enlivening light. This is the achievement of the Clark’s sumptuous, revisionary “Edvard Munch: Trembling Earth.”

The artist gleaned from the 47 paintings and almost as many prints in this exhibition is not just the godfather of figurative Expressionism — despite the show’s rather hammy title. Nor is he the neurotic, alcoholic painter of “The Scream” of 1893 — a revolutionary artwork and by now, a fixture of popular culture. And he is not the Munch who has typically been seen as an ingenious, innovative printmaker, but who lost his edge as a painter and went into decline after he recovered from a nervous breakdown.

It had come in 1908 after Munch had spent 15 years establishing his career in Berlin. He checked himself into a clinic in Copenhagen for several months after which he returned to Norway, leading a supposedly reclusive existence for the remaining three and a half decades of his life. (Even though he traveled almost as much around Europe as before.) This attitude has led to an embarrassing dearth of Munch paintings in American museums — rarely more than one, if any — but never mind.

This show, the first of its kind in the United States, takes a fresh approach by concentrating on Munch’s use of landscape — both as primary subject and as background — and the role of nature as the visual, emotional and philosophical wellspring for his work. And without much fuss, it gives equal space to Munch early and late, reducing their differences with a new sense of consistency based, oddly, on restlessness itself. Munch refused to stay put; his constant motion can bring to mind that of the great peripatetic postwar German artist Sigmar Polke.

The clue that the Clark show will not be Munch-as-usual is evident from its first painting, “The Yellow Log” of 1912. Slightly goofy, high-spirited and devoid of figures, it barely registers as a Munch. Its loose painterly realism depicts some freshly cut, yellow-orange logs lying among trees with purple trunks. (About a century later, David Hockney would boost this palette in his paintings of felled trees in Yorkshire.)



Edvard Munch, “The Yellow Log,” 1912, provides the exhibition’s uncharacteristic opening. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Munchmuseet

The painting’s primary form is the big, top log that booms outward while its back end diminishes swiftly to a distant vanishing point. You may want to step back. It’s a little like looking at the wrong end of a loaded slingshot. In between, the snowy ground is measured off by a loosely painted blue grid, a preliminary sketch that Munch found sufficient.

“Trembling Earth” was organized by Jay A. Clarke, curator of prints and drawings at the Art Institute of Chicago. She collaborated with Trine Otte Bak Nielsen at the Munch Museum in Oslo and Jill Lloyd, an independent curator affiliated, for this project, with the Museum Barberini in Potsdam, Germany, where it will be seen this coming winter and spring.

The show benefits from being arranged thematically, in six sections, ranging from “In the Forest” to “Chosen Places.” Nearly all include early and late paintings, as well as prints. You compare dates, subjects and mediums, as well as adjustments in style, from loosely

academic to strikingly improvisatory and even abstract. The paint itself ranges from thick impasto to thin washes that can presage those of Color Field paintings. All this contributes to making Munch much more vivid and relevant as a painter, not to mention as a colorist.



“The Magic Forest,” 1919-1925. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Halvor Bjørngård/Munchmuseet



"From Thüringerwald," 1905. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



"Elm Forest in Spring," 1923. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The opening section, "In the Forest," bounces you vigorously among different degrees of

relaxed paint-handling. First is the vibrant dark pink and green landscape “From Thüringerwald” of 1905. The hard-hitting “Elm Forest in Spring” (1923) translates emotional tension into twisted sinewy trunks and muscular limbs, straining upward. Everything seems animated in “The Magic Forest” (1919-25), whose composition progresses across disturbingly lively shapes defining a road, trees and blue sky where thin black branches whiplash against white clouds. The sketchy windblown figures of mother and daughter stare in wonder, or dread, from the bottom edge.

In contrast, the “Cultivated Landscape” section reveals that Munch’s painterly realism could become generic when he turned to farm animals, like horses. Yet “Spring Ploughing” (1916) redeems with a Barbie-ish landscape of pinks balanced by the fiery and blue tones of a pair of toylike draft horses. And several paintings suggest that apple trees rarely failed Munch. In “Girl Under Apple Tree” (1904), his relatively Expressionist treatment of the scene holds until the top of the tree, which seems to mutate into a Surrealist miasma of slimy green.



“Spring Ploughing,” 1916. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Halvor Bjørngård/Munchmuseet



“Girl Under Apple Tree,” 1904. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



“Starry Night,” 1922-24. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Sidsel de Jong/Munchmuseet

The six canvases of “Storm and Snow” span three decades, forming the smallest, most perfect section in the show. Like “The Magic Forest,” weather is often an active component here, as is the deep tender blue, laced with snow’s white, of Norway’s winter-long polar twilight. The culmination is “Starry Night” (1922-24), one of the last versions of a recurring subject. It includes his shadow as he looks toward the lights of Oslo beneath the stars, from stairs of his house on the city’s outskirts.

Early Munchs and exquisite yearning dominate the gorgeous “On the Shore” section, which empty out or fill up, but are devoid of people. “Moonlight” (1895) presents the basics: the simple configuration of land, beach, water, sky, and a moon whose columnar reflection cuts through them all. “Summer Night by the Beach” (1902-03) homes in closer for more detail, especially in bands of pink rocks and then algae-covered ones. In “Beach” (1904) — on

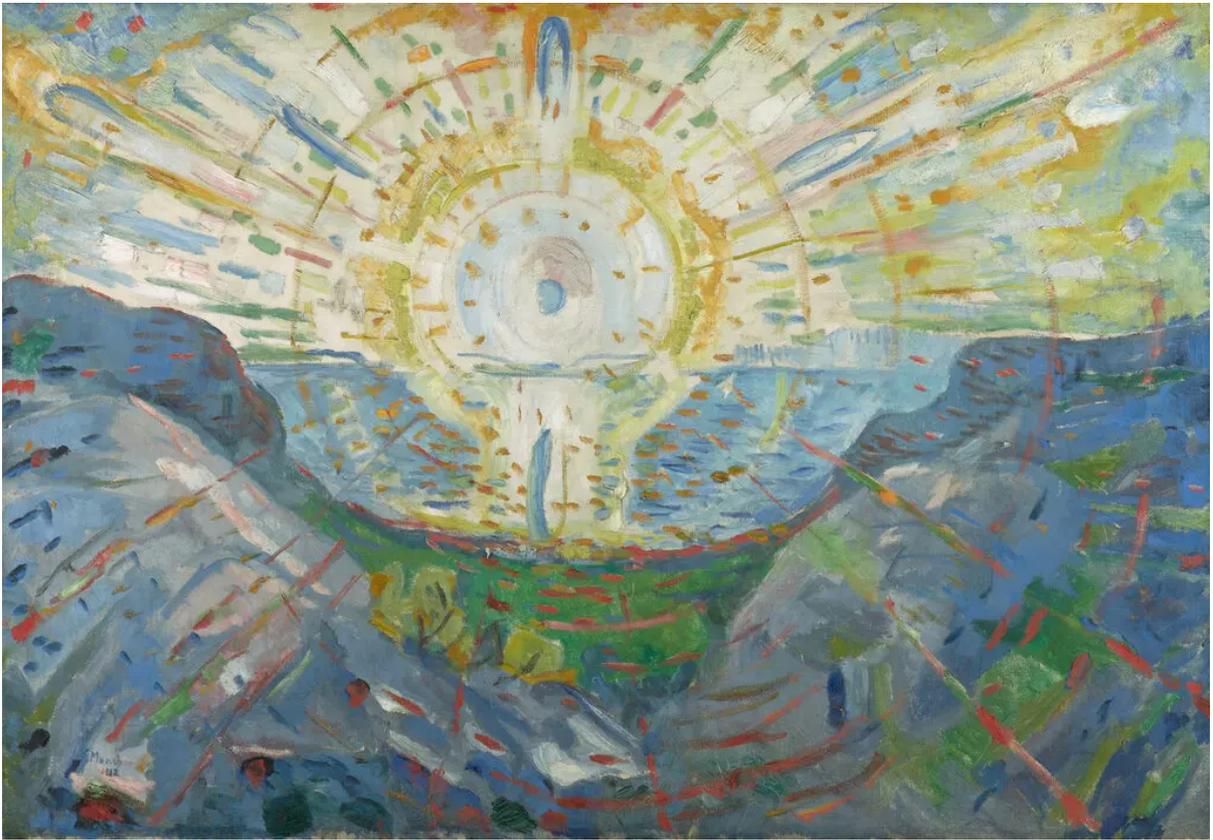
public view in this country for the first time — the rocks are bigger and closer, each occasioning different combinations of brushwork and pastel colors. They all seem alive, and some resemble faces. But the open improvisations of the Abstract Expressionists also come to mind.



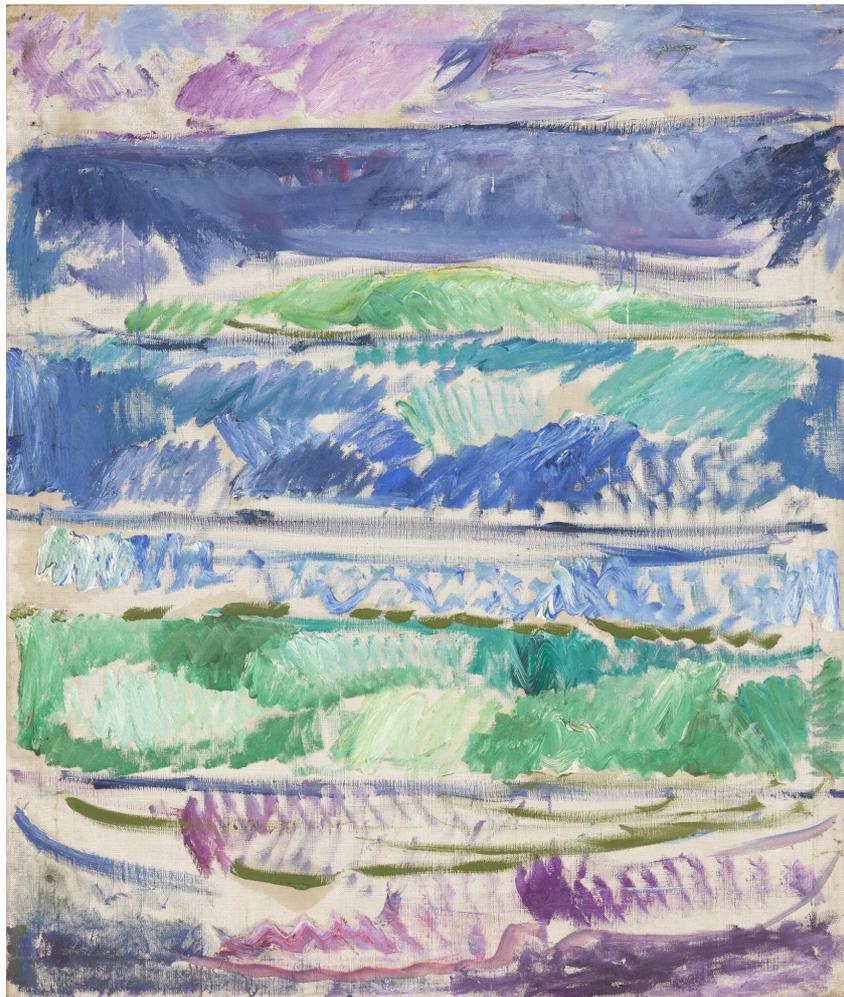
“The Scream,” 1895, lithograph on paper.
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The least interesting section is “Cycles of Nature,” where Munch’s ideas — that the animate and inanimate are united in a single continuum whether by spirit or material — turn brainy, dissolving into narrative and didacticism.

But here you’ll find an 1895 lithograph of “The Scream” — the image inspired, he said, by hearing “the scream of nature.” In essence it launches Munch’s involvement with landscape with a bang, using the rapidly receding bridge to visually evoke sound fading in time and space. Also important is “The Sun” (1912), another bang depicting a visionary dawn of light shining through light in a shimmering staccato of arcs, dots and dashes progressing from faint to vivid color. Its toothy surface gives mysticism an earthy solidity.



“The Sun,” 1912. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Ove Kvavik/Munchmuseet



“Waves,” 1908. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Halvor Bjørngård/Munchmuseet

Finally, “Chosen Places” concentrates on Munch’s portrayal of specific locales. The most striking painting here is “Waves,” which is simply a series of horizontal bands of brisk cross-hatches in soft green, blue and purple that is also being seen here for the first time.

Dating from 1908, this work is one of the most abstract paintings of its era. And yet, adjacent, in three more paintings from the same year, the blue cross-hatches are pressed into service as sky and sea behind blatantly traditional renderings of robust naked men. Munch had no intention of staying put, which is what makes him a painter for our time.

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Through Oct. 15, The Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.; 413-458-2303, clarkart.edu.

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, regularly reviews museum exhibitions, art fairs and gallery shows in New York, North America and abroad. Her special areas of interest include ceramics textiles, folk and outsider art, design and video art. [More about Roberta Smith](#)

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