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Going NATURAL

As a traveling exhibition of works by Edvard Munch proves, the artist invested his scenes of nature with as much emotion and personality as he did his figures

WRITTEN BY *David Masello*



The Clark Art Institute is the first of three venues for a traveling exhibition of works by Edvard Munch, which includes (opening pages) *Waves* (1908), *Apple Tree by the Studio* (1920), a self-portrait from 1926, and, above, *Beach Strand* (1904).

Coastal shorelines, rocks spilled along beaches, drifting clouds, trees filled with wind, these and other natural phenomena were for Edvard Munch (1863–1944) not just elements of the earthly landscape, but ones with a life of their own. For him, they really *were* alive, a dynamic of his artwork that is explored and revealed in a novel exhibition, “Edvard Munch: Trembling Earth” at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts (June 10–October 15, 2023, before the show travels to the Museum Barberini in Potsdam and Munchmuseet in Oslo).

“He saw nature and the landscape as living beings,” says Jay Clarke, Rothman Family Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Art Institute of Chicago and formerly Manton Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the Clark at the Clark; she co-curated this show with Jill Lloyd, an independent curator, and Trine Otte Bak Nielsen, a curator at the Munchmuseet. Munch’s belief that natural phenomena contained their own kind of life force was not the fantasy of a mentally ill man or an alcoholic (though

he was treated for both conditions), but rather a sensitive, introspective painter who closely chronicled, interacted with, and revered the nature he encountered in his native Norway, as well as in other European locales where he lived and worked. As if anticipating the late American poet Mary Oliver, who posited in many of her poems the idea that stones, clams, even water itself might have a soul, Munch, as Clarke writes, “animates seemingly inanimate matter.”

Munch himself wrote of how a “stone’s hard mass is alive” and how the luminescent glowing rocks he painted in certain works “lie like trolls,” adding that at night “they move.” The contemporaneous Norwegian writer Sigbjørn Obstfelder claimed that Munch “sees women’s hair and women’s bodies in waves.” Munch rendered plants with human facial characteristics, while he considered the very form that a shoreline assumes to represent “the perpetual shifting Lines of Life.” The very name of the exhibition, “Trembling Earth,” refers to a line by Munch referencing the breathing, organic ethos of nature itself

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and the seemingly lifeless but vital elements that populate it, whether mountains and islands or the sun and tidal currents.

While Munch has long been known as a painter of the human figure—embodying various emotions, be it love or loneliness, grief or existential anxiety—fully half of his vast oeuvre depicts non-human characteristics of nature. Ten years ago, Clarke, an authority on Munch, began to discern the fixations on the natural world in the painter’s works, whereupon the idea for this exhibition was spawned. She began a collaboration with the other curators, and, together, the three co-curators have gathered some 80 paintings, drawings, and prints, arranging them in eight thematic categories. Although the majority of Munch’s 1900 paintings, 750 prints, and thousands of drawings are in the permanent collections of museums around the world, Clarke and her co-curators had to carefully cultivate private owners to loan their works for this show.

“Munch had willed the entire contents of his studio to the city of Oslo,” Clarke recounts, “and a new museum devoted just to his works opened a few years ago there. Fortunately, we discovered that private collectors of his works have been extremely supportive and generous.”



While the show emphasizes Munch’s images of nature and landscapes, many of the works chosen by the three co-curators include people amid natural settings. Clockwise from above: *Haymaker* (1917) is a response to how humans interact with and cultivate landscapes. The figure and attendant imagery in *Woman with Pumpkin* (1942) reference fertility; Munch often depicted young girls and women on bridges, juxtaposed with built and natural landscapes.





Nature itself is seemingly animated with a life force in *Summer Night in Åsgårdstrand* (1904), a Norwegian seaside town in which Munch spent many of his summers. Here Munch's house, Kiøsterud Manor, is shown with an undulating imposing protective wall, bordered by a pink-hued walkway above which looms an assemblage of large geometric stones.

While the show will remain largely consistent among the three venues, there will be subtle changes in each—simply because some works are too fragile to travel. Clarke, who began her new role at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2018, mentions that her museum has some 100 Munch prints, 85 of which came from the collection of Mies van der Rohe. “He had bought them on spec and, as legend goes, kept them under his bed until the museum acquired them in 1963,” says Clarke.

Every work included in this show represents the best attributes of Munch as a painter—expressive figures and animated landscapes, vibrant and engaging colors, lushly rendered narrative scenes, such as a farmer scything a field or

two girls crossing a bridge. Even apart from this show's theme, to look at a Munch painting is to feel the movement and sheer motion of its elements, be it the people or the engaging perspectives on nature. The viewer senses the wind shaking the limbs of an elm, the inner roiling of cresting waves, the movement of stars across a night sky. Clarke cites *The Fairytale Forest*, a 1927-29 work, as among her favorites in the show, an oil-on-canvas that depicts children about to enter a magical tree-edged locale. As she emphasizes, regarding the many Munch scenes that continue to surprise her, “One could do a show purely of Munch's landscapes, but to me it's equally important to show figures occupying them. Every piece in this show is bright and beautiful.” ■

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