

Munch, Arson, and Jaywalking

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Introduction

Edvard Munch's *Madonna* and its various versions use lithography and the language of expressionism to create a connection between the mundane and divine while exploring new possibilities with form, lighting, and symbolism. The tensions of the arriving turn of the century, and new ideas about sexuality, femininity, and society are expressed through the work and its iterations. As an anxious and sickly child, the loss of his sister and mother to greatly impacted the young Munch and his father. Munch enrolled in Engineering courses but was captivated by his Technical Drawing classes, who's neat precision was a far cry from the aesthetic that eventually made him famous¹. His eventual enrollment in Norway's Royal School of Art and Design allowed him to immerse himself in contemporaries and exhibit across Europe.

The refinement of the camera and increased interest in chemo-mechanical techniques in the mid 1800's led to a corresponding increase in multiplicative art works. With the Industrial Revolution in full swing, new techniques were being experimented with to quickly and accurately recreate works for news, entertainment, and mass consumption². In reaction to the new ability to create perfect recreations via photography, the Panoramic and Romantic watercolor movements saw a decline in popularity. Romantic artists were attracted to the quick and commercial nature of lithograph in comparison to the slow-drying and delicate watercolor medium. This new speed, along with the new career opportunity to illustrate for publication, encouraged artists to work quickly and develop a more impressionistic style

1 "Edvard Munch | MoMA,"

2 Authors: Colta Ives, "The Print in the Nineteenth Century

than ever before. In contrast, other artists created precise and accurate etchings and prints based on old master prints and imported ukiyo-e prints from Japan.

As an established artist by the time of its creation, it is estimated that between 250-300 copies of *Madonna* exist, many sold in Munch's lifetime. The large collection of prints and paintings created over time allows us to view how Munch's style and choices changed during his lifetime³. The most notable of these versions are the five painted versions, including one which has revealed a new under-painting, as well as the black and white 1895 lithograph, and the red lithographs.

Materials and Technique

While using infrared reflectography curators at the Norwegian National Museum discovered a sketch under one of their painted copies of *Madonna*⁴. This sketch revealed that one of the original poses Munch tried was more conventional, with arms placed down by the woman's side, rather than openly inviting like in the final version. He created four more versions, all of which share his characteristic luminous layers of paint and deliberate brushwork. Unlike the harsh colors and texture of his most famous work *The Scream*, *Madonna* uses soft blues and greens to outline the forms of the woman's face and body, and warm pinks and oranges to highlight her vitality and the crown of her head.

Munch enjoyed this subject so much that he transferred it onto one of his first lithographic experiments. The black and white 1895 Lithograph in the Munchmuseet lacks the definition of Munch's later lithographs, and displays his evolution as a print-maker. This *Madonna* lacks definite arms, and her eyes are more like indicated circles. The black and white nature of the lithograph also strips the

³ "Madonna," <https://www.munchmuseet.no/en/our-collection/madonna/>.

⁴ Smithsonian Magazine and Nora McGreevy, "Hidden Sketch Reveals a More Traditional Version of Edvard Munch's Sensual 'Madonna,'"

warmth from the work, leaving us facing a figure reminiscent of Santa Muerte. This connotation of death must have carried through to Munch, as the note he left mentions “Now the hand of death touches life”⁵. To entwine this symbolism further, he adds a border of spermatozoa and a small and twisted figure to the bottom left. Originally depicted on the frame of the painted *Madonna*, this border becomes a permanent fixture in the proceeding lithographs, which contain color but retain the lack of arms and a closer melding of the woman and her background.

Composition

The flexibility of space is nothing new to depictions of The Madonna, she can often be found floating mid-air, or standing on a bed of roses; Munch's *Madonna* is different though, she seems to be emerging from the background and at times indistinguishable from it. As her arms wrap around her, they are echoed by ripples behind her, adding rhythm to her form and emphasizing the curves of her body. The red halo that crowns her seems to light the water, burning away her arms to leave only their indication behind. Her pose, with her tilted jaw and upturned head seem reminiscent of John Everett Millais *Ophelia*, with all its connotations of love and death.

Unlike other Madonna's, and perhaps most scandalously, in the original painting there are no indications that this woman is a mother. Unlike every other painting of Mary, this one focuses solely on the woman and her body and makes the viewer face the uncomfortable question of the Christ-child's mother's sexuality. The addition of the frame and its sperm decoration would have only served to re-enforce the contrast between the typical depictions of the holy family and the overt sexuality of this depiction. Finally, in a bit of “Murder, Arson, and Jaywalking”⁶ Munch has chosen to depict the Madonna haloed but with her hair totally unbound, and in fact only slightly tweaks the way it curls to accommodate for the different capabilities of lithography.

5 “Edvard Munch | MoMA,”

6 “Arson, Murder, and Jaywalking,” TV Tropes

Line/Color/Light

Sinuous lines of the body are echoed at large in the background like ripples in a pond, emphasizing that we have captured one fleeting moment in time and its echos. These ripples respond to the light, having ridges of red and depths of blue in response to the dramatic lighting from the top left that is centered on the woman's face and sternum. This lighting choice is especially evident in lithographs where the ability to have detailed chiaroscuro is lost in favor of prioritizing the most important lines, such as the ripples around her head and the curve of her waist and shoulder. The confident but evident lines also contribute to a sense of movement while breaking with the previous romantic traditions that called for only a very limited use of visible brushwork. This stylistic break is evident in Munch's other works as well. Munch also chooses less conventional colors than the realistic ones preferred by his forefathers, and the interplay of blue, black, and red give the background an ominous feeling while still using the traditional associated colors of the Virgin Mary.

Space, Texture, and Brushwork

The backgrounds of the versions of this piece are what make them most distinct from each other. The luminous and nuanced painted backgrounds are softer in the space they take up than the dark and recessed lithographic backgrounds. Without the carved frame originally intended for them, the painted versions more matte texture and blend of colors is easier on the eyes and draws less attention. The smooth and uniform texture left by most lithography would create more reflectivity and inhabit more space in a gallery while also giving a more concrete feeling to the *Madonna*.

Conclusion

A master of both painting and printmaking, the ways in which Munch deliberately breaks from romantic and classical art to express something new and explore new technologies. The use of color and rhythm to create an uncertain space and to focus our attentions in new ways on old figures is representative of the social changes that Munch was living through that refocused attention on old institutions such as the church and monarchy. During the creating of this series of prints, between 1894 and 1913, the world was preparing for its first greatest conflict, and new technologies were freeing people of old social norms. This tension between the joys and promises of modern life, and the fears of new and horrifying deaths, are placed between the raised arm and the turning hip of Munch's *Madonna*.

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