

THE DATING OF THE MUNCH MUSEUM'S *SCREAM*

by Ingebjørg Ydstie

There are two painted versions of *Scream*. One of them is in the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, the other in the Munch Museum. The first is signed and dated “E. Munch 1893”, while the latter is neither signed nor dated. This work of art was part of Edvard Munch’s bequest to the Municipality of Oslo in 1944 and has never been conclusively identified in any exhibition before 1918. In its official viewpoint the Munch Museum has – with few exceptions – declared 1893 as the year of its origin, but the date has been intensely disputed since the 1970s. Hereafter, the year 1910 will be noted as a more likely date, but the date will be accompanied by a question mark.¹ Neither the existing references, nor conservation-based analyses provide any absolute leads. A span of 17 years implies a rather drastic chronological shift. Nevertheless, the new dating of the painting is not controversial but is rather a question of the Munch Museum correcting its view in line with a consensus in the field of research pertaining to Munch. In the Catalogue Raisonné of Munch’s paintings, to be published in the fall of 2008 under the editorial supervision of Gerd Woll, the Munch Museum’s *Scream* will be dated “1910?”.

Observations based on style analysis are the decisive factor here: the paintings have diverse visual styles. This can best be explained as a function of Munch’s general development as a painter. The dominating style of the Munch Museum’s version resides in the bold brushwork and a striking play of colour, which is difficult to reconcile with Munch’s production during the 1890s. Had the picture been painted in 1893, it would have appeared as a sensational presaging of Expressionism. In his essay, Professor Øivind Storm Bjerke sees the style of the painting as more understandable in light of the influence of the budding Fauvist movement in France and Expressionism in Germany after the turn of the century. Similar artistic devices are characteristic of Munch’s other works from around 1906-1907 and later, and yet style analysis is not an exact science. Although the method has a long tradition in the field of art history, an informed evaluation can also produce diverse results.

Secondary sources can to a certain degree shed light on the case, but not resolve it. We know that a version of *Scream* was shown for the first time at an exhibition at Unter den Linden in

Berlin in 1893, together with other paintings in a series Munch presented under the title *Love*. In time, he developed the themes of love, anxiety and death in a cycle of paintings known as *The Frieze of Life*. A number of the central motifs of the series are found in multiple painted versions, both dated and undated. They are relatively contemporaneous developments of the motifs executed during the 1890s, or later, and in stylistically differing interpretations. The last group form part of the so-called *Late Frieze of Life*, where Munch took up the major cycle of pictures of the 1890s for renewed artistic treatment. The case is not so simple, however. At an exhibition of *The Frieze of Life* at Blomqvist in 1918, Munch mounted more recent works together with works from the 1890s. He continued, as well, to develop the cycle of motifs into the 1920s. Munch did not primarily abide by a chronological order, but rather worked with a visual imagery that was under constant development. He was by no means a fastidious type who kept a log of his entire production; he is even known to have signed works with verifiably incorrect dates.

Although the date of origin of other major works is disputed as well, the interest in the chronology of the Munch Museum's *Scream* is in a category of its own. The motif has a unique position both in Munch's oeuvre and in the canon of art history. The theme is developed in a couple of drawings, and aside from the two painted versions of *Scream*, there are three additional paintings with variations on the basic theme. They are the two versions of *Despair*, in Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm (1892) and in the Munch Museum (1894) respectively, and the painting entitled *Anxiety* (1894). An analysis of these three has little relevance for the debate about dates, however. They play a greater role in our understanding of the development of the motif. The pictures differentiate themselves from the two *Scream* paintings in a major way: all three are painted on canvas and in a rather conventional oil technique. The two *Scream* versions are painted in a mixed-media technique on unprimed cardboard.² The support is quite visible in several places and thus has an independent visual value, since the tonality of the cardboard creates an optical effect when combined with the colours. This original working method gives the impression of rough spontaneity, which is further accentuated via the clear traces of drawing in the picture. The controversial and fundamentally radical essence of the two painted versions of the *Scream* composition is thus also structured on a very fundamental choice of technical devices. These are (in part) common for both works. In other words; the painter we meet in *Scream* is not invariably like the Munch we meet in other works. There are two additional pastel versions of the *Scream* motif

in existence, both dated at 1893, but these drafts have not – thus far – contributed in any real way to clarifying the date of the Munch Museum's *Scream*.

The earliest positive identification of the Munch Museum's *Scream* is at an exhibition at Blomqvist in 1918. This is therefore also the latest possible date of the picture's origin. We are now faced with several alternative interpretations: The picture can have been painted in 1893, or later during the 1890s. Or, it could have come into being during the period 1915-1918, motivated by Munch's work on *The Late Frieze of Life*. But it can also – as the Munch Museum maintains – have been painted some time between these time limits, more accurately, in 1910.

In the catalogue accompanying the 1918 exhibition, Munch announced that several of the most significant pictures in *The Frieze of Life* had been sold; "some to Rasmus Meyer's collection, some to the National Gallery, among them *Ashes* and *The Dance of Life*, *Scream*, *The Sick Room* and *Madonna*; the pictures with the same motifs that are exhibited here are later renditions".³ This quote allows us to reasonably assume that the sale of *Scream* to Olaf Schou in 1910 was a direct cause for Munch to paint a new version for his own use during that year. The art collector Schou immediately handed the picture over to the National Gallery (today incorporated into the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design). There is documented evidence that sales incited Munch to make copies of a number of other paintings from that period. The preceding year he had sold several major paintings to Rasmus Meyer in Bergen. He very explicitly claimed the right to make copies of these pictures, something that can be demonstrated in the case of other sales of pictures during this period as well.⁴ Though it is true that documentation of this kind is lacking in the case of Schou's acquisition of *Scream*, the conspicuous frequency of copying newly sold works during these exact years, makes it reasonable to assume that Munch secured a copy of the major work *Scream* in 1910 for his own use.

The debate surrounding the dating of the painting gave impetus to conservation-based analyses early on. Unn Plahter, Professor Emeritus at the University of Oslo's Historical Museum, has examined both pictures; first in 1974 and subsequently in 1992. Among other things she tested the yellow pigment in the two versions of *Scream* and another painting from 1906. Differences between the pigments used in the National Museum's picture and the two other paintings were demonstrated. However, Plahter concluded that knowledge about the

properties of cadmium yellow was not good enough at the time to justify a straightforward answer. In recent years, painting conservator Biljana Topalova-Casadieago and paper conservator Kirsten Korff have examined the Munch Museum's *Scream*, while painting conservator Trond Aslaksby has worked on the National Museum's painting. The result of the first study exists in published form, while the latter is known in professional circles via a lecture.⁵ The conservation work on the Munch Museum's picture after the theft has also focused on the issue of its date of origin. On the basis of this information, Topalova-Casadieago has conducted an interesting comparative analysis of the two paintings for this publication. In the course of her work she has consulted both Unn Plahter and Leif Plahter, long-standing head of the National Gallery's conservation department.

Topalova-Casadieago describes the physical process of creation as fundamentally divergent in the two paintings. The National Museum's *Scream* bears indisputable evidence of an experimental and seeking attitude, while the Munch Museum's version reveals a far more calculated approach. Here, all of the elements have been incorporated in the composition from the start, laid down in an underlying sketch that is only partially painted over. These observations support the view that the National Museum's version is the first, original artwork. Yet the description of the two methods of painting can also be interpreted as evidence of a substantial disparity in time. The Munch Museum's version is characterised by a striking and vivid play of colour, where opaque colours are applied in clearly delineated and largely unblended areas. In the National Museum's *Scream*, the motif is first drawn up with paint and the surface is then re-worked in a step by step process. Munch has used an extremely diluted paint solution, which is then applied in a transparent wash technique, where the colours and tones are blended together. With the exception of the intense play of colour in the sky, the result is a more subdued overall effect. In the Munch Museum's picture, Topalova-Casadieago has registered a planned 'saving' of certain areas for the figures, the railing and the water; elements which Munch knew about ahead of time and would later fill in. In the National Museum's picture, however, the background figures are painted over existing brushstrokes. The final treatment of the pictures is also divergent. At this stage, the much discussed painting-over of the incision in the cardboard is included as an independent element in the composition, visible as a narrow red area on the right. This non-figurative element is omitted in the Munch Museum's version. In the finishing phase of the National Museum's picture, Munch has applied translucent layers of paint, which give a more unified and subdued surface tonality. As the very last step, he accentuates the composition by adding

a few drawn lines. This step by step and rather complicated method belies an unpremeditated process that gradually achieved resolution. The opposite seems to be the case with the Munch Museum's *Scream*.

Reinhold Heller was the first to introduce serious and well-grounded doubts about the 1893 dating of the Munch Museum's *Scream*. In his book *Munch. The Scream* (1974), he argued that this version must have been painted in 1915-18, and at the earliest 1909.⁶ The main focus of his study was the National Museum's painting, while the Munch Museum's version was viewed as a later copy of secondary artistic significance. Heller found a striking likeness between the *Scream* figure in the lithograph of 1895 and the Munch Museum's version, and believed that the figure in the painting was based on the motif as it was developed in the graphic work. Yet, in his opinion, the picture lacked the taut composition that characterises the National Museum's work. The expressive quality of the palette and the painting style was better explained in the light of the painting style Munch had developed during and after his sojourn in Warnemünde in 1907-1908. Heller brought attention to the two male figures in the background as well. In his opinion, they belonged in a very different social context than the two stiff gentlemen wearing top hats in the National Museum's picture. In the Munch Museum's copy, they make a more familiar and every day impression, not unlike the figures we know from Munch's presentations of workers. Heller therefore considers 1909 as the earliest possible date of origin, and possibly motivated by the sale of the first *Scream* to Olaf Schou. He considered the connection with *The Late Frieze of Life* 1915-1918 as an equally probable motivation for the copy. Heller's alternative dating of the picture had no consequences, with the exception of an exhibition catalogue published by Malmö Konsthall in 1975. It stated that the Munch Museum's specialists presumed 1893, alternatively 1909, to be the year of its origin.

Arne Eggum was the Munch Museum's influential Chief Curator for several decades, and subsequently also Director of the museum. During the 1970s he became convinced that the undated version of *Scream* was painted in 1893. In 1978 he crossed out the question mark that in periods had accompanied the date. This dating of the picture has remained standing since then. Amongst the experts, Eggum has spoken most emphatically in support of a contemporaneous theory of the two paintings. For him the disparities could not be explained by a significant disparity in time. He preferred to see the relationship as nuances in the development of two rather parallel approaches. When, in 2001, differing opinions escalated

into a crass debate in the media, he elaborated his viewpoint as follows: The colouration and visual expression of the Munch Museum's *Scream* "are most in tune with Munch's other paintings from this year".⁷ Eggum claimed that he could substantiate that the Munch Museum's version was the first to be painted by Munch; that it was this painting that was shown in the exhibition in Berlin in 1893. The National Museum's *Scream* was painted later, he claimed, possibly not before 1894. Eggum pointed to the double signature on the National Museum's painting: It is first signed "E. Munch", and then "E. Munch 1893" was later written over the first signature. This is visible to the naked eye. He claimed that the dated signature was mistakenly added at a later date by Munch himself. A photograph showing a general view of a later exhibition showed, in his estimation, the National Museum's *Scream* as an undated work. The quality of the photograph was too poor, however, to convince the other party. With the passing of time, Eggum has become increasingly more alone in his point of view. The circumstantial evidence points predominantly in another direction, yet unequivocal and satisfactory 'proof' of a later date as the origin of the Munch Museum's *Scream* has yet to be found.

In a lecture given in 1990, Pål Hougen, past director of the City of Oslo Art Collections gave his support to Heller's 1909 point of view and even claimed that it originated in himself. He made this point again in 2001. Yet Hougen expressed a far stronger fascination for the Munch Museum's painting than was the case for Heller. In this respect Hougen was more in line with Eggum. As with Heller, Hougen's main argument was linked to style analysis. The expressive quality of the Munch Museum's *Scream* first became understandable against the backdrop of the bold painting method and the vibrant palette Munch had acquired during his sojourn in Warnemünde. An 1893 dating of the picture could only contribute to creating "serious confusion about Munch's painting method during the 1890s".⁸ The background figures had, for him as well, more in common with the presentations of workers from this period. Hougen concluded that "the Munch Museum's version of *Scream* is not painted in 1893, but after 1908".⁹

Frank Høifødt participated in the debate in 2001: he too found the dating of the picture at 1893 as "hardly plausible" and recommended that the Munch Museum allow the uncertainty "that applies to so many other pictures – be expressed in its catalogues and exhibitions".¹⁰

Marit Lange, for years the National Museum of Art's leading art historian, distinctly disassociated herself from Eggum's treatment of facts and circumstantial evidence. In her article, she pointed to Munch's above-mentioned quote from 1918 regarding copies of works for *The Frieze of Life*.¹¹ She also summed up the debate in a longer article in the periodical *Kunst og Kultur* in 2005. In it she supports Hougen's and Heller's view, among other things by quoting the latter; this painting lacked "the intensity of formal interaction characteristic of the 1893 work."¹² For Lange 1915-1918 was the most probable date of origin.

The last word on the subject had certainly not been uttered. It may be added that the exchange of opinions has had many positive sides to it – first of all, those associated with a critical view of the similarities, differences and particular painterly qualities of the *Scream* paintings. When viewed by an outsider, the details might appear to be a peculiar form of hair splitting. The disagreement has nevertheless had a revitalizing effect on research pertaining to Munch, and insight and increased knowledge has been an overriding result of the debate. One can also observe that a serious study of Munch's extensive practice of creating several versions of his own major works can shed light on his procedural working methods and radical modernism. Traditional concepts such as 'original' and 'copy' might then prove inapplicable.

¹ I would like to thank Senior Curator Gerd Woll, Art Historian Frank Høifødt, Phd. and Painting Conservator Biljana Topalova-Casadio for their professional input.

² For problems related to a conservation-based evaluation of technique, see Gry Landro, Biljana Topalova-Casadio and Magdalena Ufnalewska-Godzimirska: "The Conservation of the Munch Museum's *Scream*. Examinations and Observations", and Biljana Topalova-Casadio, "The Two Painted Versions of *Scream*. A Comparative Study Based on Painting Techniques", both in this publication

³ Edvard Munch, *The Frieze of Life*, Blomqvist 1918.

⁴ Edvard Munch in a letter to Rasmus Meyer, dated "Skrubben", Kragerø 18.07.1910; Edvard Munch, draft of a letter to Rasmus Meyer, Munch Museum, N 1890; Ludvig Ravensberg's diary, Munch Museum, LR 536, 02.01.1910; Ludwig Thormaehlen, "Drei neue erworbene Bilder von Munch in der Nationalgalerie", *Museum der Gegenwart*, 1930/31, Vol. 1, p. 124.

⁵ Biljana Topalova-Casadio and Kirsten Korff, "Preliminær undersøkelse av Edvard Munch 'Skrik' 1893(?)", *Meddelelser om Konservering*, No. 1, 2005, pp. 3-15.

⁶ Reinhold Heller, *Munch. The Scream*, London 1973, note 50.

⁷ Arne Eggum, "Hvem har det første 'Skrik'?", *Aftenposten* 1.3.2001. Eggum's further contributions to the debate in *Aftenposten* were as follows: "Munch kopierte ikke seg selv" 12.3.2001; "Feilaktig av Marit Lange" 7.4.2001; "'Skrik' har to signaturer" 8.4.2001; "Fotodokumentasjon av 'Skrik'" 8.5.2001. See also Finn Robert Jensen, "Fortsatt språk om alderen på 'Skrik'", *Aftenposten* 21.3.2001.

⁸ Pål Hougen, "'Skrik': Mennene i bakgrunnen er ulike", *Aftenposten* 14.3.2001.

⁹ Pål Hougen, "Eggum har neppe rett", *Aftenposten* 6.3.2001.

¹⁰ Frank Høifødt, "'Skrik' i faglig isolasjon", *Aftenposten* 18.3.2001. Høifødt's additional articles were; "Lite tillitvekkende fra Munch-museets sjef" 19.2.2001; "'Skrik'-debatt som faglig lærestykke" 19.4.2001.

¹¹ Marit Ingeborg Lange, "Hva sier Munch selv?", *Aftenposten* 29.3.2001.

¹² "'Skrik' etc. Nok en gang kontrafaktisk kunsthistorie", *Kunst og Kultur*, No. 4, 2005, pp. 241-253, here quoted from p. 248.