



Sandra Espig Edvard Munch's "Madonna" – or "The Pause, When the World Stood Still in Its Tracks"

With flowing, long hair, her eyes almost closed, her mouth slightly open, a young woman lolls in sensual abandon. She is naked from the hips up. Sperm swirl around her at the edge, and an embryo is located in the lower left corner.

Edvard Munch created our "Madonna," or "Liebendes Weib," in 1895 in Berlin as a monochrome work in high-contrast black and white. It is one of the artist's earliest lithographs and is undoubtedly one of his graphic masterpieces. The complex history of its creation alone reflects how intensely Munch engaged with the motif, both in terms of content and form: By 1903, he had produced five paintings, one etching, and two lithographs. Our version exists in several experimental-looking variations: with or without a frame, cropped at waist level, hand-coloured or executed in multiple colours using several printing stones, and printed on different types of paper.

Munch's "Madonna" is an icon, for it embodies one of the most powerful depictions of femininity in the late 19th century. Departing from iconographic tradition, Munch does not depict a mother-child relationship marked by tenderness. On the contrary, in his work, the rather unsettling embryo is placed in isolation from its mother. The artist sets a scandalous, new focus: he portrays the Madonna as a sensual woman, as a femme fatale: from her lover's perspective, we view her in a moment of ecstasy. Deeply absorbed, she is wholly at one with herself and radiates otherworldly perfection. The fact that she is conceiving seems almost incidental.

At the same time, Munch also portrays her as a femme fragile. Her fragility, expressed in her slender stature, delicate face, deep-set eyes, and raised right arm – which appears almost transparent – reveals her proximity to death. Munch describes her in his own words: "The pause when the whole world stood still in its tracks. Your face encompasses all the beauty of the earth. Your lips red as a ripening fruit. Parted, as if in pain. The smile of a corpse. Now life extends its hand to death. The chain is closed, the one that connects. The millennium of the departed. With the millennium of those yet to come" (Edvard Munch in the sketchbook "Tree of Knowledge," Munch Museum, Oslo).

In "Madonna," the artist explores the cycle of life – birth, love, and death. As early as the 1880s, he began to grapple with existential themes, which he later summarized as the "Frieze of Life." He started with the theme of love, which ultimately brought him unhappiness in the 1890s. The Norwegian writer Dagny Juel (1867–1901) (fig. next page) likely inspired his "Madonna." Many of her writings deal with sexually self-assured women who challenged the gender roles of the time. Not only Munch, but nearly all the artists who regularly met in the 1890s at the wine bar "Zum schwarzen Ferkel" at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, were captivated by her because of her mysterious aura, warmth, and her seductive dances.

Prints of "Madonna" cost \$200 at the 1913 Armory Show in New York, making them among the most valuable and sought-after prints of the early 20th century – and even today, more than a hundred years later, Munch's "Madonna" has lost none of its seductive allure.

10 Edvard Munch

Løiten/Hedmark 1863 – 1944 Ekely near Oslo

"Madonna". 1895

Lithograph on China paper. 60,3 × 43,7 cm (23 ¾ × 17 ¼ in.). Signed. Catalogue raisonné: Woll 39 A I 2 (of D VII). [3122]

Provenance

Art dealership Hammerlunde, Oslo / Private Collection, Germany (acquired 1976 at Kornfeld und Klipstein, Bern)

EUR 150,000–200,000

USD 176,000–235,000

Literature and illustration

Auction 157: Moderne Kunst des neunzehnten and zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts. Bilder-Aquarelle-Zeichnungen-Graphik-Skulpturen-Autographen. Bern, Kornfeld and Klipstein, 9./10.6.1976, cat. no. 701, ill. pl. 126



Munch's muse and model: the Norwegian writer Dagny Przybyszewska (née Juel), 1894

