· AGNEWS ·
EST. 1817

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Edvard Munch (Ådalsbruk 1863-1944 Oslo)

Figurer ved Seinen I Saint-Cloud (Figures on the river Seine at Saint-Cloud, Paris)

Signed with the artist's initials and dated 'EM. 90' (lower right)

Pastel on paper

11 ⅞ x 13 ¾ in. (30.2 x 35 cm.)

Executed in 1890
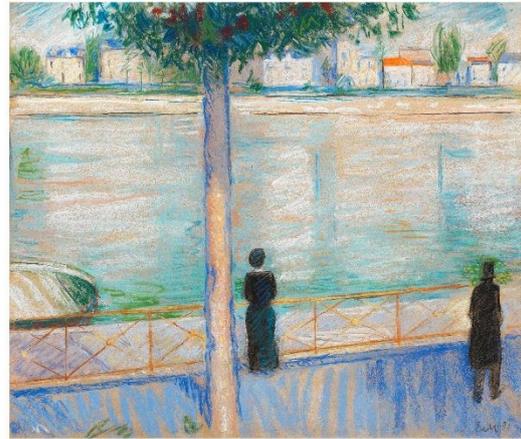
Provenance
Antonine G. Melet Collection, Paris, no. 2 (possibly acquired from the artist in January 1890).
Private collection, Nice.
Private collection, Paris (acquired from the above in April 1988), until 2022.

This work is recorded in the archives of the Munch Museet, Oslo
(inv. no. PE.T.00598, see www.munchmuseet.no/en/object/PE.T.00598)

'Munch writes poetry with colour. He has taught himself to see the full potential of colour in art... His use of colour is above all lyrical. He feels colours and he reveals his feelings through colours; he does not see them in isolation. He does not just see yellow, red and blue and violet; he sees sorrow and screaming and melancholy and decay.' – Sigbjørn Obstfelder, 1893

Few names in the history of modern art conjure quite such immediately visceral imagery as that of Edvard Munch. Globally renowned for his pictorial expression of existential dread, depicted in arguably one of the most famous images of art history, as well as his intensely probing and self-scrutinising self-portraits (fig.1), Munch experienced some of the most revolutionary social and artistic moments of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Though his personal life was plagued from the outset by tragedy, grief and mental anguish, Munch became a leading figure in the breakthrough artistic movements of the period and, contrary to the reclusive nature he embodied, was soon revered as one of the greatest artists of his time.

The traditional and strictly conservative society of late nineteenth century Europe was the perfect kindling for the liberating Bohemian ideologies that began to murmur throughout many of the small cafés and quasi-underground drinking houses of the European artist quarters. Whilst Paris and Berlin are perhaps most widely known for this cultural phenomenon, the monumental societal shift in Kristiania – as Oslo was known as from 1877-1925 – was possibly even more extreme; the intellectual readjustment hit the Scandinavian regions particularly aggressively, as Ragna Stang writes: 'the movement was met with such single-minded and relentless hostility that what elsewhere had been a few gentle ripples on the surface of society, in Norway became a full-scale storm, a life and death struggle in some circles that had far-reaching effects; social, political, and, above all, artistic and intellectual' (R. Stang, *Edvard Munch, The man and his art*, Milan, 1979, p. 45).

Artists and writers flooded to Paris during the early 1880s before returning home, brimming with not just new theoretical, philosophical and artistic ideas, but with a newfound appreciation for Continental life, with its café society, Parisian brothels and cosmopolitan people. This threatened the middle-class population of the Scandinavian capital which functioned under the stern ideals of the Lutheran Church and was deeply insular. Munch was exposed to this staunchly pious sentiment through his father, an unaccomplished doctor whose devoutness was only exacerbated by the painfully early loss of his wife Laura and daughter Sophie to tuberculosis, driving him to an almost manic-like state of piety. Illness did not escape the artist himself who was sickly throughout his childhood, forcing much of his formative education to take place at his impoverished home. He swiftly grew apart from his father's beliefs and found himself a shy, reclusive outsider. Ultimately, the opportune rise of Bohemianism in Kristiania drew in the impressionable young man and he began his involvement with the bohemian fraternities in the autumn of 1882, setting his sights on the 'modern' metropolis of Paris.

'People will be able to see ... that my philosophy of life and my spiritual art had their beginnings during my Bohemian period in the middle and end of the 1880s, and developed even more during my stay in Paris in 1889' (Munch to Ragnar Hoppe in 1929, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 20). Aside from its prominence as a bohemian metropolis, Paris in the 19th Century was the leading cultural centre of the world; it was *the* place to see the celebrated painters of the period and the 'alternative' exhibitions on view in the cafés and private galleries that flourished in the city.

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After receiving a bursary and study grants from the Norwegian state Munch made several visits to Paris during the years 1889-1891. As stated by the artist himself, these sojourns had a profound influence on his development, with some of his most iconic works dating to this period and the years following. His senses were bombarded with artistic theory - Impressionism, Post- & Neo-Impressionism and Symbolism were coming to the fore at this time and elements of all can be seen throughout his oeuvre in the radical brushwork, bold colours, and painting *en plein air*. A clear indication of this contemporary influence can be seen in *Rue Lafayette* (1891), in which Munch emulates a typically Caillebotte top-hatted gentleman who looks over the bustling city streets, with the loose handling of a radical Neo-Impressionist, such as Paul Signac. However, perhaps Munch's most frequent and poignant comparison, both as the depressed, melancholic and as the proponent of vivid and expressive colour, is with Vincent van Gogh.

Though van Gogh died in July of 1890, and it is assumed that they almost certainly never met, the two artists co-existed unimaginably closely in these Paris years, living in the Montmartre area and moving within the same artistic circles, both finding inspiration and guidance from the revolutionary Symbolist, Paul Gauguin. Whilst they would find great stimulation through the prevailing trends of the time, it is Gauguin who encouraged the two artists to translate their intense personal experience into bold colour and expressive handling which, along with their masterful use of perspective and the solitary figure, conveyed the shared theme of isolation and mental seclusion. Prevalent also is the simplification of form that each of the young artists applied to the human figure, which only expressed further the outward expression of inner suffering the painters felt as they placed themselves in their canvas.

In December 1889, prompted by an outbreak of cholera in the central area of the city, Munch moved to the picturesque suburb of Saint-Cloud. He formed a close friendship with the Danish poet Emanuel Goldstein and the two talked frequently and intensely: their conversations gave Munch cause to put his thoughts to paper, producing 'not a diary in the accepted sense of the word; [rather] they are partly extracts from the life of my soul, partly poems written as prose...' (Munch quoted in *ibid.*, p. 73). These extensive writings from the cold Saint-Cloud winter came to be known by some as the 'Saint-Cloud Manifesto', where 'he rejected the emotionally neutral subjects of Impressionism, and stated his determination to paint pictures expressive of states of mind' (G.H. Hamilton, *Paintings and Sculptures in Europe 1880-1940*, New Haven, 1993, p. 122). Munch became increasingly alienated from the materialism of the bohemians and sought to carve his own path. As Stang comments: 'under the influence of the new ideas that he had

encountered in Paris and with the strict religious atmosphere of his home gone, Munch began to develop a mystical and pantheistic philosophy and a completely different attitude towards life and art ... He systematically rejected his earlier philosophy and formulated a new artistic creed: There should be no more paintings of people reading and women knitting, in future they should be of people who breathe, who feel emotions, who suffer and love' (*ibid.*, pp. 73 & 75).

Figurer ved Seinen i Saint-Cloud dates to this prolific Saint-Cloud period of 1890, and represents a scene very likely viewed from the window of the room Munch took overlooking the Seine – perhaps the very room in which his masterpiece *Night in Saint-Cloud* (fig. 2) was painted, depicting a contemplative top-hatted figure staring morosely out into the night; a dark, complex tribute to his recently lost father. From his vantagepoint in the present work, we look out over a picturesque and quintessential Parisian scene, his Impressionistic handling offering the sensation of sunshine, the coated figures suggesting a biting Spring chill. His separation of the viewing plane through strong, defined lines is a clear example of the recent inspiration from the major Impressionist artists; Monet and Sisley, for example, both employed this method in their works from the 1870s. Munch's sinuous green, white and blue lines in the water are certainly reminiscent of his oscillating Norwegian shorelines of the years to come and his bold outlines laid the groundwork for the future Expressionists whilst also clearly showing a huge cumulative appreciation for the contemporary art world he was immersed in.

Speaking of his innovative use of colour in 1890, Munch explained 'it would be amusing to give a talk to all those who have seen our paintings over the years and have either laughed or just scratched their heads. They are completely incapable of appreciating that there is any sort of reason involved in these momentary impressions of life. All they know is that a tree cannot be red or blue, nor can a face be blue or green – since childhood they have learned that leaves are green and skin is a nice pink colour. They cannot bring themselves to believe that the artist really meant to use those strange colours – it must be some kind of effete intellectual humbug, or perhaps just the product of a deranged mind, preferably the latter. They cannot get it into their heads that these pictures are the result of serious thought, of suffering – they are the product of sleepless nights, the fruits of physical and mental torment' (Munch quoted in *ibid.*, p. 12).

To unravel the truly Munchian aspects of *Figurer ved Seinen i Saint-Cloud*, we must look beyond the immediately cheerful, lively Neo-impressionistic handling and look instead at the dark totem-like figures presented to us, thoughtfully placed and composed. Their placement and posture tell a tale, their proximity only serving to emphasise their distance apart, they are 'actors on a stage... [who] express feelings and attitudes through pose and gesture' (G. Woll, *Edvard Munch, Complete Paintings, Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. I, *1880-1897*, London, 2009, p. 25).

We can assume that Munch inserts himself into the scene through the hunched male figure, isolated and outcast, lingering on the edge of the composition with his stark black garments contrasting starkly against the lighter colours which form the landscape. His blue shadow, pigment-matched to the shadow of the tree, emanates from his person towards the female figure, who stares out over the Seine. She forces the viewer to scrutinise her contemplation, unaided by her faceless form that excludes the viewer, just as she shuns the *flâneur* character that Munch has assumed. The blue pigment appears to climb her form, possibly indicating the artist's impact on those around him. These faceless subjects are a direct contradiction to his early 1890s series of works in which we find *The Scream* (fig. 3), where the protagonist turns to stare directly into the viewer, forcing an uncompromising encounter. Another picture of this group is *Evening on Karl Johan* from 1892 in which the very same male coated figure appears on the right (fig. 4). Munch's writing suggest that *Evening on Karl Johan* was inspired by a memory of searching Oslo's main boulevard Karl Johan for a woman with whom he was infatuated and of becoming emotionally overwhelmed in the crowds.

Edvard Munch's enduring impact on our appreciation for modern art cannot be understated. He was a pioneer whose depiction of personal anguish is as unerring today as it was at the time of its creation. *Figurer ved Seinen i Saint-Cloud* sits at a pivotal turning point in the artist's oeuvre; executed during a period of intense internal reflection and self-analysis it combines a plethora of themes and contemporary inspiration and is a pristine example of Munch's ability as a draughtsman and narrator. The vibrant pastel stands as a key work from Munch's defining Parisian years and is an exceedingly rare work to appear on the market.

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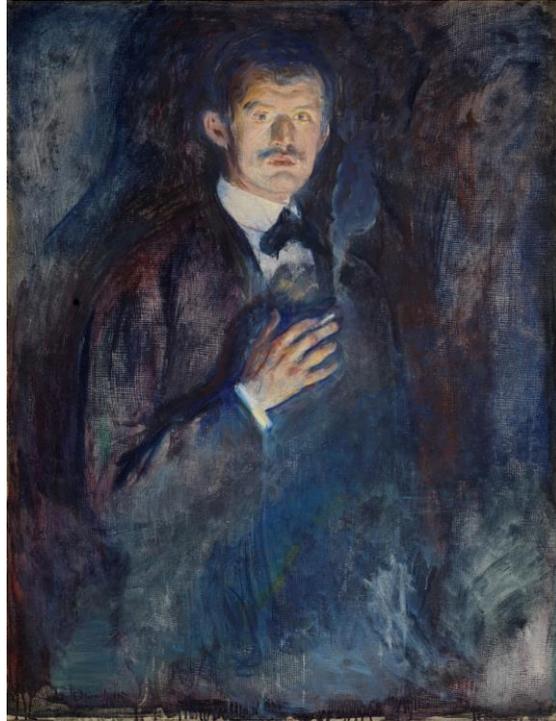
Fig. 1. Edvard Munch, *Self-Portrait with Cigarette*, 1895, oil on canvas, National Gallery, Oslo.

Fig. 2. Edvard Munch**, ** *Night in Saint-Cloud* , 1890, oil on canvas, National Museum, Oslo.

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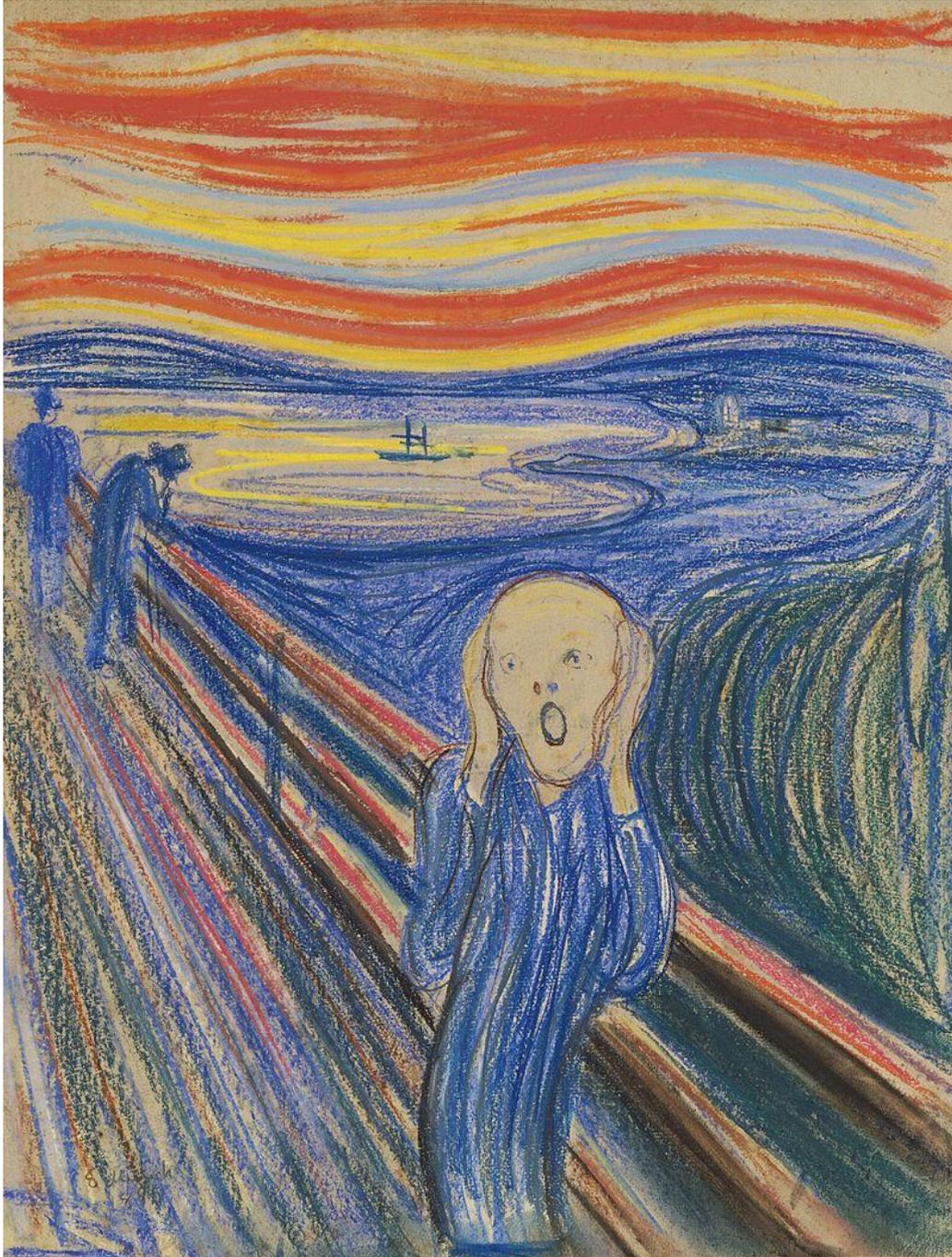
Fig. 3. Edvard Munch, *The Scream,* 1895, pastel on cardboard; sold for nearly US$120 million at Sotheby's in 2012, private collection.

Fig. 4: Edward Munch, *Evening on Karl Johan,* 1892, oil on canvas, KODE Bergen Art Museum.