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Art Is A Window Into Our Humanity

Art matters because it allows us to be aware of and communicate to others the deeper emotions and truths that make us who we are. In “Art is a Different Kind of Cosmic Order,” Brian Greene, a world renowned theoretical physicist at Columbia University, reflects on the role of art alongside mathematics and science. He notes that mathematics represents objective truths and patterns inherent in the universe, while art is a more subjective and uniquely human expression. Greene then examines multiple facets of the origins and purpose of art. Though there are multitudinous examples of creative expression that validate this claim, artists that express their deepest emotions in their work are some of the best.

Edvard Munch is a primary example of an artist who spent his life making art that expressed the dark truths within himself and in the people around him. His pieces most likely allowed him to cope with these truths, and can still guide viewers to examine their deeper feelings today. At the center of three well known works, Munch explores the human topic of fear through three different angles as outlined below.

In the first example, “The Sick Child” (Figure 1), Munch explores the fear of losing a loved one. Munch wrote, “With the sick child I broke new ground – it was a breakthrough in my art. Most of what I have done since had its genesis in this picture” (Overas, “The Sick Child”). This piece draws directly from the artist's own experiences: “This image of a young girl dying from tuberculosis draws on his experience of losing his sister Sophie when he was just 14 years old” (“Edvard Munch’s Life”). The grief and sorrow evident in this scene is made clear by how the artist incorporated the elements of shape, line, and value in this work. The hunched form of

the older woman (most likely Sophie's mother) and the rough lines apparent in the painting show that this piece is not a celebration of life. In addition to the chaotic strokes, the darker values surrounding the figures aid in showing the encroaching darkness in the scene. The pseudo-vignette could easily be equated to death coming to take the young girl's life from her mother. The use of sketchy lines and dark values to show negative emotion is a common theme in Edvard Munch's work, and is part of what makes his pieces successful.

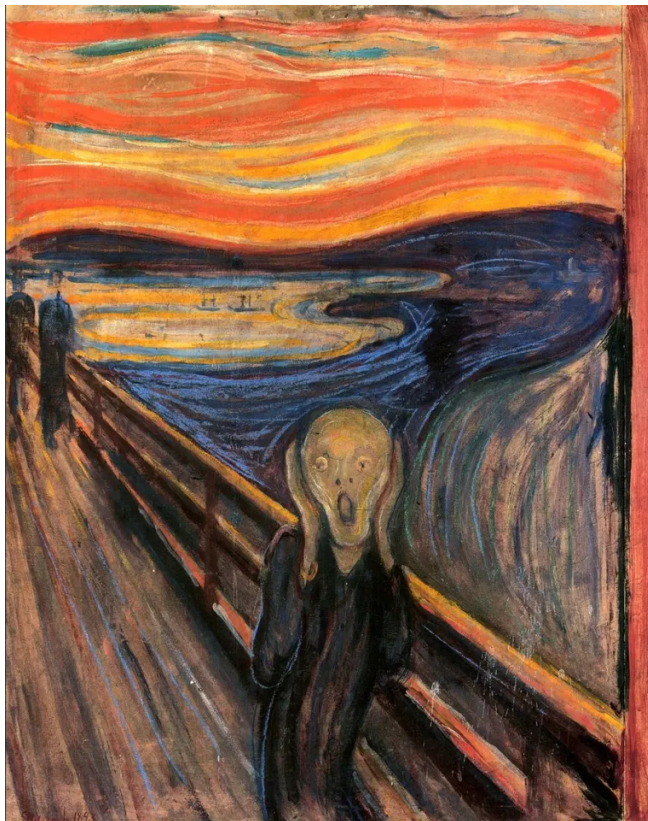
Figure 1 - "The Sick Child", 1885–86, Edward Munch



In his most famous work, "The Scream" (Figure 2), painted in 1893, the main figure's distinctive gesture is generally understood as an expression of horror and fear of self. Munch described the personal anguish behind the painting: "for several years I was almost mad... You know my picture, 'The Scream?' I was stretched to the limit—nature was screaming in my blood... After that I gave up hope of ever being able to love again" (Iker, "Edvard Munch"). The Scream successfully uses elements of movement, color, and unity to create the unnamed

feeling Munch spoke of. The bright orange, black, and blue tones used all throughout the painting create a sense of unity, despite the differing subjects and lighting. Warm colors used to create a fiery sky reflect onto the landscape below, especially visible on the fence-like railing below. Additionally, the lines in this painting are curved to create squiggly loops and wobbly shapes (with the exception of the pier). This makes the figure in the foreground appear unsteady and twisted, adding to the shaken feeling of the piece.

Figure 2 - “The Scream”, 1893, Edward Munch



In the final example, “Vampire” (Figure 3), Munch expresses his fear of manipulation and his feelings towards women. It is pertinent to note that Munch didn't want to get married. One critic wrote that “if Edvard fell into a relationship, he quickly rowed ashore. Edvard believed that women lived off men, and he compared them to leeches, dangerous predators” (Tveit, “An Interpretation”). The elements of space, emphasis, and contrast used in this painting prompt the viewer to examine the painting closely, perhaps causing them to notice that the woman appears to be feeding on the man's neck like a vampire. The black space left around the tangled figures serves to focus the viewer's attention on the center of the work in two ways. First, by providing a dark contrast to the lighter tones of the center, and secondly, by emphasizing the protruding shapes of the woman's body, and how the man fades to black below his neck.

Figure 3 - “Vampire” 1893, Edward Munch



In conclusion, art is essential to human existence because it allows us to communicate sensations that cannot be understood any other way. As shown in his paintings, Edvard Munch often saw the people around him through lenses that showed their worst facets. The tortured artist remains controversial, critics still claim that his perceptions of humanity were skewed, and to some degree, they were. However, art was never meant to be politically correct. Instead, it is best used as a tool for us to communicate what cannot be understood when it is said out loud. Despite the paranoia and disgust that plagued the beginning of Munch's life, even he found peace in his later years. We need art to remind us that to feel is part of what it means to be human.

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