

"Sickness and madness were the guardian angels who watched over my crib," stated **Edvard Munch** (1863-1944), in reference to his difficult childhood. Although he never wanted to formally take part in Expressionism as a trend, there can be no doubt of the Norwegian painter's importance as a forerunner of the movement.

Right from the beginning, Munch's life was marked by tragedy. As a small child he saw first his mother die of tuberculosis and, shortly thereafter, his older sister. His father, a doctor obsessed by religion, died and left Munch alone in the world at age eighteen. The young man refused to make a family, declaring that he did not want the family's deficient physical and mental health to be passed on to children. In spite of being attractive, he had difficult relationships with women; influenced by the misogynous outlook typical of intellectuals of his time, he considered women to be both alluring and sinful.

His painting featured the influences of Northern European literary culture, from the existentialism of Danish philosopher S.A. Kierkegaard to the writings of Henrik Ibsen and J. August Strindberg, which originated at the end of the nineteenth century in Norway's gloomy climate of pious closure.

In dealing with such **profoundly earthly themes** as loneliness, illness, death, erasure of individual identity, crises of moral values and religion, Munch used the suffering of his own life as a privileged way to view the world.

A perfectionist, the artist was tormented by his inability to make lasting choices (termed by Søren Kierkegaard as

the **feeling of anxiety**); this led him to express his works in many variations on the same theme so that subjects were often repeated in different techniques. The use of oil paint, tempera, xylography or watercolour meant that his painting varied from definite material to flattened and unfinished qualities, at other times it appeared hardened by the black and white effects of woodblock printing.

His painting **Madonna** (1894-1895) illustrates how Munch treated **sexuality** as a path to life as well as to death, the "great delusion" as the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote in his treatises on physical love. By extension Munch considered society as a place where the individual's solitude remains inexpressible. For instance in **Evening on Karl Johann Street**, the figures' haunted and mute expressions make the bustle of passers-by become a kind of funeral procession. The same silent faces appear in *The Deathbed* (1896), a wake in which the family members do not comfort each other but rather, by their detachment, increase the others' grief. The individual is always alone, as seen in the famous series of **The Scream** (1893,