Munch’s Impact on Europe

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Edvard Munch was an especially self-assured artist, organising his own one-man shows well before the age of thirty. Such strategic marketing by an artist was as unusual in Norway as it was on the continent. Thus, Munch and his pictures generated much discussion, and what could be described as a “media strategy” brought Munch wide attention. This conspicuousness in the public arena, the result of his positive cultural and social capital, formed the basis of Munch’s avant-gardism, which was identified just after 1900 and developed by a younger generation of Expressionists. An event in the autumn of 1892 projected Munch into the unexpected role of Germany’s pioneer of modern painting; but his status in the history of Scandinavian and European avant-gardism can also be traced back to that year. A young “prophet” from a Scandinavian country, Munch aroused a latent crisis within Berlin’s art establishment: his exhibition in the city, intended to honour a young talent, was instead perceived as an attack on mainstream taste.

 Succès de Scandale

On 14 September 1892, Munch opened a one-man show in Karl Johansgate, the fashionable main street of the Norwegian capital, Kristiania (Oslo), in premises he had rented from the goldsmith Tostrup. During the first week, fifty paintings, plus a number of drawings, were seen by 900 visitors. Reviews in the press were, as usual, mixed with regard to the form and content of the works. That, however, mattered little given the decisive and positive role Eilert Adelsteen Normann, one of the visitors to the exhibition, would play in
Munch’s career. Adelsteen Normann was a Norwegian painter enjoying great success in Germany with his oil paintings depicting the fjords of western Norway. (These subjects found great favour with the upper-middle class and in 1890 Kaiser Wilhelm II bought one of his seascapes.) Adelsteen Normann was travelling from his summer villa at Balestrand on the Sognefjord to Berlin when he stopped in Kristiania to pay a visit to Munch’s exhibition. Though he was familiar with contemporary art trends in Paris, Adelsteen Normann’s personal tastes were far removed from those of Munch. Nevertheless, he resolved to propose that Munch be invited to Berlin as a principal exhibitor at the artists’ association, the Verein Berliner Künstler. He was clearly impressed by Munch’s talent, and presumably felt that both the public and artists in Berlin would more readily accept the most progressive styles of the day, including French Impressionism, if they were practised and presented to them by his young Scandinavian discovery. As early as 24 September, Adelsteen Normann wrote to Munch that the Verein Berliner Künstler’s exhibitions committee (of which, propitiously, the painter himself was a member) had voted unanimously to invite Munch to hold a one-man show in the German capital that autumn. Munch’s exhibition opened on 5 November in the then recently renovated Architektenhaus at Wilhelmstrasse 92, and comprised 55 paintings, the majority of them painted after 1889. Several of these are now in the collection of the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo; they include Night in Saint Cloud (1890), Rue Lafayette (1891), and Melancholy (1892).

It soon became apparent, however, that Adelsteen Normann had underestimated the hostile attitude of the artists’ association’s academic and conservative members. The public, too, reacted with alarm: Munch’s exhibition had become a succès de scandale, as decried on 10 November in the newspaper Frankfurter Zeitung, under the headline, “Art is in danger!” (“Die Kunst ist in Gefahr!”) (Kneher 1994: 9). Because he had been invited to exhibit, Munch was assured some degree of courtesy, but during an extraordinary general meeting held on 12 November, the association’s members voted on a proposal to shut down the exhibition: by 120 to 105 they voted that it should close forthwith. The end came the very next day: Munch’s paintings had proved divisive, the response to them in newspapers and other periodicals reflecting both positive and negative attitudes. Munch was perceived as an exponent of modern French painting.