

Cultural, historical and social influences on Edvard Munch's 'The Scream (1893)

One of the most world's most famous paintings, Munch painted several versions of The Scream. The most famous is the oil painting of 1893 that resides in the National Museum of Norway (Munch's home country).

An entry in Munch's diary recorded the main inspiration for The Scream:
"I was walking along the road with two friends – the sun went down – I felt a gust of melancholy – suddenly the sky turned a bloody red. I stopped, leaned against the railing, tired to death – as the flaming skies hung like blood and sword over the blue-black fjord and the city – my friends went on – I stood there trembling with anxiety – and I felt a vast infinite scream through nature."

Astronomers now believe that the red sky was the result of a volcanic eruption on the other side of the world. Debris thrown into the atmosphere from an eruption in Indonesia caused the sky to turn angry and red throughout Europe in late 1883 and early 1884.

Munch's family life was very unfortunate and the pain of losing family members in tragic circumstances (his mother and sister died of tuberculosis, another sister spent most of her life institutionalized for mental illness and his only brother died of pneumonia) influenced the dark mood prevalent in much of his work, including The Scream.

The Symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire had a huge influence on Munch's life and work. Symbolism was a literary and arts movement that encouraged the use of symbolic imagery, the imagination and dreams. One of the reasons for the painting's enduring popularity is arguably the fact that the screaming figure is symbolic of the pain and suffering of all men.

Many historians now believe that The Scream was influenced by a Peruvian Mummy that was on display in a popular exhibition in Paris in the early 1890's. The pose and facial expression of the mummy closely resemble the figure in Munch's painting.