

EDVARD MUNCH

Color in Context

EDVARD MUNCH (1863–1944), the Norwegian artist active in Paris and Berlin at the end of the nineteenth century, is famous for images that represent psychological states and give shape to subjective feeling. His use of color, essential to the visual impact and meaning of his prints, is generally regarded as highly personal.

Without contradicting that interpretation, this exhibition places it in the context of the philosophical and pseudo-scientific movements of his time.

Near the turn of the century, ideas about higher dimensional energies were being stimulated by breakthrough discoveries in electromagnetism, x-radiography, and physics. The scientific exploration of invisible matter and properties convinced

members of the mystical movement

known as theosophy that essential realities lie beyond the human senses. Such ideas implied a challenge to traditional artistic emphasis on naturalistic representation.

Some artists used exaggerated or odd color in attempts to generate new meaning in their work. However, Munch went further than most

in applying theosophical ideas to the choice and combination of color. At the end of the nineteenth century, essays on clairvoyance, mesmerism (hypnosis), and other metaphysical concepts appeared regularly in leading literary and artistic journals. Theosophists claimed that thoughts generated auras of colorful shapes, or “thought-forms,” that could move through space: bright yellow connoted “highest intellect,” dark purple suggested “devotion mixed with affection,” and bright blue indicated “pure religious feeling.” Even though Munch claimed to select his colors at random, he was immersed in the literature of the time and was certainly aware of theosophical concepts such as thought-forms radiating energy. His journal describes “colours that encircled [a woman’s] head like a halo.” A friend confirmed that the artist claimed he could see auras around people.

Munch’s awareness and artistic application of these ideas is especially evident in his prints. By virtue of its usually limited scale and multiplicity, the medium afforded him the greatest freedom to experiment with color. The palette of his prints is often even more subjective and supra-natural than that of his paintings. Moreover, he could vary colors dramatically from impression to impression — and with them, literal shades of meaning.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art

Key to the Meanings of Colours from Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*, London [1901]

Vague Intellectual Pleasure from *Thought-Forms*

Radiating Affection from *Thought-Forms*

Self-Portrait

1895

lithograph

National Gallery of Art,
Rosenwald Collection, 1944.14.59

As important as vibrant colors were to Munch, the absence of color plays an equally critical role. Black provides stark contrast to the creamy-colored head and skeletal arm, which are the only discernible forms in this composition. The x-ray, a wavelength of electromagnetic radiation, was discovered in 1895 by Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen. With this new wavelength that could penetrate the skin, expose the bones beneath, and print that image on a plate, people realized how limited human senses truly are. This discovery furthered theosophical notions that there are forces beyond what can be perceived.

Melancholy III
(Evening; On the Beach)

1901

color woodcut

Epstein Family Collection

Melancholy
(Woman on the Shore)

1898

color woodcut

Epstein Family Collection

[DEX 4]

The Sin

1902

color lithograph

Epstein Family Collection

The green eyes of the woman are piercing and striking. According to theosophical literature, this pure green color signifies “the wish to be all things to all men.” The woman’s body is exposed, and while she seems alluring, her gaze off to the left side of the composition avoids direct eye contact with the viewer, leaving her as an object to behold and examine.

[DEX 5]

The Vampire

1895

color lithograph and woodcut
with watercolor [trial proof]

National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund
and Gift of Lionel C. Epstein, 1972.21.1

Munch added yellow to the face of the man and the arm of the woman in this retouched proof before the final printing of the composition, adding an essence of highest intellect, according to theosophical theories of color. By giving the two figures feelings of intelligence or consciousness, perhaps Munch meant to suggest that the vampiric act depicted here is one of loving embrace rather than savage attack. Munch’s original title for the composition was *Love and Pain*.

[DEX 7]

Anxiety

1896

color lithograph

Epstein Family Collection

[DEX 8]

Anxiety

1896

color woodcut

Epstein Family Collection

The muted red could indicate many different meanings: avarice, anger, or pride. These intense emotions are echoed in the title, *Anxiety*. Munch's use of red, signifying strong feelings, adds a level of tension and unease to the composition. Compare this to the companion print—also titled *Anxiety*—on the other side of the doorway, with brighter, deeper red streaks in the sky.

[DEX 9]

Moonlight I

1896

color woodcut

Epstein Family Collection

[DEX 12]

Girl's Head Against the Shore

1899

color woodcut

Epstein Family Collection

The contrasting colors of bluish green and reddish orange in the landscape may allude to specific feelings. The green could signify sympathy and the orange, sensuality. The light brown for the woman's face may denote selfishness. Perhaps these feelings are for someone the woman had lost. Munch repeated the use of brown for coloring the woman in *Kiss on the Hair*, opposite this print, and *Man's Head in Woman's Hair*, in the next room.

[DEX 13]

Girl with the Heart

1899

color woodcut

National Gallery of Art, The Epstein Family Collection,
given by their children, David, James, Richard, Miles
and Sarah Carianne, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary
of the National Gallery of Art, 1991.32.1

[DEX 14]

Man's Head in Woman's Hair

1896

color woodcut

National Gallery of Art,
Rosenwald Collection, 1944.14.60

It is unclear whether the woman is imagined by the man, or if the man's head floating in the woman's hair is a figment of her mind. Recalling the theosophical concept of thought-forms, the woman's brown and orange coloration, indicating selfishness and sensuality, is paired with the light green of the man, meaning sympathy. Perhaps she is thinking of him sympathetically, or he is recalling a woman he encountered. One figure conjures the image of the other, producing the image of the thought.

[DEX 16]

Kiss on the Hair

1910S

color woodcut

National Gallery of Art,
Gift of The Epstein Family Collection, 2007.1.4

[DEX 17]

The Kiss in the Field

1943

color woodcut touched with oil paint

National Gallery of Art,
Gift of Ruth Cole Kainen, 2007.75.1

[DEX 18]

Female Nude

1896

color aquatint and drypoint

National Gallery of Art,
The Epstein Family Collection, 2003.22.1

[DEX 19]

Female Nude in an Interior

1896

burnished aquatint and drypoint

National Gallery of Art,
The Epstein Family Collection, 2011.84.1

[DEX 20]

Madonna

1895

color lithograph

National Gallery of Art,
Gift of The Epstein Family Collection, 2015.5.1

The dark blue, relating to religious states of mind, swirls around the figure and gives her an aura of spiritual energy. The waves of blue radiate away from her, as if she is some otherworldly being. Munch used a contrasting dark orange as background to the sperm and fetus in the border, perhaps denoting the earthly, physical realm.

[DEX 21]

Old Man Praying

1902

color woodcut

Epstein Family Collection

According to literature on theosophy and color, bright yellow signifies highest intellect, thoughtfulness, and contemplation. Other sources describe the feeling of this color as akin to light, or God. The choice of yellow is thus befitting for a scene showing a man in deep prayer and reflection.

[DEX 22]

Crowds in a Square

1920

color woodcut

National Gallery of Art,
Gift of the Epstein Family Collection, 2013.10.3

[DEX 23]

Encounter in Space

1902

etching and aquatint

Epstein Family Collection

These two abstracted figures floating in the black atmosphere—one in the color of devotion or sympathy (blue/green), the other in the color of pure affection (bright red)—suggest theosophical notions of astral planes. The figures transcend and seem to be floating in a fourth-dimensional plane, outside of the physical world.

[DEX 24]

Head by Head

1905

color woodcut

Epstein Family Collection

[DEX 25]

***Young Man and Woman
in the Fir Forest***

1915

color woodcut

Epstein Family Collection



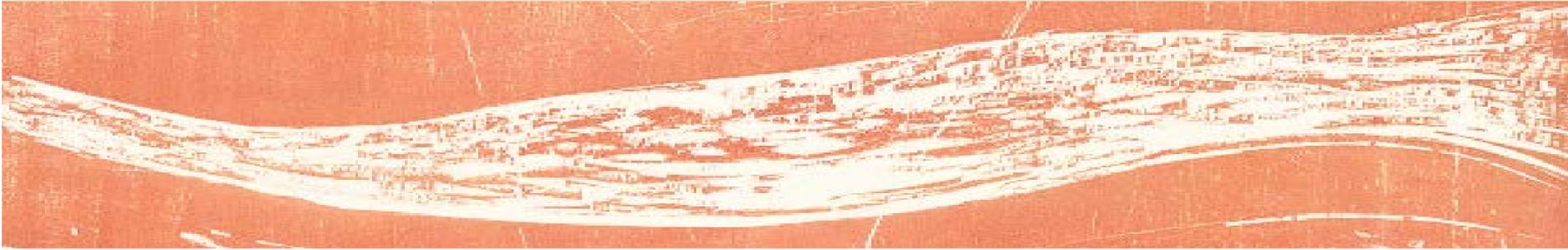
Thought-Forms

Thought-Forms is a theosophical text that explores the relationship of color to meaning. The “thought-forms” discussed in the book were believed to emerge from one’s ideas and feelings. They were auras of colorful shapes floating above and around a person, creating an energized field (see illustrations on the introductory panel). The chart on the opposite side of this card was printed at the front of the book and outlined which colors signified which meanings for the thought-forms.

Although *Thought-Forms* was not published until 1901—later than the dates of some works in this exhibition—literary and artistic journals such as *La Plume*, *La Revue blanche*, and *Le Symboliste* had previously introduced these concepts in their articles. Moreover, it is likely that Munch discussed these notions with friends such as the Swedish writer August Strindberg. There is no evidence Munch referred to this specific chart while choosing his color palette, but he was aware of theosophical theories of energies and color from his close associations with those interested in these topics.

This chart was used as a framework for understanding the prints in the exhibition. Everyone perceives color differently, however, so the descriptions in the labels should remain open to interpretation.

Please return this laminated card to the box when you are finished



EDVARD MUNCH

Color in Context



1. High Spirituality	1. Devotion mixed with Affection	1. Devotion to a Noble Ideal	1. Pure Religious Feeling	1. Selfish Religious Feeling
2. Religious Feeling, tinged with Fear	2. Highest Intellect	2. Strong Intellect	2. Low type of Intellect	2. Pride
3. Sympathy	3. Love for Humanity	3. Unselfish Affection	3. Selfish Affection	3. Pure Affection
4. Adaptability	4. Jealousy	4. Deceit	4. Fear	4. Depression
5. Selfishness	5. Avarice	5. Anger	5. Sensuality	5. Malice

Key to the Meanings of Colours from Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*, The Theosophical Publishing House, London, 1901.