



Girls on a Jetty
Edvard Munch, Norwegian, 1863-1944
c. 1904, Oil on Canvas, 31 3/4 x 27 1/4 inches
Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

About the Artist

Edvard Munch was born in 1863 into a very poor family. His mother died when he was only five, and his father withdrew into a life of seclusion. In 1877, Munch's elder sister died. Her death deeply affected him, and he is quoted as saying, "Disease, insanity and death were the angels which surrounded my cradle, and since then they have followed me throughout my life..." An important factor in Munch's early life; however, after his mother's death, the household was run by an aunt who was a painter and who encouraged his interest in art.

In 1879, Munch was sent to a technical school to study engineering, but his poor health caused him to miss many of his classes. Finally, in 1880, after several earlier refusals, his father agreed to allow Edvard to study art. His abilities were quickly recognized, and he was allowed to skip the elementary classes. Two years later, he rented a studio with other young artists, and in 1883, he exhibited his work for the first time in a group show. In 1885, Munch made his first visit to Paris where he studied the paintings in the Louvre. During his lifetime he visited Paris several times and was influenced by the works he saw there.

Between 1892 and 1909, Edvard Munch had many exhibitions in Scandinavia, Germany, France, Belgium, Austria, Italy, Russia, Czechoslovakia, and the United States. In May 1909, he settled permanently in Norway and lived there until his death in 1944. His will left his life's work to the city of Oslo, where a museum was named in his honor.

About the Art

In *Girls on a Jetty*, the viewer sees girls standing on a pier, gazing in different directions. The painting contains many ambiguities. Why did the artist leave the girls' faces undefined? Are they waiting for someone or something? Do they seem lonely or isolated? Although we may not know the answers to these and other questions, the artist encourages us to experience the overall mood of the painting. Munch is less interested in telling a specific story than exploring certain emotions we all share. While the work appears at first glance to be a landscape, it is actually intended to lead the viewer to an inner landscape of feelings and emotions.

Additional Information

Munch broke away from the traditional expectation that art should mirror nature. He produced expressive art which conveyed the powerful emotions he was feeling. Describing the purpose of art, Munch once said,

"We want more than a mere photograph of nature. We do not want to paint pretty pictures to be hung on drawing-room walls. We want to create, or at least lay the foundations of, an art that gives something to humanity; an art that arrests and engages; an art created of one's innermost heart."

Girls on a Jetty provokes many questions. Does the large linden tree appear menacing? What time of day is depicted? How does the artist's choice of colors add to the mood of the work? We know that the place shown is Åsgårdstrand on the Oslo Fjord, where Munch spent his summers. He spoke of the mystic light of a northern summer night. In this painting, he shows us just such a mysterious evening with a rising moon. The ways he has used color, the strong brushstrokes, and the thick paint also contribute to the emotional ambiguity of this work.

About the Time and Place

During the years before Munch painted *Girls on a Jetty*, art and literature in Europe reflected the dramatic changes in the life and the thoughts of the people. Works of art conveyed a spirit of turmoil, excitement, and change.

The late 1800s saw advances in science, especially biology and medicine. Louis Pasteur found that bacteria could be killed by heat, and he developed a process called pasteurization whereby most of the bacteria in milk could be killed. English surgeons developed ways to kill the bacteria on surgeons' hands and surgical instruments so bacteria would not be introduced into a patient's body during surgery.

In the early 1900s, Albert Einstein developed the Theory of Relativity, a major departure from the ideas of Isaac Newton. In 1903, Marie Curie, her husband Pierre Curie, and Henri Becquerel received the Nobel Prize in physics for their work on radioactivity. During the late 1800s, steel had become an important building material, and the construction of skyscrapers was possible.

In Germany, during the final years of the 1800s, leaders began a new phase in foreign policy. William II wanted Germany to have a place in the sun alongside other world powers such as Britain, France, and Russia. He wanted to make Germany a major commercial and military power, and he began to compete for colonies in Asia, the Pacific and Africa. He almost doubled the size of the army and attempted to build a navy that could rival the British navy.

Germans were developing a strong sense of national pride, and Germany had become the leading industrial nation in Europe at the turn of the century. They took pride in the cultural achievements of composers Ludwig van Beethoven and Richard Wagner. They were also proud of their educational system, considered the best in Europe at the time. However, as Germany became a recognized power, militarism increased and a visiting American official wrote in 1914, "The situation is extraordinary. It is militarism run stark mad...There is too much hatred, too many jealousies." He remarked that all that was needed was a spark to set the whole thing off.