

Critical Study

I decided to look at two artists whose work was executed mainly in the early and mid 20th Century.

Edvard Munch was born in Loten, Norway, on December 12 1862 and died in Ekely, near Oslo, on January 23 1944.

Edward Hopper was born in Nyack, New York, on July 22 1882 and died in New York City on May 15 1967.

I thought it would be interesting to compare these two artists of whom one, Munch, lived in and worked in Scandinavia and Europe surrounded by a vast historical wealth of art and music and the other, Hopper, who lived and worked in the still very much developing society of artists and musicians in America. It is fair to say that, as far as art is concerned, America was still very much a 'New World' by comparison to Europe. They did, however, share some common denominators in their respective lives. In the early and mid 1900s both Europe and America experienced huge industrialisation, economic instability, depression, political turmoil and wars. Although in the case of America the wars were remote and mostly only the young men sent to fight experienced first hand the horrors of fighting unlike Europe where every level of society was affected and involved in long recovery.

The first thing I noticed in comparing the work of these two artists is the difference in their styles. Munch leans towards expressionism in style with clear symbolism of emotions like misery and sickness. This may be a reflection of his own life experience at the death of his parents, a brother and sister. Spending much of his time between 1892 and 1908 in Paris and Berlin, following his first visit to Paris in 1885 he was influenced by French painters, the impressionist and post-impressionists as well as 'art nouveau' designs. There is nothing vaguely geometric about any of his works. Few of his paintings show stark contrasts and mostly use large brush strokes with colours sympathetic to each other.

Some of his paintings suggest a preoccupation with the darker side of life *The Sick Child* (1886), *Vampire* (1893) and *Ashes* (1894). It is interesting to note he was engaged to design the sets for a number of plays by Ibsen, a playwright known to bring the problems and ideas of his day to the stage, which frequently dealt with the deeper human emotions. I think, too, some of his work has a child like appearance mixed with a kind of savagery, *The Scream*, for instance.

Edward Hopper's style definitely falls in the realism camp. Unlike Munch he uses stark contrasts of both colour and light, with clear lines and frequent use of architectural settings. He uses large geometric forms and large areas of flat colour. Although he enjoyed three trips to Europe he was not affected by the current influence of French and Spanish experiments in impressionism or cubism. He remained impressed by the work of Goya, Velazquez and Manet. Perhaps it was his training as a commercial artist who set the course for most of his future works and it could be said his paintings have a 'poster' look about them. Almost all his paintings show scenes in New York City or the countryside of New England. One of his best known works is *Nighthawks* (1942). Although Hopper says he was not conscious of the melancholy 'feel' to this painting I often wonder if the characters in the picture are thinking of world events unfolding at the time it was painted. In his *South Carolina Morning* he detracts from his city works in favour of an open theme suggesting the vast area of his country void of development yet showing a sophisticated woman of ethnic origin.

Between the two I can see similarities in their paintings and music of the time in their respective continents, lending credence to the link between painting and music. At the time Munch was painting there were composers like Bartok in Europe who used indistinct form and dissonance as composition tools producing almost aggressive music evoking strife and the result of it. In America composers like Copland were using distinct melodies and musical themes to express themselves along with much development in music as entertainment rather than art.

There are other similarities in their work. In almost every example there is a detachment between the subjects in their paintings. Hopper often uses a solitary figure almost always looking pensive or sad. Where two or more characters appear in a painting they remain detached from each other almost as though each is not part of the other sphere of thought or action (Hopper - Summer Evening) With Munch the feeling of isolation and solitude is the same (Girls On A Bridge and The Scream). Both painters produced art depicting a single figure, mostly women. In Munch's The Scream it is clear the subject is caught in some sort of horror, some desperate difficulty yet in Hopper's paintings this obvious depiction is not there. One is left to imagine why his subjects look so melancholy, could it be the result of some trauma?

Munch and Hopper display many differences in their work in terms of style and execution. Munch is much more aggressive with his brush, colours and many of his subjects but indistinct in his lines, contrasts and perspectives. Hopper is more deliberate in execution with less aggressive use of colour, less savage in his subjects, geometrical with distinct perspectives and much more contrasted. Between them they share a thread of melancholy and detachment.