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Creating the modern eye

Two new exhibitions show how a Renaissance visionary and a misunderstood Norwegian eccentric changed the course of painting, says *James Woodall*

Arts & books

El Greco and Modernism
Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf, Germany. Until 12th August

Edvard Munch: The Modern Eye
Tate Modern, 28th June–14th October

This summer, a rare sequence of art events is bringing into focus the origins of European modernist painting. One of them, "The Modern Eye," an exhibition of works by Edvard Munch opening in late June at Tate Modern, fits into the traditional narrative: the Norwegian is incontrovertibly a harbinger of 20th-century art. Another Munch-connected event has been a high-profile auction of his famous work *The Scream* in New York.

A third event is more unexpected. In Düsseldorf's Kunstpalast, situated in an art-deco complex on the east bank of the Rhine, the exhibition "El Greco and Modernism" is an exuberant, densely intelligent attempt by curator Beat Wismer to show how deep the influence of the 16th century master was on a raft of artists in Germany before the first world war—most of whom had already been impressed by Munch's troubling subject matter and brazen brush work.

"After German painters had copied works by El Greco for the first time in 1907 and 1908," Beat Wismer says, "young expressionists engaged intensively with him, both with his form and with the ecstatic and visionary impulses of his painting." Modernism across Europe was lifting off, shattering the centuries-old dominance of realism. In German painting, expressionism, as it came to be known, was a particular manifestation of a desire to redraw the rules of space, structure and colour. The Düsseldorf exhibition presents El Greco alongside works by key Germano-Austrian modernist painters, including Franz Marc, August Macke, Max Beckmann and Oskar Kokoschka. Its aim is to show that the late discovery of El Greco helped them define their entire approach to how paint can be arranged on canvas.

It might seem odd that a Christian artist born some 360 years before this modernist aesthetic ferment—somewhat godless in spirit—should be so important to it. El Greco seemed in his canvases to have had intensely private relations with biblical figures whose literal existence he believed in fervently. The connection to the 20th century, then, is a stylistic one. The challenging of conventional form, the primacy of colour, the articulation of private feeling: expressionism was about all these. El Greco, too, was an anarchist in form and a miraculous colourist.

Formally, El Greco had been way too weird for his own time. Modernism was perhaps waiting for him: art radicals from Paris to Berlin were amazed to find that an old master had broken so many rules. But he did so to no acclaim in his own era. El Greco's adoptive 17th-century visual culture was, moreover, quickly dominated by Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), the defining master of post-Renaissance realism. El Greco was forgotten.

It is a matter of some serendipity then that in 2012, art lovers can see for themselves, in two immense riverside venues and in the hands of two distinct geniuses, how those rules were broken a century ago—or, more precisely, how they began to be, out of sight, in a small Castilian town 400 years ago.

Born in Crete in 1541, and cutting his teeth in Venice and Rome in the 1560s and 1570s, Doménikos Theotokópoulos moved to imperial Spain in 1577. Philip II was not an admirer of his work. El Greco, simply "the Greek," thus lived and worked, unfêted, until his death in 1614 in Toledo. There, he painted the fierce, hallucinatory canvases which have made him now, at least in terms of subject matter, as identifiable as Raphael and Michelangelo.

After classical beginnings, El Greco adopted—there is no clear reason why—his unique, fluid style, with its frequent abandonment of conventional perspective. But El Greco was no primitivist; he was a supreme he used greys, and grey-blues, and flashes of silver and white and yellow, and everywhere deployed "planes of colour," as a German connoisseur, Julius Meier-Graefe, noted in 1910, rather than framing his shapes, figures and narratives in conventional arrangements of line. Against and amid this turbulence, pearly-fleshed, enraptured figures often intertwine in dances of life, foreshadowing the circle of dancing women in Henri Matisse's famous 1910 canvas.

El Greco's bodies are vibrant, with exaggerated curves defining arms, thighs and calves; they are also elastically true, as the stunning canvases in Düsseldorf demonstrate. In particular, *The Opening of the Fifth Seal* (which illustrates a moment from the Book of Revelation) has a dramatically robed Saint John the Baptist imploring, perhaps blessing, the sky. To his right seven naked figures disport themselves with the kind of pagan abandon Paul Cézanne caught so dazzlingly around 270 years later in his pictures of bathers. In *Laocoön*, El Greco's last, unfinished canvas, contorted figures trapped in the mythical story of Troy's destruction strain and suffer in a dynamic, apocalyptic loop. Many of the expressionist works in the same room clearly emulate its movement and terror.

What the show cannot square is the contrast between 20th-century profanity and El Greco's piety. Episodes in the life of Christ, as well as profoundly imagined, human portraits of the saints (in Düsseldorf there are three entitled *Saint Francis in Prayer*, painted in three different decades; two of Saint James the Elder; and one of the Younger), recur in every stage of El Greco's career. He was—and this is possibly what still makes him quite hard to grasp—both a fearless visionary and a canny realist. He understood suffering and knew, at the same time, what it was to live in the moment. On one Kunstpalast wall, several outstanding, mainly secular busts by El Greco radiate an almost winking freshness you would never, ever sense, for instance, in Lucian Freud. The portrait of Jerónimo de Cevallos, with its lightly painted flesh-and-bone structures and magnificent white ruff, is alone worth

the trip to Düsseldorf.

Painters pounced on this unexpectedly free, irresistibly present artist in the early 1900s. Cézanne had seen only El Greco reproductions but as he pushed towards his own cubistic distortions—of apples, trees and mountains—he drew hungrily on the earlier painter's radical arrangements of space, his anatomical angularities and attenuations. Then, in Paris around 1906, Pablo Picasso studied *The Opening of the Fifth Seal* (then owned, remarkably, by a Spanish artist friend of his) and in 1907 unveiled the work which blew apart the old order: *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. It remains the most audacious attack on established form in the history of painting. El Greco was behind it.

Just 14 years before Picasso unveiled his revolutionary painting, Edvard Munch began to produce four versions of an equally notorious picture. *The Scream* is, today, bolted into the western imagination as the abiding image of psychic distress and social alienation. An amorphous, cartoon-like skull, clutched between its owner's desperate paws, shrieks in front of a blue-black fjord, topped by a horizontally striated, fiery sky. Behind the central figure, who, as Munch put it, hears "a huge extraordinary scream pass through nature," two ghostly "friends" (also his word) hover on a bridge, unable or unwilling to help, thereby pushing into more hellish perspective a new kind of loneliness: the kind Sigmund Freud was to worry away at in his treatises and Franz Kafka embody in his novels.

Like Vincent van Gogh's four canvases of apparently exploding olive trees of 1889, or Paul Gauguin's first libidinous images of Tahitian women of 1891-2, this was defiant, new painting, and, in this case—because it was quite ugly—shocking. Munch, acutely aware of impressionism and post-impressionism, was more autobiographical than any painter of either movement. *The Scream* offers a glimpse inside an artist's head. After the period when he painted it, Munch claimed, he "gave up hope of ever being able to love again." Whether the statement was true or merely melodramatic, European painting had now properly entered ungentle terrain.

The conventional Munch biography is of a man crippled inside by childhood experiences illness and death, obsessed by the pathology of sex; wandering, Nordic and drunk, into the 20th century as more disciplined post-first world war figures—Picasso, Kandinsky and Mondrian—forged spiky, taboo-busting European abstraction. Though he remained, deliberately, at a remove from fashion, he was as industrious as any of these three. In the fishing village of Åsgårdstrand, on the Oslofjord south of the capital, Munch created benchmark works, including the renowned *Dance of Life* (1899-1900)—a dozen figures dancing on the fjord shore against a ghostly moon. The cottage he had bought there in 1897 and which he occupied for a decade evokes, perfectly preserved today, the modest, almost Spartan work ethic that drove him. Like Picasso, he was unable to stop painting.

Munch ploughed his own furrow and joined no artistic school. He knew Paris and southern France but his milieu was the chillier, repressed north of Europe. There, his excavation of subjective experience was an inspiration for the first German expressionists' fight with traditional form and content. Munch had lived in Berlin in the 1890s. He was greatly admired there and in other German centres of art. The artists of the "Brücke" group, and of Kandinsky's "Blue Rider" movement (this also included Franz Marc and August Macke), flourishing in Dresden and Munich between 1905 and 1914, would never have felt so free without him.

"A hand slashing paint on the canvas as [Munch] does could sooner be imagined as wielding a knife or throwing a bomb," Brücke painter Emil Nolde wrote in 1906. He might have been describing Jackson Pollock on Long Island in the 1940s. Munch was, in a sense, the first expressionist painter. He was sometimes included in but rarely attended the movement's exhibitions that began to proliferate in early-1900s Vienna and Berlin. But these shows announced aggressively once and for all, in this part of Europe at least, an end to the long reign of realism (with the exception of the efforts of a reclusive Greek in Toledo). Munch had mounted his own assault on it at least a decade before.

Now, Munch has joined the ranks of modern-art cash-cows, up there with Picasso. On 2nd May at Sotheby's in New York a copy of *The Scream* was sold for nearly $120m to an anonymous phone-bidder—two publicly accessible painted versions and another pastel of it remain in Oslo (now under special security conditions since thefts in 1994 and 2004). The work has, over a century on, rendered angst an iconic part of—almost a cliché in—our collective interior landscape. *The Scream* has become a symbol of all our fears.

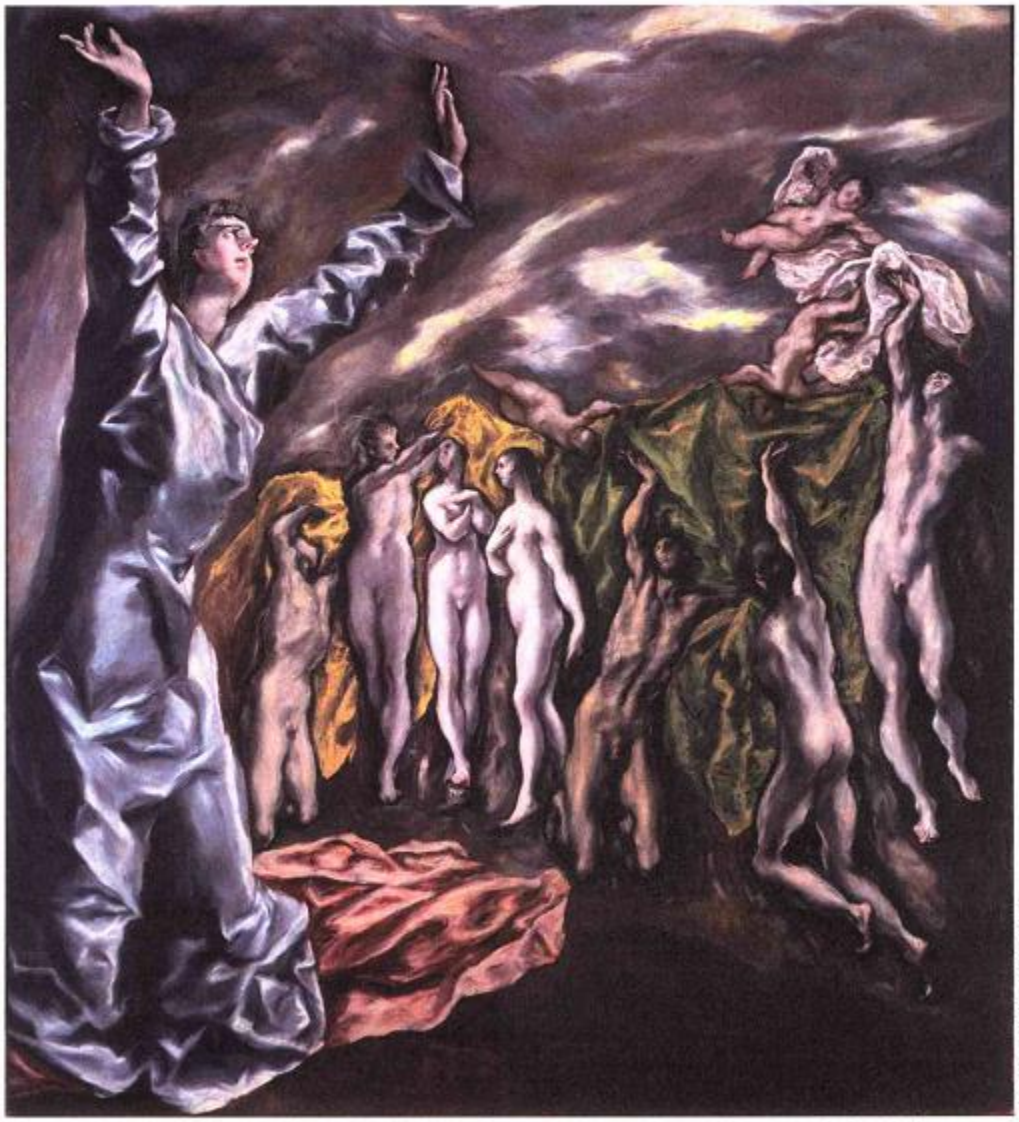
Publicity generated by the New York sale will please Tate Modern, though *The Scream* will not be displayed in its exhibition. Great paintings such as *Ashes* (1894), *Puberty* (1914-16) and *Red Virginia Creeper* (1898-1900) will be. Already seen in Paris and Frankfurt, the show argues that the painter was much more than the moody, introverted symbolist he is often depicted as. It asserts that Munch in fact responded keenly to contemporary affairs, and was especially fascinated by new, vivid, gadget-heavy means, through the camera, of representing reality.

In his final three and a half decades, lesser-known anecdotage has Munch filming pedestrians and the passing of a cart or tram, and observing a woman on a street corner, then following and filming her—hardly surprising: he loved several (and probably slept with dozens of) women, well into old age, though he never married. He also filmed his aunt and sister (always vitally important to him) without their knowing. He took hundreds of photographs. Whether with camera or brush, he remained a solitary questor, looking for visual answers, in colour, form and composition, to the existential questions his pressured, inquisitive, rather odd brain posed through the 80 years of his existence.

It is, as Tate Modern is about to do, legitimate to present a well-known painter's unexplored interests in order to highlight something less obvious than the greatest hits. But does Munch need to be redefined by a narrowing curatorial category? I'm not sure. Peripatetic and broke until the age of 45, he nonetheless left on his death in 1944 his entire oeuvre—that which did not end up in particular collections or private hands, or which had not disappeared or been destroyed—to the city of Oslo.

The Munch Museum there houses over 1,000 paintings, marvellously kept, when not hung, in a basement on 100 sliding slats. He also made tens of thousands of prints and drawings. The museum is lending a total of 130 items for "The Modern Eye." Compelling as the smaller works are it is a safe bet that most punters in London will want to stop at and really take in the brooding post-coital drama of *Ashes*, or the menacing rash of blood red engulfing the house in *Red Virginia Creeper*, with Munch's haunted Polish friend Staczu Przybyszewski staring from the foreground like a criminal: another screamer, almost. These works tell their own tales and need little context.

In Düsseldorf's Kunstpalast, we are asked to believe that context is all, that the modernists and El Greco make perfect sense together. Again, I'm not sure, all of the time: the El Grecos tower in awe and wonder above almost everything else there, though the case for connections in design between certain pictures is often well



El Greco, *The Opening of the Fifth Seal* (1608-14): the bodies are vibrant, with exaggerated curves defining arms, thighs and calves

made. As for the connection between El Greco and Munch, there is, happily, a concrete one. Julius Meier-Graefe, who wrote ecstatically about El Greco in his 1910 book *Spanish Journey* and so ignited crucial German interest in him, was an early energetic champion of Munch. By linking them up but without knowing it, Meier-Graefe was anticipating a truth that, a century later, cannot be ducked: during a short era of cultural transition, these two strange, toiling, isolated outsiders, born 322 years apart, altered for good the way people painted, and therefore the way in which the world can be seen and understood.

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Edvard Munch, *Red Virginia Creeper*, 1898-1900: a menacing rash of blood engulfs the house

Jacob Steinhardt, *Der Prophet* (1913)