

The consultation in art

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The life of the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch is well documented. He was born on 12 December 1863 on a farm in Løten, the second of five children. His father, Christian Munch, was an army doctor and later a district physician in Oslo. He appears to have been a very caring and conscientious physician. However, following the death of his wife from tuberculosis, when Edvard was only five years old, Christian Munch withdrew from society, became melancholic and developed an obsession with religious matters bordering on insanity.

Furthermore, Edvard's older sister, Johanne Sophie, to whom Edvard was much attached, also died of tuberculosis in 1877, and some years later a brother died of the same disease. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that the melancholia which affected the artist throughout his life, and which was reflected in most of his work, could be attributed to his early experiences of sickness and death. In later years his

mental state was not helped by overwork and alcohol. In fact, in 1908 he was admitted to hospital with a 'nervous breakdown' and had a course of electro-convulsive therapy. After this, his mental state improved somewhat and interestingly many of his later works became more lyrical and less tortured.

But it is his earlier works which are most often associated with his name, and these often centre on death and suffering, as in the work featured here. The face of the doctor ministering to the patient and his clasped hands emphasise the gravity of the situation, as do the dark sombre figures of the grieving relatives in the foreground. The patient's bed remains unmade with a suggestion of blood on the pillow, indicating the nature of the illness.

Despite Munch's apparent improvement following psychiatric treatment, there lingered a certain melancholy throughout the rest of his life, not helped later by increasing problems with his eyesight. He

received numerous awards in late life including the Norwegian Order of St Olav and the French Legion d'Honneur. He died of pneumonia on 23 January 1944, leaving a most interesting legacy of an artist tormented throughout his life by early memories of sickness and death.

Death in the Sick Room (1893)
Edvard Munch

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