

Edvard Munch (Ådalsbruck 1863 - Oslo 1944)

Rocks at the Edge of the Sea

Pastel on buff paper.
Inscribed and numbered 10 on the verso.
249 x 355 mm. (9 3/4 x 14 in.)

Although he worked more frequently in watercolours, Edvard Munch produced a significant number of pastel drawings throughout his long career, including two of the four versions of The Scream. A testament to his lifelong use of the pastel medium is found in what is thought to be his last self-portrait; a very large drawing in coloured chalks on canvas, in the collection of the Munch Museum in Oslo. Drawn in 1943 at the age of nearly eighty, Munch depicted himself before a drawing board and holding a stick of pastel in his hand.

This bold pastel study of rocks or boulders at the water's edge is likely to have been drawn at the little village of Åsgårdstrand, on the western shores of the Oslofjord, where the beach was strewn with large rocks. The Munch family had a summer house at Åsgårdstrand, which is about a hundred kilometres south of Oslo, and spent vacations there from 1889 onwards. Munch returned to the small fishing village, which also attracted a number of other artists and writers from the capital, almost every summer for twenty years. It was a place to which the artist remained strongly attached, and the curving shoreline and the landscape around Åsgårdstrand were to serve as a constant source of inspiration for his paintings throughout the 1890's. Ellen Lerberg has noted of Munch that 'The characteristic shoreline [of Åsgårdstrand] runs like a common thread through many of his pictures, including The Dance of Life and Melancholy.' Indeed, as Munch himself wrote, after buying a small house in Åsgårdstrand in 1897, 'To walk around here is like walking among my pictures. I feel such an urge to paint when walking around in Åsgårdstrand.' After several summers at Åsgårdstrand, Munch came to know the features of its shoreline so well that he could reproduce them, if necessary, in his paintings even when he was away from Norway.

Similar rocks appear in the foreground of Munch's large painting of Summer Night (Inger on the Beach) of 1889 in the Kunstmuseum in Bergen, in which the artist's sister is posed sitting on boulders at the water's edge. This and several other paintings of the same date were painted during the summer of 1889 at Åsgårdstrand. Among a handful of drawings by Edvard Munch of a similar subject is a chalk drawing of Stones at Åsgårdstrand, datable to after 1912, also in the collection of the Munch Museum in Oslo.

In a text that may be linked to his Åsgårdstrand paintings, as well as perhaps to the present pastel, Munch wrote, 'I was walking along the shore – the moon was shining through dark clouds. The stones loomed out of the water, like mysterious inhabitants of the sea. There were large, broad heads that grinned and laughed. Some of them up on the beach, others down in the water. The dark, bluish-violet

sea rose and fell – sighs in among the stones...'

The first owner of this drawing was the artist's younger sister, Inger Munch (1868-1952). The terms of Munch's will specified that, after his death, Inger Munch was permitted to select a certain number of works for herself from the contents of the artist's studio, before the remainder of the estate was presented to the city of Oslo. Together with several other works on paper by Munch, this drawing was later given as a gift by Inger Munch to a close friend, Berta Folkedal (b.1889).

Provenance:

The artist's sister, Inger Marie Munch, Oslo
Given by her to Berta Folkedal, Oslo
Galleri Kaare Berntsen, Oslo
Acquired from them by a private collector in 2003
Anonymous sale, London, Sotheby's, 20 June 2006, lot 115.

Artist description:

Born in the municipality of Løten in the Norwegian province of Hedmark, Edvard Munch was raised in Kristiania (now Oslo) from the age of one. His mother died of tuberculosis when Edvard was five years old, while his elder sister Sophie died of the same disease seven years later, aged just fifteen; the illness and deaths of his mother and sister were be themes he would later explore in his work as a painter. Munch trained briefly at the Royal School of Art and Design in Kristiania, and in 1885 made his first trip to Paris, returning in 1889 to study with the painter Léon Bonnat. Between these two trips, he had achieved a measure of both critical success and notoriety for his painting The Sick Child, shown at the National Annual Autumn Exhibition in Kristiania in 1886. Munch remained in Paris, supported by a grant from the Norwegian state, until 1891.

The following year he was invited to Berlin to mount a one-man exhibition at the Verein Berliner Künstler. The exhibition caused a scandal and was closed after only a few days, but established the artist's reputation in Germany. It was during this Berlin period that Munch began working on a project that came to be known as The Frieze of Life; a series of paintings on the themes of life, love, angst and death which was to occupy him for much of the rest of his career, and which came to include such seminal paintings as The Scream, Madonna, The Kiss, Melancholy and The Dance of Life. Exhibited at the Berlin Secession in 1902, the Frieze of Life paintings were to have a profound influence on German Expressionism in the early 20th century.

Munch's time in Berlin also found him beginning to work as a printmaker, through which he would come to develop countless themes that he also explored in his paintings. His first etchings and lithographs date from 1894, and in later years he would also work with woodcuts and colour woodcuts. One of the most influential and innovative graphic artists of the early 20th century, Munch was highly prolific as a printmaker, with an oeuvre that would come to number several thousand works.

Between 1902 and 1908 the artist achieved a level of international fame, dividing his time between Berlin and Paris in the winter months, and spending his summers in Norway. In October 1908, however, he suffered a nervous breakdown, and entered a psychiatric clinic in Copenhagen for a period of convalescence of several months before eventually returning to Norway for good and settling down to a more peaceful, ordered life in the coastal town of Kragerø. Between 1909 and 1916 he painted a series of murals for the main hall of the university in Kristiania, and also painted several full-length portraits. By now a wealthy and successful artist, and something of a celebrity in Germany and Scandinavia, Munch settled in 1916 at Ekely, a rural estate on the outskirts of Kristiania. He would live there, working in relative isolation, for the rest of his life, painting Norwegian landscapes and scenes of rural life, and also continuing to produce prints. On his death in January 1944, Munch bequeathed his artistic estate to the city of Oslo, forming the basis of the Munch Museum, which opened in 1963.

Edvard Munch drew throughout his life, and the collection of his work bequeathed to his native city included about 7,500 drawings and watercolours, of which more than half were sketchbook pages, contained in around 150 sketchbooks. As a draughtsman, Munch worked in charcoal, pencil, ink, watercolour, gouache and pastel, and many of his drawings can be related to finished paintings. On several occasions, the artist exhibited drawings (including watercolours and pastels) alongside his paintings.