

Sexology and Sapphism: Edvard Munch's Double Nudes

Abstract

This essay examines a group of works that Edvard Munch produced between 1904 and 1918, depicting two nude female figures in a bedroom setting. These images of female homosexuality reflected rapidly changing theories about the nature of human sexuality, drawing both on nineteenth-century visual codes of lesbianism and emerging sexological discourses on female homosexuality. The resulting compositions undeniably represented lesbian relationships, but stripped of their degenerative and decadent connotations.

Keywords

Munch
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In 1903, Edvard Munch met the English concert violinist Eva Mudocci and her companion and accompanist, Bella Edwards. His friend, Jappe Nilssen, recommended that the artist meet the two women, writing the following to Munch in a letter:

There are two women living here in Paris, the pianist Bella Edwards and the violinist Eva Mudocci. Eva M. is unlucky. Bella Edwards has complete power over her. They live together in a relationship. I have a proposition and a request for you. They are coming to Norway to give a concert. Do you think that you could look after Eva, flirt with her a little, so that perhaps her feelings may become natural.¹

Nilssen's letter makes it clear that Mudocci and Edwards are engaged in what he considers an abnormal relationship, and even enlists Munch to try and seduce Mudocci, so that she would be attracted to men. The pair lived, traveled, and performed together for their entire lives after they had met as young women at the Berlin Royal College of Music.² While there is no documentation verifying the nature of the relationship between these women, the language used to describe them indicates that Mudocci and Edwards were romantically involved.³ Munch's meeting of Mudocci and Edwards that year was the beginning of a life-long friendship between the musicians and the artist. His relationship with the women undoubtedly influenced his portrayal of female couples, a motif that he began to explore in earnest around the time they first met.⁴ Drawing from his personal interactions with Mudocci and Edwards as well as *fin-de-siècle* visual, literary, scientific, and philosophical examinations of female homosexuality, Munch incorporated divergent conceptions of lesbianism



Ill. 1. Edvard Munch, *Two Reclining Nudes*, 1917. Munch-museet. © Munch-museet/Munch-Ellingsen Group/BONO 2009



Ill. 2. Edvard Munch, *Separation*, 1896. Munch-museet. © Munch-museet/Munch-Ellingsen Group/BONO 2009

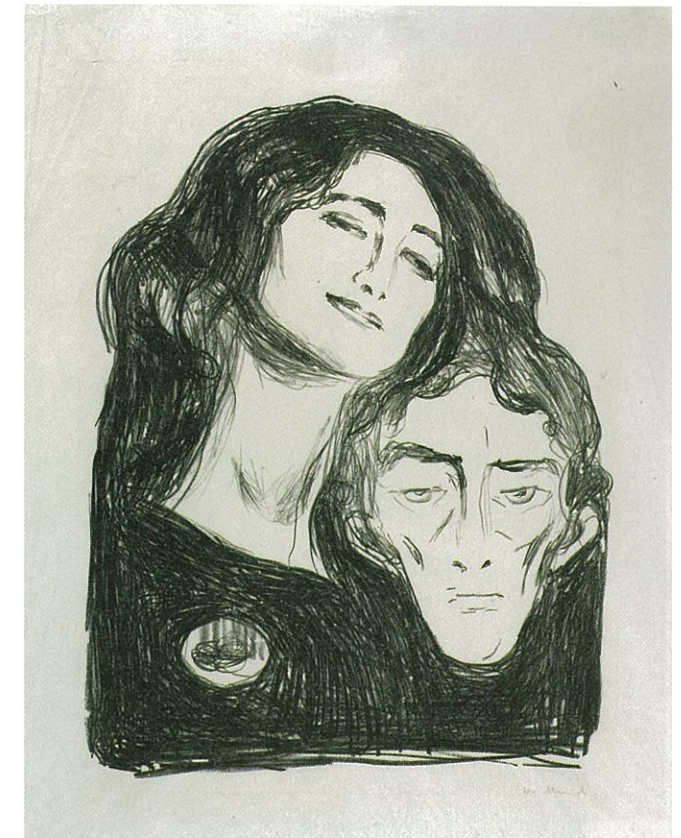
into his compositions in order to create his own unique portrayal of female relationships.

Women feature prominently in Edvard Munch's *œuvre*, although they have primarily been portrayed as *femmes fatales*, figures of danger and peril to the men upon whom they preyed.⁵ Munch's depictions of women during the height of his career – the 1890s – have been classified by many scholars as misogynist, depicting women as aggressive, destructive figures who cause men nothing but pain and suffering, as in *Separation* (1896) (ill. 2).⁶ Scholars have seen much of this negativity either as a manifestation of difficult relationships the artist had endured with various women during this period or a reflection of the trauma he

experienced as a result of the early deaths of his mother and sister. Munch's depictions of women, and more specifically, their relationships with men, dominate the artist's scholarship.⁷ As a consequence, Munch's representations of women together, a motif that he took up in earnest at the beginning of the twentieth century, have been overlooked as a focus of the artist's interest.

Munch's contributions to society's portrayal of «woman» at the end of the century correspond to the larger prevailing anxiety about the emerging role of women outside of the domestic sphere. While Munch's images of women from the 1890s are more than a straightforward depiction of chauvinistic tendencies,

there is undoubtedly a sense of fear regarding the destructive potential of a woman's love.⁸ Images of the pain of heterosexual relationships stand in stark contrast to Munch's characterization of lesbian couples. The artist's renderings of female pairs emphasizes their physical and emotional bond while his portrayal of heterosexual relationships focuses primarily on the pain associated with a woman's inevitable betrayal. Two of the lithographs that resulted from Munch's sittings with Eva Mudocci illustrate this difference. *Salome* (1903) (ill. 3) shows a woman resting her cheek on top of a man's head. Her dark locks cascade down the side of his face, enveloping him into her neck. She smiles in peaceful repose, while the man's disembodied head looks solemnly out towards the viewer. The title of the image links the female figure in the lithograph to the well-known *femme fatale* from the New Testament. While Mudocci is represented here as Herodias' daughter, Munch also casts himself in the role of the beheaded John the Baptist, whose death was brought about by *Salome's* seduction of Herod. Although he cast Mudocci as his love interest in *Salome*, the pair was never romantically involved; in a draft of one of his letters to the Mudocci, Munch told her that he loved her like a sister.⁹ In the same year, Munch executed an image of Eva Mudocci and Bella Edwards performing, entitled *Violin Concert* (1903) (ill. 4). The composition depicts Bella Edwards in profile on the left, her right hand playing the piano. Mudocci, dressed in a white gown, holds her violin in her right hand and her bow in her left while she gazes at Edwards from behind.¹⁰ Patricia Berman notes that the artist's double portrait of Mudocci and Edwards «lacks the voyeuristic eroticism with which many of his male counterparts encoded representations of lesbian couples.»¹¹ Indeed, of his renderings of female couples, this particular composition is his most personal and the least erotically charged—instead of showing the women nude inside a bedroom, he depicts them as two musicians, the harmony they create onstage perhaps serving as a metaphor for their harmonious relationship.¹² The contrast between Munch's two renderings of Mudocci shows his opinion of the wide gulf between heterosexual and homosexual relationships.



Ill. 3. Edvard Munch, *Salome*, 1903. Munch-museet. © Munch-museet/Munch-Ellingsen Group/BONO 2009

Munch also began experimenting with homoerotically charged images of male bathers at the same time that he started to explore the nature of female homosexuality. While the male bathing pictures have been the subject of recent scholarly interest, any study of the images of female couples remains absent from the voluminous scholarship on the artist.¹³ In seeing these two simultaneous streams of representation within Munch's *œuvre*, it becomes apparent that he, like many of the artists, writers, scientists, and philosophers of his time, was fascinated by a wide variety of forms of human sexuality. Understanding Munch's engagement with these discourses is imperative to broadening our conception of his later career. Munch did not become «the hermit of Ekely,» as many scholars have portrayed him, withdrawing physically, socially, and artistically from the world around him, but was inspired by many contemporary cultural and



Ill. 4. Edvard Munch, *Violin Concert*, 1903. Munch-museet. © Munch-museet/Munch-Ellingsen Group/BONO 2009

scientific issues and incorporated much of it into his work in the twentieth century.

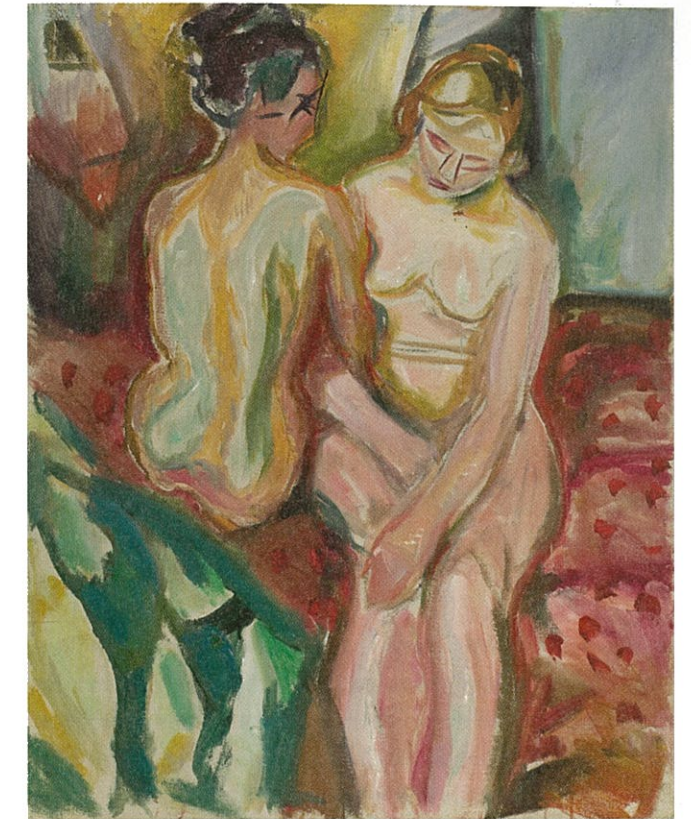
Female homosexuality in fin-de-siècle Europe

Although textual evidence of male homosexuality can be traced as far back as ancient Greece, the history of female homosexuality is far more difficult to chronicle,

as most of these relationships were dismissed as platonic friendships between two women. Numerous factors coalesced at the end of the nineteenth century to create a social climate that engendered a particular interest in female homosexuality. During this period, lesbian sexuality became a widely discussed topic as scientists acknowledged the complexity and multivalence of female sexual desire.

Depictions of sapphism in late nineteenth-century Europe were as varied as the purported causes of female homosexuality. During the last half of the nineteenth century, lesbian relationships were classified into three major categories, and each influenced the other as society's understanding of human sexuality evolved. Perhaps the earliest conception was embodied in the «romantic friendship,» which is how most sources described Mudocci and Edwards' relationship.¹⁴ These pairings, often given the euphemism of «kindred spirits» or «sentimental friends,» were quietly accepted as a form of companionship rather than love, allowing them to exist in a manner that did not threaten to usurp the importance of heterosexual pairings.¹⁵ Romantic friendships were portrayed as distinct from the decadent vice of female homosexuality. Martha Vicinus, in *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928*, notes that «during the second half of the eighteenth century, women's intimate friendships were divided into two types, sensual romantic friendship and sexual Sapphism.»¹⁶ The dichotomy between these two forms of female companionship continued into the nineteenth century. Because it was widely believed that sexual Sapphism was practiced only by sexual deviants, many educated women who loved women were inclined towards a more discreet and sexless relationship, to avoid the stigma attached to a sexual relationship with another woman.¹⁷

At the same time, scientific theories regarding homosexuality were gaining popularity in France and Germany. Sexologists and theorists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Sigmund Freud, Otto Weininger, and Havelock Ellis attempted to shed light on the origins of homosexuality. Munch, who lived in Germany from 1893 until 1896 and again from 1902 until 1908, was certainly exposed to these discourses. Sexological thought permeated various aspects of European culture and society during this time. Many sexologists lobbied for the de-criminalization of homosexuality, as they believed that it was not a crime but an inborn illness that required treatment. The results of sexological research influenced the development of criminology, as sexual deviance was often linked to criminal behavior. Thus, even if Munch had not read any of these texts,



Ill. 5. Edvard Munch, *Conversation*, 1917–18. Munch-museet. © Munch-museet/Munch-Ellingsen Group/BONO 2009

the public interest in and application of these theories were widespread, and he most likely came into contact with them through his associates in Berlin.

Among the founders of scientific sexology, Krafft-Ebing was one of the most influential. His seminal work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, was first published in 1886 and went through numerous revised and expanded editions. Both Freud and Ellis' theories are indebted to Krafft-Ebing's pioneering work. His views on female homosexuality are partly derived from the long-standing medical and popular opinion that women lacked any form of sexual desire. Krafft-Ebing notes, «[w]oman, however, if physically and mentally normal, and properly educated, has but little sensual desire [...] her need of love is greater, it is continual not periodical, but her love is more spiritual than sensual.»¹⁸ Indeed any form of sexual activity that was intended purely for pleasure and not for the purpose



Ill. 6. Edvard Munch, *Two Seated Nudes*, 1917. Munch-museet. © Munch-museet/Munch-Ellingsen Group/BONO 2009

of procreation was considered deviant. Thus, he believed that most cases of female homosexuality were due to perversity and not perversion, though some women suffered from constitutional hypersexuality, which was a major cause of female homosexual behavior.¹⁹ However, Krafft-Ebing felt that the majority of lesbians did not act upon an innate impulse, but rather, were affected by their environment, therefore implying that most women who succumbed to their homosexual desires would convert to heterosexual behavior once in the proper surroundings.²⁰

Even within sexological circles, theorists could not agree upon the origins and pervasiveness of lesbianism. In his 1897 study of «sexual inversion,» the term sexologists used for homosexuality, Havelock Ellis agreed with Krafft-Ebing on some points regarding female homosexuality, noting that such behavior was common among prostitutes and girls in single-sex boarding schools. However, Ellis disagreed with Krafft-Ebing's notion that homosexuality was a sign of degeneration or disease, and rather, he understood homosexuality to be a genetic variation, and in some cases, a superior sensibility.²¹ Indeed, Ellis' examination of female «inversion» begins not with a condemnation of homosexual behavior between women, but rather an examination of female leaders who exhibited masculine, bisexual, or homosexual tendencies,

including Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt, Catherine II of Russia, and Queen Christina of Sweden. Ellis also devoted a portion of his study to lesbian sexual practices. He also noted that «homosexual passion in women finds more or less complete expression in kissing, sleeping together, and close embraces, as in what is sometimes called 'lying spoons' [...] Mutual contact and friction of the sexual parts seems to be comparatively rare [...],» indicating that erotic behavior between women was relatively asexual in nature, in keeping with the understanding of a lack of female sexual desire at the turn of the century.²²

Although Munch did not own personal copies of writings by either Krafft-Ebing or Ellis, the artist's book collection contains a third-edition copy of Otto Weininger's book, *Sex and Character*, originally published in 1903. Johan Roede, a friend of the artist, took note of the presence of Weininger's book on Munch's table at his beach house in Åsgårdstrand during the summer of 1904.²³ Although *Sex and Character* was not influential immediately upon its publication, sales of the volume rose after the author's dramatic suicide in October 1903, as the work was viewed as the final words of a tragic genius. While Weininger's deeply misogynist and anti-Semitic views overshadow the other aspects of the volume, surprisingly, Weininger's views on homosexuality are slightly more progressive. He believed that both men and women were universally bisexual, meaning that every person had male and female characteristics, but that heterosexual women were predominantly female and similarly, heterosexual men were predominantly male, although no one was absolutely one gender or the other.²⁴

Weininger did not see homosexuality as a disease or a sign of degeneration but instead as a natural biological phenomenon, since certain humans would naturally have a greater proportion of the opposite sex than their heterosexual counterparts. In fact, like Ellis, he believed, at least for women, that homosexuality was a mark of superiority.²⁵ Weininger's overwhelming belief in the dominance of men allowed him to admire lesbians because of their masculine tendencies. Even though Munch only owned *Sex and Character*, his

depictions of lesbian couples also reflect many of the different theories proposed by Krafft-Ebing and Ellis. While it seems probable that Munch was most greatly influenced by Weininger's theories of homosexuality and its status as a naturally-occurring biological phenomenon, the artist's images of female couples and the emphasis on a more tender, almost «spiritual» love, mirrors some of Krafft-Ebing's views on lesbianism. Furthermore, both romantic friendships and sexological research were based upon the concept that women lacked sexual desires. Krafft-Ebing, in his study of congenital sexual inversion in women, notes that «woman (whether sexually inverted or not) is by nature not as sensual and certainly not as aggressive in the pursuit of sexual needs as man, for which reason the inverted sexual intercourse among women is less noticeable, and by outsiders is considered mere friendship.»²⁶ This belief in the lack of female sexual desire is present in all of Munch's images of female couples; none of the women are ever depicted in erotic situations. Instead, Munch's compositions show the women interacting with one another in undeniably intimate ways, but focused on compassion instead of lust or sexual desire.

Munch's Double Nudes

In 1917, Munch created five large-scale canvases of two women in bedroom settings. Although he had sporadically executed compositions of female couples between 1885 and 1904, Munch's experimentation with this motif was at its most intense in 1917. These works were executed in a variety of media, including painting, drawing, and lithography. His compositions show the women intertwining their arms in a moment of consolation, conversing while sitting on a bed, and lying in bed together, one woman's arms outstretched to receive the other. In these images, Munch began exploring the possibilities of alternative and ambiguous forms of human existence.²⁷ During this period, he created his most ambivalent images of female homosexuality; in every image the women are coded with the visual cues of sexual deviance, yet their interactions appear asexual in nature. Not only do they suggest Munch's acknowledgement of female



Ill. 7. Edvard Munch, *Conversation*, 1917. Private collection. © Munch-museet/Munch-Ellingsen Group/BONO 2009

erotic relationships, but they also demonstrate his intersection with the burgeoning cultural and scientific interest in both male and female homosexuality. These two divergent conceptions of lesbianism found visual form in Munch's paintings through his incorporation of nineteenth-century visual signifiers of female homosexuality with ideas derived from turn-of-the-century sexological theory.

Four of the works he painted that year take place in the same setting, as each canvas contains the same red-patterned bedspread and blue-green linens. Aside from the bed, the room is devoid of other furniture or interior decor. Particularly in *Conversation* (1917–18) (ill. 5) and *Two Seated Nudes* (1917) (ill. 6), much of the rest of the room dissolves into planes of color, making the spatial qualities of the room difficult to ascertain. Munch consistently portrayed one of the women as a brunette with olive-toned skin and the other as a strawberry-blonde with fair, pinkish skin tones. This difference is most apparent in *Conversation* (1917–18) (ill. 5) and *Two Reclining Nudes* (1917–19) (ill. 1). Even though the women are nude (with the exception of the brunette in *Conversation* (1917) (ill. 7)), they are placed in situations that are not overly erotic or sexualized; the women in these images converse as they lounge on a bed or intertwine their arms, but do not ever appear engaged in sexual acts.



Ill. 8. Edvard Munch, *Female Nudes, Standing and Lying Down*, 1917. Munch-museet. © Munch-museet/Munch-Ellingsen Group/BONO 2009

The fifth composition that Munch executed in 1917, *Female Nudes, Standing and Lying Down* (ill. 8), is the most explicit image of a female couple that Munch ever produced. The painting shows two women in a bedroom setting. One of the women is lying on the bed, her body posed seductively, and the other is in the process of joining her. The bed has lost all structural integrity, appearing as undulating waves of white, green, and blue, echoing the curves of the women's bodies. Munch rendered the rest of the interior in an abstract style, employing patches of yellow and reddish brown, forcing the viewer's eyes to focus on the interaction between the women. Although this image was created during the same period as the other four canvases, the differences between them perhaps present two different versions of female homosexual relationships.

In the series of four images of lesbian couples, Munch chose to focus on the nurturing aspect of these relationships. His arrangement of three of these works in February 1918 at an exhibition at Blomqvist sheds some light onto his conception of the nature of lesbianism. As shown in the exhibition photograph, Munch placed three canvases of nude female couples, (from left to right) *Conversation* (1917–18), *Two Seated Nudes* (1917), and *Conversation* (1917), on the same wall as his famous 1896 painting, *The Sick Child* (ill. 9). Munch's audiences were well acquainted with *The Sick Child* and its reference to his sister Sophie's death from tuberculosis in 1877. The woman tending to Sophie is Munch's aunt, Karen, who came to live with the family after Munch's mother succumbed to tuberculosis in 1868. In placing these intimate images

of nude women alongside a work that exudes caring and tenderness, Munch suggests that lesbian relationships are also based upon compassion and affection that was more familial than romantic.

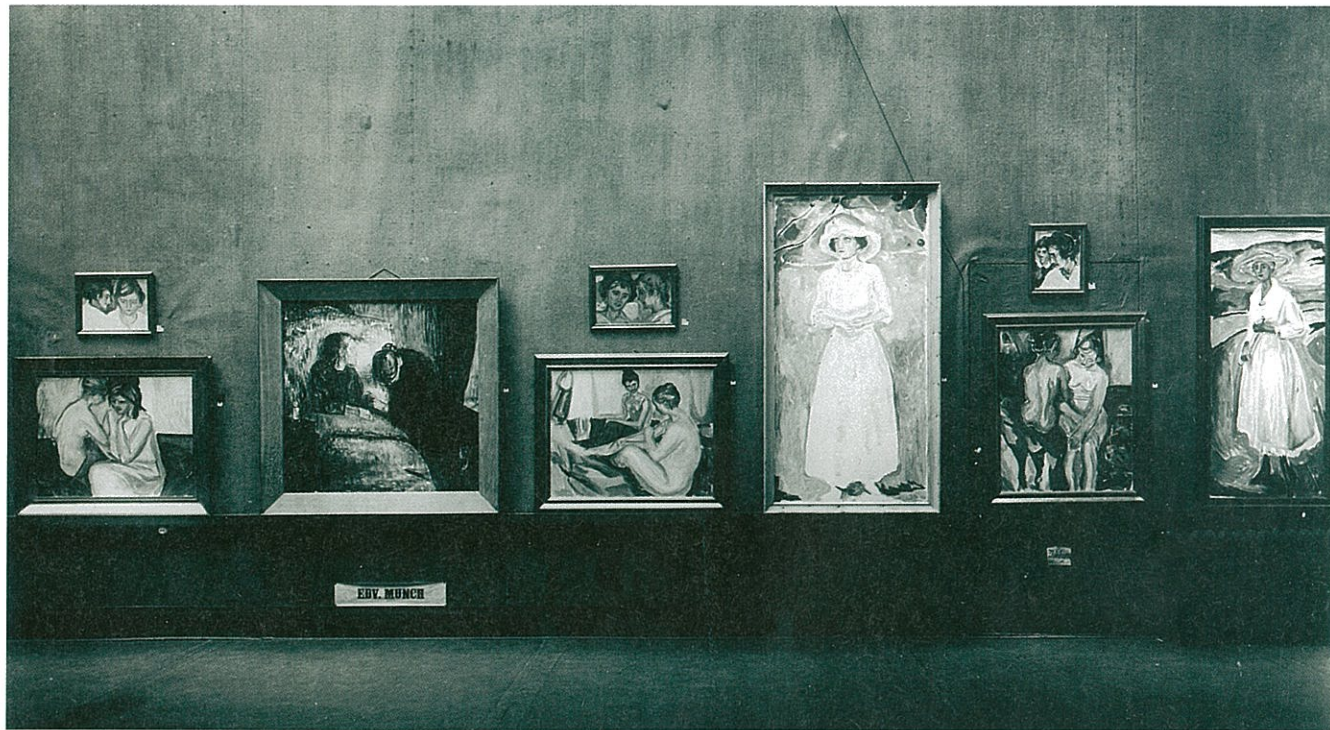
The portrayal of lesbian relationships as either maternal or sororal was not uncommon in turn-of-the-century culture, though its implications are problematic. These characterizations most likely reflect the prevailing belief in the absence of female sexual desires, since a sororal relationship implied «sexual insipidness.»²⁸ It was common practice for women to refer to each other as «sister» in letters and everyday discourse, but often the term served as a code word for a level of intimacy that went beyond friendship.²⁹

However, one of the most common models for a relationship between two women was that of a mother and daughter. In lesbian relationships in which one member of the couple is significantly older than the other, a maternal metaphor was often invoked, implying that the relationship «repeat[ed] and replace[d] the idealized relationship of childhood.»³⁰ Indeed, this type of maternal relationship evokes the comfort and security of childhood, implying that a lesbian relationship based on this model was asexual in nature, more akin to a mentorship than a sexual union. However, a mother/daughter relationship also suggests incestuous behavior, adding to the deviant nature of female homosexuality. While familial love was venerated in late nineteenth-century society, maternal lesbian relationships were simultaneously the product of abnormal sexual attraction and the domain of asexual spinsters.

Munch's juxtaposition of female homosexuality and familial relationships in his February 1918 exhibition provide an additional dimension to his images of lesbian couples. While Munch never provided a spoken or written statement with regards to his stance on female homosexuality, this very public, yet subtle, placement of canvases depicting female homosocial behavior provides some insight into his perception of female relationships, emphasizing the compassionate aspect of the interaction between these women. However, the association of female homosexuality with familial love reinforces the theory that lesbian

couples were not sexually intimate and thus their relationships were no more than that of close platonic friends.³¹

Not only were familial overtones present in Munch's juxtaposition of the *Sick Child* with several other images of female couples, but a sketch for *Female Nudes, Standing and Lying Down* (ill. 10) and the subsequent changes made to the composition in the final version also suggest a mother-daughter relationship, although eventually the motif was manipulated in order to remove any associations with such a liaison. In the sketch, rendered in black crayon, a woman lies in a bed that stretches across the picture plane. Another woman, her back turned to the viewer, is in the process of joining her companion, using her left foot to step onto the bed. The two women join hands and the reclining figure reaches her right hand up towards the other woman's face as a gesture of welcome or embrace. The contrast in size between the two figures is perhaps indicative of a significant age difference between the women. The standing woman is robust, with muscular thighs and voluptuous curves. In contrast, her companion has thin, emaciated arms and a much smaller frame than her companion, implying that perhaps she is younger, maybe even an adolescent. However, it is possible that the implication of an inappropriate incestuous relationship compelled Munch to make significant changes between the study and the final composition. In the painted version of *Female Nudes, Standing and Lying Down*, Munch has changed the point of view from which we see the couple. We now see the lying figure from the foot of the bed instead of from the side, and her body is much more clearly realized than in the sketch. Her pose is much more sexualized than before: her cocked hip and bent legs accentuate her serpentine curves. Additionally, the standing figure is turned at a different angle; in the sketch, she was positioned alongside the bed, looking at her companion, and in the canvas, she stands perpendicular to the bed, her face turned slightly towards her partner, though it is unclear that they are looking at one another. The reclining woman's gaze appears directed upwards, at a point on the ceiling above her instead of at the standing woman.



Ill. 9. Exhibition photograph from February 1918 at Blomqvist showing *The Sick Child* surrounded by female nudes. © Munch-museet

While the difference in size between the women has been made less obvious, the standing figure is still much larger than her partner, and the size disjunction hints less at a maternal lesbian relationship but instead perhaps reveals an inability to connect emotionally, manifested in the physical inequality between the two figures and the blurry paint strokes at points of connection, especially at the figures' hands. While Munch was not known for his ability to render hands, the area in which the two figures have any physical interaction dissolves into pink and peach impasto, with no indication where one hand ends and the other begins. Similarly, Munch's handling of space and perspective here is compromised in the translation from sketch to final composition. While in the sketch it was clear that the reclining woman's right hand was reaching up towards her partner, though not touching her head, Munch makes that ambiguous in the painting. The changes that Munch made from study to painting shift the focus of the composition from that of a possible relationship between a younger and an older woman to one that resists interaction between the figures.

Although this is the only image that seems to imply an imminent romantic physical interaction between the women, it appears that they will never achieve an emotional connection.

Visual Precedents in Nineteenth-Century France

While both the image of the asexual lesbian and the Sapphic *femme fatale* existed concurrently, it is the latter that dominated French thought and cultural practice at the end of the nineteenth century. Although Munch executed his first double nudes before his first trip to Paris in 1885, his repeated stays there during the 1890s would have exposed him to the tendency within the French *fin-de-siècle* cultural tradition of portraying the lesbian as a figure of decadence and sexual deviance. The characterization of female homosexuality as deviant was propagated by the depiction of lesbians as prostitutes and the proliferation of explicit pornographic photographs of two women engaged in sexual activities.³² Lesbians also featured prominently in French literature of the period; at least a dozen novels

featuring lesbian characters were published in the 1890s, including the literary works of Baudelaire, Maupassant, Balzac, and Zola.³³ For these writers, the lesbian symbolized the moral decay and decadence of turn-of-the-century Parisian society. In the visual arts, Courbet, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Rodin were among the many artists for whom the decadent character of the lesbian figured in their *œuvres*.

Munch lived in Paris intermittently from 1889 until 1891, 1895 until 1898, and again in 1903. While he lived there, he associated with some of the most influential figures in the fin-de-siècle Parisian cultural scene.³⁴ Not only was Munch immersed in numerous avant-garde circles in Paris in the late 1890s, he participated in a variety of activities that allowed him to associate with actors, writers, artists, musicians, playwrights, art dealers, critics, and poets. In 1896, Munch was commissioned by the *Société des Cent Bibliophiles* to create illustrations for a special edition of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, a collection of poems in which three are devoted exclusively to lesbian love: «Les Femmes Damnées,» «Delphine et Hyppolite,» and «Lesbos.» The artist executed two drawings, meant for the poems «La Mort Joyeux,» and «Une Charogne,» as well as a third image that does not appear to be linked to a specific poem, but could have been intended as a title page for the entire series. However, the sudden death of the president of the society seems to have aborted the project.³⁵ A commission such as this one would have required Munch to engage closely with the text in order to create images to accompany them. Though Munch never executed a sketch for «Femmes Damnées,» one of the poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* which refers to female homosexuality, it is likely that he made himself aware of the visual precedents of lesbianism in order to prepare for executing the illustrations.³⁶

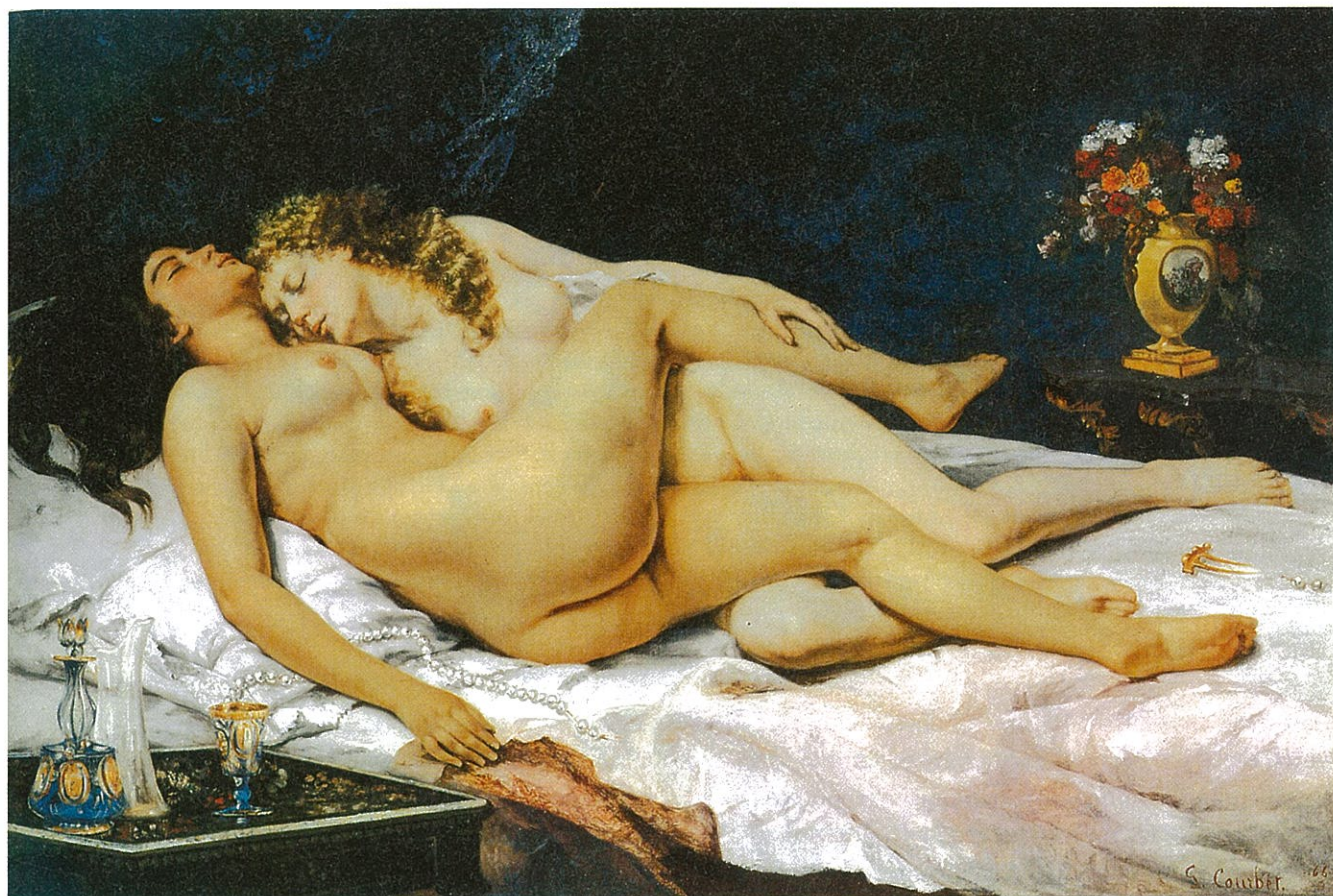
Munch's portrayal of female couples was not only influenced by nineteenth-century conceptions of the romantic friendship and sexological research, but also turn-of-the-century depictions of lesbians as sexual degenerates. Although Munch's double nudes often appear ambiguous in their homosexual content, the nature of the relationship between the two women in



Ill. 10. Edvard Munch, sketch for *Female Nudes, Standing and Lying Down*, 1917. Munch-museet. © Munch-museet/Munch-Ellingsen Group/BONO 2009

the compositions would have been clear to contemporary viewers. Munch's use of the blonde and brunette couple had a specific meaning; this well-established visual code, employed in scenes of deviant lesbian behavior, was prevalent in both «low» forms of art such as pornographic prints and photographs as well as in «high» levels of visual culture by artists such as Gustave Courbet and Edgar Degas. This pairing, which evolved to also include that of a dark-skinned woman and a light-skinned one, illustrates the dynamic between the women. In both cases, darkness suggested domination and lightness, submission.

However, most images of female homosexuality, with the exception of Courbet's *Sleepers*, were executed as a form of pornography meant for individual consumption. Usually produced in «minor» media, such as prints, drawings, and photographs, these works remained a hidden aspect of an artist's career. Most creators of pornographic photography in the late nineteenth century remain anonymous. It is possible that Munch came into contact with erotic photographs when he lived in Paris, as they were sold illegally throughout the French capital, perhaps providing a visual precedent for Munch's images of female eroticism. With the advancement of photographic technology in the mid-nineteenth century, large quantities of



Ill. 11. Gustave Courbet, *Sleepers*, 1866. Musée du Petit Palais, Paris. From V. Bajou, *Courbet*, Paris 2003.

pornographic photography were proliferated throughout Europe. Not only did their often explicit content set them apart from paintings of nude females, which were held in high esteem, but the photograph's ability to directly transcribe the real made it all the more illicit: for the viewer, the knowledge that the image bore an indexical relation to a real woman, performing in front of the camera, was probably more provocative and titillating than that of an academic painting of a nude woman in the guise of a female goddess. Among pornographic photographs, a popular subject was two women engaging in erotic acts. These images fell into two opposing categories: some were particularly explicit, showing women performing cunnilingus, analingus, and vaginal penetration with dildos or fingers, while others were more innocent, depicting two women embracing, compositions that Courbet and

Degas would incorporate in *Sleepers* and *Deux Femmes*.

Courbet's *Sleepers* (ill. 11), executed in 1866, is probably the most well-known image of lesbians from the 1800s, in part because it was the first large-scale depiction of female homosexuality that received any form of public attention.³⁷ The canvas depicts two nude women on a bed, a brunette and a blonde, their limbs intertwined as they sleep. The brunette lies on her back, her left leg thrown over her partner's hip and her right thigh resting on her companion's genitalia. The blonde figure rests her head on the brunette's chest, her eyes closed in peaceful repose. A broken strand of pearls near the brunette's arm and a discarded hair comb near the pair's feet indicate the possibly hasty and passionate removal of these objects. Courbet's use of a deep, rich blue in the background

provides a stark contrast to the pale skin of the couple, making the two women the sole focus of the composition and reinforcing the difference in skin tone between the two figures. In painting *Sleepers*, Courbet went beyond previous uses of lesbian imagery, producing an image of female eroticism on a grand scale.³⁸ Even if Munch did not see *Sleepers* in person, Courbet's rendering of lesbian interaction was characteristic of other depictions of female homosexuality, particularly in prints and erotic photography.

A number of scholars who have examined *Sleepers* have taken note of Courbet's «coding» of the work as lesbian by rendering one of the women with dark hair and the other as a blonde.³⁹ Maura Reilly contends that this particular visual cue «grew out of the mistress-maid pairings encountered in traditional bathing and toilette imagery where there was generally a blonde mistress with either an African or Oriental maid-servant... It is as if the white brunette has incorporated the role of the black and Oriental maid-servant, and that her dark hair functions as a congenital remnant of her 'blackness.'⁴⁰ Reilly's analysis infuses the relationship with a power dynamic and a clear class difference, if the brunette is supposed to be the «servant» figure while the blonde is the «mistress.» The implied relationship of a mistress and her African or Oriental servant also emphasizes the «exotic» and deviant nature of lesbian relationships. In lieu of portraying the figures as prostitutes, who were thought to have overactive sexual appetites, the association of the brunette with either African or Oriental origins links her with the widely-held stereotype that the «primitive other» was more promiscuous. Indeed, this stereotype reached as far back as the Middle Ages, and «by the eighteenth century, [the African became] an icon for deviant sexuality.»⁴¹ An African woman's sexuality was believed to be a part of her physiognomy, manifested in protruding buttocks and abnormal genitalia. Her supposedly «primitive» genitalia was a physical manifestation of her «primitive» sexual desires. The Austrian surgeon Theodor Billroth, in his *Handbook of Gynecological Diseases* (1885–86), links «the Hottentot with the lesbian; here the link is between two other models of sexual deviancy, the prostitute

and the lesbian. Both are seen as possessing physical signs that set them apart from the normal.»⁴² The prostitute, the lesbian, and the African woman are all linked by their abnormally voracious sexual appetite. With her darker hair, her olive skin, and her more aggressive behavior, the brunette in *Sleepers* serves as a surrogate for an African woman, carrying all of the stereotypes and stigmas associated with black female sexuality at the end of the nineteenth century. Not only is she a lesbian, which already implies a form of sexual deviance, but she is doubly aberrant because she embodies the primitive sexuality believed to be inherent in African women.

Degas also employs the trope of a dark-skinned and lighter-skinned lesbian couple in his monotype *Deux Femmes* (ill. 12).⁴³ The print depicts two women reclining together on a bed. One figure faces the viewer, assuming the traditional pose of an odalisque, her arms behind her head. A dark-skinned woman, seen only in profile, is in the act of embracing the central figure. The difference in skin color between the two women in *Deux Femmes* plays the same role as the blonde/brunette pairing in *Sleepers*. In her examination of the monotype, Eugenia Janis notes, «Probably with reference to a tradition which is classic, even academic, in erotica, Degas made the 'male' figure (in this case, the kneeling, more aggressive woman) darker and the female almost purely white.»⁴⁴ The darker-skinned figure, whose sexual dominance is demonstrated by her actions and supported by her «primitiveness,» plays the «male» in the pairing.⁴⁵ In this scene, she is the more assertive figure, moving proactively towards her partner, in keeping with the stereotypical sexual aggressiveness expected for her race.

Munch's use of this trope can be seen in *Conversation* (1917–18), *Two Reclining Nudes* (1917–19), and *Conversation* (1917), as well as *Two Nudes* (1904) (ill. 13). *Two Nudes* shows a brunette reclining, her body facing the viewer, while a blonde sits beside her, her hands folded in her lap, her gaze focused on her companion. While their interaction is not overtly erotic, the brunette's gestures are more suggestive than that of the blonde: she lounges in a way that displays her sexual availability, while her companion is less of



Ill. 12. Edgar Degas, *Deux Femmes*, 1879–1880. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. From R. Thomson, *Degas The Nudes*, London 1988.

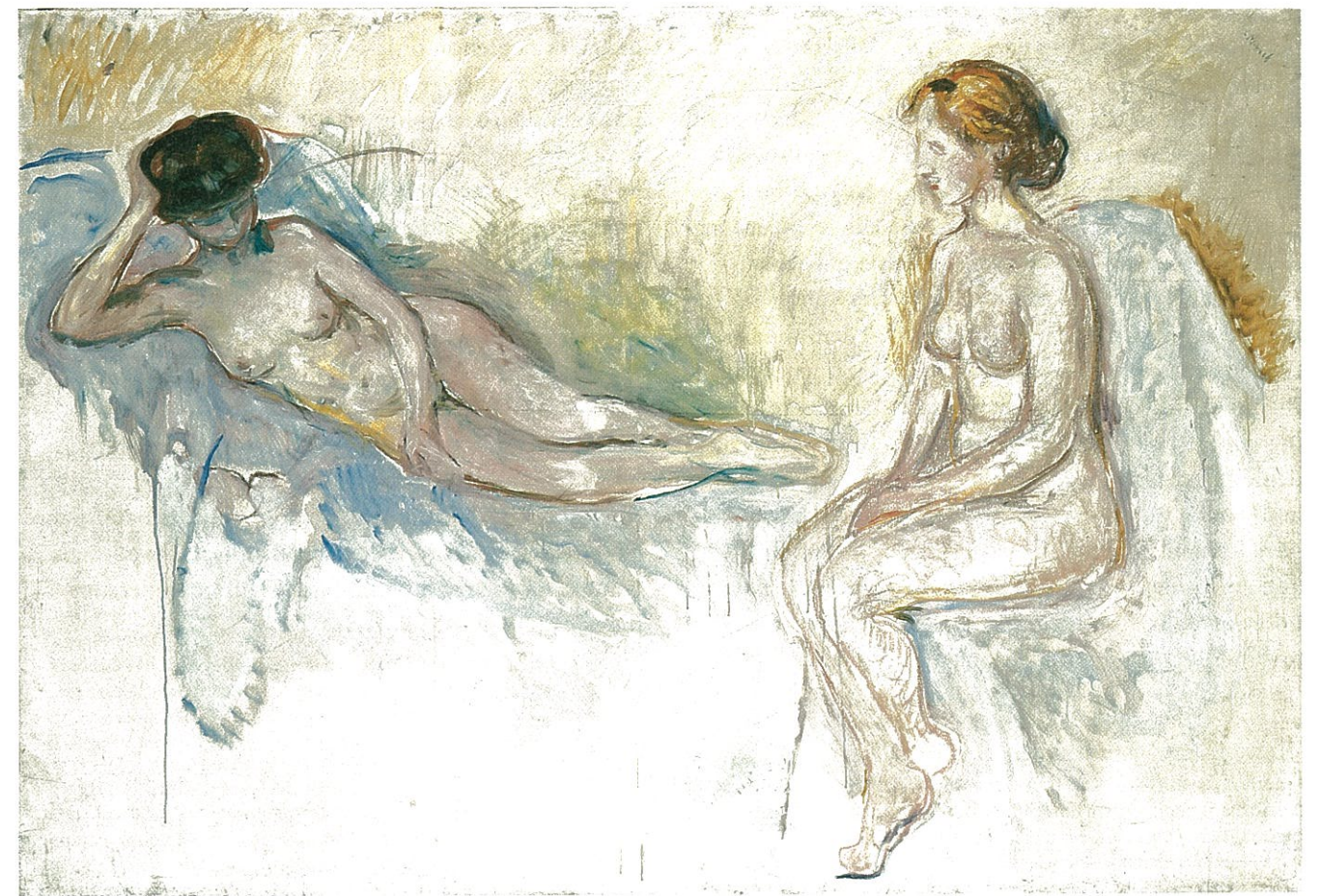
an exhibitionist, her hands folded in her lap. In *Two Seated Nudes*, *Conversation* (1917–18), and *Two Reclining Nudes*, the women are seated on a bed, where they engage in conversation or sit with their arms intertwined. In *Conversation* (1917–18), in addition to using a blonde and a brunette couple, Munch gives the figure with the darker hair a slightly darker skin tone, covering her back in large areas of green paint and emphasizing her spine and shoulders with undulating lines of brownish-yellow. This is in stark contrast to the pale peach and pink tones that Munch has used in order to render the other figure's skin. In *Two Reclining Nudes*, Munch renders the brunette's skin primarily in yellow tones outlined with touches of green, perhaps casting her as an olive-skinned woman from the Mediterranean, whom he juxtaposes with a rosy-skinned blonde from northern Europe. In Munch's canvases of blonde and brunette couples, there is no clear dominant figure: instead, Munch's use of the blonde-brunette polarity is employed in these examples solely as a visual cue to establish an intimate relationship between the women, sustaining visual continuity with an art historical tradition. Although Munch follows in the visual traditions practiced by Courbet and Degas, he eliminates any associations with prostitution or primitivism present in these artists' representations of lesbian interaction. While

the couples' aesthetic appearance reflects French nineteenth-century visual representations of lesbian sexuality, their actions correspond more closely to notions of the romantic friendship and sexological theory.

Autoeroticism and Homosexuality

In addition to painting a blonde and a brunette together in images of female homosexuality, Munch employed another visual cue that was derived from the belief that female homosexuality was a form of autoeroticism. Masturbation, in fin-de-siècle culture, was a vice that was the cause of varying forms of diseases or disorders. It also signaled a person's susceptibility to criminal behavior, deviance, and homosexuality. While debates raged within the scientific community as to the validity of claims that onanism led to neuasthenia, madness, blindness, disfigurement, or any number of medical disorders, its cultural stigma was so great that such associations with masturbation persisted well into the twentieth century.⁴⁶ Attempts to cure a person of onanism stood at the intersection between morality and medicine. Krafft-Ebing believed that masturbation perverted a person's desire for the opposite sex.⁴⁷ In Krafft-Ebing's case studies of women who were sapphically inclined, nearly every patient reported that they had experimented, to varying degrees, with masturbation. While it seems to be difficult to discern whether masturbation was a cause of lesbianism or a symptom of it, onanism among women had serious repercussions not only to their mental and physical health, but also with regards to their sexual relationships.

Masturbation and homosexuality were linked, in part, because of their shared status as deviant sexual behavior, but autoerotic acts in particular were seen as a form of homosexuality; one's desire for oneself or a similar substitute was a rejection of the opposite sex. Bram Dijkstra notes, «Just as woman's glance in the mirror, while expressing her autoerotic inaccessibility to the 'individualistic' male, had nonetheless still kept her within comfortable voyeuristic distance, so lesbian contact between two women often came to be seen as a simple extension of their autoerotic tendency [...]»⁴⁸ The concept of lesbianism as a form of autoeroticism



Ill. 13. Edvard Munch, *Two Nudes*, 1904. National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo. Photo J. Lathion. © Munch-museet/Munch-Ellingsen Group/BONO 2009

was rendered in fin-de-siècle culture in the near-identical nature of the women's bodies. Maura Reilly describes this as «visual echoing» which encompassed not only two figures who looked like mirror images of one another, but also images in which, «like two pieces of a puzzle, the woman's bodies fit together.»⁴⁹ Thus autoerotic behavior found two different visual manifestations in the early twentieth century, one in the literal depiction of onanism and another in the form of female homosexuality, a figurative form of self-love. Munch incorporates this concept in his paintings of lesbian couples by making the couple's bodies either fit together or resemble each other. In *Conversation* (1917–18), the woman on the left turns her back to the picture plane and gazes at her companion, with whom she has linked arms. Their bodies also fit

together perfectly, with little or no space in between their torsos and arms. The undulating curves of their bodies move in unison, their figures unified by the touches of golden yellow and bright orange that Munch uses to outline both figures. While the woman on the right does not look at her partner, her entire body curves towards her, emphasized by the angle of her left arm. The female couple's physical interconnectedness in *Conversation* is a visual manifestation of their rapport.

In *Conversation* (1917), *Two Reclining Nudes* (1917–19), and *Two Seated Nudes* (1917), Munch repeats the angles of the figure's bent arms, making the women appear as mirror images of one another. In all three canvases, these sharp angles are contrasted by the soft curves of the women's bodies, thus making

them more prominent. At first glance, it is difficult to discern which arm belongs to whom, emphasizing the figures' similarity and unity. In addition to Munch's employment of the blonde-brunette pairing, his use of another visual cue indicative of lesbianism allowed him to indicate that the couples he portrayed in these canvases were lovers, while simultaneously experimenting with sexological theories of female eroticism.

Munch's paintings of lesbian couples comprise a myriad of influences and cultural references that indicate the extent to which the artist was influenced by the prevailing cultural and scientific theories surrounding female homosexuality of the turn of the century. In depicting these female pairs as a blonde and a brunette and posing their bodies in similar ways, Munch juxtaposed nineteenth-century visual codes of lesbianism and emerging sexological theories regarding female homosexuality in order to create an image that was undeniably of lesbian relationships, but stripped of its

degenerative and decadent connotations. While Munch's depiction of lesbian couples are devoid of any explicit sexuality, rendering their relationship somewhat ambiguous, it is important to note that our contemporary definition of female homosexuality is not applicable to what could have transpired between two women over a century ago. The degree of sexual freedom that exists in human sexual relationships today was unthinkable in the nineteenth century. Munch's images of female couples in bedrooms reflect the multi-faceted portrayal of the lesbian in scientific and cultural circles, drawing on wide-ranging theories and incorporating them into his motifs, creating a hybrid image of homosexuality, one that juxtaposes the visual codes usually associated with French nineteenth-century portrayals of decadent lesbianism with contemporaneous medical and scientific understandings of female sexuality.

stretched out in a languid position on a sofa, which is covered with white sheets. The other is sitting beside her, drying herself. She is supposed to be a redhead. The picture is two meters long.» (letter from Munch to Olav Paulsen, Munch Museum Archives, 3.4.1885–1) While the painting that Munch describes in his letter has not survived, he provided his friend with a sketch of the canvas in his following letter, remarking on his particular success in rendering the women's breasts and the reclining figure. However, Munch's career in the following years took a different direction, as his works became increasingly dramatic and autobiographical. While this sketch of the now-destroyed canvas from 1885 is ambiguous in its possible lesbian content, the artist continued to examine the possibilities of this motif, though not until nearly twenty years later. During the intervening years, Munch's focus shifted away from the double nude motif and towards the works that he is best known for today.

I would like to thank Karen Beckman, Patricia Berman, and Christine Poggi for their insightful comments throughout the various stages of this draft. I am also grateful for the feedback I received when I delivered a shorter version of this essay as a talk at the «Edvard Munch – Ny Forskning» symposium held in April 2008 at the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo.

NOTES

- Letter from Jappe Nilssen to Edvard Munch, undated, Munch Museum archives. «Her i Paris bor to damer, pianistinnen Bella Edwards og fiolinistinnen Eva Mudocci. Eva M. er uylkelig. Bella Edwards har helt magt over henne. De lever i forhold til hverandre. Nu har jeg et forslag og en bøn til dig. De kommer opp til Norge for å holde konserter. Kunne ikke Du ta dig av Eva, kurtisere henne litt, så kanskje hennes følelser kunne bli naturlige.»
- Lucy De Knapffer, «Music and Friendship, or Two Artists of Life, or On Wings of Music.» unpublished manuscript in the Munch Museum archives, undated, Ch. IV, p. 31–32.
- Atle Næss, *Munch: en Biografi*. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2004, 265. Næss, in his biography of Munch, indicates that it was widely known that Mudocci and Edwards were a lesbian couple, but the topic was not openly discussed.
- While most of Munch's use of this motif is concentrated in the first and second decades of the twentieth century, Munch demonstrated an interest in this theme as early as 1885. He wrote to his friend Olav Paulsen in March of that year, describing a painting he was working on for the World Exhibition in Antwerp: «My motif is two girls after their bath. One of the beauties is
- For more on this topic, see Patricia Berman and Jane Van Nimmen, *Munch and Women: Image and Myth*. Alexandria, Virginia: Art Services International, 1997.
- Many of Munch's images from the Frieze of Life, particularly *Jealousy*, *Separation*, and *Ashes*, show the pain and longing associated with the end of a romantic relationship. In all of these images, the man is depicted as the victim of a callous female lover.
- In an undated draft of a letter to Mudocci (N2371), Munch remarked, «Ich fühle oft ein Lieb zu Dir wie zu einer Schwester.»
- Arne Eggum, *Munch and Photography*. Trans. Birgit Holm. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, 77. Eggum argues that this image is based upon two separate publicity photographs of the women. However, Mudocci recalls in a letter to Waldemar Stabell that Munch executed *Violin Concert* in the couple's hotel room in Paris. Waldemar Stabell, «Edvard Munch og Eva Mudocci,» *Kunst og Kultur* 56, 4 (1973): 217.
- Berman, *op. cit.* vii, 17.
- Patricia Berman believes that this portrait could even be seen as a form of a marriage portrait. Berman, *op. cit.* vii, 196.
- Munch began experimenting with the subject of male and female bathers in the mid-1890s, though the motif remained a minor aspect of the artist's oeuvre until 1904. While the female double nudes have received little scholarly attention, the male bathing nudes have recently been the subject of important research. In particular, see Patricia Berman, «Dionysus with Tan Lines: Edvard Munch's Discursive Skin,» in Patricia Berman and Gertje R. Utley, eds. *A Fine Regard: Essays in Honor of Kirk Varnedoe*, London: Ashgate, 2008, 68–85, Lill-Ann Körber, «Sunnhet versus homoerotikk? Badende menn, nakenhet og den mannlige akt rundt 1905,» in Ingebjørg Ydstrie, ed. *Livskraft. Vitalismen som kunstnerisk impuls 1900–1930*. Oslo: Munch Museum, 2006, 79–93, as well as Patricia Berman, «Body and Body Politic in Edvard Munch's *Bathing Men*,» in *The Body Imaged: The Human Form and Visual Culture Since the Renaissance*. ed. Kathleen Adler and Marcia Pointon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 71–83.
- Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1981, 16. The concept of the «romantic friendship» can be traced back as early as the Renaissance.
- The literature on female romantic friendships is extensive. Some volumes that were particularly helpful in this study include Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: the Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, Terry Castle, ed. *The Literature of Lesbianism: A Historical Anthology from Ariosto to Stonewall*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, and Faderman, *op. cit.* xiv.
- Vicinus, *op. cit.* xv, xvii.
- Francesca Canadé Sautman has written an excellent study of lesbians among the working classes in fin-de-siècle France, entitled «Invisible Women: Lesbian Working-class Culture in France, 1880–1930,» in *Homosexuality in Modern France*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis; a Medico-Forensic Study*, trans. F. J. Rebman, New York: Pioneer Publications, 1939, 14.
- Krafft-Ebing, *op. cit.* xviii, 396–7.
- Krafft-Ebing, *op. cit.* xviii, 607.
- Doan, *op. cit.* xv, 139–149.
- Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume 2: Sexual Inversion*, 3rd ed., Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2006, 306.
- Johan Roede, «Spredte Erindringer om Edvard Munch» in *Edvard Munch som Vi Kjente Ham: Vennene Forteller*, Oslo, Dreyers Forlag, 1946, p. 40. Roede states, «På bordet lå en revolver og et filosofisk verk «Geschlecht und Charakter» av den østerrikske filosof Otto Weininger, som da nylig hadde skutt seg.»
- Chandak Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science, and Self in Imperial Vienna*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 9, and 47. Although Weininger was not the first scientist of the time to conceive of universal bisexuality, his work gave the idea more general exposure, so much that he is often credited with the idea. Weininger's original contribution to this theory was that he believed this male/female dichotomy went down to the cellular level and that each cell or cluster of cells contained varying degrees of masculine or feminine traits.
- Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, 6th ed., New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1906, 58.
- Krafft-Ebing, *op. cit.* xviii, 395–6.
- For more on this topic, see Berman (2008), *op. cit.* xiii.
- Vicinus, *op. cit.* xv, xxvii.
- Carol Lasser explores sororal friendships in her article, «Let Us Be Sisters Forever»: The Sororal Model of Nineteenth-Century Female Friendship.» *Signs*. vol. 14 no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 158–81. Lasser argues that the scholarly preoccupation with whether these relationships were or were not homosexual ones overshadows a more nuanced and detailed investigation of these friendships. She notes that some of these relationships are invariably fraught with sexual tension, but that a sororal female friendship was more than just a cover-up for a lesbian relationship; such relationships often functioned as a support network with lifelong financial and emotional commitments.
- Vicinus, *op. cit.* xv, xxvii.
- One aspect of Terry Castle's argument in *The Apparitional Lesbian* is that lesbian relationships were, and continue to be, marginalized because of their perceived threat to the heteronormative social hierarchy. It was easy enough to pretend that female couples did not exist, dismissing intimacy between women as a form of platonic friendship. Other scholars take the opposing view, preferring to see the lack of acknowledgement and documentation of lesbian relationships as a sign of its relative acceptance within fin-de-siècle society, especially in relation to male homosexuality. Castle, *op. cit.* xv.
- It was common in the nineteenth century to link lesbianism with prostitution, as both were seen as the result of women possessing

- deviant sexual desires. The period's fixation on prostitution, especially in Paris, was brought on, in large part, by Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelier's study, *De la Prostitution dans la ville de Paris*, first published in 1836. His examination of the problem of prostitution in Paris was the most widely-read work from the early nineteenth century on prostitution, and was particularly influential for the development of sexological theory. Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelier, *De la Prostitution dans la ville de Paris*, Paris: Fort, 1900.
- 33 Vicinus, *op. cit.* xv, 180. Beginning in the 1820s and 1830s, lesbian characters began making appearances in French novels such as Henri Latouche's *Fragoletta*, Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, and Honoré de Balzac's *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*.
- 34 For more in-depth examinations of Munch's Parisian activity, please see Arne Eggum et. al, *Munch et la France*, Paris: Musée d'Orsay, 1991, as well as John Zarobell, «A Year in Paris: Edvard Munch's Mermaid.» *Edvard Munch's Mermaid*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State Press and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005.
- 35 Eggum et. al., *op. cit.* xxxiv, 17–18.
- 36 In Munch's copy of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, which is a part of the collection of the Munch Museum archives, he has made an «x» in pencil on the page that features the poem «Femmes Damnées.»
- 37 *Sleepers* was commissioned by Khalil Bey, a Turkish diplomat whose private collection was among the finest in Paris. Born in Egypt in 1831, Bey served as an ambassador in Athens and then in St. Petersburg, but retired eventually in Paris. The diplomat had a particular penchant for erotic art; in addition to acquiring *Sleepers* and *Origin of the World*, he owned Ingres' *Bain Turc* (1862). The diplomat visited Courbet's studio, where he saw *Venus Pursuing Psyche* (1864). Bey offered to buy the picture, but it had already been sold. Courbet promised to paint his new patron another canvas, and produced *Sleepers* in 1866. In 1867, the Goncourt brothers were given the opportunity to see the painting at Bey's residence and wrote a scathing review of the painting in their journal. In 1872, the painting hung for a period of time in the window of a picture dealer's shop in Paris, and caused quite a scandal, as shown by the specific mention of the painting in Courbet's police dossier. For more on *Sleepers*, see Sarah Faunce and Linda Nochlin, eds., *Courbet Reconsidered*, Brooklyn: The Brooklyn Museum, 1988.
- 38 Despite the fanfare that surrounded *Sleepers*, it seems unlikely that Munch would have seen the painting during his repeated trips to the French capital because the canvas was not exhibited publicly between 1878 and 1935. See Dominique de Font-Réaulx et. al, *Gustave Courbet*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008.
- 39 Dorothy Kosinski, «Gustave Courbet's The Sleepers: the Lesbian Image in Nineteenth-Century French Art and Literature,» *Artibus et Historiae* (1988):187.
- 40 Maura Reilly, «Le Vice à la Mode: Gustave Courbet and the Vogue for Lesbianism in Second Empire France.» Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2000, 120.
- 41 Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, 81.
- 42 Gilman, *op. cit.* xli, 98.
- 43 Degas executed a series of approximately fifty monotypes of prostitutes between 1879 and 1880, based upon his observations at a brothel, although only two of these images are lesbian-themed. The number of monotypes and the dates for these works vary from scholar to scholar. The brothel monotypes have been catalogued by Eugenia Parry Janis in *Degas Monotypes: Essay, Catalogue, and Checklist*, Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1968, and by Jean Adhémar and Françoise Cachin in *Edgar Degas: Gravures et Monotypes*, Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques, 1973.
- 44 Janis, *op. cit.* xliii, cat. no. 30.
- 45 Reilly, *op. cit.* xl, discusses this «heterosexualization» of lesbian images with reference to Courbet in Chapter 2 of her dissertation.
- 46 Thomas W. Laquer, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*, New York: Zone Books, 2003, 364–5.
- 47 Laquer, *op. cit.* xlvi, 265.
- 48 Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 153.
- 49 Reilly, *op. cit.* xl, 123–124.

Bokanmeldelser



Gunnar Danbolt:
Jeg former, altså er jeg
Om Zdenka Rusovas billedunivers
FAGBOKFORLAGET 2007

Hvem former?

Under lesningen av Gunnar Danbolts avhandling om Zdenka Rusovas kunstnerskap, slår det meg at forfatteren har gitt bokens tittel, *Jeg former, altså er jeg*, en dobbelt betydning. Den ene er nærliggende – det er kunstneren Zdenka Rusova som er tittelens «jeg». Det er rimelig – vi tenker gjerne at en kunstner er en som former, og at formingen er det essensielle i kunstnerens identitet. Ikke bare det, vi mener gjerne at kunstnerens person i større eller mindre grad, og mer eller mindre tydelig, er til stede i verkene – at verkens form og/eller innhold kan, om vi undersøker forholdet grundig nok, føres tilbake til kunstnerens «jeg». En kunstnerbiografi er derfor vanligvis et forsøk på å

skildre inn kunstneridentiteten og bestemme den nærmere – både kunstnerens og kunstens. Utsagnet i boktittelen kan oppfattes både å komme fra kunstnerens munn, og å betegne essensen av forfatterens syn på kunstneren: hennes liv er å forme. Boken bekrefter for øvrig det tittelen synes å love – Zdenka Rusovas liv er virkelig et liv i og for kunsten, og hennes arbeider er i særlig grad kunst, og bare det.

Etter hvert trer det imidlertid frem en annen like aktuell forståelse av tittelen. Den er at dette dobbelte «jeg» ikke er Zdenka Rusova, men Gunnar Danbolt selv. I denne boken utvikler han en generell metode til å forstå kunstverk. Han former leserens måte å bruke sitt blikk på, ikke bare når vi betrakter Rusovas kunst, men overfor all billedkunst, slik han også har bidratt til gjennom sine mange populærvitenskapelige samtaler om kunst i radioprogrammet «Kunstreisen». Han bruker boken om et av de mest betydningsfulle kunstnerkapene i Norge i nyere tid til også å gi en omfattende og lærd innføring i hvordan vi generelt kan forstå kunstverk.

Kanskje har ingen enkeltperson i Norge noen sinne hatt så sterk innflytelse på formingen av folks syn på billedkunst som Gunnar Danbolt. Bokens tittel utsier derfor noe essensielt også om Danbolt som kunsthistorisk forsker og formidler – han forsker på den del av kunstformidlingen som ligger nærmest kunstverkene, på det punkt der formidling og forskning møtes, i verkets tolkning. Boken er en avhandling

om billedanalyse forkledd som en biografi. Danbolt kan trygt si til oss – jeg former, altså er jeg.

Men så stiger det under lesningen frem også en tredje forståelse av hvem tittelens «jeg» er. Det er meg selv, leseren, når jeg betrakter kunst. Det er et hovedpoeng med Danbolts kunstteori at kunstverk åpnes og lukkes gjennom enhver betrakters eget fortolkningsarbeid. Ingen verk lukker seg varig inne i en bestemt fortolkning, så lenge noen betrakter dem som verk. Også mitt blikk former verket gjennom. Også jeg kan si, når jeg bruker mitt kunstblikk, «jeg former, altså er jeg». Det er betrakter-subjektets formende kraft avhandlingen om Zdenka Rusova egentlig handler om.

Avhandlingen

Hvorfor har det tatt Danbolt 20 år å skrive denne boken, hvorfor er den også blitt en lærebok i og avhandling om tolking av kunstverk? Det er trolig fordi Rusovas arbeider bare er kunst, og bare det. Han kan ikke si, som det ofte ligger underforstått i tradisjonelle kunstnerbiografier, at kunst og liv er ett, og at vi forstår den ene gjennom den andre. I denne biografien, om vi nå kan kalle den det, er det mindre om Rusovas liv enn i vanlige monografier om kunstnere, men desto mer om verk, forståelsesformer og kunstteori. Danbolt har trolig hatt så store problemer med å gi disse verkene en adekvat forståelse, og dermed også med å formidle grunnlaget for den, at