

My Scream Series

Robbie LaFleur

Almost every mention of Edvard Munch's expressionist painting, *Skrik* or *The Scream*, is followed by a phrase along the lines of, 'one of the world's most recognisable works of art'.

Tapestry

I've contemplated Munch's *The Scream* since the first time I saw one of the paintings in Norway during weaving school in the late 1970s; he had painted several versions of the *The Scream*. My own interpretations began in 2001, during a *Scream*-worthy situation. I worked for the Minnesota Legislature, and the legislative session dragged on in overtime, into the summer, filled with acrimony and budget dilemmas. It seemed like a good time to weave Edvard Munch's image of angst. I set up my tapestry loom in the living room and wove as frequently as possible, telling myself that when the tapestry was finished, the special legislative session would wrap up its work. I was right.

A photocopy of the image, taped to a top corner of the loom, guided my colour choices as I wove the background behind the figure on the bridge. The wavy lines created with a distorted, or eccentric weft, didn't exactly match Munch's paint strokes, but they created a similar feeling of unease. I've displayed the small tapestry (11 in x 7 in) many times during the past decade, often during a weaving demonstration. Each time at least one person asks 'Can I buy this?' I could have sold it many times over, but maybe not if I'd actually suggested a price that could make me part with it.

The tapestry was the beginning of a series, partially prompted by a friend who suggested I continue making *Scream* in various textile techniques. It is a great image for exploration. The painting is meaningful and powerful, yet also recognisable to the point of kitsch. It is also fun to examine for line and colour, to determine how to use each textile medium to advantage.

French knots

The french knots *Scream* was an experiment in shading to achieve a photo-like quality. I chose a portion of Munch's image, and using an inkjet printer, printed it onto a sheet of fabric. I carried around the small embroidery (7 in x 5 in) for a whole summer, adding a few more of the approximately 9,500 knots during car trips and snatches of free time. The knots were made with two strands of embroidery floss, which made many subtle shades possible. I framed the embroidery in a substantial gold frame, which seemed to draw viewers in to figure out how it was created.



Above: Scream – tapestry



Right: Scream – French knots embroidery
Photos: Robbie LaFleur



Line embroidery

Another summer, a line embroidery of *Scream* occupied my travel bag, starting, appropriately, on a trip to Norway. The face is surrounded by a phrase used by my Scottish grandmother in a letter to me when I was 21, 'We sure have missed you, but life doesn't hand us all our desires' (I think Munch would agree). This has been embroidered in her handwriting. The line drawing itself, embroidered in a variegated purple silk thread, seemed dull, so I quilted the linen backing with thin batting and short, randomly-placed linen stitches. The practical part of me felt this piece should become a pillow (completed size: 15 in x 13 in).

Skinnfell

In 2010 I took a course from a Norwegian instructor, Britt Solheim, on making *skinnfell* (coverlets sewn of several sheepskins). In traditional *skinnfell* pieces, which have become popular again in Norway, the smooth side was either wood block printed with traditional motifs or covered by a woven textile, or sometimes both, leaving secret designs underneath the fabric. After the class I created a *Scream* wall piece (18 in x 26 in) on sheepskin (see below), incorporating the iconic image with traditional wood-block patterns. I wanted to explore the relationship, or lack thereof, between Munch's fine art prints and the traditional folk arts of the period.



Top left: *Scream* – line embroidery

Left: *Scream* on sheepskin fleece

Fabric printing

I carved a *Scream* linoleum-block image for textile printing. It has been well-used; many of my friends have napkins and guest towels with the image. I titled my original textile piece *Edvard Munch Kommentarer Paa Oppvask* (*Edvard Munch Comments on Washing Dishes*). Five IKEA dishtowels, printed with the same screaming figure, hang from a towel bar, which portrays the title in Gothic script (total dimensions: 29 in x 31 in). It's intended to be amusing, but also a comment on Munch, a serious male Expressionist painter who likely spent little time thinking about domestic arts.

Rya

The largest *Scream* piece (36 in x 60 in), a Scandinavian rya (see below right), was an experiment in weaving in a pixelated fashion. I cut the full-sized pattern into narrow strips. With each row of knots on the rya I entered bundles of yarn to match the colours along the strips. This technique did not work perfectly; after unrolling the finished piece from the loom I spent many hours with a tapestry needle, putting in some bundles and taking out others to improve the image. This piece is much larger than the original images in Munch's paintings, and while weaving it I was surprised by my emotional reaction to the image which I had reproduced many times before. As I tied the knots of the face and hands, I worked at close range and spent many hours looking at my blown-up pattern and back at the unfolding face on the loom. To me the yarn gathered the sense of psychological unease in Munch's painting. Would the piece be large and frightening? Once completed, however, the shaggy image was striking, but not scary.

The 150th anniversary of the birth of Edvard Munch was celebrated in 2013, a fitting time to complete my textile appreciation series. Still, I might pick up the theme in the future. Could the collection be complete without a knitted *Scream*?

About the author

Robbie LaFleur is a weaver and librarian living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She began her weaving study with a course in traditional Norwegian weaving at Valdres Husflidsskole in Fagernes, Norway, in 1977. Since that time she has studied with several Norwegian and American weavers. Among other projects, her current series is an exploration of family members, current and long past, in tapestry. You can follow her weaving activities at her blog, boundweave.wordpress.com. She is the editor of *The Norwegian Textile Letter*, and recently converted it to a digital publication, norwegiantextileletter.com.



Above: Munch towel installation

Below: Scream - rya

