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Andreas Platthaus, Two Painting Geniuses: She declared him her personal patron saint," *Franfurter Allgemeine*, May 17, 2026.

Franfurter Allgemeine

📖 TWO PAINTING GENIUSES

She declared him her personal patron saint.

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Maria Lassnig's painting "Married Couple" from 2001, Hamburger Kunsthalle

The Norwegian painter is notorious for being misogynistic, the Austrian painter is considered a benchmark of feminist art: The Hamburger Kunsthalle confronts Edvard Munch with Maria Lassnig.

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This is the third major Munch exhibition in Germany within a year: after Chemnitz and Dresden, now Hamburg. There's no anniversary celebration, just an interest in art history surrounding the once-provocative figure of the fin de siècle, who has long since gained widespread public acclaim. His contemporaries admired him even during his lifetime: Munch's influence is among the most formative of the twentieth century, and so it's only fitting that, as in Dresden, a female colleague is juxtaposed with his work in Hamburg: after Paula Modersohn-Becker, now Maria Lassnig. The work of these two painters benefits from being in close proximity to Munch's – partly, of course, through his popularity, but above all through the realization of how much these artists owed to his example. And what they made of it.

This may seem surprising at first, as Munch's work is often criticized as misogynistic due to its use of *femmes fatales* (the vampire and Madonna depictions) and suffering women (the deathbed and sickroom scenes). However, his life was overshadowed by the early deaths of his mother and sister, and Munch was a product of his male-dominated era (he lived from 1863 to 1944). Maria Modersohn-Becker, thirteen years his junior and tragically young, who died in 1907, was among the first female painters to assert themselves in the virile art world around the turn of the century, and Maria Lassnig was born only in 1919. When she began her career, immediately after the Second World War, it was still not easy for female painters, but the civilizational rupture of National Socialism had shattered trust in patriarchal structures. An independent feminist spirit like the Austrian Lassnig benefited from this.

What Munch lacks, Lassnig has in abundance: self-irony.

She received her training at the Nazi-aligned Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, but it was precisely there that her interest in the work of Munch, then considered "degenerate," developed. The notebooks of the artist, who died in 2014, preserved by the Maria Lassnig Foundation (without whose loans the Hamburg exhibition would have been impossible), document an intense curiosity about the Norwegian artist from 1943 onward, and one would have liked to learn more about this incubating period of fascination than the terse catalog remark that Lassnig proved to be a "politically largely unreflective student." There are only two works from this early period, both self-portraits, but the later one, from 1944, already displays a use of color that has nothing to do with the ideals of fascist artistic preferences, but everything to do with Expressionism. In 1945, her first masterpiece was created, explicitly titled "Expressive Self-Portrait": Lassnig paints herself naked, as she would continue to do until her death. No motif appears in her work as often as her own body.

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Munch was more scrupulous and, above all, completely unironic when it came to looking at herself, but the section in the Hamburg exhibition where their self-portraits are juxtaposed is as eye-opening as only the comparison of their landscapes will be. It's as if Lassnig had even adopted Munch's gaze—quite literally. The fact that she then increasingly abstracts the naked body, depicting it in ever paler tones, goes hand in hand with a further development of her visual language, which, however, never loses its connection to Munch. The most striking example of this is almost graphic, but has been little known until now: In Lassnig's painting "Chain of Tradition" from 1983, on loan from an unnamed private collection, the artist portrays herself kneeling, behind whom, on pedestals, are lined up the busts of three admired painters: Velázquez in the back, Van Gogh in the front, and Munch between the two.

What Hans Dieter Huber, the driving force behind the exhibition, has gathered and, above all, curated is truly inspiring. The group of self-portraits depicting screaming figures, created in the early 1980s, is inconceivable without the model of Munch's most famous motif, "The Scream." Like Chemnitz and Dresden before it, Hamburg was unable to borrow a painted version of "The Scream" (although in all three cases, the Munch Museum in Oslo, where most of the artist's works are housed, proved to be an exceptionally generous lender). The Kunsthalle made do with the lithographic version "Scream" from 1895, which is part of its own graphic collection—a Munch holding begun by the Kunsthalle's founder, Alfred Lichtwark, and systematically expanded ever since. This collection is among the finest in the world, and the exhibition draws heavily on it.

The entire art gallery is vibrating with energy.

But interest in Lassnig also began relatively early in Hamburg: in 1982, the then-director Werner Hofmann acquired her "Self-Portrait as Prophet," a key painting from 1967 that can now be considered iconic. One only wishes that Lichtwark and Hofmann's current successor, Alexander Klar, had refrained from his obsequious remarks about this painting; the personal texts on individual works scattered throughout the exhibition (including those by attendants and children) are all far more worthwhile.

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