

The Scream: What were those colorful, wavy clouds in Edvard Munch's famous painting?

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Rutgers Professor Alan Robock with an image of *The Scream*, an 1895 painting by Norwegian artist Edvard Munch. From top to bottom on the right are: a nacreous cloud over McMurdo Station in Antarctica in 2004; an 1883 drawing by William Ascroft showing the sky in London after the Krakatau eruption; and a 1982 volcanic sunset over Lake Mendota in Madison, Wisconsin, after the El Chichón eruption in Chile. Credit: Nick Romanenko/Rutgers University

What inspired the iconic red-and-yellow sky in *The Scream*, the painting by Norwegian artist Edvard Munch that sold for a record \$119.9 million in 2012? Some say it was a volcanic sunset after the 1883 Krakatau eruption. Others think the wavy sky shows a scream from nature.

But scientists at Rutgers University-New Brunswick, University of Oxford and University of London suggest that nacreous, or "mother of pearl," [clouds](#) which can be seen in southern Norway inspired the dramatic scene in the [painting](#). Their study is published in the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*.

"What's screaming is the sky and the person in the painting is putting his or her hands over their ears so they can't hear the scream," said Alan Robock, study co-author and distinguished professor in the Department of Environmental Sciences at Rutgers-New Brunswick. "If you read what Munch wrote, the sky was screaming blood and fire."

There are four known versions of *The Scream*: an 1893 tempera on cardboard; an 1893 crayon on cardboard; an 1895 pastel on cardboard that billionaire Leon Black bought for nearly \$120 million at auction; and a tempera on hard [cardboard](#) thought to have been painted in 1910.

Iridescent light from below the horizon illuminates polar stratospheric clouds, also known as nacreous clouds. Robock said the sky colors and patterns in Munch's paintings match [sunset](#) colors better when nacreous clouds are present versus other scenarios.

The study builds on a 2017 study that also proposed nacreous clouds. The new study provides a more detailed and scientific analysis of Munch's paintings, focusing on photographs of volcanic sunsets and nacreous clouds and analyzing the color content and cloud patterns. If the new analysis is correct, Munch's art is one of the earliest visual documentations of nacreous clouds, the study says.

Robock and others have previously proposed that a volcanic sunset inspired the painting, and he still thinks that's possible.

"We don't know if Munch painted exactly what he saw," Robock said. "He could have been influenced by the Krakatau sunset and nacreous clouds and combined them."

More information: Fred Prata et al, The Sky in Edvard Munch's "The Scream", *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* (2018). [DOI: 10.1175/BAMS-D-17-0144.1](https://doi.org/10.1175/BAMS-D-17-0144.1)

Provided by Rutgers University

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