Caspar David Friedrich, the peculiar Romantic.

The Landscape of Longing

BY ANNE HOLLANDER

Only nine oil paintings and eleven works on paper make up the Metropolitan Museum's current exhibition of Caspar David Friedrich's works from Russia; and they are only minimally augmented by a few engravings, owned by the museum, which were made by the artist's brother from some of Friedrich's 1803 drawings. Housed far to the rear of the main floor in a small section of the Lehman wing, this show must be sought out, but it is important despite its small size and ascetic flavor. Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) is now generally acknowledged as a great Romantic painter, and space has been made for him beside inner, Géricault, Blake, and Goya on the roster of Early Nineteenth Century Originals. Friedrichs are now reproduced on book jackets, record albums, and in other public places, and the pictorially conscious have added The Cross in the Mountains, The Monk on the Seashore, and The Arctic Shutter to their mental furniture along with The Raft of the Medusa and The Third of May.

And yet virtually all of Friedrich's important works are in Germany, with some in Austria and Russia, whereas England, France, and the United States boast just one painting each, and no major ones. The current show offers an unparalleled view of the works now held at the Hermitage and the Pushkin Museum, none of which has ever been to America before, and many of which are not even commonly reproduced. This is, in fact, the first exhibition devoted to Friedrich ever to be mounted in this country. It is possible that many more Friedrichs still lurk in the Soviet Union, unknown in the West, even in reproduction; but for now we are greatly pleased to see these. They are few, and many are very small, although two of them, measure

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that has the same register whether the artist is dealing with gothic ruins in the moonlight or with a local fence or a window in the morning.

It is the very difference among these subjects that makes Friedrich’s single-mindedness so uncanny. He was devoted to his native North German landscape around the Baltic port of Greifswald, and to the nearby places where he did his only traveling, and he celebrated them all again and again with his usual concentrated reticence. But he was also wonderfully unafraid of owls and moons, sunbeams and crosses, swans and ships, anchors and towers: the whole warehouse of old spiritual emblems. He found that they would do very well, just as they always had. And he wasn’t afraid of absolute symmetry either, which also served splendidly, just as in the Middle Ages, to impose its ancient authority on a seeker’s needy eye. In Friedrich’s works, a taut new atmosphere is held in place by very old devices.

For Friedrich, the new meaning being discovered in land and light and water, the things Turner was working with so explosively, had to be fused and integrated with potent old emblematic machinery, and so did the casual beauty of landscape motifs used by Northern Renaissance masters like Altdorfer and Seghers, artists who had already understooed the appeal of larch trees seen against the sky, without even having to stand the appeal of religious terms. Artists of the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century, other German Romantic painters did insist on overdoing it, as eighteenth-century painters of varying nationalities had already overdone it, exaggerating plain ancient methods for rendering nature with the tendentious theatrics suggested by baroque horror merchants such as Salvador Rosa. Friedrich stayed with the old Nordic school that renders fearful material with limpid modesty.

He was dubbed great in this country and acquired his popularity here, as in France and England, only during the last twenty years, and in Germany only in this century. Having been successful at the beginning of his career, he had already fallen into disfavor by the second half of it, even at home, and was forgotten at the time of his death. He was revived in Germany in the early 1900s and became celebrated, but only there. Some art historians and art lovers outside Germany encountered his works on their travels or in books and fell in love with him; but theirs was a subterranean passion at odds with a hundred years of prevailing taste.

Reasons have been adduced for Friedrich’s lack of modern fame outside Germany, beginning with the proposition that the Nazis took him up and so no one else could. But I don’t believe that. It might have been true of Böcklin, for example, except that people hated Böcklin not because Göring liked him, but because most of Böcklin is truly dreadful. Friedrich had other qualities that rendered him unacceptable in an aesthetic climate dominated by French ideals of perpetual artistic revolution, of the abiding value of an avant-garde. Friedrich’s program could not meet the modernist requirements that were applied retroactively to the whole history of art. The fealty of great artists was now seen to be pledged not to academic tradition or to the truth of nature, and certainly not to external political or religious mandates, but only to the inner dynamics of painting itself. Those alone were seen to generate the true spiritual core of great art on any subject, religious or not.

Thus the Virgins of Piero, the mythologies of Poussin, and the rocky hills of Cézanne could all appear to have a single spiritual source. Spiritual expression required some transmutation through paint itself, not just by means of the old lexicon of religious terms. Artists of the past with a claim to greatness, whatever their announced themes and known patrons, must appear to have fundamentally detached their artistic selves from the requirements of the church, the duke, or the academy, from everything but their personal responses to the demands of painting when they actually took up the brush. One sign of this was that they would appear especially detached from too careful (usually called slavish) imitations of realistic appearance that might seem intended to make base appeals to sentiment or stupefaction.

Until the 1960s Friedrich’s fate as an obscure cult figure was sealed by his utter unwillingness to expose any painterly turbulence or spontaneity in a set of energetic new graphic terms (the quality that made Delacroix and Turner so appealing to the modern world); by his obvious comfort with the rigors of his technical training and his belief in sober speech devoid of elliptical or fragmented rhetoric; and especially by his unashamed expression of a profound religious desire, unmediated by literary mythologies in the style of Blake or by political passion and social satire in the mode of Goya, and unashamedly rendered in the tight simplicities of an outmoded painterly system.

In 1975, in Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, his book about the kind of modern painting that expresses spiritual longing, Robert Rosenblum offered Friedrich as a source for painters such as Gottlieb and Rothko, whose versions of intense nothingness he demonstrated to be similar illustrations of “the search for the sacred in the secular modern world.” But it is important to remember that Friedrich’s own search insisted on precisely the verity that was abandoned by modern seekers. A delicate respect for each twig continued to be essential to his quest, as it was not to Turner’s at the time, nor certainly later to Rothko’s. Friedrich’s paintings with nothingness as their subject always insist on the absolute presence of something, often in detail. Adherents of modernism could comprehend spiritual longing, but not if a cross were still part of the composition, or a person pointedly staring into the distance.

In an essay in the catalog of the Metropolitan’s show, Rosenblum points out that Friedrich used the same themes as the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century. Here are the marine scenes, the woman at her window, the neighboring terrain, the views of churches, all closely observed and set forth in a unifying luminous atmosphere. But again a difference should be noted. Modernist demands were quite satisfied by seventeenth-century Dutch artists, who had, despite...
any of the neutral themes and the lucid technique are unchanged in Friedrich's art, but it is clear that his works aimed at the soul without recourse to uniquely painterly methods for doing so. He repeatedly signaled his spiritual intention in an arcahnic way, organizing the picture around a central axis, which can always force the most primitive psychic attention on the most banal phenomena. Friedrich would even place figures along the same axis and make them stare with the same attention at the same sight, blocking and emotionally filtering the view; and so in his landscapes he denies any unself-conscious detachment even to his incidental figures, and wrenches still more empathy from the hapless spectator. When it isn't a person, it may be a stunted tree or a pregnant shrub, a crude hut brooding under its cap of snow or a small gate sagging in a sunlit wall that fills the picture's center with fateful importance. It may be a coffin or a cross, or it may be nothing but water or sand, seen against a luminous emptiness.

It was Friedrich who single-handedly made it natural to summon religious feeling when looking at the calm sea and the local evening sky, or while watching boats slide quietly into the mist. It was he who managed the transfiguration of the unremarkable nearby hills or the uninteresting grove of firs behind the house, insisting on a sharp spiritual need quite different from the divine awe aroused by big sublime vistas. There were contemporary British watercolorists also exploring local subjects in a restrained transparent mode, but their interest, just as with the old Dutch masters, was vehe­mently secular. Their works always look briskly committed to the extreme possibilities of paint, not piety.

Friedrich's great contribution was swallowed up in the increasing tide of modern scorn for the popular arts that fostered cheap versions of religious impulses, and that were thus at odds with modern views of seriousness. Still, the pictorial strategies that Friedrich invented were steadily redeemed and perfected by photographers and cinematographers. It has been they, not modern painters, who have shown how an artist, by bringing the viewer's gaze to bear with a certain meditative intensity and a certain use of light on undistinguished bits of the natural world, can convey the power of transcendence and the naked force of spiritual longing in just the way Friedrich had first done it. Many moviegoers have felt the power of Friedrich's originality without knowing its source; many have learned from the camera to see God in plain landscapes without ever having seen a Friedrich.

Now, after the steady rise of camera art on the aesthetic scale during the last thirty years, along with the recent irreversible disintegration of the solid modernism that used to govern so much response to art, Friedrich's time has come again. The works in the exhibition in New York are organized by medium, so that an assortment of small sepia and watercolors occupies one small room, and the array of nine oils is disposed around the adjoining hemicycle at the back of the Lehman wing. The sepias include several studies of owls, coffins, and moonlight where the pale and delicate texture is in eerie contrast to the somber theme; and there is a watercolor of the gothic ruins at Eldena, often used by Friedrich in urgently grim compositions, here seen with urgent tenderness.

On the curved wall of oil paintings hangs Friedrich's vision of the marital journey titled On the Sailboat, in which a man and a woman sit in the bow of a big boat has no visible crew or cargo, only the two passengers perched far forward the better to see what's coming, both of them oblivious to the apparently supernatural handling of their craft. What's left behind is also behind us; our view is from amidships, but the boat may well have no stern, the journey no beginning. He wears a hat, but there is no portmanteau, no shawl, no basket, no umbrella, no rug, and no hat for her.

These absences are noticeable because of the sense of present life that the plain technique permits him to feel, the artist's refusal to adopt a fairy-story style. The lady's coiffure and the shape of her clothed body are acutely contemporary, and so is the boat. But wait. There are other strange things only slowly apparent. The shore for which they are making bears a row of towered structures, which have been identified as coming from three different towns; but more than that, it bears a certain resemblance to Dürr's incandescent 1495 watercolor of Innsbruck, viewed from the north over water. And what about the man's hat, and those long curls? Dürr again, by golly, and the amorphous garments he wears below the neck only confirm the idea, since they are otherwise seamless and pleatless and buttonless in any modern scheme. And what is that spiky collar she has on? It is not, although it might seem so, a fashionable detail. It is, in fact, a standard picturesque reference to the olden days, meaning anything even vaguely of the Middle Ages, and a common international device for illustration and stage costume between the 1770s and the 1820s. So maybe we are in the past; but we are clearly right here at the same time, and circling over the ocean to the future, where the past still remains.

The clothes in Friedrich's pictures need further discussion, mainly because of his ability to convey the subjective mode so well owes a great deal to his excellent sense of current fashion, a gift that he shares with Goya. Both artists turn pointedly contemporary dress into a visual sign of corporeal subjectivity. They use it to illustrate the currency and the presentness of the self in its body, and to engage our sense of our own physical selves. But writers about Friedrich want mainly to talk about something called "altdeutscher Tracht," translated as Old German Costume, that many of his figures are wearing. Except for the discussion in Joseph Leo Koerner's new book, critics haven't said what that actually was, and nobody says anything about the range of ordinary clothing that adds such poignance to Friedrich's works, nor about any other interesting departures from it.

Koerner has finally explained that the "altdeutscher Tracht" was not medieval clothing at all, but a bit of politicized counterculture worn devised and adopted around 1815 by students and artists and ex-freedom-fighters who had struggled against the imperial might of Napoleon and were afterward trying to foster a nascent opposing sense of German nationalism. The clothes were supposed to suggest the sixteenth century and the great days of German cultural ascendance—Dürer, Luther. The style naturally became an issue only when it was
banned in 1819, along with other forms of nationalist expression. But Friedrich continued to put it in his pictures, in the spirit of solidarity that also inspired his views of the tombs of ancient German heroes and other treasured monuments. The costume itself made no pretense to real historical style, being intended mainly to look very different from anything modern and French. Its chief effect, defying the chic cropped hair and high hats of the day, was the wearing of long hair, beards, and the big floppy berets that are still associated with the Middle Ages.

Ever since Rembrandt, of course, artists often affected such hats to suggest Raphael, not Dürer, and to claim an apolitical solidarity with painters of all epochs, not with current national issues. They were certainly worn by many German Romantic painters for just those unworldly reasons; you can see them in many portraits, and I believe you can see them in Friedrich. At the same time there were many sorts of soft student cap in use, worn with ordinary tailored coats, and these are also shown by Friedrich, notably on the younger man in *Two Men Contemplating the Moon*. The older, meant to be Friedrich himself, does indeed wear the "Old German" version, but there is clearly a point to the different clothes these two have on.

The man on the sailboat, however, is wearing something truly peculiar, even with the strangely familiar hat and hair, a sort of indefinable, timeless jumpseat. In this picture Friedrich really did take up his Romantic license to use imaginary garb, clearly neither part of current fashion nor of current politics. The woman's pointed collar and the man's blurry suit and antique hat instead indicate a standard attempt at universality through antiquity, whereby an artist invents legendary-looking raiment that evade specific practice, old or new, to make clear that we are in no time, but in a mythic past that may encompass a mythic present. Friedrich did the same with vaguely classical drapes in an earlier painting of lovers called *Summer*.

Yet this hat, too, this monumental mushroom cap, bears uncanny traces not only of Dürer and Rembrandt, but of the historical hat Vermeer wears when he paints himself into his allegory of painting, where the muse is the model holding fame's trumpet, and his hand holds the brush. Is this a vision of Friedrich the painter, newly married at 44, finally sailing forth hand in hand with his radiant new muse to join the company of great Northern artists, skimming over the water toward his own eternal Greifswald, Dresden, Straßburg, his own tropes of the immortal Innsbruck, the everlasting Delft, and all the holy cities of the Northern landscape painter? Maybe; but probably not, since he probably did not know the Vermeer.

Anyway such speculations connect Friedrich with past history, whereas this exhibition, as its title shows, is devoted to Friedrich the Romantic, to whatever attached him so vitally to his own moment and now makes him so necessary a figure for our understanding of Romanticism. Koerner's new book provides a most valuable background to this exhibition, even though he only reproduces one or two of the pictures on display. His (and his publisher's) many ravishing reproductions of Friedrich's other works show how smoothly the present examples interleave with those even more vivid ones; and the discussion of the artist is riveting and instructive.

Koerner wants to describe how Friedrich transformed landscape painting into as definitive an exponent of Romantic thought as landscape poetry became with Wordsworth. In so doing, he can link Friedrich to modern aesthetic principle, just as Romantic poetry has been shown to be linked to it during the last two decades of literary criticism. Friedrich helped produce a new art criticism, as Wordsworth did a new literary history, by forging a new relation between nature, the artist, and the viewer, one that would...
serve a new art of experience instead of
the old quest for ideal perfection.

Thus began the modern aesthetic
idea, according to which the point of natural
landscape lies in how it is personally
seen and subjectively felt. Such seeing
and feeling may best be demonstrated by
an artist (poet or painter) whose individ-
ual genius perceives, transmutes, and
presents the world so as to make the sub-
jectivity become ours. It is only through
will have to become the modern subject
for art, because its true subject is subjec-
tivity itself. Thereafter art could replace
religion, supplementing outworn creeds
by rightly showing us what to make of
nature in the modern world.

It is true that the importance
of Romanticism to modern
thought was explained first by
literary critics, while Romantic
painters were mainly valued by art critics
for their expressions of painterly free-
dom, usually seen to pave the way for
more serious exponents of personal vi-
Sion in later decades. They were not seen
as modern themselves. Koerner convinc-
ingly offers Friedrich as the Wordsworth
of painting as no other artist was, anoth-
er founder of emotion recollected in
tranquility—and not just recollected,
but re-created as a form of deep contem-
plation, out of the deliberate exercise of
the artist's contemplative talent.

Friedrich thus becomes the first pictorial
poet of loss, the one who wishes to
show the natural world as an image of
something that feels as if we once pos-
sessed it but that really was not ours,
something that is always still desired and
still unattained. He is the painter who
can give the sense of all experience as
weighted with unretrievable mem-
ory—of how this thicket is meant for you,
to illustrate how this group forms not just a wall but
an embracing chapel, not just a barrier
but an invitation and a discovery; and
how both pictures seem to suggest that
you are the first person ever to stop just
here and to look at these particular
shrubs in just this way. But since they also
bear the careful look of having been pre-
viously seen, the look of memory, they
can never quite be yours. "You stand be-
fore the pictures," he says, "as before
answers for which the questions have
been lost"; and that seems right.

Thus he begins his discussion of "Er-
lebnismus," the Art of Experience,
which is most thoroughly expounded in
a later chapter titled "The Halted Travel-
er," where he includes a discussion of
the "Rückentfigur," the figure seen from
the back who is so insistent a presence in
Friedrich's art. He connects this person-
age also with his or her replacement by
the viewer in such works as the thicket
picture, again showing how Wordsworth
manages the same thing with a smooth
take of tenses and persons in his poe-
try. The participation of the viewer is in-
vited as essential to the completion of the
picture—which is not a completion,
but only a continuation, a constant shar-
ing in the sense of God's inexplicable
promise.

Between these two discus-
sions comes Koerner's study
of Friedrich as a specifically
German Romantic, whom
Schlegel, Novalis, and other unpictorial
German Romantics felt to be their advo-
cate without having very articulate ways
to say why. It was his old-fashioned
critical enemies, thinks Koerner, who un-
derstood Friedrich's innovations and ex-
plained them best, notably the Freiherr
von Ramdohr, who wrote a sustained at-
tack on The Cross in the Mountains when it
was first exhibited in 1808. His stout de-
defense of the basic principles of land-
scape art, and his outrage at what Frie-
drich made of them, give a good view of
the artist as a crucial figure for his date,
someone after whom nothing would ever
be the same. The subjective, emotional
claims offered in Friedrich's painting
were directly opposed to Enlightenment
views of art's normative function to cre-
ate, to refine, and to maintain timeless
aesthetic ideals, and thus even to impose
a detached morality on taste and judg-
ment.

Koerner further describes how Frie-
drich's clear adherence to the old reli-
gious and emotional qualities in North-
ern Renaissance painting showed him to
be suspiciously prone to the new habit of
reviving Old German glories. The un-
enlightened medieval artistic style was
seen by neoclassical critics to have been
rightly swept away forever by the same prin-
ciples articulated in the classical seven-
teenth century. By reverting to the old
ways in the current climate of emergent
nationalism, Friedrich could seem not just
naive or incompetent, but even a bit artis-
tically compromised by his political views.

In his various attacks on The
Cross in the Mountains, Ram-
dohr makes us see only how
purely subversive Friedrich's
painting then appeared. Instead of offer-
ing a subtle progression back through
the overlapping planes of the scene, al-
ternating degrees of light and spatial gra-
diations to draw the eye gracefully
into the distance, he brutally thrusts a moun-
tain up in front of the sun. He thus
plunges the entire front half of the view
into shadow, and prevents us from right-
ly seeing any of its recessions in the re-
main ding available light; and then he
sinks even the immediate foreground
into deeper shadow, digging a pit just
where we need firm ground on which to
move into the picture. And just where
are we standing? We seem to be floating;
and there's that huge obtrusive crucifix,
no quaint wayside fixture but a looming
presence with which a too-symmetrical
array of overinsistent pines is contending
for God's distant light and our instant
response. Friedrich has notably failed to
integrate the rough elements of a given
prospect into a harmonious interwoven
whole, to create a visual symphony out of
uneven natural appearances, and so on.
More obviously, he has failed even to try.

This picture instead expresses the
thought, unwellcome to the Enlightened
academic critic, that nature is the one
ture cathedral of personal worship,
and that art's real task is to show how this is
so, even to make it so. To accomplish
this, art must abandon its old desire
to make landscapes lie back among their
adornments and gradually unveil them-
selves in a solemn dance for Beauty's
sake. Obstructions must be suggested,
contrasts must be emphasized, to invoke
the true character of our unappeased
lust; art must convey not beauty, but the
way that nature makes us long for what
we will never attain, the heaven that lay
about us in our infancy.

In most of Friedrich's work it lies be-
Yond death, which exerts its powerful
pull in any setting he describes. Death
waits not just in the graveyard but past
the thicket, past the boat half gone in
fog, waits beyond the entrance to the
wood. Heaven, moreover, requires no
obvious cross to guide our expectations,
and death no coffin. The pull is simply
there, and it's always out of reach—just
beyond this parapet, out there on the
sea, across that chasm, beyond those roll-
ing slopes. In all of Friedrich's scenes we
may observe the obstacle that he never
omits: even if it's only the shore or the
In the Beginning

By Paul Berman

Sandino: The Testimony of a Nicaraguan Patriot, 1921-1934
compiled and edited by Sergio Ramirez
edited and translated with an introduction by Robert Edgar Conrad

To Lead As Equals: Rural Protest and Political
Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979
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Koerner's book is densely packed with thought and no less packed with an emotional drive similar to Friedrich's own, a refusal of detachment that feels quite appropriate for the elucidation of these charged works. His prose, however, suffers from this obsessive tendency, so we get "recuperate" fifteen times when "recovery" would certainly be good now and then, and similar repetitions that become irritating. Intensive study in German has also affected Koerner's English, so that he invents words like "enframe" to mean "frame," and then again uses them much too often. But forceful arguments and vivid explications, both historical and theoretical, make this book a most welcome antidote to Helmut Börsch-Supan's ponderous tome, Caspar David Friedrich, which appeared in 1974, until now the only book on him in English, where dream lists of symbols keep hampering all discussion of the works. In his careful analysis, by contrast, Koerner proves that Friedrich's Romanticism was fundamentally modern. If a painterly modernity is the point, however, the painting doesn't make that case. The meditative precision of these owls and hills and hats and trees keeps them attached to their time, effectively preventing them from sharing in the "modernity" of a Romantic painter like Turner, whose use of primal blur detached him from his century.

But on some lovers of art the effect of Friedrich's works is quite direct; and such impact suggests that he certainly had the conceptions of a modern artist, if not a modernist painter. He was a maker of visions that can arouse deep responses in contemporary viewers, and especially in those trained to seek and find the sublime in films. It is in the mobile poetry of cinema that Friedrich's ideas seem to have been confirmed, in situations where the camera may sit for many seconds on the same empty patch of ocean, insisting on a meaning it can only adumbrate, capturing the viewer's unconscious without warning, setting memory in motion. At this exhibition, looking at a flock of birds skimming past some fishermen's nets drying on an empty moonlit beach, we can believe that in his own day Friedrich's modernity went beyond paint. Maybe it will go still further among the uncharted media of the future.

ugosto César Sandino was a knockabout oil worker and mechanic who in 1926 organized his own army, appointed himself general, and joined, on the Liberal side, the last of Nicaragua's Liberal-Conservative civil wars. That was an extremely odd thing to do. Generals in Nicaragua's civil wars usually came from the oligarchic elite. Sandino was the product of a degraded feudal-style liaison between a coffee farmer and one of the farmer's wretchedly exploited women field workers. But humble origins failed to make him humble.

In 1927 the United States Marines landed in Nicaragua, not for the first time, to impose the Treaty of Tipitapa on the rival armies. The treaty called for a kind of Liberal-Conservative power-sharing in a context of free elections and, as the clincher, a new American-style army, non-political and professional, to be called the National Guard. The generals on both sides agreed to sign—except for two of the Liberals, one of whom was quickly killed by the Marines. The other was Sandino, who exploded with nationalist wrath and vowed to battle on. That was another odd decision. The Liberal leader, General Moncada, advised him, as any military man would have done, that fighting the Marines was a fool's mission.

Yet with no more than twenty-nine loyal comrades at his side, Sandino launched an attack. The Americans replied by sending what Sandino called...