

## 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 Turner, 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 Shipwreck* 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

ANNE HOLLANDER is the author most recently of *Moving Pictures* (Knopf).

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, measur-

able thing about this mini-retrospective is its consistency. Friedrich perfected his method by 1808 and never changed it, even during the period after his stroke in 1835, when he worked very little.

Friedrich never dated his paintings, and he showed none of that obsession

with development so common to artists of his period and to others ever since. Apparently he had no need to enact a visible fight for artistic territory, to be seen to be struggling steadily along inside the medium itself, to give perpetual evidence of his personal battle with the intractable eye, the pesky materials, the superior predecessors, the present rivals, with abiding artistic problems and new self-imposed technical tasks, with dominant opinion, with the laziness that gives in to facility, with the stupor that blocks definitive vision and action. Unlike everybody's other favorite Romantics, Friedrich refused to demonstrate the new drama of the painter's work, the phrasing of a personal career in paint.

There are, instead, certain tightly controlled shifts in a prevailing idea that itself is not about painting, although it has to do with art. Friedrich gives the strong impression of being glad to be alone with his preoccupations, eager to satisfy only his inward eye. He is quite

free of the artistic self-importance that places itself inside a current idea of the state of painting. Instead he seems bursting with a particular spiritual consciousness that requires illustration; and that's what gives such peculiar intensity to all his works. Packed into these soberly wrought views of various sober subjects is a single concentration, a uniform focus



ON THE SAILBOAT, 1818-19

ing about 53 inches by 67 inches, are the largest he ever did. It is also true that none of his most celebrated and popular works is among these, which are less spectacular. Still, they span Friedrich's whole career, and they give ample evidence of his unique quality at every stage of his life, and in the different media that he used. The first no-

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 homely details. He did not try to look revolutionary by scrapping those old vocabularies, but he clearly did not rely on them either. He made plenty of pictures without any crosses, coffins, or ruins at all, indeed often with nothing but trees, images that are nevertheless tense with the same fateful longing that informs the moonlit graveyards.

With all his unprecedented advances in the spiritual use of pure landscape, Friedrich discarded nothing he inherited from the austere Northern tradition that began in the fifteenth century. This meant that he could help himself to landscape motifs used by Northern Renaissance masters like Altdorfer and Seghers, artists who had already understood the appeal of larch trees seen against the sky, without even having to consider such intervening classic models as Claude. He internalized the Northern pictorial heritage, never needing to repudiate but only to transform. When he presents a funeral among gothic arches and dead trees in murky lighting, everything is offered with the circumspect clarity of Van Eyck, Bosch, and Vermeer. Later in the nineteenth 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 ba-

roque horror merchants such as Salvatore 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 ex-

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*The Romantic Vision  
Of Caspar David Friedrich:  
Paintings and Drawings from  
the U.S.S.R.*

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,  
January 23 to March 31, 1991;  
catalog edited by Sabine Rewald,  
110 pp., \$24.50, \$18.75 paper)

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*Caspar David Friedrich  
and the Subject of Landscape*

by Joseph Leo Koerner  
(Yale University Press, 256 pp., \$50)

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ample, 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 expound 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

their careful realism, a firm grip on the right sort of painterly detachment. They preserved the correct look of wishing chiefly to address artistic problems, to force art to work for them alone, never mind the patron and the subject. Hals with his wizard strokes and twenty shades of black, Vermeer with his points of light and amazing perspective dispositions had clearly submitted themselves to stiff painterly tests and had visibly triumphed. Let the philistines admire the faces and fabrics; serious painters and modern critics understood the real point, the artist's real work that united him to all other artists, past and present. Tears of awe were appropriate, but only for viewers appreciating the feat of genius or the act of art, not the beauty of the room or the view.

Many 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 archaic 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 pain of transience 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 landscape 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 sepias 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 small ship, outward bound. The relative scale is striking; Friedrich's original sketch shows a very small vessel, but he has here enlarged it to rise protectively around the small pair silhouetted against the sky, who hold hands on the gunwale and stare ahead. The 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 us 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 Dürer's incandescent 1495 watercolor of Innsbruck, viewed from the north over water. And what about the man's hat, and those long curls? Dürer 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 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 wear 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 jumpsuit. 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 bits of 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, Stralsund, his own tropes of the immortal Innsbruck, the everlasting

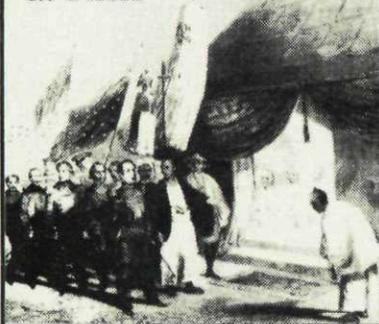
Delft, and all the holy cities of the Northern landscape painter? Maybe; but probably not, since he probably did not know the Vermeer.

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

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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 individual genius perceives, transmutes, and presents the world so as to make the subjectivity become ours. It is only through the contemplation of nature, moreover, that such individual subjective exercise authentically occurs; and so landscape will have to become the modern subject for art, because its true subject is subjectivity 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 freedom, usually seen to pave the way for more serious exponents of personal vision in later decades. They were not seen as modern themselves. Koerner convincingly offers Friedrich as the Wordsworth of painting as no other artist was, another founder of emotion recollected in tranquillity—and not just recollected, but re-created as a form of deep contemplation, 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 possessed 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 memory—with the loss of the visionary gleam, the fleeing of that music. Such a dip into the unconscious was an early move toward modernity quite familiar to students of Romantic poetry, but less so to those accustomed to the idea of Romantic painting as primarily spontaneous.

Koerner's book opens with one of Friedrich's haunting clumps of centrally organized shrubbery that seem to fill the universe, here a thicket you can't see past. His text begins, "You are placed before a thicket in winter." Indeed you are, and Koerner goes on to show in detail how this thicket is meant for you, to display your feelings to you, to illustrate the psychic barriers you recognize between yourself and your desire. Then he goes on to show a symmetrical group of fir trees in the snow, and begins again: "You are placed . . ." And now he shows 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 previously seen, the look of memory, they can never quite be yours. "You stand before the pictures," he says, "as before answers for which the questions have been lost"; and that seems right.

Thus he begins his discussion of "*Erlebniskunst*," the Art of Experience, which is most thoroughly expounded in a later chapter titled "The Halted Traveler," where he includes a discussion of the "*Rückenfigur*," the figure seen from the back who is so insistent a presence in Friedrich's art. He connects this personage 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 change of tenses and persons in his poetry. The participation of the viewer is invited as essential to the completion of the picture—which is not a completion, but only a continuation, a constant sharing in the sense of God's inexplicable promise.

Between these two discussions comes Koerner's study of Friedrich as a specifically German Romantic, whom Schlegel, Novalis, and other unpictorial German Romantics felt to be their advocate without having very articulate ways to say why. It was his old-fashioned critical enemies, thinks Koerner, who understood Friedrich's innovations and explained them best, notably the Freiherr von Ramdohr, who wrote a sustained attack on *The Cross in the Mountains* when it was first exhibited in 1808. His stout defense of the classic principles of landscape art, and his outrage at what Friedrich 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 create, to refine, and to maintain timeless aesthetic ideals, and thus even to impose a detached morality on taste and judgment.

Koerner further describes how Friedrich's clear adherence to the old religious and emotional qualities in Northern Renaissance painting showed him to be suspiciously prone to the new habit of reviving Old German glories. The unenlightened medieval artistic style was seen by neoclassical critics to have been rightly swept away forever by the sane principles 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 artistically compromised by his political views.

In his various attacks on *The Cross in the Mountains*, Ramdohr makes us see only how purely subversive Friedrich's painting then appeared. Instead of offering a subtle progression back through the overlapping planes of the scene, alternating degrees of light and spatial gradations to draw the eye gracefully into the distance, he brutally thrusts a mountain up in front of the sun. He thus plunges the entire front half of the view into shadow, and prevents us from rightly seeing any of its recessions in the remaining 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, unwelcome to the Enlightened academic critic, that nature is the one true 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 themselves in a solemn dance for Beauty's sake. Obstructions must be suggested, contrasts must be emphasized, to invoke the true character of our unappealed 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 beyond 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 rolling 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

wall, or only a dim foreground against a light sky, there is always an impediment that separates foreground from distance, near space from far, and us from the incalculable future that seems to lie in our psychic past.

The painter made thousands of minute sketches of particular trees and the precise profiles of rock, summoning and mustering the elements of paintings he would distill later in the studio, sometimes twenty years later, with all the particularities intact. Koerner shows how the details of the foreground in *The Cross in the Mountains* are perfectly clear, despite their shaded tonality and the commanding drama behind them. Nothing specific has been sacrificed to that epiphany; and Friedrich is shown as the poet of *Eigentümlichkeit*, the uniqueness, the singularity, even in an extreme sense the strangeness, of anything and anyone, the particularity of each self and each of its experiences. This subjectivist position was important to many German Romantic thinkers; and it was the way Friedrich managed to convey the same idea with his close personal visions of rather barren scenery that made them believe he was their true exponent, even without trying to be so. In his art, religious longing may be precipitated only by the look of an actual tree, never by an idealized tree, a visionary tree, an idea of trees. And the experience of observing the unique tree is also unique, a moment like no other.

At the same time, Friedrich is the poet of retrieval. He collects many unique fragments and builds them into paintings that are like attempts to collect a meaning in them, not to assert what that meaning is. And so they echo what Schlegel and Novalis believed was their project, that of "Romanticizing the world." Always vaguely explained, this seems to have meant trying to rediscover its meaning according to a new sense that any such meaning is itself in a state of unfinished process, in a state of becoming. Consequently, only the sort of quest that moves both onward and backward together may hope to yield some awareness of what God intends; and that awareness, needless to say, will also be forever incomplete. Divine significance may or may not dwell in the thicket. The painting only shows the search for it.

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 "recover" 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 explanations, 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 dreary 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. ●

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## In the Beginning

BY PAUL BERMAN

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**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

(Princeton University Press, 516 pp., \$55, \$17.95 paper)

**To Lead As Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979**  
by Jeffrey L. Gould

(University of North Carolina Press, 392 pp., \$47.50, \$14.95 paper)

Augusto 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

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