



Else Marie Bukdahl

**CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH'S STUDY YEARS AT
THE ROYAL DANISH ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS**
and his importance for Danish art, particularly for the painters of the
Golden Age and of the present day

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German Romanticism and Danish Art

Casper David Friedrich's study years at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and his importance for Danish art, particularly for the painters of the Golden Age and of the present day.

From the end of the 1770s and up to the mid-19th century the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen was both an artistic and intellectual centre for the art world of Northern Europe. The most famous of the young German artists who studied at the Academy is the Romantic painter Casper David Friedrich. He has had a growing influence in both Danish and foreign art and cultural life. There are two questions in particular that claim our attention. The first goes like this: Is the distance between Casper David Friedrich's art and the art created by his contemporaries, especially by the so called Danish "Golden Age painters", greater than we have hitherto assumed. The second question concerns the relation between Casper David Friedrich's art and the art of our times, especially of the 1980s? Do present-day artists experience Casper David Friedrich's art as relevant? Does he still have an important place at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and in the Danish and international art world?

The contemporary relevance of Casper David Friedrich's landscape art at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts from the 1970s to today

Casper David Friedrich, who studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in the period from 1794 to 1798, inspired the landscape painters, German, Danish and Norwegian, of his day. In the second half of the 19th century his art received relatively little attention. But after the Norwegian art historian Andreas Aubert rediscovered his landscape art in 1920, he has been the object of an ever-increasing interest. And since the beginning of the 1970s he has been designated as the most central German Romantic artist. And now he has become an International star both in Europe and The United States. The museums have arranged exhibitions with his works. Especially in the 1980s he was also defined as an artist who challenges modernity and gave inspiration to the new expressionistic departures in painting, which took place in this decade.. His art is also involved in the discussion of "the activity of the sublime", which resurfaced in the 1980s. The topical relevance of Casper David Friedrich's art occupied a central place in the discussion of modernity and of the postmodern that has taken place at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts over the past 25 years

and is still continuing. The analyses of Casper David Friedrich's art that were discussed in this period also serve to profile both differences and similarities between the paintings of the German Romantic artist, his teachers' works and the works of the painters of "the Golden Age". To this very day pictures by his professors, e.g. Abildgaard, and by the painters of the Golden Age, e.g. Eckersberg, hang in the reception rooms of the Academy. For this reason teachers and students always have them freshly in mind. And now paintings by these Danish artists can be seen in the great museums in Europe, e.g. Musee du Louvre in Paris.

In 1980 the well-known Danish sculptor Hein Heinsen invited me to give a course of lectures on European Romanticism. He had just been appointed professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and leader of the School of Sculpture in Frederiksholmskanal that Johannes Wiedewelt had created. Already in the 1760s Wiedewelt introduced Winckelmann's vision of Antiquity, thereby founding Neo-classicism. I had imagined that Hein Heinsen would wish to present his students with some of the new directions in the art of our time, as he was a specialist in, for example, *Minimal Art*. To this he answered that he was sure that Romanticism would occupy a central position in the new trends in art that were on the way. He was right.

The more intensely Hein Heinsen, our colleagues, the students and I myself regarded certain Casper David Friedrich pictures painted after 1806, the clearer it became for us that we were unable to detect a unifying feature that combined the many spaces and situations into a united whole. During visits to the National Gallery and Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin as well as to other museums we were confirmed in our idea that most of Casper David Friedrich's landscape pictures are not built up as a whole and therefore mediate an interpretation of reality in which there are fractures in the interface between the ideal and the real world.

A typical example of such a landscape is *The Monk by the Sea* (1809-10) (Fig. 1), where the landscape appears in a strongly reduced form. Here land, water and air are reproduced in a severe and stylised fashion.

The illusion of nature is almost effaced and the colour surfaces therefore take on an independent meaning. The picture is divided into three horizontal spaces: the narrow, light stripe of sand dune, a just as narrow section of sea and the enormous sky. The only vertical element in the picture is a tiny human figure a hooded monk who is looking into the sea and into the monumental vault of the sky that seems to give him a sense of giddiness. But there is a barrier between the foreground and the background. The world that emerges in the background is therefore inaccessible to him. The monk's bowed figure indicates that he is melancholy.



1. Casper David Friedrich. *The Monk by the Sea*. 1809. Oil on canvas. 110 x171,5 cm. Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

The two diagonals intersecting at the edge of the dunes might make one think that the picture is structured with a linear perspective. But this is not the case. Each of the three spaces is unconnected with the others, and moreover they are seen from different angles. The picture presents us with an uneven, multi-perspective space, as it composed of different and irreconcilable worlds. The dunes are painted in transparent colours, while the background is characterised by pastose brushstrokes. The graduations of the aerial perspective are replaced by leaps from one space to the other. The eye is almost forced to look up towards the great vault of the sky. The little monk, who longs to - but is not permitted to enter into the great cosmic space, inspires the viewer to identify with him and in this way we are also drawn towards the colossal space. Through his compositional and painterly effects Friedrich makes us clearly see that for him the world is without reconciliation, without harmony and without unity. But how should we interpret his type of landscape, where there are barriers between the foreground and the middle ground and an unmistakable confrontation with the representative models of traditional landscape painting? It is just like this that the contemporary

scientists interpret our world – there is no center – the space is infinite – and we cannot interpret our world as a whole.

In most of Friedrich's landscape paintings for instance, *Couple Gazing at the Moon* (ca. 1830-1835) (Fig. 2) where there is no middle ground, and where the edge therefore has the effect of an abyss the figures look into a world that they can never enter.

What we see is an interpretation of a shift in human values. They are not easy to realise. You have to make go a roundabout way to get hold of them and then work on registering them in our world.

We should not forget that a deeply existential relation influenced Friedrich's life and work to Christianity. For this reason a number of his pictures can be interpreted as the expression of a perception that the Divine and Christ's uncompromising message of love illuminate our world and give it new meaning. We can believe in this, but like light it lies outside the sphere of our power.



2. Casper David Friedrich. *Couple Gazing at the Moon*. Ca. 1830-35. Oil on canvas. 34 x 44 cm. Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

We can find this interpretation in *The Cross in the Mountains (Tetschener Altar)* 1807-08) (Fig. 3). The powerful reddish-violet light shining through the cloud is not a natural phenomenon, as it does not follow the laws of nature. This is probably because Friedrich wished to emphasise that this is a celestial light - may be also from other religions .Friedrich has further underlined this interpretation



3. Caspar David Friedrich. *The Cross in the Mountains*. 1808. Oil on canvas. 115 x 110,5 cm. Gemälde Galerie, Dresden.

by painting the sky in red and violet colours that are far more intense than those to be found in nature.

Following our examination of Romanticism in the courses at the Academy, Kant's analyses of "the sublime" from *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) (*Theory of Taste*) and the modern French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard's new interpretations of this concept were studied with particular attention. (1) Kant is part of the romantic movement in Germany. I will talk about this in detail in my next lecture.

It was therefore natural to enquire whether the form of experience that Friedrich articulates in his *Monk by the Sea* (1808) (Fig. 1) is "the sublime" or "the elevated" (das Erhabene) as Kant in particular has described it. Kant's definition of "the sublime" contains an answer to how the imagination functions in relation to human reason, a relation that has consequences for the process of artistic creation and our understanding of the world around us. The "sense of the sublime" is awoken by our meeting with the formless, the infinitely large, for instance, the stormy sea, the vault



4. Nina Sten-Knudsen. *Approach*. 1997. Oil on canvas. 100 x 150 cm. Private collection.



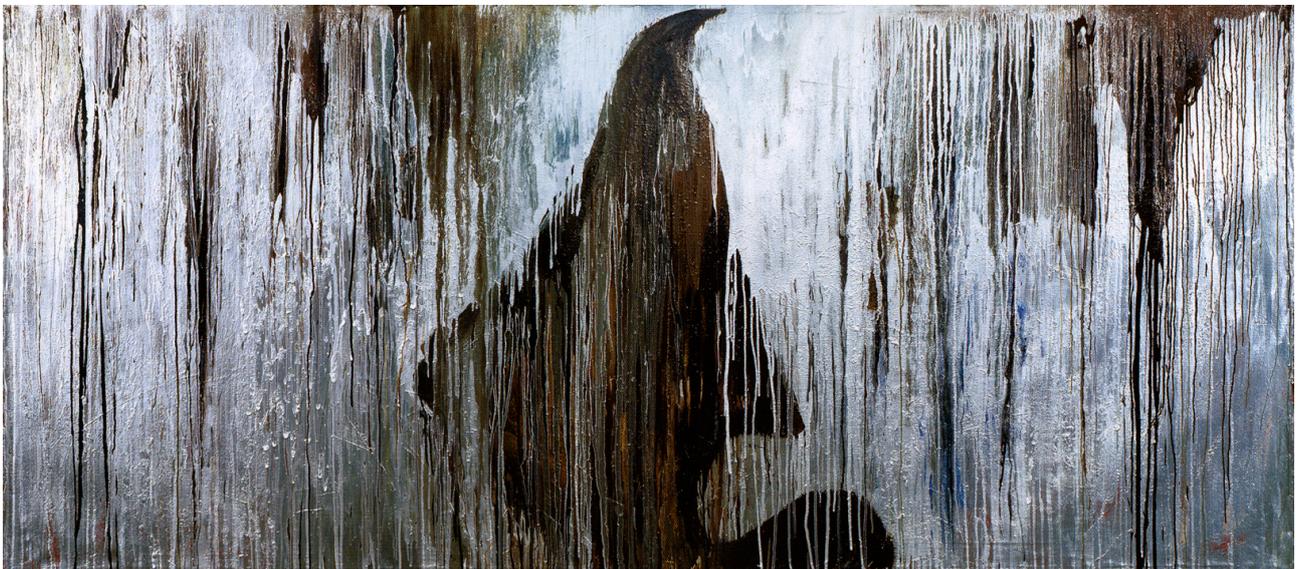
5. Casper David Friedrich. *Seashore enveloped in Fog*. 1807. Oil on canvas. 34,5 x 52 cm. Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna.

of the sky and the infinite all that the imagination is unable to take in in one impression. The attempts of the imagination to interpret the infinitely large and the all-powerful forces of nature evoke discomfort or “pain”. But this pain is transformed into joy, because, according to Kant, it “exposes an understanding that our reason contains a capacity that is superior to sensuousness and nature and makes us conscious of our reason-based ideal purpose.” (2) But it is doubtful whether Friedrich agrees with Kant that “our reason contains a capacity that is superior to sensuousness and nature”. What we find in Friedrich’s work is, rather, that the experience of joy that follows pain is linked to the insight that we have gained through experience, since we can understand that the absolute, the infinite and the Divine lie outside our sphere of power and for that very reason reveal new dimensions in a known world and inspire artists to create new forms of expression. In *The Monk by the Sea* Friedrich shows us how the monk is staring into a world that quite clearly is not only within the frame of the picture but also points the way to the infinite space outside it. The viewer is also drawn into the giddy experience that the monk is accorded and perhaps also feels pervaded by a sense of the sublime.

Two contemporary painters in particular Dorte Dahlin and Nina Sten-Knudsen who contributed to the new departure in painting that took place all over Europe at the beginning of the 80s were

inspired by the discussions of Friedrich's landscape paintings in which they themselves participated. This new departure, which was influenced by the German "new expressionistic painting", was called "wild painting" in Denmark. But the inspiration from Friedrich became clearer in the work of the two artists as each in their own way they created their own personal idiom, in which new solutions to the structuring of pictorial space were given a central place. And in these solutions Friedrich's art was a source of inspiration. (3)

For instance, in *Approach* (1997) (Fig. 4) by Nina Sten-Knudsen, where banks of fog and clouds almost conceal the landscape and render the space open, so that the picture becomes a poetic whole, in which vision and reality seem to merge in a way that is hard to define. This particular kind of vast space, in which fog and mist create a dimension of infinitude is to be found in many of Friedrich's landscapes, for instance in *Seashore enveloped on Fog*



6. Dorte Dahlin. *Mnemosyne (The Goddess of Remembrance)*. 1984. Oil, aluminite and asphalt on canvas. 140 x 310 cm. ARoS Kunstmuseum, Aarhus.

In *The Goddess of Remembrance* (1984) (Fig. 6) by Dorte Dahlin one can sense a deep indeterminate space through the silvery, almost pastose "curtain of fog" falling down over the canvas. In and out of this "curtain of fog" there appears a silhouette-like figure modelled in dark asphalt colours. Now it seems to lie upon the surface, now to open up to an infinite space, multi-perspectival and structured around a multiplicity of directions for the eye to follow. It is in particular the element of perdition and the sublime dimension in Friedrich's pictures – e.g. in *The Wanderer over the Sea of Fog* (ca. 1818) (Fig. 7) that have inspired Dorte Dahlin. But in Dorte Dahlin's picture the sea of fog is placed alternately in the foreground and in the background of the

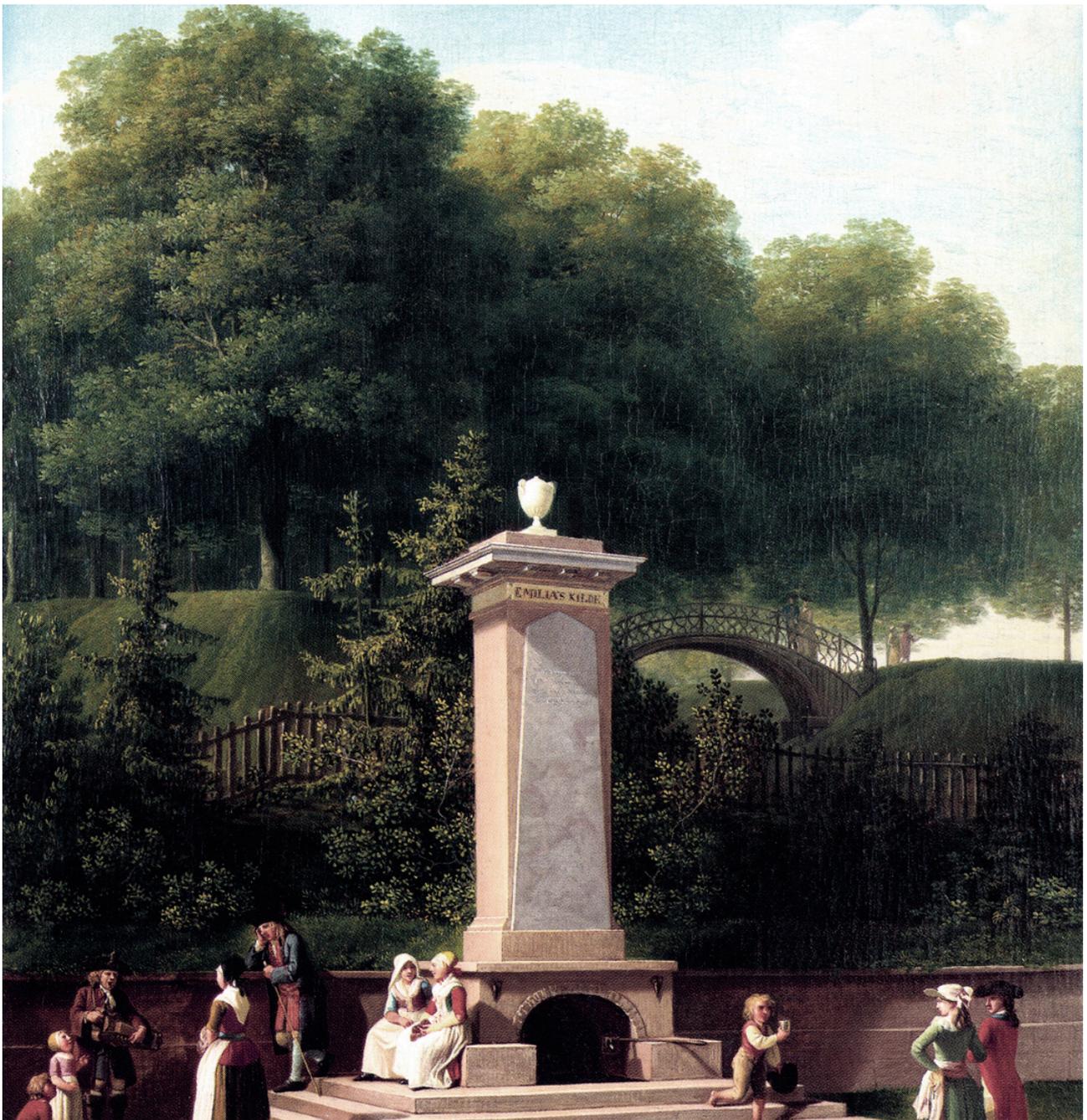


7. Caspar David Friedrich. *The Wanderer over the Sea of Fog*. Ca. 1818. Oil on canvas. 94,8 x 74,8 cm. Kunsthalle Hamburg.

pictorial space, while in Friedrich's painting it is located in the distant background. Both pictures, however, open up to a huge infinite space of which one sees only a section.

The relationship between Casper David Friedrich's art, the painters of the Golden Age and the works of their predecessor:

At the Royal Academy we are proud that such an outstanding and original artist as Friedrich studied at our Academy. But we have little information about his experiences and development in Copenhagen. One of Friedrich's teachers at the Royal Academy was the landscape-painter Jens



8. Jens Juhl. *Emilie's Spring Near Copenhagen*. 1784. Oil on canvas- 49,9 x 37,5 cm. Fyns Kunstmuseum. Odense.

Juhl. In a series of drawings produced by Friedrich while studying at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen, we can see both an inspiration from Jens Juhl's landscape paintings and the seeds of the landscape painting that Friedrich himself created, and which contains contrasts to his teacher's art. In *Emilie's Spring Near Copenhagen* (1784) (Fig. 8).

Jens Juhl has created a harmonious landscape structured in a perspective in which the rhythmic interaction between the vertical and horizontal lines creates a space that presents itself as a balanced whole. The classical composition and the finely judged integration of the figures in the picturesque



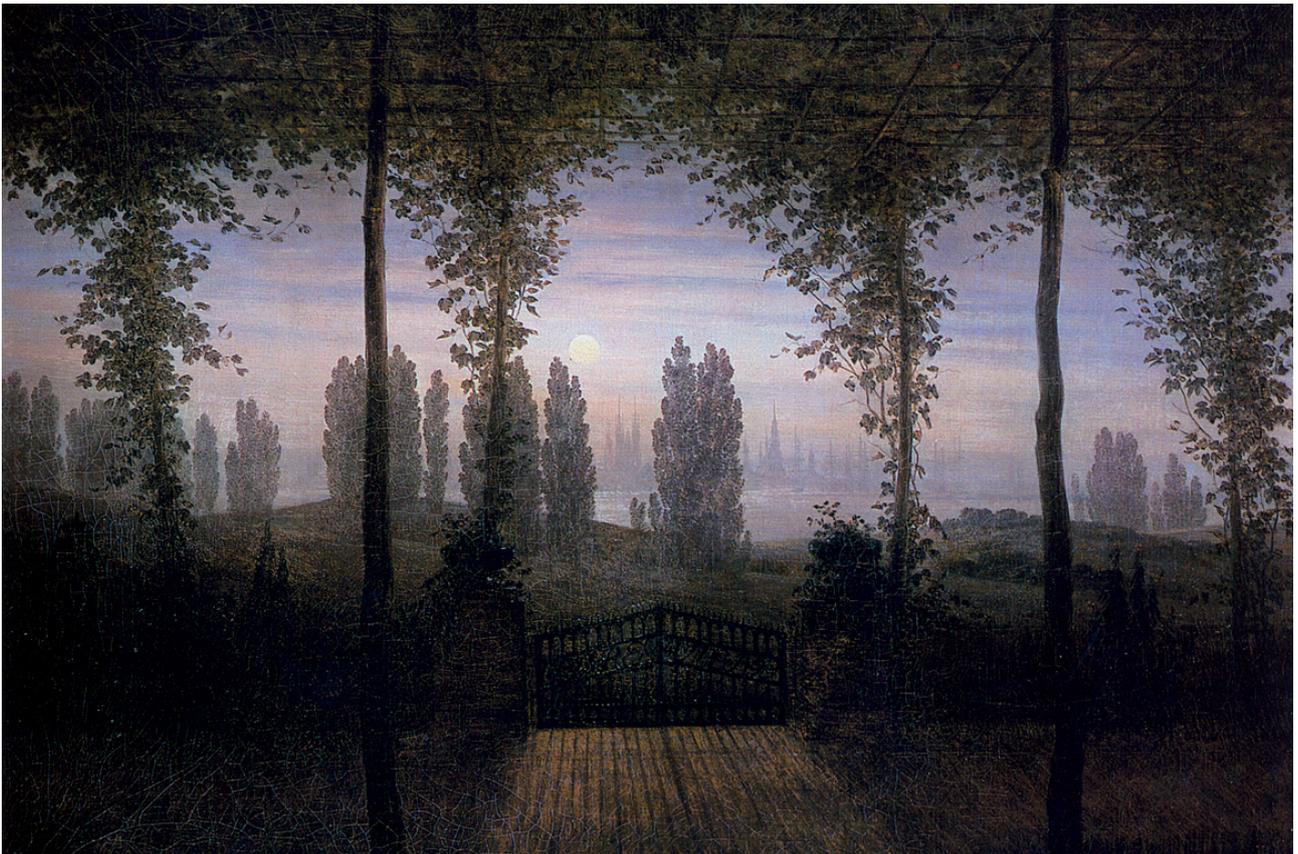
9. Casper David Friedrich. *Emilie's Spring Near Copenhagen*. 1797. Ink and watercolour on paper. 21.8 x 16.7 cm. Kunsthalle Hamburg.

landscape are inspired by the French Classical painters, for instance Claude Lorrain, while the traces of a direct observation of nature reveal studies of Ruisdael's and Constable's landscapes. The monument with the spring, which Abildgaard drew to commemorate his friend, the Swedish sculptor Johan Tobias Sergel, occupies a central place in this light-pervaded landscape in which there are no dark shadows. In 1797, inspired by his teacher, Friedrich painted a watercolour of the same motif., entitled *Emilie's Spring Near Copenhagen* (1797) (fig. 9)⁽⁴⁾.

The monument, which is seen from the side, stands in a deserted spot. The shadowy foreground, the gnarled trees and the withered or dead tree stumps create a mood of melancholy and make the experience of death and transience very immediate. There are moreover different ways in which we can look into the picture. It was undoubtedly his familiarity with contemporary landscape conventions and pictorial compositions, especially Jens Juel's, that as shown by this watercolour inspired Friedrich to begin to move towards a different type of landscape painting than that he had met in Copenhagen.



10. Jens Juel. *Landscape with Northern Lights*. Ca. 1790. Oil on canvas 31,2 x 395 cm. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.



11. Casper David Friedrich. *Picture in Remembrance of Johann Emanuel Bremer*. 1817. Oil on canvas. 43 x 57 cm. Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin.

In Friedrich's later landscape pictures, which are pervaded by his own special idiom, the contrast with Jens Juel's landscapes is very obvious, but it is also possible to trace influences from his old teacher. This emerges clearly if we compare *Landscape with Northern Lights* (Fig. 10), painted around 1790 by Jens Juel, with Friedrich's landscape *A la mémoire de Johann Emanuel Bremer* (ca. 1817) (fig. 11) in Dresden in Germany.

There is an unmistakable similarity of motif between the two pictures, inasmuch as both pictures contain a closed gate with a view on a large flat landscape. But in Jens Juel's painting there are nuanced transitions of line and colour between fore-, middle and background, which therefore produce the effect of a completed poetic whole. In Friedrich's picture there are displacements of perspective – parallaxical displacements – and the gate firmly and finally closes the way to both the middle ground and background. In the background we can sense a town – Greifswald, where Friedrich is born – enveloped in fog. Perhaps this is a dream, perhaps it is reality, perhaps it is the ideal world while the iron gate represents death. Groups of trees appear in the middle ground as silhouettes and almost force the viewer to go round them before he can obtain a view of the great

radiant space. The picture is a memorial to a dear friend of Friedrich, the doctor Emanuel Bremer. But the artistic interpretation of death and eternity have been given a universal perspective. However, the comparison of the two paintings also shows parallels between the Danish and the German painter. It is not improbable that Jens Juel's open, flat landscapes with their light and highly nuanced tones of colour and delicate glazing technique inspired Friedrich. The suggestive mood permeating Jens Juel's painting may also have stimulated Friedrich to underscore the highly



12. Casper David Friedrich. *Mountain landscape with Rainbow*. Ca. 1810. Oil on canvas. 70 x 102 cm. Museum Folkwang, Essen.

expressive atmosphere of his landscape. The comparison shows that Friedrich took his point of departure in contemporary landscape painting in this case perhaps in Jens Juel's but he breaks the given landscape conventions and creates his own multi-perspectival space, which is also the space of our own time.

What contrasts and parallels are there between Friedrich's landscape pictures and the contributions made by the painters of the Golden Age to this genre?



13. C. W. Eckersberg. *Farm in Spejlsby on Møen*. 1810. Oil on canvas. 57,5 x 75 cm. Kunsthalle zu Kiel.

There is no doubt that a number of the latter painters, for example Eckersberg, Købke and Lundby, knew Friedrich's art and were inspired by it. Some of them visited him in Dresden in Germany and had the opportunity of seeing his work there.

To illustrate the differences and similarities between the artistic universe of the Golden Age painters and Friedrich's, we can compare *Mountain Landscape with Rainbow* (1810) (Fig. 12) by Friedrich with Eckersberg's *Farm in Spejlsby on Møen* (1810) (Fig. 13).

They were both painted in 1810. There is no doubt that Friedrich inspired Eckersberg to paint extensive open landscapes with huge skies, but the difference in their perception of the landscape is also striking. In Friedrich's picture there are three clearly marked horizontal spaces. Compositionally and colouristically, in particular, there is a contrast between the small foreground and the big, monumental mountain landscape and the sky. In the narrow strip of foreground sits a weary wanderer looking out over the imposing scene. Only in the foreground are the grass, the trees and rocks painted with a vital intensity with delicate transitions and a network of values. But there is no transition between the landscape in the foreground and the mountain landscape in background, which stands in half shadow like an inaccessible dreamscape in which a rainbow like a luminous sign emerges from the sombre sky. In Eckersberg's picture, which in contrast to Friedrich's is



14. Christian Købke. *Autumn by the Sortedam Lake*. 1838. Oil on canvas 33 x 45 cm. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.



15. Caspar David Friedrich. *Tree of Crows*. 1822. Oil on canvas. 54 x 71cm. Musée du Louvre.

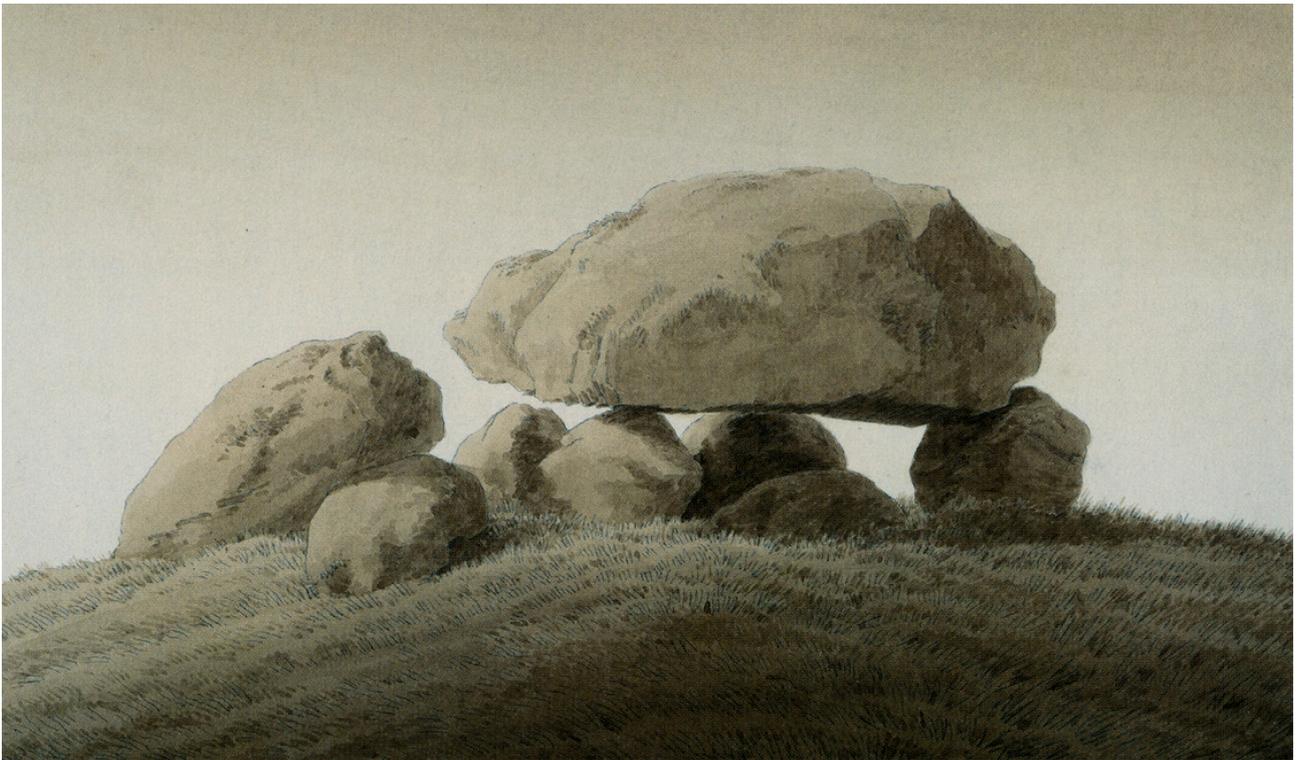
painted as a poetic whole, the rainbow comes out in all its splendour to intensify the picture's atmosphere.

It was not until a stay in Dresden in 1816 that Eckersberg had an opportunity to meet Friedrich.

Eckersberg's pupil, Christian Købke, who is today regarded by most people as the most impressive and internationally famous painter of the Golden Age, was undoubtedly introduced to Friedrich's art through Niels Lauritz Høyen, who was professor of Art History at the Royal Academy. It is especially in Købke's landscapes in evening light or autumnal mood that Friedrich's influence is discernible. *Autumn Morning on Lake Sortedam* (1838) (Fig. 14) is the only one of Købke's pictures in which a personal interpretation of the inspiration from Friedrich's landscape art is especially apparent. The melancholy mood of this extensive landscape, the golden morning haze appearing on the horizon, the complicated structures in the branches of the trees and the small, solitary stooping wanderer who Per Kirkeby calls "a shadowy figure" ⁽⁵⁾ are pictorial elements often to be found in Friedrich's landscapes. The great distance between the light-filled background and the dark autumnal landscape through which the solitary wanderer is passing are probably also inspired by Friedrich's art. A number of these pictorial elements appear in *Tree with Crows* (1822) (Fig. 15).

But in this landscape painting there is a more dramatic, suggestive and very sharp contrast between the dark foreground and the landscape in the background, where the central space is occupied by the golden sky. In Købke's picture the tops of the trees do not form a coherent whole because each leaf and branch is painted in independent detail. But in Friedrich's picture the group of trees is depicted as a network of fractal structures so that they appear as demonic and menacing silhouettes. Nor is there any connection between foreground and background. This contrast between the two pictorial spaces underscores the symbolic meaning of the landscape. The dark space symbolises our world, where transience reigns and death has the final word. The radiant space in the background symbolises, in all probability, the divine or ideal world that illuminates our world and gives meaning to it, but is always separate from it.

Johan Thomas Lundbye, who is also regarded as a major Golden Age painter, was well acquainted with Friedrich's art. In 1837-38 Friedrich executed a sepia drawing *Dolmen at Gützkow* (Fig. 16). The work was acquired by Crown Prince Christian Frederik (the later Christian VIII). In his article "Caspar David Friedrich og Danmark" [Caspar David Friedrich and Denmark] Caspar Monrad rightly points out that the similarities in motif and composition between this work and a *Dolmen at Raklev* (1839) (Fig. 17) by Lundbye are so striking that there can be no doubt that the Danish artist had seen Friedrich's drawing. For artists had access to the King's art collection.



16. Caspar David Friedrich. *Dolmen of Gützkow*. Ca. 1837-38. Pencil and sepia on paper. 24 x 30,8 cm. H. M. The Queen's Collection of Drawings, Amalienborg, Copenhagen.



17. Johan Thomas Lundbye. *Dolmen at Raklev*. 1939. Oil on canvas. 66,7 x 88,9 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum. Copenhagen.

But Lundbye has interpreted this drawing, which he had had plenty of opportunity to study in the royal collection, in his own idiom and placed the burial mound in a smiling summer Danish landscape. In this way he has underlined the national aspect and – to a greater degree than Friedrich – created a painterly whole that softens the impression of the brevity of life and the proximity of death. In the German artist's work the burial mound is large, almost threatening and is placed on top of a small hill painted in toxic green colours.

As a young man Casper David Friedrich was inspired by the Danish landscape art he met when studying at the Royal Academy, but he later left this tradition in favour of a Romantic, strongly symbolic form of landscape painting that influenced the Danish Golden Age painters in the first half of the 19th century. In the last 25 years or so his landscapes have stimulated a number of young Danish artists to find new solutions to the problems that painting raises today especially as regards the structuring of space. But it has also been a source of inspiration for them that Friedrich's view of life has a number of features in common with their own even if he visualises this view of life in a different way. For already in Friedrich's landscape art we encounter a world where multiplicity rules, and where there is no harmonisation. But an open world of this kind also affords a new point of vantage and possibilities of uncovering new and unknown perspectives.

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This essay can be found in a printed version in: Else Marie Bukdahl. *Casper David Friedrich's Study Years at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and his Importance for Danish Art, particularly for the Painters of the Golden Age and of the present Day*, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Visual Arts, Copenhagen 2005.

Notes

¹In 1985 Stig Brøgger, Else Marie Bukdahl and Hein Heinsen published an anthology entitled *Omkring det sublime* [Around the sublime], 1985. It contains an account of why “the sublime” has been an important concept on the Danish and international art scene since the 80s. Jean-François Lyotard’s text “Le sublime et l’avant-garde” from the journal *PO&SIE*, no. 34, 1985 (pp. 97-109) was published in the anthology in Carsten Juhl’s Danish translation. Friedrich’s landscape paintings were among the anthology’s illustration material.

² Peter Brix Søndergaard, “Casper David Friedrich – oplysningens angst and landskabets sørgespil” [Casper David Friedrich – the anxiety of the enlightenment and the tragedy of the landscape], *Ny Poetik* 3.

³ See Else Marie Bukdahl. *Caspar David Friedrich’s Study Years at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and his Importance for Danish Art, particularly for the Painters of the Golden Age and of the present Day*, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Visual Arts, Copenhagen 2005, p. 12, fig. 4.

⁴ See Else Marie Bukdahl. *Caspar David Friedrich’s Study Years at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and his Importance for Danish Art, particularly for the Painters of the Golden Age and of the present Day*, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Visual Arts, Copenhagen 2005, p. 17, fig. 9.

⁵ Per Kirkeby, “Det nordiske!” [The Nordic!] an article in the catalogue for the exhibition, *Northern Romantic Painting. Melancholy*, Aarhus Museum of Art, 1991, p. 120.

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2. Casper David Friedrich. *Couple Gazing at the Moon*. Ca. 1830-35. Oil on canvas. 34 x 44 cm. Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Public Domain.

3. Caspar David Friedrich. *The Cross in the Mountains*. 1808. Oil on canvas. 115 x 110,5 cm. Gemälde Galerie, Dresden. Public Domain.
4. Nina Sten-Knudsen. *Approach*. 1997. Oil on canvas. 100 x 150 cm. Private collection. Photo: Jens Frederiksen. © Nina Sten-Knudsen.
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