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MASTERPIECE – anatomy of a classic

'Engulfed by an Endless Solitude'

In 'Monk by the Sea,' Caspar David Friedrich is as eccentric, driven and dream-obsessed as any Romantic figure



Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatlich Museen zu Berlin

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Put the words “romantic” and “landscape” in the same sentence and most people think of 19th century painting. Here, for instance, are the powerfully emotive blasts of weather, water and sun by Britain’s eccentric master of light, Joseph Mallard William Turner, and visionary odes to nature in an encroaching industrial world by our own masters of the Hudson River School, Thomas Cole and Frederick Edwin Church.

Although less well-known today, another landscapist of the Romantic Era, Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), was of equal stature. Emerging at the dawn of the century and active through the 1830s, Friedrich gave his German homeland a compelling intensity by painting

mountains enshrouded by mist, religion-tinged neo-gothic fantasies, shorelines at moonrise, and views through open windows. In Freidrich's work, figures in traditional German costume often appeared looking outward, pensively, as if to invite the same from us.

Friedrich made many masterful paintings, but none as masterful as "Monk by the Sea," c. 1809. The work hangs at Berlin's Alte Nationalgalerie, a repository for 19th-century German art on that city's Museum Island. Startlingly atmospheric and, yes, Rothko-esque (as art historians like to point out), it depicts a swaybacked, standing monk, back to the viewer, at the left center of a nearly four-by-six-foot expanse, tiny in his surroundings. Alone except for a handful of gliding gulls, he gazes out, hands in prayer, from a broad grassy shore to take in the inky, white-capped sea and the spectacle of night turning into day—black atmosphere rising to parting clouds rising to blue sky—inviting us to enter his private thoughts of life, death, loneliness, love, regret, the future, the unknown, the power of nature. Who knows? Interpretation is an open book.

Next to the work is Friedrich's "Abbey in the Oakwood," a companion piece (same size, same date—c. 1809) of Gothic ruins, twisted oaks and a grim funeral procession. Both paintings have influenced Richard Wagner opera sets, but the theatrical look and tone of "Abbey" is hyperbolic, perhaps even distracting, compared with "Monk." My vote, as art, goes to "Monk by the Sea."

The pair premiered in 1810 at the Academy in Berlin, where the artist traveled from his home base of Dresden, to the south. While "Abbey" was well received, "Monk by the Sea" drew mixed responses. "Grim and desolate," a diarist commented. "No moon, no storm, no sun, no thunder, no boat or ship, not even a sea monster." Dramaturge Heinrich von Kleist, a friend of the artist, disagreed: "It is a wonderful run to look out over an infinite water of waste, engulfed by an endless solitude at the seashore," he wrote for a newspaper. "The picture touches my heart, deeply moves me so that I become the . . . monk myself."

Empathy is at the heart of this masterwork. To achieve it, Friedrich used the Rueckenfigur motif, or reverse-facing figure, wherein the viewer looks over the shoulder of a central figure to capture the same scene. Invented by 17th-century Dutch marine painters, the device became Friedrich's trademark and has continued into our own time, a conspicuous example being Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's World" of 1948.

Our sense of connection with Friedrich's monk deepens upon discovering, as recent scholars have in corroboration with a contemporary account, that the monk is a self-portrait.

Look closely at other self-portraits and you'll see why. Friedrich is the same tall, thin, stooped man with wavy reddish hair and twin cascades of mutton chops. This self-identified monk escaped, when he could, to the rugged coast of Rugen, a Baltic Sea island, near his hometown village of Greifswald in Pomerania, to roam and sketch. Ludwig Theoboul Kosegarten, a poet and pastor who was Friedrich's closest friend and mentor there, urged the

artist to discover God in the barren landscape and raw nature of “Germany’s Last Crag,” as he called it. Rugen was Friedrich’s Walden Pond, his arena for transcendence.

Combing its coastline on canvas, Friedrich dressed himself as a monk of the self-abnegating Capuchin order, an allusion to Medieval simplicity and faith increasingly in vogue among northern European intellectuals of the time. The figure’s slow-motion trudge across an unforgiving, lifeless tundra is an apt metaphor for the artist. Acknowledged as a loner but admired, Friedrich had already made waves with his “Tetschen Altarpiece” (1808), which eschewed Biblical storytelling to make landscape, not people, the focus of veneration. Turning to the monk, Friedrich painted and repainted the work over several months, visited in his studio by writer-thinker Goethe, among others. Friedrich changed a night sky to dawn, shifted cloud formations, and sketched out but then deleted boats offshore. In this work, Friedrich is as eccentric, driven and dream-obsessed as any Romantic figure in the arts—Lords Byron and Chatterton in literature, composers Frédéric Chopin and Robert Schumann in music, and poet-illustrator William Blake.

The monk’s outsider persona also had a political edge. In early 19th-century Europe, especially among the duchies of what now make up Germany, a mood of anxiety and uncertainty prevailed about a new social order in the wake of a fallen French monarchy and revolution in America, with its ideals of democracy and nationhood. Napoleon’s troops controlled much of Europe, including Friedrich’s home town. Stay away, the monk seems to say, this is my life and my turf.

Seen in terms of German nationalism, “Monk by the Sea” acquires an unexpected chill when we learn that Friedrich’s mystical landscapes and costumed Gothic allegories, along with the operas of Wagner, active a generation later, were highly prized during the Third Reich. Friedrich’s nostalgic vision apparently hit a chord.

German nationhood was achieved in 1871, some three decades after the artist died, forgotten and half-mad, at age 65. But Friedrich’s career had been full of successes as a teacher and artist, with patrons (including Prussia’s King Friedrich Wilhelm III, who bought “Abbey” and “Monk” in Berlin) and a reputation that once ranged as far as Russia and Denmark, site of his youthful studies.

Even today, 200 years later, the rawness and power of “Monk by the Sea” resonate in a way that few other works of art do. Your mind and senses are wide open. You become the monk.

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