

“A painting must stand as a painting,
made by human hand;
not seek to disguise itself as Nature.”

Caspar David Friedrich















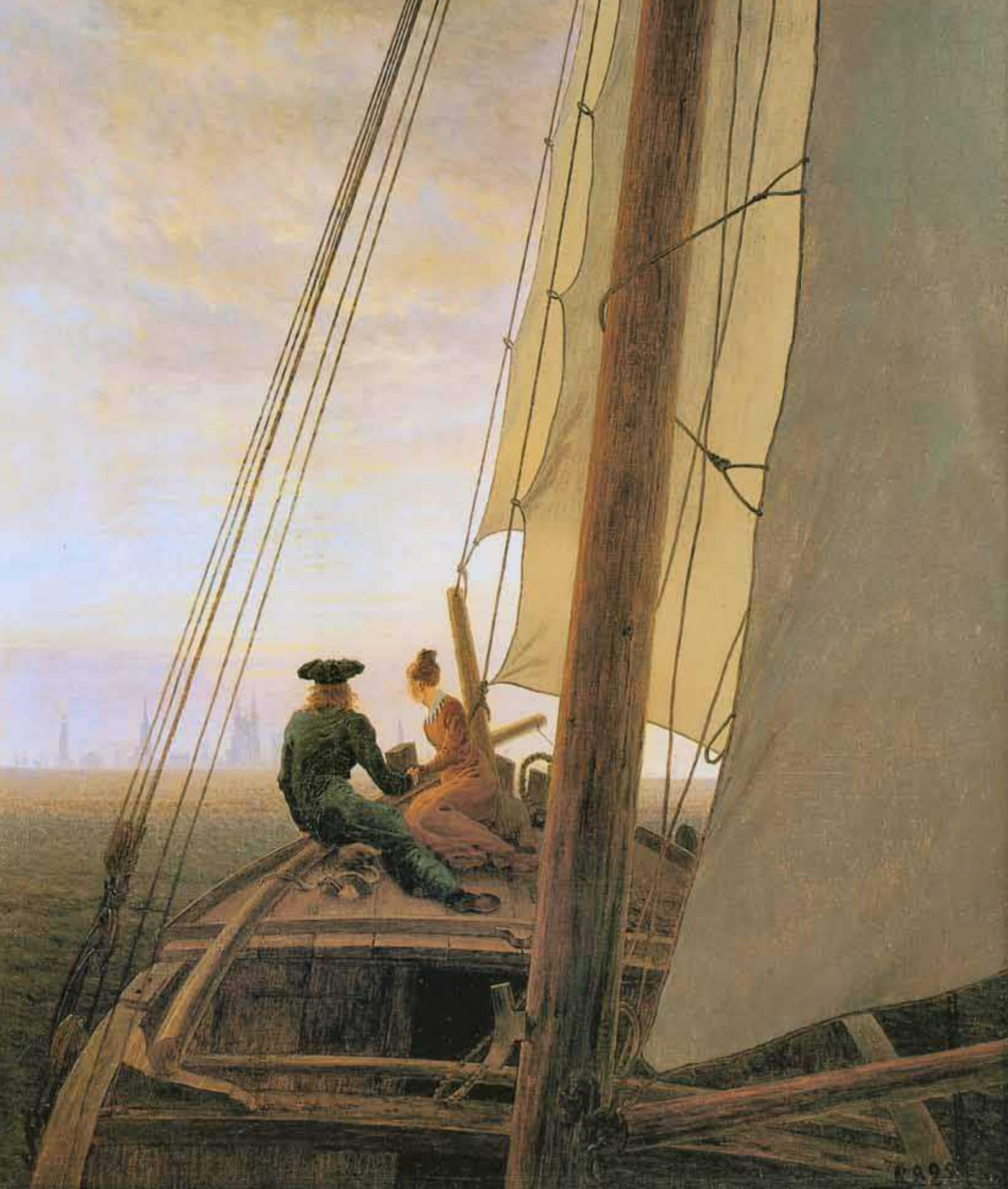












1893

Caspar David
Friedrich

Johannes Grave

Prestel

Munich · London · New York

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CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH

A New Image?

I





Fig. 2
Caroline Bardua
Portrait of Caspar David Friedrich
1810
Oil on canvas
76.5 × 60 cm
Alte Nationalgalerie,
Staatliche Museen, Berlin

The name Caspar David Friedrich immediately calls to mind a unique, unmistakable artistic persona. The very mention of his name is enough to conjure up a distinct impression of the artist and his work. We feel we know precisely who is meant. And yet, the images of Friedrich by his contemporaries and later generations are much more varied and contradictory than might be expected. The existence of a remarkable number of portraits demonstrates that—contrary to tales of a misunderstood artist—he was already famous enough during his own lifetime to be a sought after subject.¹ Not long ago another portrait emerged to join the ranks of those already familiar to us. It came as something of a surprise, not only for its small size (8.6×7.2cm) and its style, but also for the fact that it was painted by a French artist, Alphonse de Labroue (1792–1863) (fig. 1).² It owes its existence to an encounter between the two artists in Dresden in 1819, when the relatively unknown miniaturist took the opportunity to capture the features of the landscape painter. And he expressly noted on the back of the small ivory panel, painted in watercolour and gouache, that the portrait was made “après [la] nature”, that is to say, in the presence of the subject. In all likelihood, when the two men met Labroue will have been able to make only a detailed sketch of Friedrich, which he later painstakingly executed as a miniature and dated 1820. So it is now clear that long before Pierre Jean David d’Angers (1788–1856) created a portrait medallion of Friedrich in 1834 (fig. 3),³ another French artist had already made a portrait of

the Dresden artist—all the more astonishing since Friedrich had despised all things French ever since the Napoleonic occupation of Germany. However, Labroue had himself been obliged to leave Metz with his parents, settling first in Germany and later moving to Russia, which probably meant that he was easily able to converse with Friedrich in German.

The miniature itself leaves us in no doubt that Labroue not only met the painter in Dresden but also became acquainted with his work. The muted, diffuse background of his portrait looks very much like an allusion to Friedrich’s preference for misty landscapes and twilight in his paintings, and the pose adopted by the artist combines the requirements of portraiture with another ‘trade mark’ of Friedrich’s work, namely the figure seen from behind. Despite its small format, Labroue’s portrait seems perfectly to anticipate the admiration in David d’Angers evaluation of Friedrich’s aims a good ten years later: “Voilà un homme qui a découvert la tragédie du paysage!” (“Behold a man who has discovered the tragedy of the landscape!”).⁴ In an almost theatrical manner, Labroue has placed the painter in the landscape as he himself imagined it. Friedrich appears to have become the protagonist in one of his own paintings, yet his attitude is also that of the supreme master. In its integration of the painter into a landscape typical of his own work, Labroue’s miniature has a certain affinity with an early portrait of Friedrich (fig. 2) by Caroline Bardua (1781–1864).⁵

Labroue’s dramatisation of the portrait, in the smallest possible space, stands in the greatest possible



Fig. 3
Pierre Jean David d’Angers
Portrait of Caspar David Friedrich
1834
Bronze medallion
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Angers

◀ Fig. 1
Alphonse de Labroue
Portrait of Caspar David Friedrich
1820
Watercolour and gouache on ivory
8.6 × 7.2 cm
Foundation Custodia,
Collection Lugt, Paris



Fig. 4
Georg Friedrich Kersting
Caspar David Friedrich
in His Studio (II)
1812
Oil on canvas
53.4 × 40.9 cm
Alte Nationalgalerie,
Staatliche Museen, Berlin

► Fig. 5
Georg Friedrich Kersting
Caspar David Friedrich
in His Studio (I)
1811
Oil on canvas
54 × 42 cm
Kunsthalle, Hamburg

contrast to the painting that Georg Friedrich Kersting (1785–1847) made of his artist-friend. This painting, now in Hamburg (fig. 5),⁶ showing Friedrich at his easel—a companion piece to his painting of the studio of Gerhard von Kügelgen (1772–1820)—does not even hint at the works that are created in this plain, austere room. As far as the foreshortened view of the canvas allows, it is possible to make out a thundering waterfall in the painting Friedrich is working on. The power of this natural phenomenon is entirely at odds with the silence and seclusion of the studio. This impression is heightened still further in the painting Kersting made of Friedrich’s studio just one year

later (fig. 4),⁷ for now the painting on the easel, being scrutinised by the artist, is hidden from the viewer’s gaze. Kersting evokes the artist’s concentration as he engages in the creative process, and the complete exclusion here of any outside influences recalls a much-cited remark by Friedrich: “Close your physical eye, so that you see your picture first with the spiritual eye. Then bring what you saw in the dark into the light, so that it may have an effect on others, shining inwards from outside.”⁸ While Kersting highlights the difference between the artist’s immediate surroundings and the landscapes he creates, Labroue suggests a oneness of the art and its maker. And whereas the

