

**CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH**



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Front Cover: Village Landscape in Morning Light (The Lone Tree), 1822,  
Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin (detail, see page 93)

Frontispiece: Georg Friedrich Kersting, Caspar David Friedrich in His Studio (II), 1812,  
Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin  
pages 08/09: Moonrise over the Sea, 1822 (detail, see page 89)  
pages 38/39: The Large Enclosure, c. 1832 (detail, see page 105)

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# INTRODUCTION

The *Oxford Dictionary of Art* describes Caspar David Friedrich as 'the greatest German Romantic painter' in the landscape tradition. Yet it is important to note that the artist was largely forgotten for more than half a century and rediscovered only after Germany had become a nation-state. Much of Friedrich's work had been political and patriotic, produced during Napoleon's invasion and the country's subsequent reactionary reorganisation.

What exactly is meant by the Romantic era? From the mid seventeenth until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Enlightenment thought and culture prevailed in most of Europe. It was the Age of Reason, noted for its intellectual debate and empiricism. Painting, at least in most of Europe, was Neoclassical in style and landscapes appeared only as incidental backdrops for mythological or historical motifs. A perfect example is *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, painted in 1800 by Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). In Holland, however, artists like Jacob van Ruisdael (1628–1682) had begun painting landscape for its own sake. Friedrich saw many such paintings at the Academy in Copenhagen and later in Dresden.

The reaction against the Enlightenment, particularly in landscape painting, was essentially an Anglo-German phenomenon. An early challenge to Enlightenment aesthetics in England was the treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) by Edmund Burke (1729–1797); this was followed in Germany by the critique *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Both philosophers questioned the aesthetics of Neoclassical painting. Burke makes the point that the 'beautiful' is ordered and pleasing, whereas the sublime is an aspect of nature that can compel and even destroy us. Kant expanded on Burke's argument by identifying three kinds of sublimity, the 'terrifying' sublime accompanied by dread and melancholy, the 'noble' sublime which is a quiet wonder, and a 'splendid' sublime which contains aspects of beauty. Kant's distinctions are notably reflected in the highly varied painting of Caspar David Friedrich.

Romanticism was characterised by individualism, the use of personal emotion as an aspect of aesthetic experience, a love of and sense of awe in nature and most often a spiritual awareness of man's comparative frailty. The main proponents of this aesthetic in landscape were J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) and John Martin (1789–1854) in Britain and Caspar David Friedrich and his pupil Carl

Gustav Carus (1789–1869) in Germany. It is helpful to refer to Friedrich's paintings as 'moodscapes', for in many ways they are hard to categorise within the broad spectrum of a Romantic or sublime aesthetic. In his time these contemplative paintings were unfathomable to most viewers and understood by only a few aesthetes. There is often an ambiguity about his work with its elements of religiosity, symbolism and allegory. Perhaps its most lasting impression is its sadness.

We know little about his private life beyond letters written by and to him. He was a very private person, deeply religious, sometimes described as affable and sensitive but essentially a loner living an ascetic life. He married when he was in his forties and had three children, spending most of his life in Dresden, with occasional sojourns in his hometown of Greifswald and on the island of Rügen. In the last decade of his life Friedrich was debilitated by ill health, his reputation had declined, and he died in 1840 in poverty. It was not until the twentieth century that his work was subjected to a reappraisal by artists and art historians, and we are now able to relate key paintings to successive periods in his life and make them more readily understood and appreciated.



# LIFE

