

Johannes Grave

# Caspar David Friedrich































1899

Caspar David  
**Friedrich**

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup> 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),<sup>3</sup> 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!”).<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup> 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),<sup>6</sup> 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),<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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





Fig. 6  
Johan Ludvig Lund  
Portrait of Caspar David Friedrich  
c. 1800  
Oil on zinc  
Dia. 13.1 cm  
Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum,  
Hanover

studio views convey something of the rigorous precision of Friedrich's painting, the French artist's painting conveys a sense of the "tragedy of the landscape".

There is a remarkable and rich variety in the images of Caspar David Friedrich that have come down to us: an early portrait, painted by Johan Ludvig Lund (1777–1867) (fig. 6),<sup>9</sup> reproduced as a copper engraving by Johann Benjamin Gottschick (1776–1844),<sup>10</sup> shows the young Friedrich in pensive mode, his left hand resting on a book, with no hint of any artistic activity. Not so the much more dramatic portrait by Gerhard von Kügelgen, where the artist's gaze and pose are turned directly towards the viewer, giving him an unusually resolute air.<sup>11</sup> A portrait drawing of 1823 by Carl Christian Vogel von Vogelstein (1788–1868) again shows the landscape painter without painting accoutrements and dressed in a coat that is not at all like the Old German dress of Friedrich's rear-view figures at that period.<sup>12</sup> And whereas Johann Carl Baehr (1801–1869) painted him, one year after his serious stroke, as a dignified, older man (fig. 7),<sup>13</sup> Caroline Bardua's late portrait of 1839 makes no attempt to conceal Friedrich's suffering (fig. 8).<sup>14</sup> Prominently placed in the foreground there is an unused artist's palette, with a fine shoot from a plant extending across it. Individually, each of these portraits appears to present a more or less appropriate characterisation of Caspar David Friedrich. But as soon as we view them as a group, the differences become positively disconcerting. At one moment the painter has a thoughtful, even melancholic air, at the next he is filled with determination; in one portrait he is deeply introspective, in another he seems to be directly addressing the viewer; and whereas Alphonse de Labroue and Caroline Bardua place the painter in his own landscapes, Kersting portrays him in the bare interior of his studio.

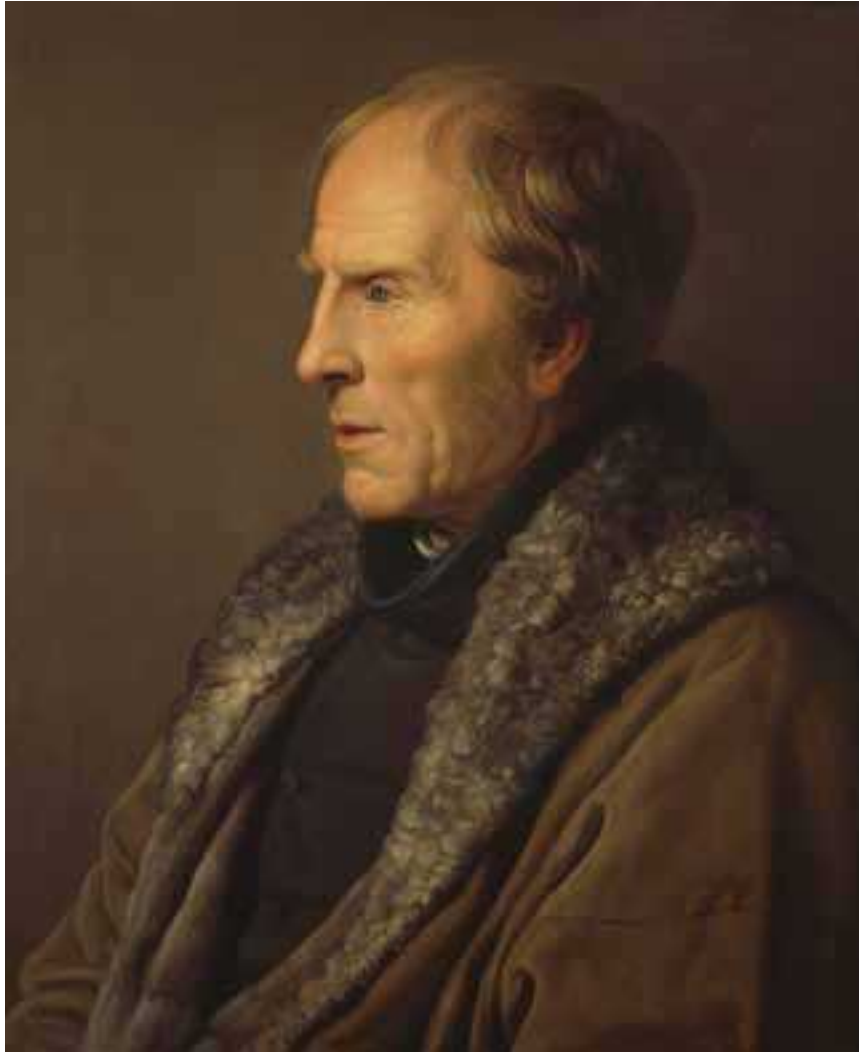
Yet we should not be too surprised by the wide variety of portraits. The same is seen in the case of other figures, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who seems to undergo so many transformations in his portraits that one could be forgiven for doubting that they are all of one and the same person.<sup>15</sup> However, in the case of Caspar David Friedrich, the striking contrasts in the portraits perfectly match the often irreconcilable differences in the images of Friedrich in the literature on his work. Few other artists seem to invite such conflicting interpretations as Friedrich. To this day, there is no general agreement as to whether his work is an expression of traditional, Protestant faith, whether it arises from a fundamentally new approach to religion and aesthetics, or whether it should be read

above all as political and social reflections. There are also opposing views as to whether fixed meanings are conveyed by his paintings, or whether his landscapes are in effect open-ended and that any attempt to attach particular meanings to them is unacceptably reductive.<sup>16</sup> Might it be that in his paintings the Dresden artist had found a visual form for thoughts that are on a par with the complex theoretical and aesthetic deliberations in the air around 1800? Or did his work constitute a naïve approach to the world that was free of intellectualism and possibly evidence of a relatively unsophisticated level of education? These questions have been a source of endless, sometimes heated, debate among art historians and—despite the renewed efforts of the research community over the last ten years and more—there is as yet no end to the debate.

Although the ongoing divergence of opinion regarding fundamental issues has at times led art historians to indulge in questionable exaggeration, and spurious alternatives (certainty of meaning versus open-endedness) have blocked the path to subtler approaches, it can also be highly productive. Scholarly debate has repeatedly encouraged viewers to look at Friedrich's compositions all the more closely and to pay greater attention to the circumstances of their making. Since the publication of the catalogue raisonné by Helmut Börsch-Supan and Karl Wilhelm Jähnig in 1973, only four hitherto unknown paintings have come to light that can be attributed to Friedrich with any real certainty:<sup>17</sup> the London *Winter Landscape with Church* (fig. 140),<sup>18</sup> the Washington *Nordic Landscape, Spring* (fig. 11),<sup>19</sup> *Forest Interior by Moonlight* (fig. 12), and, most recently, *Owl in a Tree* (fig. 10).<sup>20</sup> By contrast, while the material basis of research into the work of Caspar David Friedrich has barely changed, in recent decades new documents relating to the artist's life have emerged, previously neglected aspects of his work have been explored, and supposed certainties have been questioned.<sup>21</sup> Most notably, greater depth in the examination of Friedrich's drawings and recent investigations into his creative process have laid the foundations for greater sophistication in the interpretation of his work.<sup>22</sup> Comparable efforts are still required above all with respect to Friedrich's own writings, which have, on the whole, not yet received the editorial attention they deserve.

Since research on Friedrich has by now produced an almost incalculable wealth of books and essays and since there is not even consensus with regard to some of the most fundamental issues, any attempt





to provide an overview of his life and work must, of necessity, operate within certain confines. It has to be all but impossible both to present his oeuvre as comprehensively as possible and to do justice to the full complexity of the highly differentiated debate amongst scholars in the field. Moreover, it is impossible to delve more deeply into Friedrich's work—as is my intention here—without adopting a particular standpoint for one's examination of his compositions. However, every decision in favour of a particular perspective and every view of a work inevitably means ignoring other matters. Therefore, I ask for forbearance in advance from the numerous Friedrich scholars, from whom I have learnt both as a reader and in conversation, for all the blind spots that by definition arise in any attempt to present an overview of the work of this artist.

In order to establish a point of departure for what is to come, let us return once more to the portraits of Friedrich, but this time to some of his self-portraits, of which there appear to be seven in total.<sup>23</sup> On several occasions between 1800 and 1810 Friedrich subjected

the image he saw of himself in a mirror to the sharp scrutiny that is required of anyone proposing to make a self-portrait. Some of these seven drawings may owe their existence to external circumstances—as in the case of the earliest, from around 1800 (fig. 9)—which was drawn in return for a picture by Friedrich's friend Johan Ludvig Lund. Other sheets are clearly more personal—such as the self-portrait from September 1800 (fig. 14), with emphatically drawn features that almost give it the air of a caricature. Meanwhile two portraits from 1802 show an artist searching for his own identity. *Self-Portrait with Raised Arm* (fig. 15) depicts the artist in a melancholic pose at his drawing table, revealing his sensitive persona. However, contrary to the impression created by the rapidity and spontaneity of the pen on the paper, this portrait could well be the outcome of the detailed study of older precedents. Rembrandt van Rijn, for one, portrayed himself in an etching of 1648 (fig. 16) in a similar configuration, drawing by a window,<sup>24</sup> and in 1758 Georg Friedrich Schmidt (1712–1775) chose the same scenario for his own self-portrait.<sup>25</sup> In showing himself resting his

Fig. 7  
Carl Johann Baehr  
Portrait of Caspar David Friedrich  
1836  
Oil on canvas  
55.5 × 47.5 cm  
Galerie Neue Meister,  
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen,  
Dresden

Fig. 8  
Caroline Bardua  
Portrait of Caspar David Friedrich  
1839  
Oil on canvas  
77 × 36 cm  
Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie, Dessau