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## Caspar David Friedrich's Medieval Burials

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### Abstract:

This essay offers a new reading of Caspar David Friedrich's *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, situating the work within the context of the artist's other paintings of cemeteries and churchyards. It argues that in these paintings, Friedrich was commenting on changes in the ways that bodies were buried at the start of the nineteenth century, picturing burial in ruined medieval churches rather than in the new urban cemeteries in Dresden, which Friedrich himself was involved in planning. Rather than comforting viewers by conforming to contemporary notions of how death was performed, Friedrich places the viewer into the past to confront death through spaces that were then being erased from the landscape.

## Caspar David Friedrich's Medieval Burials

by Karl Whittington

Little can prepare a viewer for the first encounter with Caspar David Friedrich's *Abbey in the Oak Forest* (fig. 1); nothing in nature or in the western art-historical tradition looks very much like it. Friedrich's paintings seem to represent a familiar nowhere; various places, moments and impressions are combined into images that appear both real and constructed, familiar and disorienting. *Abbey in the Oak Forest* similarly places the viewer outside of a particular place and time, but the scene is not a familiar or natural one. Instead, the painting depicts a landscape of dreams or even nightmares. A Gothic ruin, a group of monks, and an open grave present only a hint of a narrative. A deteriorating graveyard and ancient, twisting oaks have filled the space where a church used to stand, as the monks move in procession through its fragmentary portal, toward a crucifix still standing in the snow. As we will see, the funeral may be Friedrich's own and the effect of this ahistorical juxtaposition of ancient ruins with a contemporary, or possibly even *future* burial unsettles the initial silence that the painting projects through its still, snow-muffled quiet. As the viewer grasps for the painting's subject or meaning, the only tangible hook is the picture's evocation of death and loneliness. The claustrophobic space of the picture is a trap, and the open grave at the center beckons as its closest point of entry or exit.



Fig. 1, Caspar David Friedrich, *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, 1809–10. Oil on canvas. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.  
[\[larger image\]](#)

Other paintings by Friedrich evoke a similar mood. Though scholars have not discussed them as such, a specific genre of death paintings, what I call "deathscapes," may be detected in Friedrich's vast oeuvre; these works depict open graves, cemeteries, and churchyards, often in winter and ruin. These paintings are distinct in subject and mood from his many other paintings that simply evoke melancholia or loneliness through the individual's isolation in nature. Friedrich's paintings of cemeteries and graves point not only to his own preoccupation with death, or to general Romantic notions of mortality or transience; they also address a fear of death that is historically specific, speaking to new concerns surrounding the status of the dead body in the first decades of the nineteenth century, and the rituals associated with those places. Death and burial, in pictures such as *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, are depicted as separate from contemporary rituals and institutions, placing the space of death into the past, and,

especially, back into the hands of the church, an institution from which death had become increasingly separate.

Scholarship on Friedrich has been rich in both the United States and Germany during the last thirty years, but most studies contain no coherent investigation of his cemetery paintings, especially *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, for which he was (in)famous in his own day.<sup>[1]</sup> In this essay, I argue against the accepted interpretation of these paintings as redemptive and picturesque by exploring their formal qualities, the social-historical changes in death and burial during the early-nineteenth century in Germany, and the actual cemeteries built in Dresden during this time. Friedrich's involvement in the planning of Dresden's new burial grounds, and his designs for tombstones and memorials, present an interesting and rich paradox when viewed in tandem with his paintings of cemeteries. For Friedrich, the pristine, planned cemeteries that he helped to design and build on the outskirts of Dresden may have been adequate for the quotidian burial of her citizens, but they were unsatisfying as either an envisioning of his own resting place or as an artistic subject for the exploration of death itself; rather, his paintings always depict death and burial in entirely different contexts. Perhaps a painting like *Abbey in the Oak Forest* may be seen as redemptive, but only in the sense that it makes the most of a bad situation: the fear of death, of its vastness and depth, is just barely managed by placing the scene within a decaying yet somehow attractive other world—a ruined medieval church.<sup>[2]</sup>

### **Abbey in the Oak Forest**

Contemporary scholars, following the reactions of nineteenth-century viewers, have long recognized the importance of *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, along with its companion-piece *Monk by the Sea* (fig. 2), within Friedrich's oeuvre. Friedrich's friend and fellow painter Carl Gustav Carus called *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, "perhaps the most profoundly poetic work in all of modern landscape painting."<sup>[3]</sup> The two paintings, *Monk* and *Abbey*, were completed between 1808 and 1810; *Abbey* was completed much more quickly than *Monk*, which Friedrich is known to have repainted many times.<sup>[4]</sup> Though their subject matters are quite different, the two paintings form a distinct pair through their compositional similarities: similar size, a continuous line of haze about a third of the way up each painting, similarly shallow foregrounds with tiny figures, and almost identical tonal structures characterize both works. They were completed at the height of the young artist's fame; only three years before, he had won widespread acclaim for his most celebrated and controversial work, *The Tetschen Altar*, a large painting that established the religious landscape as a new genre.<sup>[5]</sup> Unlike this altarpiece, *Monk by the Sea* and *Abbey in the Oak Forest* were not painted for specific patrons; they were conceived in the artist's studio and sent to the 1810 exhibition at the Berlin Academy, where they were purchased by Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia.<sup>[6]</sup>



Fig. 2, Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, 1808–10. Oil on canvas. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

[\[larger image\]](#)

Wieland Schmied, Helmut Börsch-Supan, and William Vaughn's readings of *Abbey in the Oak Forest* best characterize the modern critical response to the painting: for them, the *Abbey in the Oak Forest* is, as Schmied writes, a visual expression of the soul's transcendence of the earthly realm.<sup>[7]</sup> According to this interpretation, Friedrich constructed an allegory to demonstrate how nature has replaced the church in framing the soul's experience and transcendence of earthly death. The church's open door provides the passageway between life and death, but the experience is framed and completed by nature (the oaks). The earthly realm of nature symbolizes death, while passage through the door leads the viewer into the realm of everlasting life, signaled by the crucifix; Friedrich's painting is a stage for a Christian reversal of expectation. Schmied writes that within this system, "nature is unmistakably involved with death, [but] isolated signs of hope have been planted for the knowing eye; everything is full of expectation."<sup>[8]</sup> In a slightly different vein, Börsch-Supan identifies different symbols of "expectation," arguing that the ruined church symbolizes a deteriorated Christian way of life, and that in contrast, "Friedrich uses oaks as symbols of the pagan way of life," whose "passionate and indomitable force...represents the antithesis of the Christian ethos."<sup>[9]</sup> The crescent moon is a symbol of Christ, "as the light which illuminates the night of death," the visible outline of which indicates the "promise of a brighter future."<sup>[10]</sup> Nature has replaced the church, but hope for salvation reigns.<sup>[11]</sup> Vaughn marshals Friedrich's own words to support this interpretation; in a verse, Friedrich wrote:

Warum, die Frag' ist oft zu mir ergangen,  
Wählst du zum Gegenstand der Malerei,  
So oft den Tod, Vergänglichkeit und Grab?  
Um ewig einst zu leben,  
Muss man sich oft dem Tod ergeben.<sup>[12]</sup>

*Why, the question is often asked of me  
Do you choose as subjects for painting  
So often death, perishing and the grave?  
In order to one day live eternally  
One must often submit oneself to death.*

Judging from these words, creating deathscapes may have been cathartic for Friedrich on some level, but must each painting necessarily "represent" that catharsis?

Joseph Koerner, whose modern classic *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* redefined the terms of Friedrich scholarship upon its publication in 1990, characterizes the painting's effect (though perhaps not its iconography) quite differently. Following his interest in compositional structure and image-beholder relationships, Koerner argues that the compositional symmetry of the *Abbey* transforms (what he characterizes as) banal subject-matter into something more disturbing. The trees and the fragment of the church complete one another's structures, symbolically linking society's collapse with nature's chaos, but the ultimately stable effect is, Koerner writes, "contingent on our placement before the scene."[\[13\]](#) The painting encourages us to reconstruct in our minds the original wholeness of the church, through the symbolic linkage of Gothic forms and German forest, a comparison well-trodden since Goethe's 1773 essay on the Gothic cathedral in Strasbourg.[\[14\]](#)

Koerner argues that the viewer's gaze in the picture is the same as the artist's, whose subjective pictorial system is laid bare:

Not only is landscape itself elegized as monument or tomb, but the original elegist, Friedrich, has himself become the corpse at the system's absolute center. Beyond any conventional religious allegory of transcendence, beyond any encoding of the Gothic abbey as "Christendom" and the surrounding oaks as the 'pagan' past (Börsch-Supan), *Abbey* effects and interprets the passage between order and disorder in art, and therefore between the identity and alterity in our cognitive experience. Observing his own funeral with a particularizing gaze that constitutes the landscape's fragile symmetry, Friedrich takes *us* to the point of our true return to nature – death – and imagines our re-emergence into 'one eternal whole'.[\[15\]](#)

Here, Friedrich uses the return to nature through death to show interconnectedness and wholeness, rather than fragmentation or loss. Koerner makes a similar claim when addressing another painting of a ruined abbey, Friedrich's 1818 *Cloister Cemetery in Snow* (fig. 3, destroyed in 1945); he writes that, "by echoing the standing remnants of the cloister, the vertical forms of the oak trees open up the church, and with it the mass celebrated within, to surrounding nature."[\[16\]](#) Again, the ruin is placed not in opposition to nature, but in concord with it, designed by the artist's hand for the eye of the spectator. The painting comments not on death, or even life, but rather on art itself; Friedrich uses images of these ruins and traces, Koerner writes, to invoke "the intensifying impact of *art* for rendering immediate—on the model of sacred architecture and icon—the referential relation between image and meaning, representation and experience."[\[17\]](#)



Fig. 3, Caspar David Friedrich, *Cloister Cemetery in Snow*, 1818. Oil on canvas. Formerly in Alte Nationalgalerie (destroyed 1945). [\[larger image\]](#)

Koerner's interpretation is subtle and nearly convincing, but what he and other scholars have failed to address is the way the painting actually *looks*: by characterizing *Abbey in the Oak Forest* as hopeful, transcendent, or artistically self-referential, they have directed attention away from fundamental aspects of the painting's mood and appearance, as well as the effect that it is known to have had on Friedrich's contemporaries. Quite simply put, the *Abbey* is a depressing painting. Though celebrated, it was always characterized in its time as unflinchingly bleak; Goethe described it most evocatively, writing, "here is coldness, impetuosity, dying, and despair," and in an article appearing in a Dresden literary journal, Johanna Schopenhauer wrote, "what a picture of death this landscape is!...one shudders when looking at it."<sup>[18]</sup> One would certainly expect Goethe and other contemporaries to see the "hidden signs" of hope if Friedrich had intended them to be seen. And if we follow Koerner's interpretation, in which death is staged as the ultimate return to nature, where is the "one eternal whole"? One can certainly find imagery of both natural and spiritual wholeness in many of Friedrich's other works, but not in *Abbey in the Oak Forest*. In interpreting this painting, one would do better, I think, to accept the early-nineteenth-century evaluations of the painting—that it is a meditation not on transcendence but on death itself. In the sections that follow, I propose a new visual analysis of the painting based on this interpretation, and a brief look at Friedrich's other deathscapes, before historically situating what kind of death Friedrich evoked in these works.

In many modern reproductions of *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, the sky seems to glow from within, with warm shades of caramel brown, yellow ochre, and lichen green merging into an eerie illumination whose light source remains indeterminate. But the painting is notoriously difficult to photograph; I have seen no two reproductions that depict the colors, particularly of the sky, in the same way. The glowing colors of most reproductions have, I think, played a major role in the acceptance of the dominant interpretation of the painting as redemptive or hopeful. When the original is viewed, the difference from most reproductions is shocking—the painting is far bleaker than it appears in photographs. The sky is a bleached brownish-gray, with none of the golden or rosy glow of many photographs. There truly is not a single warm color in the painting, only washed-out grays, blacks, browns, and whites.



The moon, a small sliver lost in the upper right corner, does not seem to be the source for the painting's thin, bleached light. The eerie play of light and shadow is central to the initial effect created by the painting; the light seems otherworldly rather than observed, and probably does not reflect any natural conditions in the regions surrounding Friedrich's homes in Dresden and the tiny village of Greifswald on the Baltic Sea where he grew up. Rather, the light transports the viewer into another time and space; contemporary reviewers also saw the picture as a kind of "dreamscape," a ghostly world populated by monks, who, in reality, "would have ceased to inhabit such a ruin centuries ago."<sup>[19]</sup>

The forms and figures in the foreground are miniature in comparison to the architectural and natural forms that pierce the picture's sky. The small shapes of the monks winding their way in procession through the ruined doorway are nearly indistinguishable from the dark shapes of the gravestones and crosses which lie scattered in the snow among the trees and ruins, invading nearly every space of the foreground. Small obelisks, crosses, and grave steles make up the cemetery, many half-buried in the snow; nearly all of them are falling over, unkempt and forgotten by all but the monks. The placement of the gravestones on all sides of the ruin, even visible beyond its open portal, affirms the scene's lack of correspondence to a real place. It is impossible to imagine a historical setting in Germany in which a church and a cemetery might have mingled in this way. The dead lie decaying and forgotten along with the church, both relics offering not consolation or completion, but stifling stillness and the creeping destruction of time and neglect.

The curving sky is pierced by the fragmentary entryway of the ruined abbey and the twisting, barren branches of the oak trees, which look more like a screen or backdrop than trees placed in space. Friedrich based these ruins, and those in many other of his paintings, on the remains of a Gothic abbey at Eldena, near the Baltic coast, which were well known during Friedrich's time, and which the artist included in over three dozen of his compositions. Friedrich almost never painted his landscapes directly from nature, and the variations in composition and structure that one finds in his many uses of the Eldena ruin are a good example of this tendency to re-arrange elements in the studio. His 1825 watercolor *Eldena Ruins Viewed from the Northeast* (fig. 4), is the most faithful to the ruin's actual appearance, yet it is still a construction.<sup>[20]</sup> He stripped away several of the walls of the ruin, and added rolling hills that are not present on the site (see fig. 5 for its current appearance). Judging from the watercolor, no cemetery survived on the site, no large oaks grew around it (though large trees now grow on the site), and certainly there was no remaining monastic presence in the area. Friedrich's *Abbey* was almost entirely a creation of his own imagination, and its inherent constructedness allows us to probe more deeply into Friedrich's intentions for the painting, since it represented an image that he held entirely within himself rather than one that he saw in the world.



Fig. 4, Caspar David Friedrich, *Eldena Ruins Viewed from the Northeast*, 1825. Watercolor on paper. Private collection. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 5, Ruins of Eldena Abbey. Near Greifswald, Germany. Photo by the author. [\[larger image\]](#)

The painting's mood and meaning are evoked through the combination of each individual element: the twisting oaks, the fragmented portal of the abbey, the grey snow among the gravestones, the dark ambiguous haze, and especially the monks in procession at the picture's center, create its effect of cold isolation and a nightmarish non-reality. The monks' "celebration" of mass, the assumed goal of their funereal procession into the church, is not staged as a triumph of religion or ritual over death, or of life over decay—quite the opposite. The monks in *Abbey* are humble and isolated figures, struggling to carry out their way of life (and death) in a place of ruin; the fragments of the abbey are all that is left of their way of life, and though it falls into decay, they persist in bringing their dead to rest in the shadow of a church. Nature, though, has over-grown it, not to complete its mission or its form, but to tear it down.

My stubborn insistence on the idea that the painting's meaning lies in death, and my comments on the destructive rather than conciliatory role of nature, are based most of all on the painting's self-referentiality. As Helmut Börsch-Supan has shown, Friedrich's contemporaries recognized that the figure of the monk in *Monk by the Sea* was a self-portrait. [\[21\]](#) Thus, according to the accepted interpretations of the painting by Börsch-Supan and Koerner, the monk in the first painting stares out at the sea, contemplating his mortality; *Abbey*



*in the Oak Forest* then shows the same figure's death, as Friedrich's corpse is carried in procession through the ruins of a decaying Gothic church. If this interpretation is correct, Friedrich's depiction of his own burial mirrored his earlier sepia painting from 1804 (now destroyed), titled *My Burial*, in which an open grave was monumentalized in the foreground, and surmounted by a cross with the inscription "Here rests C.D. Friedrich in God."<sup>[22]</sup> In Friedrich's confrontation with mortality, imagined in these unsettling scenes, he turned to very specific signs: the ruined and neglected (rather than tidy) cemetery, a burial tied to monastic ritual, and a distinct placement within the spaces of a derelict Christian church in a snowy, deserted necro-landscape. These must have been personal and significant forms for the young artist (he was only in his thirties when he painted *Abbey in the Oak Forest* and *My Burial*). He looked beyond his own iconographic and stylistic norms to stage his own death and burial specifically within the physical and ritual space of a ruined medieval church.

### Friedrich's Deathscapes

Friedrich painted over two dozen works that include cemeteries or graves, and the vast majority share at least one of two characteristics: they are either shown in a state of dilapidation and disrepair, or are associated with church buildings, ruined or standing. This contrasts greatly with the general conventions of nineteenth-century cemetery painting, which usually emphasized the beauty and melancholy of the cemetery, rather than its isolation from contemporary society. Friedrich's first extant combination of a cemetery with the Eldena ruins was in a sepia from around 1800, *The Eldena Ruins with a Burial*.<sup>[23]</sup> The artist returned to the theme in an 1803 series of four sepias of the seasons; his *Winter*, a composition to which he would return in three subsequent versions, showed the Eldena ruins from a different angle, with a cemetery in front of them and an old man sitting in contemplation at the edge of an open grave, presumably his own.

Chronologically, Friedrich's next two cemetery paintings were the *Abbey* from 1810, and *Cloister Cemetery in Snow* (fig. 3) from 1818, paintings nearly identical in subject matter, but with distinctly different compositions and moods. Friedrich's later paintings of cemeteries were less melodramatic, more intimate images. He painted a conventional cemetery scene in 1822, commissioned to elegize the death of Gerhard von Kugelgen and based on a cemetery within the city of Dresden—one of his only compositions referencing the city in which he lived for over 40 years.<sup>[24]</sup> Significantly, as this painting memorialized the death of a specific person, it was not, presumably, a veiled reference to Friedrich himself.

In 1824 Friedrich began work on *Cemetery Gate* (fig. 6), a monumental work that remained unfinished in the artist's studio at his death.<sup>[25]</sup> This time, the cemetery is shown from the outside of a monumental gate, usually understood as a symbol of the passage from life to death.<sup>[26]</sup> A couple hovers outside, looking in on an open grave that lies in the picture's foreground, in a setting of gently rolling hills populated with slightly askew gravestones. This painting was also a commission<sup>[27]</sup>, possible explaining the contemporary depiction of the cemetery gate, which was based on the entrance to the Trinity Cemetery (*Trinitätsfriedhof*) in Dresden, whose gate Friedrich designed and in which Friedrich was ultimately buried.<sup>[28]</sup> But even though it shows a contemporary entryway from Dresden's largest cemetery, Friedrich changes the scene slightly but significantly; in reality, the cemetery is flat but the artist added gently rolling hills, down which the gravestones seem to spill, slightly askew.



Fig. 6, Caspar David Friedrich, *Cemetery Gate*, 1825. Oil on canvas. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.  
[\[larger image\]](#)

In 1828 Friedrich returned to the motif of the snow-covered graveyard in *Cemetery in the Snow* (fig. 7).<sup>[29]</sup> Yet another open grave lies in the foreground, positioned precisely at the eye level of the viewer, who adopts the perspective of a gravestone in the snow. Other gravestones lie in the shallow background, along with a small cemetery entrance gate backed by bare bushes. Again, the dead body's ultimate resting place lies in the snow in a forgotten, derelict cemetery, this time brought uncomfortably close to the viewer's space. In Friedrich's last monumental cemetery painting, *The Churchyard* from 1825–30 (fig. 8), he depicted a small church and cemetery from Preisnitz, a village near Dresden, in a composition blocked off by a large gate in the foreground that partially shields the cemetery and church from the viewer's gaze.<sup>[30]</sup> The painting shows again Friedrich's ongoing fascination with the gate as a symbolic passageway, as well as with small, dilapidated rural cemeteries that were the last vestiges of an idyllic type of resting place increasingly lost in the modern city. To summarize, the majority of Friedrich's cemeteries are non-urban, desolate, and in disrepair; several are also placed into pictures with the Eldena ruins. The several exceptions to this rule, showing scenes set in the urban cemeteries of Dresden, were paintings that were commissioned by specific patrons.<sup>[31]</sup> It appears that, when the artist was left to ruminate freely on the subject, he turned consistently to the rural, ruined cemetery.



Fig. 7, Caspar David Friedrich, *Cemetery in the Snow*, 1828. Oil on canvas. Museum der Bildende Künste, Leipzig. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 8, Caspar David Friedrich, *The Churchyard*, 1825–30. Oil on canvas. Kunsthalle, Bremen, Bremen. [\[larger image\]](#)

Friedrich's designs and paintings of visionary Gothic church structures provide a telling counterpoint to his cemetery images, though both have been associated, in art-historical scholarship up to this point, with the transcendence of death through religious experience in nature. Paintings such as *Winter Landscape with Church* (fig. 9), finished in 1811 just after the *Abbey*, show that Friedrich had already established a distinct iconography for the depiction of the soul's transcendence of the barren world through the idealized structure of a church.<sup>[32]</sup> It depicts a snowy landscape with two distinct layers; in the foreground, a man sits in the snow, his back propped against a rock, praying before a wooden crucifix flanked by three evergreens and several large rocks. In the background, shrouded in mist, rises an impossibly high and elongated Gothic Cathedral, clearly lying in a visionary realm. As Koerner writes, "the wanderer discovers the icon of God in nature, and we, the painting's interpreters, are shown analogies between fir tree and cathedral in confirmation of our exegetical surmise."<sup>[33]</sup> This painting, and the artist's many others with similar subject matter display a striking contrast to the vision offered by *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, in which *nothing* is shown in nature that can bring the viewer beyond what is represented in the canvas. In *Abbey*, the spectator is trapped within

the artist's vision, rather than offered a comforting comparison of natural and divine forms. Significantly, it is the cemetery in which this vision is located; as we can see in works such as *Winter Landscape with Church*, Friedrich painted many compositions emphasizing loneliness and barren landscapes (most famously, *The Sea of Ice* from 1823), but only those associated with cemeteries feature this entrapping, dreamlike interiority—likely a reflection of Friedrich's continued preoccupation with his own death and burial.



Fig. 9, Caspar David Friedrich, *Winter Landscape with Church*, 1811. Oil on canvas. Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Dortmund. [\[larger image\]](#)

Koerner writes that, "Friedrich's burial scenes do not demand a biographical gloss; for the fascination with death, the depiction of the churchyard as feelings' *locus amoenus*, and indeed the whole larmoyant vein of so many of Friedrich's works can be understood as part of the general repertoire of sentimentality shared in Germany" during this period.<sup>[34]</sup> Yet despite the evident similarities between Friedrich and other Romantic painters in subject matter, and, in some of his works, in mood, it is the idiosyncrasy of such paintings as *Abbey in the Oak Forest* that strikes the viewer most; if Friedrich could be explained simply as a part of his movement, his pictures would not look so dramatically different from those of his contemporaries. Moreover, prominent Romantic artists and philosophers, including Goethe, emphatically rejected many of Friedrich's deathscapes, criticizing them for being too gloomy and depressing. Friedrich's relationship to Romantic melancholia is less straightforward than many have argued.

Any analysis of Friedrich's work, especially of a painting like *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, must include some discussion of his life and character, as one way of explaining the painting's incredible eccentricity in mood. The two elements of Friedrich's personality that have emerged most strongly in the accounts of both his contemporaries and modern biographers were his misanthropy and religious conviction, and it is possible to see both of these traits in his imagery of burial and death. <sup>[35]</sup> His self-portrait as a monk, explicit in *Monk by the Sea* and implicit in *Abbey*, is an essential part of his perceived place outside of society, and it remains ill explored, particularly as it relates to his representations of death and burial.

Paintings by Friedrich's contemporaries highlight *Abbey in the Oak Forest* and *Monk by the Sea's* idiosyncrasy. In his survey of Romantic painting, Wolf argues that the monks who appear in the *Abbey*, *Monk*, and *Cloister Cemetery* paintings, (and perhaps in a famous early charcoal self-

portrait), are simply "the embodiment of that tragic, melancholy sense of life which was one of the essential ingredients of early German Romanticism."<sup>[36]</sup> Indeed, we do find other paintings of monks during this period, but they are never so explicitly associated with death as they are in Friedrich's paintings, and there is no evidence that other Romantic images of monks are to be understood as self-portraits. Carl Blechen's 1829 *Monks at the Gulf of Naples* (fig. 10) is quite similar in subject matter to *Monk by the Sea*, but its compositional structure and mood could not be more different. The monks do not express a sense of loneliness, death, and isolation, but rather a quiet and contemplative fellowship; in contrast, Friedrich's monks are solitary, or interact with one another only within the confines of the funeral procession. Ernst Oehme's 1821 *Cathedral in Wintertime* (fig. 11) depicts a more dramatic scene, which seems to have been greatly influenced by Friedrich's paintings of elongated, visionary Gothic Cathedrals. Again, however, we have a significant difference, in that the monk here is associated not with ruins, as in the *Abbey* and *Cloister Cemetery*, but rather with what appears to be a functioning contemporary, if idealized, religious space, more analogous to Friedrich's visionary churches. Friedrich's use of the monk is thus not easily explained as a common Romantic iconographic motif, but must rather be understood as a part of Friedrich's own self-imagining and self-presentation.



Fig. 10, Karl Blechen, *Monks at the Gulf of Naples*, 1829. Oil on oak panel. Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne.

[\[larger image\]](#)





Fig. 11, Ernst Oehme, *Cathedral in Wintertime*, 1821. Oil on canvas. Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister, Dresden.  
[\[larger image\]](#)

Friedrich created several self-portraits dressed in clothing that can evoke (although it may not specifically represent) monasticism, including his famous early charcoal self-portrait of 1810. [37] If these are read as self-portraits as a monk, they are another element that conveys his mistrust of society and removal from human fellowship, a defining feature of his personality. He regarded melancholia as an essential part of his character, "created, coined and stamped in him congenitally," and he viewed its expression in his art as natural. [38] As a consequence, however, all of his "melancholic" paintings have been lumped together; his self-portraits as a monk have become conflated with those in which he appears as the famous *Rückenfigur*, the solitary, halted traveler seen from behind. But the monk often appears in the death paintings, and the well-dressed, bourgeois *Rückenfigur* only in paintings of religio-transcendental nature. This self-fashioning as a monk within Friedrich's personal death matrix may refer specifically to his characterization of the Middle Ages as an earlier and purer religious time, as well as an isolationist removal from society.

Friedrich's writings suggest that artistic expression was about rendering visible the interior self (see quote below), and this idea, when placed in contrast with the fact that he was almost exclusively a landscape painter, forms the crucial reversal at the heart of his artistic project. It also relates him fundamentally to contemporary religious thinkers, most significantly Friedrich Schleiermacher, who similarly aimed to personalize and subjectivize religious and aesthetic experience. [39] One of Friedrich's most famous aphorisms, quoted again and again by art historians, was that "the artist should paint not only what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him. If, however, he sees nothing within him, then he should also refrain from painting that which he sees before him." [40] Friedrich's paintings illuminate his various interests and beliefs: some allegorize transcendence (such as his visionary images of heavenly churches), others reflect a deep love of nature, others ponder the inseparability of God and nature, and others emphasize solitude, reflection, or death. Rather than seeking evidence of his entire personality in *each* of his paintings, as many scholars have attempted, I think it makes more sense to see his different paintings as representations of various emotional states—distinct things that Friedrich "saw within him." In a crucial and underappreciated statement, Friedrich wrote that, "Every truthful work of art must express a definite feeling, must move the spirit of the spectator either to joy or to sadness...rather than try to unite all sensations, as

thought mixed together with a twirling stick."[\[41\]](#) Here, Friedrich comments unconsciously on a recurring pattern throughout art-historical scholarship: in seeking out the continuities that mark an artist's production, we too often expect each painting to express the entirety of an artist's style or worldview. Friedrich, however, clearly believed in the power of different works to express different emotional states.

Friedrich's consciousness of his own mortality may also be a result, I think, of the increased separation of death from the realm of the church, a situation which I'll discuss below, and which was itself part of the well-documented secularization of many aspects of German society in the nineteenth century. Accounts of Friedrich's misanthropy cite this secularization as a key concern, arguing that they led to a "loss of confidence" in contemporary church institutions, which then led the artist to nature—the one place where God could be experienced that remained largely unspoiled by human intervention.[\[42\]](#) Friedrich's deep faith is clear, and no one doubts that his landscapes are packed with religious symbols: crosses, rising and setting suns, church steeples, curved arching skies, and numerous natural forms were clearly intended to evoke the sense that nature was a manifestation of God on earth, though natural elements were always recombined into even more perfect forms. In some of Friedrich's works, as in those of many of his contemporaries, the artist's achievement is that he awakens sentiments that would have already existed in nature, but rearranges them into images that somehow possessed a greater emotional poignancy than nature itself, embodying religious truth through their forms.

### **Death and Burial in the Early Nineteenth Century**

The early-nineteenth century was a period of great change in the social history of death—both in burial practices and in the way that the performance of death was culturally constructed.[\[43\]](#) Friedrich's *Abbey in the Oak Forest* occupies a complicated place within this history of death and burial. In his paintings, we find an expression of many of the tensions and fears of death that were characteristic of his time, but his response to them was self-consciously different from that of his contemporaries. In Philippe Ariès's master narrative of death, the twelfth through the early eighteenth centuries were characterized by the close connection between churches and dead bodies; burial almost always occurred inside a church, or in a cemetery connected with one, and the church's authority became inextricably bound up with the inherent power that Ariès and others argue is possessed by dead bodies. The dead body created a sanctified space around itself, and the Church subsumed this power under its own.[\[44\]](#) This relationship was reciprocal—the dead and the church both gained power through their close, extremely physical interaction.

The separation of cemeteries from churches began only in the eighteenth century, and was widespread only starting in the early nineteenth[\[45\]](#); the cemetery was re-introduced, for the first time since classical antiquity, into the social fabric and topography of the city and suburbs, separate from religious institutions. In Germany, this wasn't a simple and gradual "moving away" from traditional Christian burial practices; German states actively restricted the religious character of cemeteries, limiting the construction of public chapels and ritual spaces within their walls.[\[46\]](#) As in France and England, cemeteries in Germany, which were once part of the churchyard, forming crucial extensions of the church's physical influence into the urban fabric, moved in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries to the secular spaces of the city, often in the inner suburbs, the most famous example being the Cimetière de Père

Lachaise in Paris, founded by Napoleon in 1804. Such cemeteries were increasingly removed from the Church not only in space but also in the cultural imagination, coinciding with and influenced by the rapid urbanization of the European landscape at the start of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>[47]</sup>

In his cemetery paintings, Friedrich observed and commented on this process as it was happening around him. The history of the cemeteries in Dresden, where he spent most his adult life, mirrored what was happening throughout Europe. The countryside around Dresden, where Friedrich often sketched, was still populated by small rural churches and their accompanying cemeteries; it was the city that witnessed massive changes in its necro-landscape. The city's primary cemeteries, all of which surrounded the major churches, were closed or destroyed; these included the closing of the cemetery near the *Alte Frauenkirche* in 1727, the *Dreikönigskirche* in 1732, and the *Sophienkirche* in 1819.<sup>[48]</sup> Most citizens were buried inside these churches or in their churchyards until around the 1750s, when overcrowding sparked the construction of new cemeteries farther from the center of town. The new burial grounds included older cemeteries for the poor and sick which were taken over by the middle and upper classes, such as the *Eliasfriedhof*, opened in 1680 but not used by most of the population until the early-nineteenth century, and new cemeteries like the *Alte Katholische Friedhof*, opened in 1720, and the *Trinitätsfriedhof*, opened in 1814, where Friedrich was buried in 1840.<sup>[49]</sup> None were connected to churches. The closing of the old church cemeteries in Dresden, and the opening of larger-scale "secular" ones, which must have caused a fair amount of anxiety among the population of the city, happened over a century and a half and reached its conclusion in Friedrich's life with the opening of the massive new *Trinitätsfriedhof*.

The modern eye can easily appreciate the aesthetic character of these new cemeteries because of their close similarity to our own. The oldest of the "new" cemeteries, the *Eliasfriedhof*, retains some of the character of pre-modern cemeteries, with its uneven placement of monuments, their various shapes and sizes, and its overgrown vegetation (fig. 12). The *Alte Katholische Friedhof* and the *Trinitätsfriedhof*, in contrast, look modern; their even layout, careful planning, and tasteful monuments betray the rhetoric of restraint that has characterized most cemeteries of the past two centuries. Friedrich's gravestone in the *Trinitätsfriedhof* (fig. 13) is typical of the early nineteenth-century graves found there.



Fig. 12, Eliasfriedhof, Dresden, founded 1680. Photograph by the author. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 13, Caspar David Friedrich's Grave, Trinitätsfriedhof, Dresden, founded 1814. Photograph by the author.

[\[larger image\]](#)

Whether still functioning, or closed, forgotten, and falling into ruin, the *rural* church-associated cemeteries (like the massive church-cemeteries of the city) were relics of an age that had already passed in Friedrich's day; they are also the ones that show up again and again within his most personal paintings. The necro-landscape of the past, intimately tied to the church, had been replaced in Friedrich's day with the modern cemetery, in which the realities of death and dying were erased and made beautiful through the orderly arrangement of tombs and simple, hopeful decorative iconography. Friedrich's paintings reject this modern trend towards hiding death under tidy gravestones.

There is thus a contradiction: Friedrich was intimately involved in the inception of these new cemeteries, as a member of the artistic and cultural elite of Dresden who were planning these works, as the actual designer of several architectural features of the cemeteries (such a main gate of the *Trinitätsfriedhof*), and as a designer of highly traditional grave-markers and monuments in all three of the new cemeteries.<sup>[50]</sup> Two examples show the blandness of his funerary designs (see figs. 14 and 15)—timeless and unimaginative, their plain rectangular forms mesh perfectly with the other orderly graves around them. Yet in his paintings he turned to an entirely different iconography to deal with his own mortality. His opinion of these new burial grounds is difficult to judge without written statements concerning their design, location and character, and one must rely on information from three sources: the style and content of the gravestones which he designed, the fact that he was involved in this design in the first place, and the representation of cemeteries in his paintings.



Fig. 14, Caspar David Friedrich, Grave marker for Gerhard von Kugelgen, 1820. Alte Katholische Friedhof, Dresden. Photograph by the author. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 15, Caspar David Friedrich, Grave marker. Eliasfriedhof, Dresden. Photograph by the author. [\[larger image\]](#)

The deathscape illustrated by Friedrich in *Abbey in the Oak Forest* is intimately tied to the Catholic Middle Ages, through both the medieval architectural forms of the ruined Gothic structure and the inclusion of the community of monks, which then, as now, conjured medieval religiosity. Gothic churches, both ruined and functional, carried with them the memory of how death and burial had been performed—tamed, Ariès argues, by the individual's control over his or her own moment of death and by the standardization of death rituals in the medieval and early-modern Church. These two pillars of the death experience, personal control and religious rites and spaces, created a culture in which death, in itself, was more easily managed: as Ariès writes, perhaps overstating his case, "Of course, people were afraid to die; they felt sad about it, and they said so calmly. But this is precisely the point: their anxiety never crossed the threshold into the unspeakable, the inexpressible."<sup>[51]</sup> This all changed, Ariès argues, in the nineteenth century, with the rise of what he calls the "Great Fear of Death," whose origins were rooted precisely in Friedrich's day. *Abbey in the Oak Forest* expresses exactly this sense of the unspeakable fear surrounding death. Friedrich is



unexceptional for his day in his excessive fear of death, but he responds to it by looking back to the past, to a medieval tradition of taming death through spirituality and ritual.[52]

In the Middle Ages, the primary concern of the "moment of death" was with the man who was dying, who was in careful control of his experience, since the manner in which his death occurred carried great consequences in his experience of the afterlife.[53] The others present at the deathbed scene are represented, in images and in texts, as passive—all activity lies in the soul of the dying man himself. In the Romantic period, however, the dying person's loved ones assume a crucial role as their mourning takes center stage. As evidence, we might point again to Schleiermacher, whose sermon preached at the burial of his young son provides an instructive comparative example. Schleiermacher scarcely mentions Church institutions or heavenly peace in his eulogy, focusing entirely on the love that his son had brought to the family, and the moral lessons left behind in his wake.[54] For a socially isolated figure like Friedrich (described as an "*aparter Mensch*" by Förster)[55] who, in contrast to Schleiermacher, has been shown to have been consistently ambivalent towards the companionship of his much younger wife and their children[56], death could have been a lonely and terrifying prospect when taken away from the church and placed into the arms of friends and family. In the visionary staging of his own death, Friedrich re-placed his confidence squarely on the shoulders of the church, despite its being stripped of control over burials in his day.

Friedrich's characterization of his own burial may have been indicative of his interior fears, expectations, and beliefs, but it may also have been an attempt to evoke emotional response from viewers who lived in the same state of tension over death's role in their lives, which vacillated between unspeakable fear and sweet melancholic consolation. Rather than comforting them by conforming to modern notions of how death was to be performed in the context of the Christian family, Friedrich places the viewer into the past, to confront death's basic character through rituals and spaces that were being physically erased from the landscape. *Abbey in the Oak Forest* may not be meant to comfort its viewers, but rather to inspire a thoughtful kind of fear, both shocking and persuasive, reawakening a sense of the church as a place of refuge in the face of death. Though many analyses of Friedrich's religious beliefs emphasize his suspicion of church institutions, the church is evoked in many of his works, in both ruined and idealized states, as a means of commenting on both its contemporary inadequacies and its historical virtues.[57] Even in its disrepair, the church in *Abbey* is portrayed as a refuge from nature, rather than an organic part of it.

## Conclusions

How then, is death ultimately characterized in Friedrich's painting? Death is outside of contemporary social structures—it takes place in a land of uncanny dreams and historical ruins. There is no sign of comfort from one's family or friends—only the cross peeking through the church's ruined doorway. The place of burial is neglected, the cemetery disorganized, and the nature surrounding it as barren as the snowy ground. Death takes place within an interior vision, not in the world as it is lived and experienced. In seeking to support this claim—that the *Abbey* represents Friedrich's death as isolating rather than transcendent—it is critical to look directly at the artist's own religious faith. The argument that the painting rejects religious transcendence is, after all, somewhat contradictory; his faith in Christian salvation, as it may be discovered in nature and in the church, is represented in his other works. Scholars have attempted to reconcile the painting's iconography with that of his other

works, under the umbrella of transcendence through nature, but in doing so have ignored the painting's appearance.

The explanation for the painting's contradiction within his oeuvre lies in Friedrich's complicated faith, and in the fact that the painting specifically represents Friedrich's *own* death. Lutheran theology emphasizes the uncertainty of one's personal salvation: good works, a moral life, and a "good death" could not ensure passage to heaven. Though Friedrich advertised the universal truths of Christian salvation in many of his paintings, his deathscapes are highly personal works in which he could process his own fear of death, while still believing in the power of his religion in the system as a whole. There is no contradiction here: Lutheran faith demands both a fear of one's own ultimate judgment *and* the acceptance of salvation as a possibility and a goal for others. In the early-nineteenth century, the focus was shifting within Friedrich's religion from the old to the young, and from death to life. Religious education and indoctrination of the young, rather than a fear of death and a desire to "die well," were the new tools used to spread and cement faith.[58] Friedrich was both in and out of step with these new trends; the new religion, articulated by theologians such as Schleiermacher, called for a more "direct, unmediated religious experience," and many of Friedrich's landscapes reflect this kind of experience through a personal connection with God via nature.[59] But Schleiermacher's and Friedrich's theology also included an interest in returning to the "foundations" of Christianity, a trend aligned with Romanticism's retrospective impulse but which, in this context, could also include a return to the institutionalism of the early Church. While most of Friedrich's paintings address the first concern, perhaps his deathscapes speak more to the second; they show a continuing anxiety, throughout his life, over the place of the dead within the new necro-landscape of the modern cemetery, divorced from foundational Christian institutions, rituals and spaces. They confront an anxiety related not just to mortality but also to the physical handling and framing of death and burial in the world.

The reading of *Abbey* as a landscape of death is reinforced not only by the contemporary expectations of Friedrich's religion, but also by his visual rhetoric. The defining feature of Friedrich's works is their constructedness: his landscapes are not about any one place. In the *Abbey*, *Monastery Graveyard*, and *Cemetery in the Snow*, he depicts cemeteries as no-where, and, through them, evokes the lack of a satisfying place for the dead in his city. In *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, Friedrich's erasure of place serves a different purpose than in his other works: the traditional places of the dead were disappearing in Friedrich's day, and when he reconstructed them in his paintings, their lost wholeness was reaffirmed and preserved only by the presence of a ruined church. As Friedrich became personally disconnected from society, his visualizations of his death and burial similarly moved away from contemporary religious and social practices and spaces. The past, even in ruin, became the only attractive alternative to the new spaces of the dead in Friedrich's day—tidy, de-sanctified landscapes of the contemporary cemetery and contemporary commemorative cemetery paintings.

Returning one last time to the painting itself, we find ourselves in a liminal state; as Koerner has written, Friedrich's paintings *hold* us before them, through their compositional structure of simultaneous spatial invitation and rejection.[60] The viewer is trapped not only within the painting, though, but also within the artist, whose own interiority is powerfully evident. The brown haze hiding the horizon exists not as a flat backdrop, but curves upward at the sides, wrapping in a half-circle around the picture to embrace *you* standing before it: the darkness

comes from all sides, leaving the viewer no exit. The painting's structure and tones are themselves metaphors for death as a state of fixed interiority. There still remains, however, a transition within this painting, and in many of Friedrich's cemetery paintings: the portal that provides a way out. Not a way to a better place, necessarily, but simply as the demarcation of a boundary. The door in the façade of the ruined Abbey, and the open or closed gate to the cemetery in other works, betrays a concern with the transitional moment of death itself, an interest that Aries characterizes as typically medieval, in contrast with an eighteenth and nineteenth-century focus on the deeds of a whole life.<sup>[61]</sup> The passage into death can carry as much meaning as life, and Friedrich's deathscapes show a keen interest in this transition, though they make every effort to obscure what lies beyond the barrier.

The project of Romantic art has been described by the phrase, "Art as Religion"; for Friedrich, however, art never came to replace religious experience, as it did for some of his contemporaries. Friedrich's spiritual life was continually made evident in his paintings, in response to the evidence *he* saw of God's presence in nature, and the corresponding analogies he saw between the "natural and the cultural."<sup>[62]</sup> With his inner life thus laid bare before us, the category of paintings identified in this paper, whose subject can only be characterized as death itself, occupies a specific place in the artist's psyche, distinct in style and iconography from the rest of his works. This difference was the result of a changing fear of death in Friedrich's day, and an insistence on his part that, when faced with this fear, the only option was to confront it directly—both through painting and through the institution that, for a millennium, had guarded death's gates. When faced with this fear, and imagining his own end, Friedrich turned inward, to himself, to the *Abbey*.

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## Notes

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[1] Werner Hofmann does "categorize" Friedrich's cemetery paintings, but only in a one-page summary. I have found no other discussion of these paintings as a group. See Hofmann, *Caspar David Friedrich* (Munich: Prestel, 1974). Another important discussion of *Abbey in the Oak Forest* and other cemetery paintings is found in Gerd Unverfehrt, *Caspar David Friedrich* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1984), 121–22.

- [2] For previous interpretations of Friedrich's "medievalism," see Unverfehrt, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 97–137; and Gerhard Eimer, *Caspar David Friedrich und die Gotik* (Hamburg: von der Ropp, 1963).
- [3] Wieland Schmied, *Caspar David Friedrich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 64.
- [4] Helmut Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich* (Munich: Prestel, 1990), 84. Börsch-Supan's monograph is still widely considered the essential work on Friedrich, and I largely follow his historical treatment of chronology, dates, etc.
- [5] See Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 80; and Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 47–68.
- [6] Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 82.
- [7] Schmied, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 34.
- [8] Ibid. He mentions the sprigs of grass pushing their way up through the snow, and the "glowing light" in the background of the painting.
- [9] Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 85. This argument is partly similar to the reading of the painting by Kristina van Prooyen, who states that "Friedrich often depicted decayed Christian architecture, which he used to symbolize the Church shaken by the Reformation and the Enlightenment," although she differs from Börsch-Supan's reading of the trees, writing that, "Friedrich's faith in a renewed religion was represented by the surging strength of spontaneous forest growth, which contrasts with the gloom of the gray abbey." Van Prooyen, "The Realm of the Spirit: Caspar David Friedrich's Artwork in the Context of Romantic Theology, with Special Reference to Friedrich Scheiermacher," *Journal of the Oxford University Historical Society* 1 (Winter 2004): 12–13.
- [10] Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 85.
- [11] One possible reason that this interpretation has been so influential and accepted is the fact that it is echoed in a pair of sonnets written about Friedrich's painting around 1810 by the poet Theodor Körner, entitled "Friedrichs Totenlandschaft." The poems end with a message of religious transcendence, symbolized by the monks' procession through the doorway towards the "ewige Lichte," eternal light. See Helmut Börsch-Supan, "Caspar David Friedrich's Landscapes with Self-Portraits," *Burlington Magazine* 114 (September, 1972): 620–30.
- [12] William Vaughn, *Caspar David Friedrich* (London: Tate Gallery, 1972), 16–17.
- [13] Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, 106.
- [14] Ibid.; and Vaughn, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 20. It is perhaps surprising that Goethe and other Protestant Romantics (including Friedrich) seemed to have no problem idealizing Gothic architecture given its Catholic connotations, but it seems not to have been a major issue. There was enough basis in aesthetic and nationalistic appreciation of Gothic forms to override any objection on theological grounds.
- [15] Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, 109.
- [16] Ibid., 133.
- [17] Ibid., 135.
- [18] Schmied, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 64.
- [19] William Vaughn, *Friedrich* (London: Phaidon, 2004), 124.
- [20] Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 190.
- [21] Ibid., 85.
- [22] Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, 67.
- [23] See the catalogue raisonné: Börsch-Supan and Karl Jähnig, *Caspar David Friedrich: Gemälde, Druckgraphik und bildmäßige Zeichnungen* (Munich: Prestel, 1973).
- [24] Ibid., 373–74.
- [25] Hofmann, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 272. On this painting, see also Jörg Gehler, *Ein Blick in die Natur – Aussicht in die Ewigkeit: C.D. Friedrich's "Friedhofseingang und die Malerie der Romantik in Deutschland* (Kiel: Verlag Ludwig, 1999).
- [26] Ibid., 272.
- [27] Ibid.; and Börsch-Supan and Jähnig, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 400.
- [28] John Leighton and Colin J. Bailey, *Caspar David Friedrich: Winter Landscape* (London: National Gallery, 1990), 25.
- [29] See Hofmann, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 281.



- [30] See Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 156; and Hofmann, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 281.
- [31] For example the Cemetery Gate (fig. 6), commissioned by a friend in Leipzig, and Kugelgen's Grave (1820), commissioned by Kugelgen's brother, Karl. See Börsch-Supan and Jähnig, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 373–74, 400.
- [32] An interesting exhibition and catalogue were organized around this painting at the National Gallery in London in 1990. See Leighton and Bailey, *Caspar David Friedrich*.
- [33] Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, 26.
- [34] *Ibid.*, 68.
- [35] One of his most famous sayings, included in every biographical sketch, was, "You call me a misanthrope because I avoid society. You err; I love society. Yet in order not to hate people, I must avoid their company." Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, 66.
- [36] Norbert Wolf, *Painting of the Romantic Era* (Cologne: Taschen, 1999), 39.
- [37] Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 10.
- [38] Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, 68.
- [39] On connections between Friedrich and Schleiermacher, see especially Van Prooyen, "Realm of the Spirit," William Dyrness, "Caspar David Friedrich: The Aesthetic Expression of Schleiermacher's Romantic Faith," *Christian Scholar's Review* 14, no. 4 (1985) and Werner Busch, *Caspar David Friedrich: Ästhetik und Religion* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2003), 159–85.
- [40] Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 10.
- [41] This was in response to Ramdohr's criticism of his painting, *Cross in the Mountains*. See William Vaughn, "Caspar David Friedrich" in *Caspar David Friedrich: Romantic Landscape Painting in Dresden* (London: Tate Gallery, 1972), 15–16.
- [42] Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, 68. The question of how sympathetic Friedrich may have been to pantheistic ideas about the inseparability of God and the universe has been widely discussed. In *Ästhetik und Religion*, Werner Busch convincingly demonstrates that Friedrich's beliefs did not cross the line into pantheism—that he was interested in demonstrating the ways in which God's presence could be sought or experienced in nature, but not that these things were the same.
- [43] Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of our Death* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 41.
- [44] *Ibid.*, 476; and Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Towards Death* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 75.
- [45] See, for example, Richard Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: The Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984); and Ken Worpole, *Last Landscapes: The Architecture of the Cemetery in the West* (London: Reaktion, 2003).
- [46] Johannes Schweizer, *Kirchhof und Friedhof* (Linz: Oberösterreichischer Landesverlag, 1956), 23.
- [47] See Barbara Happe, *Die Entwicklung der deutschen Friedhöfe von der Reformation bis 1870* (Tübingen: Vereinigung für Volkskunde, 1991); and Herbert Derwein, *Geschichte des christlichen Friedhofs in Deutschland* (Frankfurt: Franzmathes Verlag, 1931).
- [48] Otto Rudert, *Alte Dresdner Friedhöfe* (Dresden: Heinrich, 1931), 3.
- [49] The author gleaned the dates and descriptions of these cemeteries while visiting them on a research trip to Dresden in 2006. See also Marion Stein, *Friedhöfe in Dresden* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 2000).
- [50] See Hans Joachim Kluge, *Caspar David Friedrich: Entwürfe für Grabmaler und Denkmaler* (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1993).
- [51] Ariès, *Hour of our Death*, 405.
- [52] Friedrich's contemporaries used very different strategies to try to tame death following its separation from the religious sphere. Ariès calls the time of this response (to the new fear of death) "the Age of the Beautiful Death"; death, in this narrative, is given back its sublime or Romantic character, which had been eroded through the centuries of death's exclusive association with the church. "Death was not desirable," Ariès writes, "but it was admirable in its beauty." Ariès, *Western Attitudes towards Death*, 58.
- [53] *Ibid.*, 11–14.
- [54] See Albert Blackwell, "Schleiermacher's Sermon at Nathanael's Grave," *The Journal of Religion* 57, no. 1 (1977): 64–75.
- [55] Wieland Förster, *Rugenlandschaft: Hommage à Casper David Friedrich* (Berlin: Union Verlag, 1975), 156.



[56] His friend and fellow painter Carl Gustav Carus remarked, for example, that Friedrich's marriage "did not change his life or personality at all." Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 44–46.

[57] See for example Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, 68.

[58] Michael B. McDuffee, *Small Town Protestantism in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 111.

[59] David Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany 1780-1918*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 23.

[60] Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, 5.

[61] Ariès *Hour of our Death*, 410.

[62] Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, 106.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1, Caspar David Friedrich, *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, 1809–10. Oil on canvas. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

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Fig. 2, Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, 1808–10. Oil on canvas. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

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Fig. 3, Caspar David Friedrich, *Cloister Cemetery in Snow*, 1818. Oil on canvas. Formerly in Alte Nationalgalerie (destroyed 1945). [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Caspar David Friedrich, *Eldena Ruins Viewed from the Northeast*, 1825. Watercolor on paper. Private collection. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Ruins of Eldena Abbey. Near Greifswald, Germany. Photo by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Caspar David Friedrich, *Cemetery Gate*, 1825. Oil on canvas. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.  
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Fig. 7, Caspar David Friedrich, *Cemetery in the Snow*, 1828. Oil on canvas. Museum der Bildende Künste, Leipzig. [\[return to text\]](#)





Fig. 8, Caspar David Friedrich, *The Churchyard*, 1825–30. Oil on canvas. Kunsthalle, Bremen, Bremen.  
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Fig. 9, Caspar David Friedrich, *Winter Landscape with Church*, 1811. Oil on canvas. Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Dortmund. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Karl Blechen, *Monks at the Gulf of Naples*, 1829. Oil on oak panel. Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, Ernst Oehme, *Cathedral in Wintertime*, 1821. Oil on canvas. Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister, Dresden.  
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Fig. 12, Eliasfriedhof, Dresden, founded 1680. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)





Fig. 13, Caspar David Friedrich's Grave, Trinitätsfriedhof, Dresden, founded 1814. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 14, Caspar David Friedrich, Grave marker for Gerhard von Kugelgen, 1820. Alte Katholische Friedhof, Dresden. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 15, Caspar David Friedrich, Grave marker. Eliasfriedhof, Dresden. Photograph by the author.  
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