

Into the Void

The Wanderer above the Sea of Mist, Caspar David Friedrich

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It is often difficult to achieve consensus on whether or not a work of art is a masterpiece. What can be said with more certainty, however, is whether a work has achieved iconic status, since this is decided by the public. Caspar David Friedrich's *The Wanderer above the Sea of Mist* is a work that has grown into an icon, and remains recognizable even in the most unusual of contexts. The Wanderer can appear on the cover of the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, gazing out over the horrors of German history; or can feature on a box of teabags, embodying the longing for a nice cup of tea; or can even be shown wearing Levi's jeans. So what is it about the work itself that makes it so iconic? In the case of the *Mona Lisa*, it is its androgynous quality, which was underlined by Marcel Duchamp. In Friedrich's *Wanderer*, it is, perhaps, the intangible sense of pathos. The man, seen from behind and positioned on the vertical central axis of the painting, is very upright and seemingly proud and self-possessed as he stands on a rocky hilltop and looks out onto a sea of dissolving mist, through which other rocky peaks can be seen rising in the distance. Through the cloudy fog, the spatial relationships between these peaks is impossible to judge, so from the point of view of the Wanderer and for us, they appear to be stacked not only behind each other, but on top of one another too. In this way, the image seems literally boundless, and so can be viewed as a representation of ‘the sublime’. The painting remains a vision of a subject that cannot really be objectified.

While the image of the landscape is far from concrete, the abstract aspects of the picture's construction can be clearly identified. Not only does the Wanderer stand on the central axis of the painting, but the horizontal and vertical axes intersect at the figure's navel. This recalls the ‘Vitruvian Man’ from Cesarino's 1521 edition of *De architectura*, whose navel marks the centre of the world in an abstract universe, and which turns man, made in God's image, into the measure of all things. In Friedrich's painting, the geometric ordering of orderless phenomena is also absolute, and the connection of the figure to the landscape must surely be intended to abolish any idea of alienation between mankind and nature. In countless pictures, Friedrich makes use of the Golden Section, the aesthetically pleasing division of space expounded in Luca Pacioli's *Divina proportione* of 1509. Here, the two vertical lines of the Golden Section frame the figure, passing through his foot on the left and the tip of his cane on the right. The upper horizontal of the Golden Section serves a double function: it cuts through the collar of the figure (the head rising above it), and on the right-hand edge of the picture it almost exactly marks the top of one of the two mountain ridges, which slope softly down on both sides to meet at the Wanderer's heart. This geometric precision is only revealed by taking exact measurements; so the fact that on one hand the painting is made up of disparate elements, and yet on the other

c. 1818
Oil on canvas
94.8 cm x 74.8 cm / 3 ft 1½ in. x 2 ft 5½ in.
Kunsthalle, Hamburg

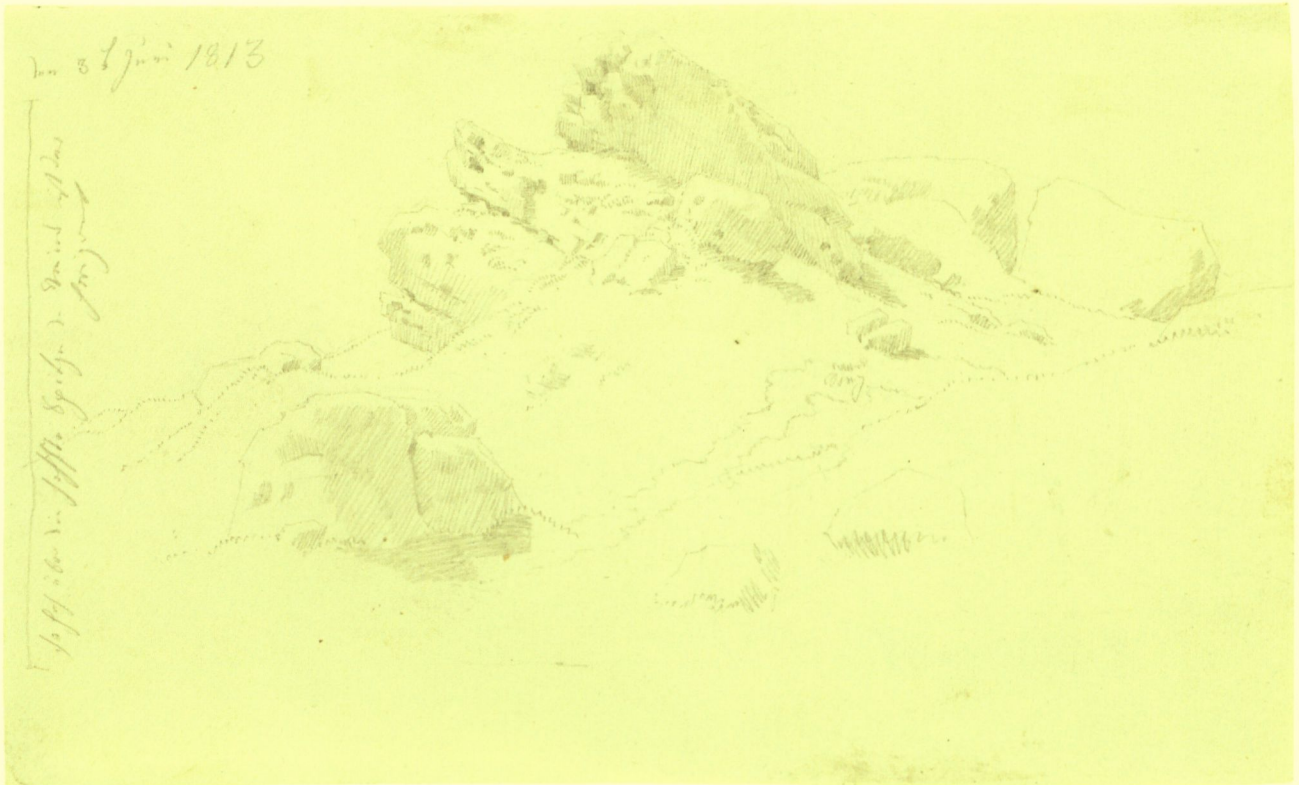


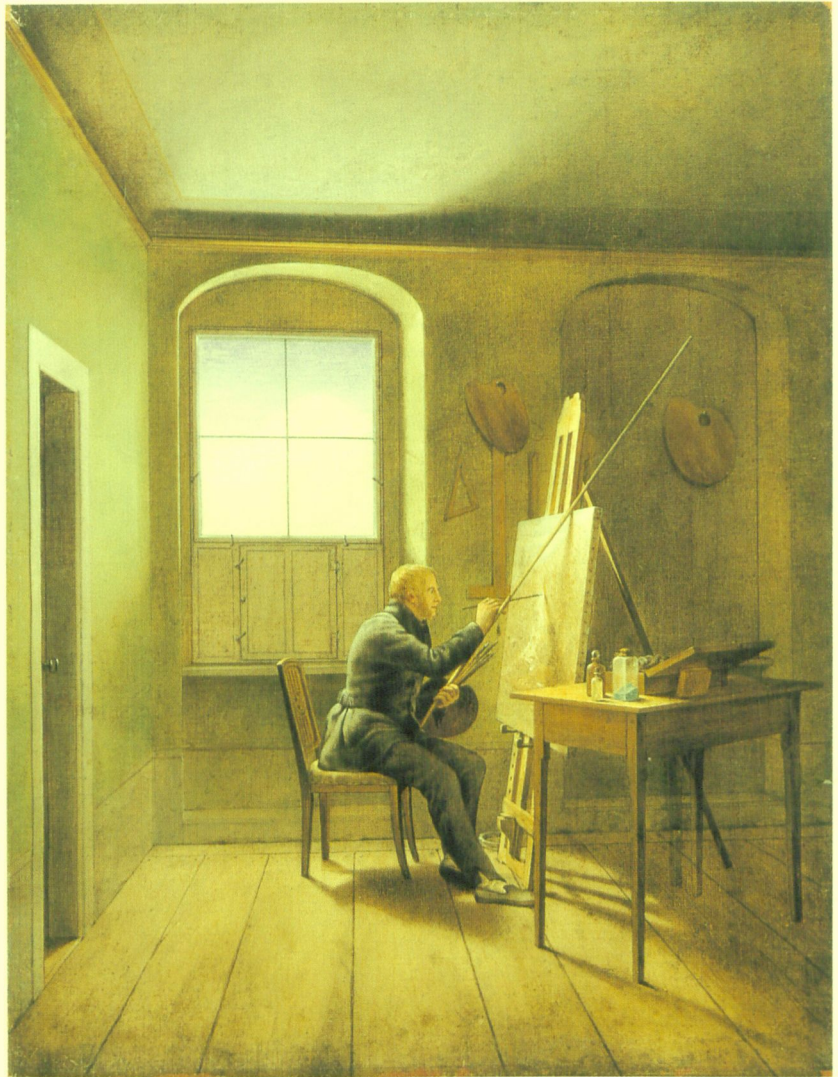


has evidently been carefully constructed is something that every viewer experiences when faced with a Friedrich painting, and even more so if it is based around a central axis.

What does this signify? How should the abstract pictorial composition, with its aesthetic power, be understood in relation to the apparently unconnected landscape elements? Friedrich's studies for the work can be given firm times and places, since he always noted the date and location on each sketch. In this case, every detail of the rocky hilltop on which the Wanderer is standing can be traced back to a drawing of 3 June 1813. On the left-hand edge of this drawing, Friedrich drew a long line, marked with short horizontal strokes at the top and bottom, and wrote next to it: 'The horizon is this far above the highest point of the rocks.' If this information from the sketch is applied to the proportions of the painting, the Wanderer's gaze is fixed precisely on the horizon. This rocky outcrop and the other mountain peaks are demonstrably taken from different parts of Saxon Switzerland: the Kaiserkrone, Gamrich near Rathen, the view of Wolfsberg from Krippen. The oddly flattened rock formation in the distance on the right is an image of the Zirkelstein, its height also exactly matching the top of the Wanderer's head.

As techniques of abstract construction and the montage-like assembly of the image from natural elements are recognized to be fundamental principles of Friedrich's paintings, so the way that they are used must be reconsidered for every single picture. One early source suggests that the figure could be Colonel Friedrich Gotthard von Brincken, who fought in the Saxon Infantry in the wars of liberation against Napoleon, and who was killed in around 1813 or 1814. Friedrich was a resolute supporter of the wars: he witnessed the





Opposite top

Caspar David Friedrich, *Self-Portrait in Profile*, c. 1802, indian ink, 13.1 cm × 9.2 cm / 5¼ in. × 3½ in. Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

Opposite below

The contours of the rocky outcrops captured in this drawing are minutely repeated in the mist-shrouded mountains of *The Wanderer*. (*Rocky Hilltop*, 3 June 1813, pencil, 11.1 cm × 18.5 cm / 4¼ in. × 7¼ in. Kupferstich-Kabinett der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen, Dresden)

Above right

In one of two portraits by the German artist Georg Friedrich Kersting, Friedrich is shown wholly absorbed in the painting of a mountain landscape. The bare, empty studio, from which all distracting comforts have been banished, suggest his total dedication to his art. (Georg Friedrich Kersting, *Friedrich's Studio*, 1811, oil on canvas, 54 cm × 42 cm / 1 ft 9¼ in. × 1 ft 4½ in. Kunsthalle, Hamburg)

issuing of the Karlsbad Decrees and the dissent that followed, paid for equipment for his young artist colleague Kersting to join the Lützow Free Corps (which put him into debt), left Dresden during the French occupation, and spent a month living with a friend's family in Krippen in Saxon Switzerland, to escape the famine and disease that were rife in Dresden. Napoleon's long-held superior strength paralysed Friedrich's creative abilities, but as soon as his hope returned, he started to draw from nature, including the sketch of the rocks on which the Wanderer stands, which could almost be a memorial plinth. The *Wanderer* painting has been firmly dated to around 1818, so could well be a tribute to Colonel von Brincken. This would explain the otherwise atypical sublime sense of pathos. Normally Friedrich tackled subjects of Protestant humility, avoiding the awe-inspiring themes that here can be heard echoing from the hills. We must therefore imagine von Brincken facing this amazing mountain realm as if standing before the throne of God. His head, fixed on the vanishing point of the horizon and rising above the upper horizontal of the Golden Section, seems to be seeking the hope of redemption. Only for a dead man was Friedrich able to formulate such things.