On 8 February 1808 the Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände in Dresden informed its readers that Caspar David Friedrich 'had abandoned his previous practice of painting in sepia [whether permanently or not, it could not say] and had started to paint for the first time in oils'. The matter was especially newsworthy since Friedrich, by now in his thirty-fourth year, had long since established a substantial reputation in Germany with his large sepia compositions, two of which, Procession at Dawn [126] and Summer Landscape with a Dead Oak Tree [125], both now in Weimar, had earned him half the first prize and the public approbation of Goethe when they were submitted in 1805 to the seventh (and last) of the annual competitions organized by the 'Weimarer Kunstfreunde', Goethe himself and Johann Heinrich Meyer. 2

Among the earliest oil paintings that Friedrich produced was the one which has come to be known as The Tetschen Altarpiece (fig. 1). When viewed in the context of Friedrich's subsequent career this picture, now properly regarded as a cornerstone of his art, partakes of the quality of a manifesto in which the artist openly proclaimed an entirely new direction for landscape painting – a variety, of which Philipp Otto Runge had only dreamed, in which natural elements would be invested with deep religious significance. Until very recently, on the seemingly dependable evidence of Friedrich's friend Johann Jakob Rühle von Lilienstern, The Cross in the Mountains (to give the picture its alternative title) was believed to have been commissioned by Count Franz Anton von Thu$n-Hohenstein for the

* This paper was originally given at the 'Romantic Occasion' in October 1988. The numbers in square brackets after the titles of Friedrich's works are the catalogue raisonné numbers in Helmut Borsch-Supan and Karl Wilhelm Jähnig, Caspar David Friedrich: Gemälde, Druckgraphik und bildmassige Zeichnungen (Munich: Prestel, 1973).

1 Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände (1808), 132. Quoted in full in Borsch-Supan and Jähnig, Caspar David Friedrich, 68.

altar of his private chapel at Tetschen in Bohemia. According to Rühle von Lilienstern, the count’s bride-to-be Theresia Anna Maria Countess von Brühl had been so captivated by one of Friedrich’s sepia drawings shown in the Dresden Academy exhibition of 1807 (the lost *Cross in the Mountains* [146]) that, in order to prepare a surprise for her, the count persuaded the artist to execute a version in oils of the same composition. However, the discovery of a letter from the countess in the Tetschen archives, written to her fiancé on 6 August 1808, reveals an entirely different sequence of events. Far from its having been commissioned, Friedrich is now known to have begun *The Cross in the Mountains* of his own accord, with the original intention of presenting it to Gustavus Adolphus IV, King of Sweden, as a token of admiration of his defiance of Napoleon. Only after the count’s first visit to his studio sometime between 30 July and 6 August 1808, when the painting was already in progress, was Friedrich induced to part with it. On completion of the picture, and before it was despatched to Tetschen, *The Cross in the Mountains* was put on public exhibition in Friedrich’s Dresden studio, in conditions intended to simulate the chapel for which it was destined. One of the windows was covered so that the studio was only partially lit, and a black cloth was spread on the table where the large framed canvas was to stand. The advance preparations had the desired effect. Countless visitors thronged into the studio to see Friedrich’s painting, and Marie Helene von Kügelgen, a friend of the artist, wrote to her husband, ‘It struck all who came into the room as though they were entering a temple. Even the biggest loudmouths spoke quietly and seriously as if they were in a church’.

Not all the criticism was favourable, however. The chief opponent of the picture was Friedrich Wilhelm Basilius von Ramdohr, a self-appointed champion of academic classicism, who took particular exception to the theme and to the formal language in which it was expressed and published a vitriolic attack in January 1809 in the *Zeitung fur die elegante Welt*. He accused Friedrich of sacrilege for allowing a ‘landscape to creep onto the altar’ and associated his nature symbolism with the ‘neoplatonic sophistry’ of the Dresden Romantics. In defence of his ideas Friedrich took the, for him, unusual step of writing an interpretation of the picture. The text, edited by Christian August Semmler, Secretary to the Dresden Library, was subsequently published.

---

5 Rühle von Lilienstern, *Reise*, 44.
published in April 1809 in the *Journal des Luxus und der Moden*. In view of the controversy which *The Cross in the Mountains* unleashed and the fact that to our certain knowledge Friedrich was motivated to furnish the meaning of a specific painting on only one other occasion, it is important to consider carefully what he had to say, for his own interpretation provides us not only with the means of properly understanding *The Tetschen Altarpiece* itself but also with vital clues to the correct appreciation of the symbols and imagery in his work as a whole. In the *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* Ramdohr had asked,

Can the indicated scene of nature be painted without sacrificing the most essential merits of painting and particularly of landscape painting? Is it a happy thought to use a landscape as an allegory of a specific religious idea or even for devotion? Finally, is it compatible with the dignity of art and the truly pious man to invite to worship by such means as Herr F[friedrich] has employed?

Friedrich did not address these questions directly but countered instead with a simple statement of how his picture was meant to be understood:

*Interpretation of the Picture*

Jesus Christ, nailed to the tree, is turned here towards the sinking sun, the image of the eternal life-giving father. With Jesus' teaching an old world died — that time when God the Father moved directly on the earth. The sun sank and the earth was no longer able to grasp the departing light. There shines forth in the gold of the evening light the purest, noblest metal of the Saviour's figure on the cross, which thus reflects on earth in a softened glow. The cross stands erected on a rock, unshakably firm like our faith in Jesus Christ. The fir trees stand around the cross, evergreen, enduring through all ages, like the hopes of man in Him, the Crucified.

In this short passage Friedrich supplies meanings for the rocks, the sun, and the fir trees that enable us to interpret along similar lines paintings such as *Morning Mist in the Mountains* in Rudolstadt [166]; *Cross and Cathedral in the Mountains* in Dusseldorf [201]; and the later *Cross in the Forest* in Stuttgart [450].

At this juncture it is as well to emphasize that, while the idea of a landscape as an altarpiece was novel, the symbolism which Friedrich employed was not. His symbols and the notions associated with them were without exception firmly rooted in tradition. This is true also of the motifs incorporated in the ornate carved and gilded wooden frame made for the painting to Friedrich's own design by the sculptor Gottlob Christian Kuhn. Here the themes of sacrifice and redemption are reiterated in standard iconographic terms in general currency since the early Renaissance. Palm branches, age-old symbols of martyrdom, rise from columns on either side to form an arch above the picture. Below, ears of corn and vines, eucharistic allusions to the flesh and blood of Christ, flank the all-seeing eye of God, enclosed within a

---

triangle (to signify the Trinity) from which emanate rays of light like those of the setting sun in the picture.

Regarding The Cross in the Mountains, an important question remains to be answered. Assuming that Friedrich conceived his picture as an altarpiece from the outset (and this is a big assumption, remembering that he intended it originally for the king of Sweden), from whom did he derive the revolutionary idea of using a landscape for the purpose in place of a more conventional narrative painting? The answer seems to be from the poet and theologian Gotthard Ludwig Theobul Kosegarten. According to Runge’s brother Daniel, as early as 1806 Kosegarten had already considered commissioning Friedrich to execute an altarpiece for a chapel at Vitt on the Baltic island of Rügen.9 Kosegarten can only have had a landscape in mind for Friedrich was known for nothing else. Friedrich apparently declined the invitation, however, and eventually the commission was given to Runge, who chose as his subject Christ Walking on the Water, the unfinished painting now in the Hamburg Kunsthalle.

Kosegarten was influential on Friedrich in other ways. As a fervent disciple of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, he preached the emotional piety of the Enlightenment and in his open-air sermons, delivered on the seashore near Altenkirchen on Rügen, interpreted natural phenomena as divine revelations in the way that Friedrich was later to do.10 Kosegarten’s pantheism, whose origins lay in the philosophical writings of Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder, was more widely promulgated through his poetry, with which Friedrich was probably acquainted as a young man as a result of his friendship with Johann Gottfried Quistorp, the university drawing master in Greifswald from whom he received his initial artistic training. Though Kosegarten and Friedrich may never have met, it is impossible to mistake their close spiritual affinity. They were also alike in their religious beliefs and in their notions concerning the unique role of the artist in communicating hidden truths. Kosegarten’s religious interpretation of nature, as manifested in his Rhapsodien, is echoed not only in Friedrich’s paintings but also in his published statements on art. One should also not overlook the fact that Semmler, in his Untersuchungen über die höchste Vollkommenheit in der Landschaftsmaleri, published in 1800, had likewise advanced the view that landscape provided an ideal vehicle for the interpretation of human feelings; and his ideas may have held equal value in Friedrich’s mind with those of Kosegarten. What is especially noteworthy in the present context is Kosegarten’s use of imagery, for the references in which his poetry abounds to ancient oak groves, moonlit landscapes, lonely ruins and heathen burial sites, have the same symbolic import as their

10 Werner Sumowski, Caspar David Friedrich-Studien (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1970), 12.
counterparts in Friedrich’s pictures, including early sepia compositions such as *Dolmen by the Sea* of 1806 in Weimar [147] or oil paintings such as *Dolmen in the Snow* in Dresden [162], described by Carl Schildener in 1828 as ‘one of Friedrich’s first completed oil paintings’.\(^{11}\)

At precisely what point in his career Friedrich made the decision to devote his life to symbolic landscape painting is unclear. What is beyond doubt is that he was already thinking of landscape in allegorical terms while he was still a student at the academy in Copenhagen. In 1797 he had painted a series of watercolours depicting springs and fountains in the surrounding Danish countryside. In one of these, the Hamburg *Luise Fountain at Frederiksdahl* [10], the figure of a man pointing to the monument erected in memory of Luise Schulin disturbs the idyllic mood of the landscape and lends the painting the character of an *et in arcadia ego*. Another of Friedrich’s watercolours executed about this time depicts an eighteenth-century pavilion near Klampenborg just north of the Danish capital (fig. 2). The contrast between the wretched straw-roofed hut in the foreground, with the dying tree beside it, and the elegant pavilion set amid luxuriant vegetation has predisposed Borsch-Supan to interpret the subject in allegorical terms as a reference to the poverty of our earthly existence compared with the enchantments of paradise, which we may only attain by means of the gated bridge, a dual symbol for the barrier of death and the path of Christian faith.\(^{12}\) If the interpretation postulated by Borsch-Supan is correct, this drawing represents perhaps the first example of Friedrich’s use of landscape metaphorically, anticipating the elegiac tenor of his mature landscape paintings and the late sepia compositions. However, interpretations of this kind may be premature, for the motifs which Borsch-Supan here invests with symbolic meanings were in fact part of the stock repertoire of the European picturesque tradition, and many other artists at this time, including Friedrich’s erstwhile teacher Jens Juel, made use of exactly similar motifs with no concern for eschatological symbolism. The inspiration behind Friedrich’s subjects of this kind is, in fact, more likely to have been the prevailing taste for the informal garden and the influence in particular of Christian Hirschfeld’s *Geschichte und Theorie der Gartenkunst* (Leipzig, 1779), in which Danish landscape gardens were accorded special attention.

We may be more certain of Friedrich’s intentions when endeavouring to interpret sepia drawings such as his *Tragic Scene on the Seashore* of 1799 in Mannheim (fig. 3) or similar compositions contained in the slightly later *Mannheim Sketchbook*. *Tragic Scene on

---


the Seashore is the companion piece to another sepia drawing in Mannheim depicting a young sailor bidding farewell to his father [19]. In the present scene the family is shown mourning the loss of their son at sea. So unequivocal is the narrative that the meaning of the symbols is immediately clear. The stunted willow dominating the centre of the composition, while also denoting grief, signifies the Resurrection as it continually sends forth fresh shoots. Likewise, the cross, linked to the tombstone on the right by a creeper of evergreen ivy, symbolizes the hope of everlasting life, an idea reinforced by the three small birds winging their way into the sky as emblems of the Christian soul. In the foreground are the rocks of faith familiar to us from The Tetschen Altarpiece and its derivatives.

Friedrich's attempt to formulate a system of symbolic motifs was further developed and substantially elaborated around 1803 when he painted a cycle of four sepia compositions (believed to have been destroyed in the Second World War) in which parallels were drawn between the ages of man, the times of the day, and the seasons of the year. In the first [103], naked children gambolled and played in the early morning light of a spring landscape. In the second [104], two of the children had become young lovers embracing in a bower where they sheltered from the heat of the mid-day summer sun. In the last [106], a bearded old man sat grieving beside an open grave near the ruins of a Gothic church silhouetted against the moonlit winter sky. The third composition, Autumn [105], was unique in containing no figures to connect the narrative of the ages of man. Seen together, these sepias constitute one of the most important keys to our understanding of Friedrich's art. They affirm through association his fundamentally optimistic philosophy, for just as we know that night is followed by day, and winter just as assuredly by spring, the logic inherent in the cycle implies the inevitability of life after death. The woman lying in her grave in Winter will live again just as certainly as the withered tree in the cemetery will soon bring forth new buds.

Later (in 1826, and again in 1834) Friedrich combined these self-same ideas in cycles of seven sepias in which representations of man's existence before birth and after death were incorporated. Three from the earlier cycle and four from the later are preserved in the Hamburg Kunsthalle [338-40; 431-4]. In a diary entry made at Loschwitz in August 1803 Friedrich described minutely the original composition of Spring:

Gently rising hills block the view into the distance; like the wishes and desires of the children, who enjoy the blissful moments of the present without wanting to know what lies beyond. Bushes in bloom, nourishing herbs, and sweet-smelling flowers surround the quiet clear stream in which the pure blue of the cloudless sky is reflected like the glorious image of God in the souls of the children. Children play, and kiss one another, and are happy; and one of the children greets the rising sun with a joyous clapping of the hands. Lambs graze in the valley and on the hillsides. There is no stone
RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN FRIEDRICH

to be seen here, no withered branch, no fallen leaves. The whole of nature breathes peace, joy, innocence and life.13

In 1807 Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert saw a later version of Summer in Friedrich’s Dresden studio. In Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaft (Dresden, 1808) he describes it as follows:

The hours of dawn were soon over; far behind us are left the green hills of childhood with their spring flowers and the dream of playing lambs. Brighter and grander shines the sun rising towards its zenith and the fresh trail is not yet threatened by obstacles. When in the glimmering hours of noon the blossoming world opens itself so freely to the inner eye, when to the keen mind – yet unaware of the limits of its aspirations – the distant high clouds appear like faraway mountains, still to be reached easily in the end, then in the sweet time of roses all deep longing seems to have found its fulfillment. There, where the lily weds the rose, where slim trees with dark green branches entwine, youthful love clasps its arms around us. There the blissful heart no longer needs the outside world; we only dream of the quiet, lonely hut on a green hillside, of the pastoral song of the turtle dove and the lonely valley. Momentarily all further striving is forgotten and for the first time – also for the last perhaps – we rest in perfect blissful contentment. For behold! among the roses and the lilies there also stood the tall sunflower which with its faithful head follows the path of the eternal light.14

In 1807 Friedrich painted oil versions of Summer (fig. 4) and Winter (fig. 5) though not, it seems, of Spring or Autumn. Both appear to have been inspired to some extent by old master paintings in the Dresden gallery: Summer by Claude Lorraine’s Acis and Galatea; Winter by Jacob Ruisdael’s Jewish Cemetery. With regard to these two pictures it is interesting to observe that, whereas for his oil version of Summer Friedrich relied almost verbatim on the compositional scheme of the early sepia, for its lost pendant Winter, destroyed in the Munich Glaspalast fire of 1931, he devised an entirely new picture calculated to emphasize still more powerfully the pervading sense of death and desolation. In Summer, as Schubert observed, Friedrich had recourse to traditional botanical symbols. The sunflower, continually turning its head towards the light, is an age-old symbol of Christian faith; the lilies symbolize purity; the roses are emblems of love. The poplar and the nearby birch tree, however, strike a different note for they signify respectively death and resurrection. A leitmotif throughout the Seasons cycle is the everpresence of water. It bubbles from the earth in Spring, develops into a broad river in Summer, and merges finally with the sea at the end of its course in Winter. It was evidently introduced by the artist as an eloquent metaphor both for the passage of time and for man’s journey through life. Our knowledge that it will evaporate and fall again as rain to refresh the earth dispels the apparent pessimism of Winter as forcibly as the glimmer of sun in the sky or the hint of an imminent thaw. This implicit promise of new life evokes

13 Hinz, Caspar David Friedrich, 81.
14 Quoted in Borsch-Supan and Jahnig, Caspar David Friedrich, 70.
belief in the Resurrection as persuasively as the rainbow silhouetted against the stormclouds in Ruisdael's *Jewish Cemetery*, a motif which Friedrich also occasionally employed, notably in the Essen *Mountain Landscape with a Rainbow* (fig. 6).

Originally this landscape was conceived as a simple moonlight scene, and it was in this state that Marie Helene von Kügelgen saw it during her visit to Friedrich’s studio in June 1809. Evidence of its subsequent transformation can be deduced from the ambiguity of the light source and the thicker layer of paint where Friedrich superimposed the rainbow over the already finished clouds. The fashionably dressed figure in the foreground is a self-portrait (one of many in the artist’s oeuvre), and it seems reasonable to infer from this that the painting represents an avowal of Friedrich’s own religious beliefs. He stands bareheaded, with his hat at his feet, as though on sacred ground, and gazes at the landscape before him. The rainbow not only lends the scene a magical quality of light, it also serves as a time-honoured symbol of man’s reconciliation with God through Christ. The sharp contrast between the well-lit foreground and the foreboding mountain peak beyond the valley is a device that Friedrich frequently adopted to suggest the gulf between life and death, between the now and the hereafter. Like the figures in his paintings, Friedrich intended that we too should be transported by these spectacular natural effects, which he was so singularly adept at reproducing. For him, as for Runge, who regarded nature as ‘the purest thing that still exists in the world’, the contemplation of unspoiled landscape was a means of divining the very essence of God Himself.

As well as his cycles of sepias, Friedrich produced numerous paintings in oils also intended to be seen in series (like *The Times of Day* in Hanover [274–5; 296–7]) or, when there were only two, as companion pieces or pendants. Often, though by no means always, the interpretation of one picture is predicated on a knowledge of the other(s). This is the case with Friedrich’s *Winter Landscape* in Schwerin (fig. 7) and its pendant *Winter Landscape with a Church* recently acquired by the National Gallery in London (fig. 8). They were exhibited together in 1811 in Weimar and reviewed as companion pieces in January 1812 in the *Journal des Luxus und der Moden*. Considered on its own the *Winter Landscape* in Schwerin presents the bleakest of scenes and would appear to corroborate the opinion of those who are disposed to interpret Friedrich’s art as essentially melancholic or pessimistic, as did the French sculptor

---

16 See Borsch-Supan and Jähnig, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 316–19. The painting in the National Gallery is demonstrably autograph and unquestionably the true pendant of the *Winter Landscape* in Schwerin. The Dortmund picture, which is unfinished and very inferior in quality, must be wholly or largely the work of another artist, and is probably a contemporary copy by one of Friedrich’s students.
David d’Angers, who declared that the artist had created what amounted to a new genre: ‘la tragédie du paysage’. However, in order to understand Friedrich’s intentions properly, it is necessary to read the picture in conjunction with its companion piece and to realize that the two are not only interdependent but, in a narrative sense, sequential, to the extent that the seeming pessimism of the first is wholly negated by the second. The same cripple who hobbles through the desolate wintry landscape of the picture in Schwerin and gazes past wizened oak trees at a leaden curtain of mist obscuring the horizon is seen next in the London pendant supported by the rock of faith, his crutches discarded in the snow, holding his hands in an attitude of prayer before the sculpted image of the crucified Christ. As he prays, a Gothic church (whether real or visionary, it makes no matter) looms dramatically out of the mist. The snow on the branches of the fir trees begins to thaw, signifying the reawakening of nature and, by analogy, the resurrection of the soul. As in the Gospel story, the cripple’s faith has made him whole.

With some of Friedrich’s companion pieces, the relationship between the one and the other is not always so evident. The Monk by the Sea (fig. 9) and Abbey among Oak Trees (fig. 10), exhibited as pendants at the Berlin Academy in 1810, do not rely on each other in the same way for their meanings to be clear. Contemporary reports of The Monk by the Sea at successive phases of its development indicate unequivocally that it underwent a number of important changes between its inception in 1808 and its appearance in October 1810 at the Berlin Academy. Semmler, who saw the painting in Friedrich’s studio in February 1809, described it then as ‘uniformly grey’ with a sky ‘heavy with mist’; and four months later Marie Helene von Kügelgen, in a letter to Friederike Volkmann, wrote of it in similar terms, deploring the absence of either ‘sun, moon, or thunderstorm’. By September 1810, however, the sky had been radically transformed to represent night, in which condition it was seen by Karl Friedrich Frommann, who referred to it in his diary as a view of ‘the Baltic . . . with the evening star and the moon in its last quarter’. Finally, between 24 September and 13 October 1810, Friedrich again repainted the sky to produce the effect we are familiar with today. But these were not the only alterations he made. Infra-red photography has revealed the underdrawing for two ships that Friedrich originally intended to depict heeling over in the wind on either side of the monk in the foreground. Their suppression and the exclusion from the composition of any kind of framing device resulted in a design so radical that it must have seemed at the time to be a consummation of the Romantics’ dream of representing the infinite in finite terms. Here

18 See Bösch-Supan and Jähnig, Caspar David Friedrich, 303.
19 ibid.
the very exclusion of symbols created an image of unprecedented intensity. The modernity of the picture was recognized at once by Heinrich von Kleist, who in 1809 had moved from Dresden to Berlin, where he made the acquaintance of Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim. When in 1810 Arnim and Brentano reviewed The Monk by the Sea for the Berliner Abendblätter, of which he was the editor, Kleist exercised his prerogative by eliminating the tone of irony that pervaded their original submission and interpolated opinions of his own. The following passage, with which Kleist’s own contribution opened, concludes with a characteristically Kleistian observation:

Nothing could be sadder or more unnerving than this position in the world: the only spark of life in the wide realm of death, the lonely centre of a lonely circle. With its two or three mysterious elements the picture hangs there like the apocalypse, as if it were dreaming Young’s Night Thoughts, and, since in its uniformity and boundlessness it has no other foreground than the frame, when one looks at it, it is as though one’s eyelids have been cut away. 20

Compared with The Monk by the Sea, Abbey among Oak Trees is pictorially conventional. Its symbolic content breaks no new ground but synthesizes two distinct iconographic types: the variety of winter landscape characterized by the last in the Seasons cycle and the kind exemplified by the Dresden Dolmen in the Snow. In Abbey among Oak Trees a procession of monks bears a coffin past the open grave in the foreground, through the archway of the ruined abbey towards a giant cross. In the sky above the oak tree on the immediate right of the ruin can be seen the sickle of the new moon, its waxing state signifying the coming of Christ.

Among Friedrich’s more extensive cycles of oil paintings one series is worthy of special attention, not least for the light that it sheds on a number of other works whose meanings might otherwise have remained enigmatic. The cycle in question deals again with The Times of Day but presents them in the guise of sea-pieces. The little painting of Morning in Hanover [234] is the first in the sequence and depicts a little sailing boat setting out to sea in a fresh breeze shortly after daybreak. Noon [235] (now lost) represented shipping on the high seas; Evening [236] (Bührle Collection, Zurich) shows the return of a boat to harbour; and Night [237] (Peter Nathan, Zurich) a boat moving by moonlight towards some unseen destination. The boat is intended here to designate the ship of life, an idea that found more mature expression in Moonrise over the Sea (fig. 11) and the later Stages of Life (fig. 12).

Moonrise over the Sea (completed, like its pendant Village Landscape in the Morning Light [298], by 1 November 1822) 21 treats a

21 Borsch-Supan and Jähnig, Caspar David Friedrich, 378.
RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN FRIEDRICH

recurring theme in Friedrich's work, the return of ships to harbour at the close of day. The subject, in a less ambitious form, had been prefigured in the third picture of the marine cycle The Times of Day already referred to. It was further developed in a painting now in the Hermitage in Leningrad [281] which Friedrich is known to have executed in 1821. For the present version Friedrich reverted to a simpler composition that had been adumbrated (in reverse) in a little seascape of around 1818 entitled Farewell [244], which was another casualty of the Munich Glaspalast disaster. Here the figures gazing wistfully out to sea at the sailing ships outlined ethereally against the moonlit sky express by their bodily attitudes their common involvement in the natural spectacle before them. More than mere repoussé figures, their united response lends emphasis to the prevailing mood of melancholy, which Friedrich, ever sensitive to the emotional potentialities of colour, achieved by judicious use of violet. That the practical application of his (unwritten) colour theory was not lost on his contemporaries is attested by Ludwig Richter in his Lebenserinnerungen, where he declared, 'Green is fresh and lively, red joyful . . . violet melancholy (as with Friedrich)'.[22] One of the most perceptive remarks made with regard to the figures in this painting was that they seem to be contemplating their own destiny.

The painting The Stages of Life takes the theme of the ship of life an important step forward by concentrating in the one picture the narrative ideas formerly divided among four in the marine cycle The Times of Day. Though The Stages of Life is a modern title, coined in 1904, there need be little doubt that it accurately reflects the artist's idea of associating the figures in the picture and the corresponding vessels out at sea with the ages of man in a manner that emphasizes the continuity of life. To this end Friedrich chose as his protagonists representatives of three generations from within his own family. Friedrich himself is the old man in the grey fur coat with his back towards us. The children are his son Gustav Adolf, holding the Swedish flag, and his daughter Agnes Adelheid (born in 1824 and 1825 respectively). Though his identity is more problematic, the man in the top hat is most probably Friedrich's nephew Johann Heinrich (for whom the picture may have been painted), and the young woman either Friedrich's wife Caroline or their daughter Emma (born in 1819). The shoreline represents the Utkiek (lookout) at Wieck, which afforded a fine view of the Baltic shipping routes.

The theme of the boat returning to shore as night approaches links The Stages of Life with The Cross on the Baltic in West Berlin (fig. 13). This is the only painting, apart from The Tetschen Altarpiece, whose meaning Friedrich deliberately made explicit. On 9 May 1815 he wrote to Goethe's friend, the painter Luise Seidler, 'The picture

destined for your friend is already sketched out but there will be no church in it, nor a tree, nor a plant, nor a blade of grass. Raised up high on the barren, rocky seashore is a cross: to those who see it a consolation; to those who fail to see it, merely a cross'. We may be certain it was to this picture that Friedrich was referring since at the foot of the second page of his letter he added a thumbnail sketch of the composition (fig. 14) which detailed all the salient components, omitting only the two small boats on the left of the painting (which may have been added as an afterthought) and the wooden supports of the cross itself. The principal elements of the painting – the cross, the anchor, the empty shore, the boats returning homeward at nightfall – belong to Friedrich’s repertory of symbolic motifs, though never before had the cross and the anchor been so prominently placed nor so potently juxtaposed. The underlying message of redemption through Christ, which the artist himself had disclosed in his letter, is here reinforced by the inclusion of the moon (to symbolize the Saviour) and by the ubiquitous rock of faith on which the cross, like the Christian Church itself, is based. The Cross on the Baltic, an amalgam of ideas already expressed in earlier paintings such as The Tetschen Altarpiece and sepias like the large View of Arcona in Vienna [128], may have been conceived as a Gedächtnisbild, a category of picture painted in memory of someone who had recently died. Friedrich produced several such pictures in the decade or so after 1815, including one in a Berlin private collection honouring his friend and fellow painter Gerhard von Kugelgen, who was murdered in Dresden in 1820. The memorial picture for Kugelgen [290] depicts the Catholic cemetery in the Friedrichstadt district of Dresden, with an open grave in the foreground as a vivid memento mori and a view through the churchyard gate towards the rising sun.

A similar picture is Cemetery at Dusk in the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden (fig. 15). Writing in the Artistisches Notizenblatt in 1825, Carl August Böttiger mentioned having recently seen this picture in progress in Friedrich’s studio and reported that it was being painted as the result of a commission from a collector in Leipzig. Due perhaps to Friedrich’s serious illness of 1824–26, the work was never completed and it remained in the artist’s possession until his death in 1840. The supposition that Cemetery at Dusk is another of Friedrich’s memorial pictures (commissioned, in this instance, in remembrance of a dead child) gains support both from Böttiger’s description of the painting and from remarks made by the Russian poet Vasily Andreyevich Zhukovsky in a letter begun on 2 October 1826 to the Grand Duchess Alexandra Feodorovna:

---

23 Börsch-Supan and Jähnig, Caspar David Friedrich, 330.
24 ‘Werke hiesiger Maler’, Artistisches Notizenblatt (1825), 94.
FIG. 1.
The Tetschen Altar (The Cross in the Mountains), 1807–08
Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie [167]
FIG. 2.
Pavilion near Klampenborg, c. 1797
Hamburg, Kunsthalle [12]

FIG. 3.
Tragic Scene on the Seashore, 26 May 1799
Mannheim, Kunsthalle [20]
FIG. 4.
*Summer*, 1807
Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek [164]

FIG. 5.
*Winter*, 1807–08
Formerly Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek (destroyed in 1931) [165]
FIG. 6.
*Mountain Landscape with a Rainbow*, 1810
Essen, Museum Folkwang [183]

FIG. 7.
*Winter Landscape*, 1811
Schwerin, Staatliches Museum [193]
RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN FRIEDRICH

FIG. 8.
Winter Landscape with a Church, 1811
London, National Gallery

FIG. 9.
The Monk by the Sea, 1809–10
West Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Galerie der Romantik [168]
FIG. 10.
*Abbey among Oak Trees*, 1809
West Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Galerie der Romantik [169]

FIG. 11.
*Moonrise over the Sea*, 1822
West Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Galerie der Romantik [299]
FIG. 12.
The Stages of Life, c. 1835
Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste [411]
Fig. 13.
*The Cross on the Baltic, 1815*
Berlin, Verwaltung der Staatlichen Schlösser und Gärten [215]

Fig. 14.
*The Cross on the Baltic, sketch, 9 May 1815*
Bonn, University Library
FIG. 15.
Cemetery at Dusk, unfinished, c. 1825
Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen,
Gemäldegalerie [335]

FIG. 16.
Churchyard in the Snow, 1826
Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste [353]
Fig. 17.
*Boats in the Harbour at Evening, c. 1828*
Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie [358]

Fig. 18.
*Memorial Picture to Johann Emanuel Bremer, 1817*
Berlin, Verwaltung der Staatlichen Schlösser und Gärten [228]
FIG. 19.
*Man on a Lofty Mountain Peak*, c. 1818
Hamburg, Kunsthalle [250]
FIG. 20.

The Watzmann, c. 1824-25

West Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Galerie der Romantik [1359]
From time to time I see the painter Friedrich here. He has started a large landscape, which will be magnificent if the execution matches the conception. A large iron gate, which leads into a cemetery, stands open; by the gate, leaning on one of its posts and partly covered by its shadow, a man and a woman can be seen. They are a husband and wife who have just buried their child and in the night are looking at its grave, which can be seen inside the cemetery; it is just a little grass mound, beside which one can see a spade. Streaks of mist lie over the cemetery; they hide the tree trunks from sight so that they seem to be detached from the ground. One can make out other graves through the misty veil, and, above all, natural monuments[!]; an upright stone looks like a grey ghost.25

The indistinct outlines of figures hovering above the grave, Zhukovsky explained, were intended to represent the child’s ancestors, whose ashes are contained in the urn beyond the grave, and the angel of peace bearing an olive branch. The massive stone gateway resembles the entrance to the old Trinitatis cemetery in Dresden. Friedrich used it here as a solemn symbol of the barrier between this world and the next but what Zhukovsky interpreted as a night scene is probably early morning for the mist appears to be rising under the warmth of an emerging sun.

A third memorial picture for which Friedrich chose a cemetery as his subject is *Churchyard in the Snow* in Leipzig (fig. 16). It was painted for the Leipzig collector Baron Maximilian Speck von Sternburg and bears the inscription 1826 on the second cross from the left. As a memorial picture *Churchyard in the Snow* is rather unusual (though not entirely unprecedented) in that it appears to have been commissioned by the baron as a future monument to himself. In his memoirs Friedrich Pecht records that the baron made elaborate arrangements for his own funeral and even selected the site of his burial,26 so it is by no means inconceivable that the open grave in the foreground was meant to be construed as his own. *Churchyard in the Snow* typifies Friedrich’s tendency in the mid-1820s to focus closely on a scene, thereby reducing the angle of vision. Unlike most of Friedrich’s graveyard scenes, but in common with his memorial picture *Kugelgen’s Grave*, this one is unusual in depicting a view from inside the cemetery looking out through the churchyard gate. In other respects, it is consistent with most of Friedrich’s works of this type and contains traditional *vanitas* symbols such as crosses, graves, dead flowers, and leafless trees. But lest such images be misinterpreted as further evidence of Friedrich’s pessimism, it is important to remember that ‘the great white blanket of snow’, which here covers the ground, represented for him ‘the essence of the utmost purity, beneath which nature prepares herself for a new life’.27

26 Friedrich Pecht, *Aus meiner Zeit* (1874), i. 159. See Börsch-Supan and Jähnig, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 408.
Churchyard in the Snow was not the only painting by Friedrich in Maximilian Speck von Sternburg’s collection. In fact, he owned three other works by the artist: the Seapiece by Moonlight now in Leipzig [393], a watercolour Landscape in the Riesengebirge, now in Cologne [492], and Boats in the Harbour at Evening (fig. 17). He took possession of the last sometime before Easter 1828, which probably means it was started the year before. Like the earlier Churchyard in the Snow it seems to have been commissioned with the intention of preserving the baron’s memory, for his name is inscribed on the stern of the rowing boat in the foreground of the picture. As we have seen, Friedrich’s use of the boat as a symbol of man’s passage through life was already well established by this time, so its inclusion here served as a kind of memento mori. The baron’s own ship of life lies peacefully at its mooring in the harbour that signifies heavenly salvation. The coming together of the fleet of boats suggests the communion of Christian souls and the setting sun the imminence of death.

Though it differs in its basic iconography, Boats in the Harbour at Evening is similar in other respects to Friedrich’s Memorial Picture to Johann Emanuel Bremer in Berlin (fig. 18). The man in whose memory this picture was painted was a Berlin doctor of Friedrich’s acquaintance, remembered especially for his work among the poor and for the introduction to the city of inoculation against smallpox. He died, aged sixty, on 6 November 1816, and Friedrich’s painting was presumably started shortly afterwards. An interesting feature of the picture is Bremer’s surname written in the metalwork of the garden gate, an idea that may have been prompted by the cast iron gates at Schloss Paretz, erected in 1811 by Frederick William III after the death of Queen Louise, in which was set in similar fashion her own personal monogram.28 The elegiac tone of the painting is unmistakable and Friedrich’s unerring sense of colour is here put to particularly poignant effect. In the context of the Gedächtnisbild, the vines are clearly intended as eucharistic symbols; the tripartite division of the picture plane suggests the Trinity; the poplars, traditionally used in Christian art, signify salvation; and the spires of Greifswald’s skyline appear across the water like some celestial vision. Death, represented here in the form of the gate, is thus to be interpreted not as an end, but as a beginning – mors janua vitae.

It would be difficult to think of a picture that better expresses the quintessence of the German Romantic attitude to nature than Friedrich’s Man on a Lofty Mountain Peak (fig. 19). The isolated figure lost in silent communion above the clouds, gazing introspectively across the sublime mountain scenery stretching before him into infinity, evokes a mood of deep spiritual tranquility. It is reminiscent in some ways of Benjamin Robert Haydon’s painting in the National Portrait

28 Börsch-Supan and Jähnig, Caspar David Friedrich, 340.
RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN FRIEDRICH

Gallery of Wordsworth Musing Upon Helvellyn. The figure in Friedrich’s painting has tentatively been identified as Friedrich Gotthard von Brincken, a former Saxon infantry officer who later became a high-ranking Saxon forestry official. A Saxon connection is certainly suggested by the landscape, which is composed principally of motifs in the Elbsandsteingebirge: the Schrannenstein, the Zirkelstein, and the Rosenberg. The monumental character of this work, and the unusual (one might almost say unparalleled) emphasis given to the figure are strong indications that we are dealing here with another of Friedrich’s memorial pictures, in which the clouds of mist are intended, as they were on other occasions, to allude to the mysteries of the divinity. Friedrich himself once explained to Carl Gustav Carus, ‘When a landscape is enveloped in mist it appears larger, more majestic, and increases the power of imagination . . . The eye and the imagination are on the whole more attracted by a hazy distance than by one which is near and clear in front of you’.

An even more hieratic mountain landscape, entirely devoid of human habitation and activity, is depicted in Friedrich’s painting The Watzmann (fig. 20) which, like his Temple of Juno at Agrigentum in Dortmund [381], may have been intended to challenge the more fashionable manner of landscape painting exemplified at that time by the Italianate landscapes of Ludwig Richter and other expatriate German artists working in Rome in the circle of Joseph Anton Koch. The title of the painting is somewhat misleading since, in addition to the Watzmann itself, the artist included immediately recognizable motifs from other distinct mountain ranges: in the foreground the unmistakable shapes of rocks in the Elbsandsteingebirge, and in the middle distance the massive crag in the Harz mountains known as the Erdbeerkopf. For the snow-covered peak of the Watzmann itself, which Friedrich had never seen, he used a watercolour sketch of 1821 (now in Oslo) which had been produced by his favourite and most talented pupil, August Heinrich. Heinrich had died at the age of twenty-eight in 1822, three years before The Watzmann was first exhibited, and Friedrich, who had inherited the watercolour, may have copied it as a kind of tribute, perhaps intending this picture too as a kind of Gedächtnisbild. The birch trees visible in the foreground were often employed by Friedrich, as we have already observed, for their association with the Resurrection, and his contemporaries, versed in the iconography of German Romanticism, would have recognized in the image of the inaccessible, pure white mountain, perpetually covered in snow and ice, a conscious allusion to the godhead. Interpreted in this way, the inclusion of the other mountain ranges assumes greater significance, for Friedrich thereby established a

29 ibid., 349.
30 Quoted in Hinz, Caspar David Friedrich, 133.
31 See Borsch-Supan and Jähnig, Caspar David Friedrich, 397.
contrast between the more walkable terrain of the Elbsandsteingebirge (a metaphor for our earthly existence) and the remoter ice-capped summit, attainable only after the deep valley that lies hidden beyond the middle ground has been traversed.

During his lifetime Friedrich’s art was comprehended by some, completely misunderstood by others. Despite his early successes at the Dresden and Berlin Academy exhibitions he failed to achieve the recognition he deserved. The support of loyal friends and commissions from private patrons could not entirely compensate him for the lack of official favour. It was not until 1824, when he was almost fifty years old, that Friedrich was finally made an associate professor of the Dresden Academy; but he was never called upon to teach there. Even when he was at the height of his career the number of his private pupils remained small. Part of the problem had to do with the fact that his art was intensely personal and did not readily admit of a following and certainly not of a school in the usual sense of the word. He quarrelled with one of his students, Karl Wilhelm Lieber, for the very reason that he was copying his work without attempting to understand it. The contemporaries who were most deeply influenced by Friedrich were Ernest Ferdinand Oehme, Carl Julius von Leypold, and the amateur Carl Gustav Carus. To varying degrees all three modelled their style on his and attempted to assimilate his symbolic vocabulary. Occasionally Carus produced works of such quality (and, one suspects, with such feeling) that they might just be mistaken for those of his teacher. His *Dolmen by Moonlight* in Oslo is one such example. Generally, however, where Oehme and Leypold are concerned, even when they based their own compositions directly on prototypes in Friedrich’s *oeuvre* and borrowed from his repertory of symbols, this was not alone sufficient to produce works nearly as compelling. Friedrich left it to posterity to judge the real worth of his art – how (to use his own analogy) he would emerge from the chrysalis. The modern consensus seems to be that it was as a butterfly rather than a grub.

32 ibid., 319.
33 ‘Ich spinne mich in meiner Puppe ein, mögen andere ein Gleiches tun, und überlasse es der Zeit, was aus dem Gespinste herauskommen wird, ob ein bunter Schmetterling oder eine Made’ (‘Ausserung bei Betrachtung einer Sammlung von Gemälden’). Quoted in Hinz, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 119.