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Visual Analysis

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Caspar David Friedrich, *Winter Landscape with a Church (Winterlandschaft mit Kirche)*, 1811, oil on canvas, 33 x 45 cm, Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Dresden, Germany

This landscape painting by Caspar David Friedrich is an image of a snowy hill and a hazy atmosphere. Due to the small size of the image, one must look particularly closely at the details featured. Upon first glance, we see a snowy valley of some sort, with an atmospheric silhouette of a towering gothic church in the background. In the midground, we see the main subject of the image; a small cluster of snow-capped pine trees. Nestled within the foliage of the central pine, we see a tall wooden crucifix with a carving of Jesus affixed to it. Below the towering cross, along a snowy boulder in front of the tree, rests a miniature man, gazing upwards towards the

cross with his hands clasped in prayer. Along the foreground, a pair of wooden crutches are strewn, presumably his.

The palette of this image features a mix of mainly warm, natural colors. The forest-green pines stand out against the bluish-white snow, and their snow-tipped needles provide a sense of depth and highlight to the foliage. The pines are the most vibrant of the otherwise muddled colors. Should the snow have been a clean, stark white, it would have distracted from the mix of hues and somber mood of the image. Instead, Friedrich utilizes a mix of blues, purples, yellows, and browns along with white to create a subdued snowy scene. In addition to the sharp, saturated green pine trees, Friedrich adds to this landscape by creating an atmospheric background. The possibly-morning glow from behind the church creates a sunrise of both warm and cool tones, featuring reds, purples, oranges, and blues. The light source in this painting deviates from natural law-- while it is clear there is natural light coming from behind the church (the rising sun, though the sun itself isn't visible), there are no shadows cast from the trees, rocks, and other objects to suggest how they are lit. Depth is also created by a series of diagonal lines formed by the peaks of snow, with the most notable being just behind the center pine tree and another in the far distance, where the background begins to become a series of indistinguishable shadows and shapes.

The two human figures in this piece, Christ on the cross and the man praying to him, are rendered in very small detail. Our eyes are drawn up from the long, narrow, cross that looks almost sprouted from the trees, up Christ's body, and continue beyond the narrow line of the pine tree's trunk. Similarly, the long, thin shapes of the pine and the cross are repeated in the spires of the distant gothic church. The crutches, strewn a distance from Christ, also mirror the thin line motif.

The trees here seem to be the origin of the scene in a sense; as the man looks up at Christ on the cross embedded in the trees, we are reminded that the crucifix is made out of the same material. Similarly, his wooden crutches that lie before the trees seem to mirror the sentiment that the trees' natural resource and the landscape itself are the main subject, not necessarily Christ or the man praying to him. Without the pine, the crutches that allow the man autonomy and the relic of his faith cease to exist.

The image evokes a range of emotions; a sense of loneliness against a vast and desolate landscape, a yearning for a return to the rural world, and a persevering faith despite physical setbacks. We can surmise that the figure in this image has undoubtedly struggled across the unforgiving landscape with his crutches and has collapsed against the rock for relief, yet he remains steadfast in his faith and need to pray to his devotional icon. One also can't neglect the importance of the gothic church in the background, highlighting the influence of the Christian faith over the wild landscape. The inclusion of the medieval past is a pattern throughout Friedrich's work<sup>1</sup>, and it is meant to evoke feelings of nostalgia for a simpler, greater past and a yearning for rural life.

The theme of wood and the wilderness as the subjects of the scene align with the historical and ideological context of German<sup>2</sup> landscape painting at the time. This German quality of an emotional, melancholic resonance with the landscape can be identified with the Romanticism period, which strove to use emotion and color as main components of images over rigid guidelines promoted by official academies. Specifically of German Romantic paintings, the

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<sup>1</sup> Other works which feature medieval undertones include *The Abbey in the Oakwood*, 1810, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany; *The Dreamer (Ruins of the Oybin Monastery)*, 1840; and *The Cemetery Entrance*, 1825, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Of course, in 1811, Germany as a country did not exist yet, and "German" in this context refers to the region in which Germany exists today.

overarching theme of the “sublime landscape” and “pathetic fallacy” are present<sup>3</sup>, in which natural elements reflect feelings of the artist’s and the viewer’s interior psyche. Religious undertones are also important to understanding the context of German landscape paintings at the time. The Pietist movement, which arose a few decades earlier in Germany, was founded upon the ideals that Christian religion should not be observed through set rituals, but rather through “private, emotional, introspective devotion” while in nature. We can see these themes reflected through the figure praying to Christ in the woods. Additionally, the distance between the figure in the foreground and the church in the far distance reflect, as historian Marsha Morton writes, “metaphors for moments of confrontation with the divine.”<sup>4</sup> Friedrich himself noted that art for him was a religious experience.<sup>5</sup>

It's vital to reiterate that the function of this scene is not to describe a real-life setting, but rather to but to encourage imaginative thought, reflection, and spirituality. Historians note that the work is likely not representative of a particular place.<sup>6</sup> Instead of the viewer trying to resonate with the specific location of the setting, attention is rather placed on personal introspection.

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<sup>3</sup> See Sarah Linford’s “Romanticism and the Nation,” slides on Moodle, 3.1,

<sup>4</sup> Morton, Marsha. “German Romanticism: The Search for ‘A Quiet Place.’” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 28, no. 1 (2002): 9–107. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4113048>.

<sup>5</sup> The religious undertones in landscape Friedrich’s landscape paintings was criticized by art critic Friedrich con Ramdohr in 1809, questioning whether it was “a happy idea to use landscape for the allegorizing of a particular religious idea, or even for the purpose of awakening devotional feelings,” Von Ramdohr, F.W.B., ‘Über ein zum Altarplatte bestimmtes Landschaftsgemälde von Herrn Friedrich in Dresden, und über Landschaftsmalerei, Allegorie und Mystizismus überhaupt’, *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* (1809), pp. 89- 119. Ramdohr’s criticisms are reprinted in Hinz, op. cit., pp. 138-59; cited in Leighton, John, Anthony Reeve, and Aviva Burnstock. “A ‘Winter Landscape’ by Caspar David Friedrich.” *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 13 (1989): 44–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42616295>.

<sup>6</sup> Leighton, John, Anthony Reeve, and Aviva Burnstock. “A ‘Winter Landscape’ by Caspar David Friedrich.” *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 13 (1989): 44–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42616295>.

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