Caspar David Friedrich and the 20th Century

by Alicia Berdan

Art styles in the twentieth century were heavily influenced by the revolutionary changes in art and culture that occurred in the nineteenth century. The first fifty years of the nineteenth century saw the rise and change of how art was expressed to the viewer. During this time period, Germany was home to some of the most essential artists who brought to life emotions, dreams, and nature in their paintings. At the turn of the nineteenth century, German artists reacted against classicism and created a very unique style of German Romanticism that highlighted an important shift in intellectual thinking. In the city of Dresden, located on the eastern border of Germany, one Romantic painter brought to life images of his country and ideas of transcendence that would re-define the ideal message of landscapes. His ideas would resonate through time and inspire artists over a century later. Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) developed a unique use of the *rückenfigur,* a rear-facing figure, in his landscapes to visually enhance the emotional, metaphysical, and the transcendence experience of his works. These developments greatly affected the works of several prominent twentieth century artists, specifically Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) and Mark Rothko (1903-1970), who would both build upon Friedrich's ideas.

The Romantic period of art, which lasted roughly from 1800-1850, was not contained to Germany. Artists from all over Europe are categorized as being Romantic painters today. Romanticism was not a precisely distinct style of art but an extremely complex movement with many different facets. Artists dealt with dreams, the imagination, beauty, drama, and the profound and strange experiences of the individual.[1] Some of the best-known artists of this time period were the Spanish artist Francisco Goya (1746-1828), the French painter Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863), and the British painter J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851). Intellects of this movement were more than just artists, both writers and scientists were also making great leaps in developing their courses of study. Many writers, such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Immanuel Kant (1724-1802), and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), were interested in the representation of the individual and his personal experiences. Their works would have a great impact upon the artists of Romantic style and upon the

[1] Richard G. Tansey and Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, 10th ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 932.

subject matter of their artwork. Unlike many other European countries, Romantic artists in Germany were not surrounded by examples of traditional art, such as Greek and Roman statues. The absence or minor presence of traditional art in Germany played a great part in why much of the German artists of the Romantic period choose to become landscape painters. Prior to the Romantic Movement, landscape painting was not considered to be Fine Art like portraiture, history, and other classical themed artworks. The writer Goethe had large influence on shaping how landscape painting was perceived. It is much believed that Friedrich himself had read Goethe's work and was influenced by Goethe's ideas to infuse *manner* into landscape painting. *Manner* is the concept of creating a visual language that spoke of a connection between the soul and the painted image.[2] Friedrich's adaptation of Goethe's ideas is one of the many reasons he was an inspiration to artists in the twentieth century. Friedrich would work to infuse *manner* into his artworks by dealing with composite landscapes, emotional mood settings, metaphysical connections with the viewer, the *rückenfigur*, and atmospheric presence.

Friedrich was an artist with a visionary sensibility that gave his ideas life through gloomy and emotional landscapes.[3] Often those who do not pause to ponder his work miss the chance to connect with the emotion Friedrich imbued into his landscapes and figures. Friedrich's landscapes were more than just "records of natural phenomena," they were statements on silence, the sublime, transience, and eternity.[4] Friedrich developed a way to connect the exterior world of Germany with the inner landscapes of the mind. The beautiful and wild sceneries of nineteenth century Germany are what "became the indication of a universal totality beyond our comprehension" in Friedrich's work.[5] The Swedish poet Daniel Amadeus Atterbom (1790-1855) wrote that Friedrich was a "mystic with a brush" who brought to life the beauty of Romantic landscapes.[6] Perhaps like the artist, Friedrich's mysticism might have been born out of his fascination with the northern coast of Germany. The Baltic Sea and the barren dunes on its

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[2] Hofmann, Werner, and Caspar David Friedrich, *Caspar David Friedrich*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 22

[3] William Vaughan, Helmut Börsch-Supan, and Hans Joachim Neidhardt, *Caspar Friedrich 1774-1840: Romantic Landscape Painting in Dresden* (London: Tate Gallery, 1972), 9.

[4] Ibid., 10.

[5] Ibid., 13.

[6] Norbert Wolf, *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840: The Painter of Stillness* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2007).

coastline were often used by Friedrich to create landscapes that put the viewer at the "precipice of nothingness."[7]

Friedrich often depicted the fantastic and mysterious coasts and forest of Germany as a symbol for more. These places laid a foundation for the purpose of evoking more than just a visual curiosity, they were meant to inspire the surfacing of deep spiritual emotions. For Friedrich many of his landscapes embodied a personal obsession with melancholy that represented a cycle of life.[8] Friedrich did not champion the exploration of emotions in artwork, but he was the "first artist to employ this theme in landscape painting."[9]

Friedrich's landscapes were also not exact duplicates of places in Germany. He would fuse together many details from his sketches of German nature. This created a "distinct feeling" in his composite landscapes.[10] He chose which details he painted together based on their visual, mental, and emotional value they would add to his paintings theme.[11] Many of Friedrich's works conveyed universal emotions that were prevalent in people's lives. This often included "the certainty of death and the hope for salvation."[12] Many scholars have linked these emotional themes in Friedrich's works back to his own personal life. These scholars have come to this conclusion through the written records of several of Friedrich's friends and acquaintances. Friedrich was often mentioned as being a melancholic and glum person.[13] Perhaps the events of his life impacted his personality and moods, which transferred into the atmospheric moods of his paintings. Many of his works, such as *Two Men by the Sea at Moonrise* (1817), have dark earthy tones and isolated figures in dreary or secluded landscapes.[14]

The emotion in Friedrich's works could also be a reflection of the emotion felt within the country and its people. At the age of 39, Friedrich lived through the Napoleonic War in Germany and experienced the turmoil of death and the beginnings of nationalism. This national uncertainty and Friedrich's own

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[7] Robert T. Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1975), 23.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Jens Christian Jensen, *Caspar David Friedrich: Life and Work* (New York: Barron's Education Series, Inc., 1981), 106.
[10] William Vaughan, *Romantic Art* (London:Thames and Hudson, Ltd, 1978), 150.
[11] Wolf, *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840*, 8-9.
[12] Jensen, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 106.
[13] Ibid., 103-104.
[14] Caspar David Friedrich, *Two Men by the Sea at Moonrise*, 1817, oil on canvas, 51 x 66cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

personal melancholic state contributed to the development of his landscapes. Because of the beautiful way that Friedrich captured and portrayed emotions within his landscapes, they were dubbed "moodscapes."

Marcel Brion writes, "For the Romantic everything is integrated in the self of the artist, everything emanates from him as a continuous osmosis is established between man and the universal flux in which he feels that he is rooted."[15] Brion's statement reflects how Friedrich thought to use his landscapes as a way to communicate the integration of the universe and the soul of humanity. Friedrich's works have been seen as an attempt at devotional paintings and self-realization.[16] Friedrich's "moodscapes" scratched the surface on just more than human emotion, they were "pictorial spaces that resonate[d] in the psyche."[17] Friedrich had prescribed to Goethe's ideas on *manner*, and held the belief that in order to create a true work of art, he needed to deal with the human psyche. He believed he needed to create works that were *seelnvoll* – "full of soul".[18] Brion believed that viewers of Friedrich's works could come to see where the artist had contemplated nature and created a relation to the soul.[19] Friedrich himself stated the essence of what he was trying to achieve, "Shut the physical eye in order to see your subject first with the spirit's eye, then steer towards the daylight that you have perceived among the shadows."[20] Friedrich was a pure Romantic in this sense, he worked in the most pure form of representing a landscape, through the use of what "dwell[s] in the conscious and the sub-conscious of the painter."[21] He wanted to reach beyond just visually representing a scene or person, he wanted his works to turn the viewer inwards and feel a connection that transcended the physical world. Perhaps Friedrich's most famous work and most representative of these ideas is *The Monk by the Sea* (c.1809).[22] In this work, a lone monk on the edge of a sea is overcome by the vastness of the physical world. The tiny figure faces away from the viewer and peers out towards the murky rough waters and the cloudy skies above. Perhaps the monk is communing with nature or God in a place he feels is the most void of

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[15] Marcel Brion, *Art of the Romantic Era* (New York: Frederick A. Pager, 1966), 114.
[16] Jensen, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 106.
[17] Wolf, *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840*, 9.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Brion, *Art of the Romantic Era*, 114.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*, c. 1809, oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

human disruption. Like the monk, it is speculated that the purchaser of this painting, the Crown Prince Frederick William IV of Prussia, was also fascinated by the "fundamental tone of anchorite isolation" that it depicted.[23] This emotional connection that prince may have had with this work, is what made Friedrich's landscapes so unique in the relationship to the viewer.

Another key element in Friedrich's visionary works was his ability to find and convey the idea of transcendence through landscapes and *rückenfiguren.* In many of the landscapes he painted, the images offer an end to the material world and a halting moment in which the viewer can be confronted with the spiritual.[24] In many of his landscapes there are small fragments of an otherworldly experience that are meant to "make us feel that we have been elevated to an exalted destiny that can no longer be entered by physical means."[25] The feeling of elevation and transcendence of the person or soul is very closely tied with the messages of religion. Friedrich's work "fulfill[ed] the transcendental expectations of religious art" yet they were without a "canonic religious subject."[26] The lack of prevalent religious iconography in the majority of his works but the element of transcendental thought was what categorized Friedrich as a Romantic painter and not a religious painter.

When looking at Friedrich's works, Robert Rosenblum asks, "How does Friedrich persuade us, again and again, that we are at the very edge of the natural world, ready at last to immerse ourselves in something that, for want of a better word, must be called the supernatural – a domain of the mystical speculation about human life and afterlife that before the Romantics found a proper home in the church?"[27] Rosenblum reflects upon the entire nature of Friedrich's works. The viewer is often confronted with the dark and melancholic landscapes that faceless figures are cast into, alone and isolated. For those who study his works, they are aware of the composite nature of the landscapes, but for those who are not, they might often brush Friedrich off as a *just* a landscape painter. The use of Friedrich's faceless *rückenfiguren* are perhaps the element he incorporated to reach beyond the artwork and create a connection with those who might at first not sense the metaphysical elements of the painting. Friedrich's ingenious work on creating this connection is more than just an

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[23] Hoffman, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 53.

[24] Robert Rosenblum and Boris I. Asvarishch, *The Romantic Vision of Caspar David Friedrich: Paintings and Drawings from the U.S.S.R.* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990), 11.

[25] Ibid., 11.

[26] Rosenblum, *Modern Painting*, 14.

[27] Rosenblum and Asvarishch, *The Romantic Vision*, 8.

intrinsic value. Friedrich opened the door of metaphysical art long before an Italian artist would champion it in the twentieth century.

In the early nineteen hundreds, a young artist by the name of Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) would be inspired by Friedrich and his development of Romanticism in the nineteenth century.[28] De Chirico's works developed and matured into a style that today can be traced back to his admiration of the German Romantics.[29] One of the most iconic parts of his works was the barren empty landscape that dominated much of his early career. Those forlorn city-like landscapes reflected the metaphysical qualities that Friedrich had portrayed a century earlier. De Chirico's bleak atmospheres were so specific to his work that this style was later dubbed "Chirico City."[30]

In these cityscapes de Chirico painted "a world of silent squares, peopled with statues and shadows and bounded by far horizons, a world of elegiac beauty and vast dignity."[31] Like Friedrich, de Chirico was influenced from the places around him. In a more modern time and far cry south, these places were Florence and Rome.[32] These beautiful cities would become a part of his need to create his own dream world.[33] Similar in style to Friedrich, de Chirico found "a way to surcharge this world with emotion, to keep it alive and haunted, to keep it still but breathing."[34] De Chirico's paintings explore a different kind of landscape than Friedrich's; gone are the mountains, forests, and coastlines, and painted is the dream world of rigid buildings, towers, and rail lines.[35] Despite the visual differences of the landscapes, there is a link between the two artists and what they were trying to portray. De Chirico had a credo much like Friedrich in which he deemed the inner self to be of a great importance in his works: "What I hear is worth nothing; there is only what I see with my eyes open and, even more, what I see with them closed."[36] After a hundred years, de Chirico would expand upon the metaphysical elements that Friedrich brought to life in his work.

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[28] James Thrall Soby, *The Early Chirico* (new York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1941), 7.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 15
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 16.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Soby, *The Early Chirico*, 16.
[35] Ibid., 21.
[36] Ibid, 40.

De Chirico's metaphysical style is defined by two fundamental concepts: Enigma (Revelation) and Melancholy.[37] De Chirico considered himself to be a melancholic and deemed melancholy to be "a fundamental state of conscience through which every man who looks upon the mystery of life, at the meaning and final objective of all of our suffering, hope, illusion and sorrow, must pass."[38] De Chirico was also heavily influenced by the philosopher Nietzsche whose own meditations lead him to the idea of melancholy as a part of life.[39] Nietzsche's ideas on the non-sense of life influenced de Chirico to transmute this into his art through fleeting gasps of revelation, which are represented as enigmas in his work.[40] De Chirico became a master at representing melancholy through his "love of mystery and the desire to go beyond appearance and the immediate look of things."[41] He was sickened by how art had become a decorative function in life and he wanted to restore art to "its power as a stimulus to deep emotion."[42] Unlike Friedrich, de Chirico took a more direct approach in connecting his viewer with the emotional elements of his work. The strange and alien aspects of the cityscapes are an abrupt visual definition of a metaphysical meaning.

De Chirico was not the only artist to take inspiration from metaphysical aspects of Friedrich's artworks. Many critics and peers of Friedrich saw him as an anomaly of the nineteenth century. One such artist, Adrian Ludwig Richter (1803-1884), commentated that "Friedrich bound us to an abstract idea…"[43] The development of abstract ideas in art would not fully blossom into a recognizable style until the mid-twentieth century with the maturity of Modern art. Friedrich set precedence for the abstract expressionists with his landscapes images that "[waded] deeper into the thick fog of mysticism."[44]

In the late 1940s, the American artist Mark Rothko (1903-1970) became relevant as an abstract expressionist whose paintings were often viewed as abstracted landscapes that dealt with the "inner self."[45] Many critics of his time

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[37] Riccardo Dottori, "The Metaphysical Parable in Giorgio de Chirico's Painting," *Metafisca*, no. 5-6 (2006): 203.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Dottori, "The Metaphysical Parable," 2014.
[42] Soby, *The Early Chirico*, 26.
[43] Wolf, *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840*, 9.
[44] Ibid., 10.
[45] Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subject in Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989), 120.

experienced and commentated on the emotions in Rothko's paintings and deemed it as his special forte.[46] Much like Friedrich worked to link the experience of landscape with personal emotion, Rothko worked to link "color to inner experience."[47] Both artists' paintings were defined by evoking emotion in their viewers, and they both dealt with these various indefinable emotions as they experienced them in their work.[48] Friedrich had metaphorically described his process of painting as "shutting the physical eye" and as Rothko's works progressed in the 1950s, he similarly linked color with his interest in the inner self and human emotion.[49] Much like Friedrich's paintings *Dolmen in the Snow (1807)* and *Dolmen in Autumn (1820)*, Rothko found sources for his paintings in the myths of antiquity because "they expressed man's fears and predatory passions."[50] Rothko painted with a "desire on his part that the viewer vacate the active self" and be lead into a "cosmic identification," which he envisioned would ultimately lead into the "loss of self – death."[51] The necessity of connection and a deeper understanding between the artwork and the viewer is once again another relative quality between Rothko and Friedrich. Rothko calls into question the viewer's "complexity of introspective thoughts and feelings" through his images.[52] Where as Friedrich developed this relationship between the artwork and the viewer through bleak landscapes and *rückenfiguren*, Rothko accomplished this through color minimalism.

Rothko stated that his works were not influenced by landscape, yet it is easy to see where a correlation might be found in Rothko's rectangular fields.[53] There is a Surrealist concept called "inner landscape" or "in-scape" that was conceived by the artist Matta many years before Rothko started creating artwork for the inner self.[54] Robert Rosenblum argues that Rothko's abstract paintings, filled with "hovering tiers of dense, atmospheric color or darkness" evolved from

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[46] Ibid., 121.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid., 122.
[49] Ibid., 120.
[50] Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1970), 175. See also, Caspar David Friedrich, *Dolmen in the Snow*, 1807, oil on canvas, 64.5 x 80cm, Gemaldegalerie Neue Meister, Dresden; and Caspar David Friedrich, *Dolmen in Autumn*, 1820, oil on canvas, 55 x 71cm, Gemaldegalerie Neue Meister, Dresden.
[51] Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 183.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Chave, *Mark Rothko*, 129.
[54] Ibid., 132.

the "landscape imagery of mythic, cosmological character."[55] This is where the argument for Friedrich's landscapes comes in. The transcendental nature of the landscapes in Friedrich's works relate closely to the focus of Rothko's works to create an inner landscape. Beyond the meaning of his works, the visual elements can be tied into the composition of landscapes. Rothko's works appear to have "metaphorical suggestions of an elemental nature: horizontal division evoking the primordial separation of earth or sea from cloud and sky, a luminous field of dense, quietly lambent color that seem to generate the primal energies of natural light."[56] Rothko's works *Untitled (1951), Orange and Yellow (1956), Black and Tan on Red (1957),* and *Number 10 (1950)* demonstrate how these compositions relate to landscapes with their fuzzy yet distinct horizontal divisions.[57] In Anna Chave's book, she argues that there is "a subtle but tense visual tug-of-war [being] waged in Rothko's canvases between the lateral pull of the individual rectangular areas an the vertical movement of the gestalt compromised by the stack of rectangles."[58] Friedrich's landscapes were meant "to function as a metaphor for transcendental or religious experience and to induce the emotions of the sublime."[59] For Rothko, it was the color in his works that prompted "the sense of self-transcendence."[60] Rothko's technique of using thin-layered colors was to enhance the transcendental experience.[61] Friedrich did not paint with color as an abstraction, though he often worked with a muted palette to accomplish the similar connections as Rothko.[62] As an integral part of a painting, color has a large impact on how a viewer relates and reacts to a work of art. For Rothko it was his medium of transporting the viewer. In contrast, Friedrich used more objective means to explore and transport his viewers.

Within Friedrich's works, he enhanced his landscapes and their representation of expressing the inner self and transcendence through his use of limited and distinctly stylized figures. These figures are most often presented to

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[55] Rosenblum, *Modern Painting*, 309.

[56] Ibid., 214.

[57] Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1951, oil on canvas, 236.9 x 144.5cm, Collection of Jane and Terry Semel; Mark Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956, oil on canvas, 231.1 x 180.3cm, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; Mark Rothko, *Black and Tan on Red*, 1957, oil on canvas, 176.5 x 136cm, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. L Donald Grossman; and Mark Rothko, *Number 10*, 1950, oil on canvas, 229.6 x 145.1 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[58] Chave, *Mark Rothko*, 132-133.

[59] Ibid., 129.

[60] Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 183.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Hubert Schrade, *German Romantic Painting* (Cologne: Verlag M. DuMonth Schaubert, 1967), 74.

the viewer in an untraditional way. Friedrich bestowed viewers with images of his figures' backs while they peer into the world of the painting. Friedrich's use of people in landscapes, or commonly termed for landscapes as *staffage*, "is perhaps the most characteristic feature of his approach to the [landscape] genre."[63] *Rückenfigur* or *rückenfiguren* are German terms used to describe the use of a rear-facing figure. Friedrich was not the first artist to use a *rückenfigur* in his works, but he was the first to pioneer their use as a more central and key element of his compositions.[64] Prior to Friedrich's application of *rückenfiguren*, these figures had been used as compositional additions, a foreground object, or often a device to lead the viewer's eye.[65] Friedrich's use of a *rückenfigur* was part of his approach to depict the sublime. He needed an element that would "preserve the unique quality of individual experience."[66] The *rückenfigur* was his solution to creating that preserve within a composition dominated by nature's wildness. These figures acted as a placeholder for the viewer. By including a faceless figure into his works, Friedrich opened the visual dialogue up for the viewer to metaphorically step into the shoes of the figure and imagine the fictional experience presented before them.

The simple balance Friedrich created within his compositions, acted to create a frozen and static quality about the *rückenfigur*.[67] Their implied physical movements may have been arrested by the landscape, but they were meant to elicit an intellectual movement. Their appearance of being transfixed by "the luminous spectacle before them" was meant to be shared and experienced by the viewer.[68] Frozen in time, they still can transport a viewer two centuries later. The addition of the *rückenfiguren* to Friedrich's works helped to solidify his uniqueness from the contemporaries of his time. Today he is not considered a pure genre, landscape, or marine painter because of the relationship he developed between the landscape, figure, and the viewer.[69]

The *rückenfigurs* are a vital part of Friedrich's paintings, whether they are immediately apparent in the painting or not. The first sighting of these

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[63] David L. Mosley, "The Material Thinking of Caspar David Friedrich and Gustav Mahler," *Nature and the Humanities*: 103.
[64] Jensen, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 174.
[65] Ibid., 174-175.
[66] Mosley, "The Material Thinking," 100.
[67] Rosenblum, *Modern Painting*, 21.
[68] Ibid., 21-22.
[69] Ibid., 22.

mysterious figures in his paintings started with his expansion into oils.[70] According to art historian Dr. Jen Christian Jensen:

> The isolation of Friedrich's back-view figures underscores their importance. They are alone, solitary, in pairs or in a small group, in a natural setting. They are aliens in the elementary coordinate system of nature. One always feels that they have only just now entered the painting, to pause for a long moment and then go on.[71]

His paintings *Winter (1808)* and *Monk by the Sea (c. 1809)* "are the first to give the figure a weight that rules the pictures."[72] In Friedrich's *Winter (1808)*, we are confronted with a frozen and departed landscape that is dominated by a tall imposing tree on the left and the broken ruins of a church on the right. The lone figure in this dreary landscape is easily passed over when first viewing the painting, but upon closer examination, he can be found just below the ruins on the right.[73] In such a dark and dismal landscape, a viewer can wonder as to why this traveler or monk would take an expedition out into this quiet and timeworn abyss. There is perhaps a connection the traveler feels with the landscape and thus finds himself alone places where nature has dominated man.

In the painting *Monk by the Sea (c.1809)*, Friedrich confronts his viewers with a small figure, which is engulfed by a much more expansive and barren landscape. The monk is almost lost against the darkened waters of the sea, which creates the horizon line between nature and the sky above.[74] The monk seems mere and insignificant in comparison with the overpowering murky sky. *Monk by the Sea (c.1809)* is an example of how Friedrich's figures are not just objects but are a part of the picture's meaning and essence.[75] The painting depicts a moment when man and nature meet, and in this otherworldly collision," the divine universe unfolds in the tableau of nature, it manifests itself in transcendental infinity."[76] The self-contained layers of this painting in relation to the lone figure

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[70] Jensen, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 173.
[71] Ibid., 175.
[72] Ibid., 173.
[73] Caspar David Friedrich, *Winter*, 1808, oil on canvas, destroyed by fire.
[74] Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*, c. 1809, oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.
[75] Jensen, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 175.
[76] Ibid.

give an impression of an "unlimited experience of space."[77] This suggestion of the expansive and overwhelming quality of the world, lends the viewer the feeling of being either in commune or at odds with the ever-present untamable presence of nature and the unknown.

Friedrich's use of the rear-facing monk in a silent landscape brings forth his greatest need as an artist, "to stimulate the viewer spiritually and arouse thoughts, feelings, and sensations…"[78] Rosenblum's grandiose words connect Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea (c.1809)* with "an experience familiar to the spectator in the modern world, an experience in which the individual is pitted against, or confronted by the overwhelming, incomprehensible immensity of the universe, as if the mysteries of religion had left the rituals of church and synagogue and had been relocated in the natural world."[79] The physicality of a religious building has been replaced with the nature and the universe. Friedrich's monk was painted as if experiencing what would be later termed as existentialism. He appears unbounded by the confinements of man's world and confronted with the glory of nature's freedom.[80] He is on the precipice of leaving the safety of the shore and venturing into the great unknown that dominates the mind, world, and space.

In contrast to the minor presence of the figure in *Monk by the Sea (c.1809)*, Friedrich's paintings *Woman before the Setting Sun (1818-1820)* and *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1817-1818)* are dominated by a *rückenfigur* in the foreground.[81] The figures in each painting, both man and woman, appear to be in the act of experience a fantastical moment of nature.[82] The connection created between the figures and nature has a spiritual quality much like the monk. The calm and accepting appearance of the lone figures communicates a sense of experiencing a religious sacrament.[83] In the painting, *Woman before the Setting Sun (1818-1820)*, the figure's is thought to have been in the act of Holy Communion with nature as her arms are reaching, as if in prayer, towards the hazy rays of the hidden sun.[84] It is thought that with this painting, Friedrich had accomplished something that

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[77] Wolf, *Caspar David Friedrich, 1774-1840*, 31.
[78] Jensen, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 176.
[79] Rosenblum, *Modern Painting*, 14.
[80] Wolf, *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840*, 34.
[81] Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman before the Setting Sun*, 1818-1820, oil on canvas, 22 x 30 cm, Museum Folkwang, Essen; and Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1817-1818, oil on canvas, 94 x 73.5cm, Kunsthalle, Hamburg.
[82] Jensen, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 175.
[83] Ibid, 175.
[84] Wolf, *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840*, 51.

other Romantic artists had tried to depict, "man's yearning for the infinite and his perpetual separation from it."[85]

In respect to the work *Wanderer over the Sea of Fog (1817-1818)*, Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert (1780-1860) wrote "… it was a picture of the kind that only an aeronaut can see, when he rises in his airship above the height of the clouds… up to where… the untroubled blue of the heaven is visible between the wisps of mist."[86] The awkward angle and the view to figure receives, is one of pure imagination. Perhaps Friedrich painted his wanderer far above the fog in search for greater meaning or he was meant to be seeking his place within the infinite.

A significant outlier of Friedrich's work is *Woman at the Window (1822)*.[87] This painting is dominated by the rear-facing figure of a woman as she leans out a window and the landscape is no longer a visually defining feature of this painting. The outside has been narrowed down to the view accessible through the window, and the bare interior of the room becomes the setting. By having veered away from the typical composite landscape Friedrich experimented with a more internal relationship than external. Schrade aptly describes Friedrich's attempt at linking the inner self and nature:

> That outdoor world, all earth and sky, is what the woman is seeing, yet she is not really looking at anything. Her glance has become a motionless gaze, an inner awareness of something, which does not so much embrace the ships as their soundless passage – no the trees in their solid stance but the way they shimmer in the light. Most of all, the woman's awareness encompasses the great sky and the clouds sailing across it like ships, even though she is not looking up at the sky but at the ships in the water.[88]

In some interpretations, the dark interior in which the woman stands symbolizes "the narrowness of the terrestrial world in which light only enters through the window."[89] The open window, which she leans towards, represents an "opening

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[85] Vaughan, *Romantic Art*, 142.

[86] Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman at the Window*, 1822, oil on canvas, 44 x 73 cm, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

[87] Schrade, *German Romantic Painting*, 78.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Helmut Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich* (Munic: Prestel-Verlag, 1990), 154.

to the supernatural world."[90] Is the room a symbolic place of the unenlightened, and the world beyond it the place of man's connection to others and spirituality? The unseen river outside, that is suggested by the masts of the two ships, possibly correlates to the symbolism of the River Styx and which is further interpreted as such by the presence of the poplar trees standing tall across the river on the opposite bank.[91] These could be interpreted as a longing for death and transcendence to the beyond. For some commentators, the shore across the river Elbe is a symbol of Paradise.[92] It has been suggested that the painting is a representation of Friedrich's own preoccupation with death or could have been a representation of how the "problem of death can be overcome by seeing it simply as the difference between two ways of life."[93] Perhaps not all viewers have and will reach the full meaning of Friedrich works, but the *rückenfigur* demands a curiosity that peaks the imagination.

In conjunction with his composite landscapes and the *rückenfiguren,* Friedrich often employs the dramatic imagery of dawn and dusk to compound the effect of "having arrived at the last outpost of the terrestrial world."[94] Rosenblum looks at Friedrich's landscapes in two different ways: "as settings for objects of contemplation…. Or [as] views toward an infinity where light itself is the object to be contemplated."[95] Friedrich's ability to have immersed his works in such haunting atmospheres of light was another element that captured the minds of his viewers. Friedrich painted both a landscape of contemplation and light as an object of contemplation. In his work, *Two Men by the Sea at Moonrise (1817)*, the perspective looks out towards the figures on the rocky sea shore as the moon ascends into the night's sky.[96] Once again, these men stand on edge of their material landscape, and the viewer must perceive this from a distance behind them.[97] Friedrich portrayed these men as something not to be disturb, a quiet ceremony of experience in which the viewer is intruding upon. Does the viewer imagine calling out to the men or quietly perceive their moment of their experience with nature? Several years before *Two Men by the Sea at Moonrise*

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[90] Ibid.
[91] Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 154.
[92] Vaughan, Börsch-Supan, and Neidhardt, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 77.
[93] Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 154.
[94] Rosenblum and Asvarishch, *The Romantic Vision*, 11.
[95] Ibid., 56.
[96] Caspar David Friedrich, *Two Men by the Sea at Moonrise,* 1817, oil on canvas, 51 x 66 cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.
[97]Rosenblum and Asvarishch, *The Romantic Vision*, 11.

(1817) Friedrich painted a similar landscape, *Evening Landscape with Two Men (1830-1835).*[98] The painting depicts two figures in medieval garb being immersed in a twilight landscape where they gaze upon the hilly land below as its crevices are taken over by water.[99] The figures are silhouetted by the orange glow of the setting sun and the landscape spreads out below them from the perch on a hill. Together they experience the beauty and reflections of the mystical hour before night.

Friedrich often used dusk and dawn as a symbol of the cycles of life – of birth and death.[100] In *Moonrise by the Sea (c.1822)*, the viewer approaches a scene where evening is falling and the landscape is settling into a dreamy quiet state.[101] The three isolated figures are surrounded by a dream-like world, which appears to be "extending between yearning and melancholy, between near and far, [and] between this world and the universe."[102] The figures are riveted by the rising moon, an image often used to symbolize Christ, and by the sea-faring ships. These returning ships were often used as symbols for the approaching end of life.[103] Friedrich drew on the experiences of his life to infuse emotion into his works. His constant reference to the cycle of life was perhaps a reflection of how the seasons changed and the days grew drearier and nature decayed in the countryside around him.[104] The dusks and dawns depicted in his work heightened and dramatized the emotion perceived in the landscapes he painted.

Friedrich painted the effects of light in other scenes void of the reflective nature of the sea. The *rückenfiguren* can be found contemplating a scene as the light changes before them in other works such as *The Cemetery Entrance (1825), The Dreamer (1820-1840),* and *The Evening Star (1830).*[105] *The Evening Star (1830)* depicts a mother with her son and daughter in a landscape silhouetted by the

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[98] Caspar David Friedrich, *Evening Landscape with Two Men*, 1830-35, oil on canvas, 25 x 31cm, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg

[99] Rosenblum and Asvarishch, *The Romantic Vision*, 74-75.

[100] Wolf, *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840*, 69.

[101] Caspar David Friedrich, *Moonrise by the Sea*, c.1822, oil on canvas, 71 x 55cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

[102] Wolf, *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840*, 72.

[103] Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 138.

[104] Wolf, *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840*, 66.

[105] Caspar David Friedrich, *The Cemetery Entrance*, 1825, oil on canvas, 143 x 110cm, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden; and Caspar David Friedrich, *The Dreamer*, 1820-40, oil on canvas, 27 x 21cm, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

setting sun.[106] The family has gone for a quiet walk on a hilltop overlooking the eastern German city of Dresden. Once again, the depiction of this family's journey home represents the "approaching end of life."[107] Much like the painting *Woman before the Setting Sun (1818-1820)*, the young boy is greeting the city and the setting sun with his arms stretched open. Friedrich strengthens his undertone of death through the use of the "evening star" in his title, which symbolizes death and resurrection. The poplar trees painted along the edges of the horizon also are a common signifier of death.[108] Friedrich uses the depiction of this young and joyous child to "symbolize the longing for death" and the reason for mankind's existence is "dominated [with the] longing to return to the transcendental."[109] In order to transcend the physical world, one's life must reach its end and release the soul.

Another notable painting by Friedrich that deals with his figures contemplating the changing time of day is *Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon (1824).*[110] The coupled figures are standing under a pine tree where they are in rapture of the Moon. In the foreground of the figures, there is a stump of a pine tree, an allegory of a Christian, which alludes to the death of these two travelers.[111] Much of Friedrich's work reflected upon contemplating death and the idea of transcendence. Many of his lonely travelers became the medium in which he painted his ideas on death and nature came to represent the mystical elements of transcendence.

Friedrich did not abstract the physical depictions of his figure in his persistence of infusing them with abstract meanings. In the twentieth century, the world saw the abstraction of the figure to extremes that matched the abstract ideas Friedrich intended to portray. The art movements of Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism were a few that pushed past representational imagery and into the realm of total abstraction. Both Rothko and de Chirico were at the epicenter of abstracting the figure and its implications.

Despite that there are no visual figures in a majority of his paintings, Rothko described his artwork as "pictures of a single human figure – alone in a

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[106] Caspar David Friedrich, *The Evening Star*, 1830, oil on canvas, 32.1 x 45cm, Goethe Museum, Frankfurt.
[107] Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 166
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Caspar David Friedrich, *Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon*, 1824, oil on canvas, 34 x 44cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.
[111] Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 168.

moment of utter immobility."[112] His purpose was to put the viewer "at the brink of a resonant void from which any palpable form is banned."[113] Rothko deducted the human form from Friedrich's *rückenfiguren* while maintaining the emotion and experience they had invited the viewer to have. As mentioned before, Rothko's paintings have an idea of a landscape about them but they also deal with the inner self. For Rothko, his paintings of the inner self are created so that there is an understanding of the link between "a human being and his or her environment."[114] His abstract perceptions are centered around a human perspective, even without an identifiable figure in his works.[115] Compared to Rothko's own contemporaries, he was seen as conservative when it came to moving past the relationship of figures and the ground.[116] His rectangles were considered still to be abstract figures and thus his paintings retained the tamer subject of the figure-ground relation.[117] Despite the semblance of holding on to the figure, Rothko accomplished the bridge between painting and the viewer through color, where Friedrich use figures, nature, and lighting elements.

Giorgio de Chirico worked many years before Rothko, and he still clung to a semblance of recognizable form. The most apparent correlation of de Chirico's figures with Friedrich's is during an early stage in his work known as the metaphysical phase.[118] De Chirico's painting *The Enigma of the Oracle (1910)* appears much like a modernization of Friedrich's work[119] The painting depicts a man, described as an oracle, with his back turned to the viewer while he gazes upon a landscape below.[120] This figure, like many of Friedrich's, leaves the viewer with a feeling of uncertainty and otherworldliness that is hard to define.[121] The strangeness of de Chirico's figures adds to the mystical quality of his works. The forms are still recognizable as human, but they are bordering on the abstract. The environment has also moved past any recognizable location, and become something more obviously imagined.

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[112] Rosenblum, *Modern Painting*, 213.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Chave, *Mark Rothko*, 133.
[115] Ibid., 132.
[116] Ibid., 140.
[117] Ibid.
[118] "Giorgio de Chirico and the Quantum Metaphysics of Art: Convergences Between Existentialism, Symbolism & Romanticism," *Lexzine Magazine* (2013).
[119] Soby, *The Early Chirico*, Plate 1.
[120] Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of the Oracle*, 1910, oil on canvas, 42 x 61cm, Private Collection.
[121] Soby, *The Early Chirico*, 16.

One of de Chirico's most important earliest works was the painting titled *The Enigma of an Autumn Evening (1910)*.[122] For many this painting was seen as the key painting that led to the revival of Romanticism in the twentieth century.[123] The painting contains two figures, excluding the sculpture, which are turned away from the viewer. In contrast to Friedrich's fantastical views, these figures do not appear to be contemplating anything but a wall.[124] When looking at two of de Chirico's other works, *The Enigma of the Hour (1914)* and *The Enigma of the Arrival and the Afternoon (1911-1912)*, the influence of Friedrich's *rückenfiguren* can be seen.[125] Later in de Chirico's career he would continue to use his sparse alien landscapes, but he would often replace his small *rückenfiguren* with the imagery of faceless mannequins.

Another of de Chirico's works, *The Melancholy of Departure (1914)*, contains two small indistinct figures standing in a place of isolation and stillness.[126] Beyond the two figures the viewer can see the "presence of a train in motion" traveling past this desolate station.[127] In many of de Chirico's paintings, the audience sees these tiny figures as visitors or the left behind remnants of perhaps a civilization that was once there. Much like Friedrich, de Chirico's figures are isolated and appear alienated in landscapes of "existential solitude."[128] And much like Friedrich's depiction of the "yearning of the infinite," de Chirico achieved a "more persistent element of human presence in the conflict with the awe inspired by the Unknown Known."[129] The elements of the landscape's world are recognizable, but are strange and out of place. Perhaps here the viewer is no longer asked to step into the shoes of the figures, but to be spectators of the mysterious places and people that are painted. Evan Maurer writes that de Chirico "sought to express his personal consciousness of mystery and the sense

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[122] Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of an Autumn Evening*, 1910, oil on canvas, 45 x 60cm, Private Collection.
[123] Soby, *The Early Chirico*, 16.
[124] Ibid., Plate 2.
[125] Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of the Hour,* 1914, oil on canvas, 185.5 x 139.7cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of the Arrival and the Afternoon,* 1911-12, oil on canvas, 70 x 86.5cm, Private Collection.
[126] "Giorgio de Chirico and the Quantum Metaphysics of Art," *Lexine Magazine*. See also, Giorgio de Chirico, *The Melancholy of Departure (Gare Montparnasse),* 1914, oil on canvas, 140 x 184.5cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
[127] "Giorgio de Chirico and the Quantum Metaphysics of Art," *Lexine Magazine*.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid.

of his special role as a creator… of metaphysical scenes" in his paintings.[130] De Chirico painted the abstract landscapes and people in his mind and used them to convey the very sad things he saw in reality. His ability to create works that were separated from reality is what inspired many of the artists in the well-known movement of Surrealism.

The successes of new ideas are often built off the principles of old ones. Both Rothko and de Chirico abstracted and developed work that can trace its roots back to Friedrich's remarkably unique attempts at merging art and the metaphysical. Both twentieth century artists are perhaps indebted to Friedrich for exploration into the visual representation of life and the psyche, but they were also both visionaries in changing how art was perceived. We shall never know what art may have looked like without the developments of Friedrich, but the accomplishments of all three of these artists continue to inspire and challenge the minds of artists and viewers today

[130] Evan M. Maurer, "A Metaphysical Interior by Giorgio de Chirico," *The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin* (1971-1973): 68-71.