Three Paintings from Dresden
and the New Concepts of Art of the Early 19th Century

Carl-Johan Olsson
Curator, Paintings and Sculpture

Fig. 1 Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869), Fantasy of the Alps, 1822. Oil on canvas, 52.5 x 67 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7308.
ACQUISITIONS/THREE PAINTINGS FROM DRESDEN AND THE NEW CONCEPTS OF ART OF THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY

The newly acquired works, Carus’s *Fantasy of the Alps* is a kind of manifesto, in which the artist employs several of the key compositional devices of Romanticism. There is a grandeur to his subject, with its broad perspective stretching into the distance. Leypold’s image of two trees represents a segment of nature as a subtly heightened reality, in line with the Romantic idea of making the familiar unfamiliar. Baade’s view of Dresden, meanwhile, is an example of how these artists used the sky and the city to create an awareness of a spiritual presence in the viewer’s own immediate environment.

New content
To explain more fully the significance of these three pictures, it is important to place them in the context of the cultural and philosophical melting pot of early-19th-century Dresden. This was a time when not only image making, but also the way people looked at images was changing. Put simply, the viewing of art went from being a rational, intellectually determined process to something subjective and emotional. When Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Monk by the Sea* (Fig. 2) was exhibited at the Academy of Arts in Berlin in 1810, it represented a definitive breakthrough for a new way of depicting nature and,
with it, a new way of looking at the resultant art.¹

Carus’s *Fantasy of the Alps* has several features in common with Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea*. The most striking similarity is that, at the concrete level, both artists have reduced their subject matter to a minimum of elements: a simple foreground, a vast and desolate middle ground, and a distant horizon and sky. This simplicity, coupled with closeness to nature, goes a long way to explaining how the viewing of art evolved into a more subjective search for the meaning of an image. In 1810, a painting like Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea* must have been regarded as astonishingly empty or uneventful, in the sense that no narrative or portion of a narrative unfolded within it.² The viewer was confronted with what appeared to be a segment of tangible nature, devoid of literary, biblical or mythological references. What did this entail for the process of viewing and the means by which a viewer could arrive at content and meaning?

**From tangible content to an intangible dimension**

Much was written during this period about nature symbolism and the relationship between nature and the divine. In the thinking of philosophers and poets such as Schelling, Schiller and Novalis, one of the fundamental ideas was that of a new relationship between the viewer and the work of art. Virtually all the aesthetic and philosophical texts produced by this circle of writers highlighted the viewer’s powers of imagination as crucial to experiencing and comprehending the meaning of an artwork. This presupposed that the literary and historical references were not too obvious, as there would be a danger otherwise of their constraining the viewer’s experience. The new way of viewing art required, rather, that an image both stimulated and left room for the imagination. Referring to Ludwig Tieck’s texts, Synnöve Clason describes the devices he uses to achieve this in the following terms:
Schelling regarded nature and spirit, not as two separate dimensions, but as united in a single spiritual reality, a reality with room for the imagination. In his day, the word spirit, or the Spirit, did not refer exclusively to the Holy Spirit or God, but to an intangible dimension that perhaps best illustrated Schelling’s notion of a primal force permeating the whole of existence.

In the text of a literary work, as in the visual constructions of pictorial art, the concern was to create, in the concrete stratum of the piece, elements of incompleteness that stimulated the imaginative powers of the reader or viewer. Hints of a hidden content that was not entirely accessible could be achieved, for example, by mist and darkness. These cast a mysterious veil over the content, which was there, but was not directly readable. Another starting point for a person’s intellectual and literary experience was the idea of spirit, perhaps best illustrated by Schelling’s notion of a primal force permeating the whole of existence.

It is a matter of making magic. Fewer words than in popular literature, but a stronger emanating force. Collocations such as moonlit night, sighing in the trees and ruby glow are repeated like mantras. The text is filled with acoustic signals that bewilder and confuse the figures of the narrative.6

In the text of a literary work, as in the visual constructions of pictorial art, the concern was to create, in the concrete stratum of the piece, elements of incompleteness that stimulated the imaginative powers of the reader or viewer. Hints of a hidden content that was not entirely accessible could be achieved, for example, by mist and darkness. These cast a mysterious veil over the content, which was there, but was not directly readable. Another starting point for a person’s intellectual and literary experience was the idea of spirit, perhaps best illustrated by Schelling’s notion of a primal force permeating the whole of existence.

Schelling regarded nature and spirit, not as two separate dimensions, but as united in a single spiritual reality, a reality with room for the imagination. In his day, the word spirit, or the Spirit, did not refer exclusively to the Holy Spirit or God, but to an intangible dimension that
encompassed the divine, together with elements and conditions that stimulated other areas of intellectual and spiritual life. Schelling viewed art as nature raised to a higher power. Its purpose was to charge or concentrate nature and present it in such a way that, within it, the viewer could experience spirit.

Carl Gustav Carus’s *Fantasy of the Alps* (Fig. 1) is an almost programmatic example of Schelling’s thinking. In it, there are two elements that suggest a rich content and a sense of the infinite: the mists shrouding the mountain landscape, and the horizon, promising a land beyond it. Carus’s painting shows marked similarities to Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, from 1818 (Fig. 3). In both works, a projecting mass of rock forms the foreground to a dizzying view of distant mountains. The middle ground is enveloped in dense fog. Yet there are also significant differences. In Friedrich’s image, the fog is pierced by rocky peaks, whereas in Carus’s it blankets all that lies below. In the latter painting, the rock in the foreground is beyond our reach, while in Friedrich’s it extends across the entire width of the picture space.

Of Friedrich’s *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, Helmut Börsch-Supan writes that the rocks emerging from the mists in the middle distance are a reference to the labyrinths of human life, which the man on the rock now rises above. Börsch-Supan tends to be very specific in his interpretation of the possible symbolic meanings of individual elements of Friedrich’s paintings. Here, the interpretation he offers is confirmed by the wanderer turning his back on the viewer and gazing out into the infinite, illustrating the longing of Romanticism. This is something Goethe describes in detail in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, when Werther observes that the attraction which the distant exerts over him continues into infinity. In that respect, the medium of the visual image is superior to reality, in that the distant remains distant and we as
The following lines from Novalis offer a possible conceptual basis both for the creation of paintings like Friedrich’s *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* and Carus’s *Fantasy of the Alps*, and for the way we look at them:

Great is the gain when the striving to understand nature completely is ennobled to yearning, a tender, diffident yearning that gladly accepts the strange, cold creature, in the hope that she will some day become more familiar. Within us there lies a mysterious force that tends in all directions, spreading from a center hidden in infinite depths. If wondrous nature, the nature of the senses and the nature that is not of the senses, surrounds us, we believe this force to be an attraction of nature, an effect of our sympathy with her; but behind these blue, distant shapes one man will seek a home that they withhold, a beloved of his youth, mother and father, brothers and sisters, old friends, cherished times past; to another it seems that out there unknown glories await him, a radiant future is hidden, and he stretches forth his hand in quest of a new world. A few stand calmly in this glorious

Fig. 6 Knut Baade (1808–1879), *Dresden at Sunset*, 1848. Oil on wood, 16 x 22 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7325.
abode, seeking only to embrace it in its plenitude and enchantment; no detail makes them forget the glittering thread that joins the links in rows to form the holy candelabrum, and they find beatitude in the contemplation of this living ornament hovering over the depths of night. The ways of contemplating nature are innumerable; at one extreme the sentiment of nature becomes a jocose fancy, a banquet, while at the other it develops into the most devout religion, giving to a whole life direction, principle, meaning.⁸

Friedrich’s Wanderer can essentially be regarded as an illustration of Novalis’s thinking, with its human figure gazing out over distant mountains. What, then, are we to make of the birds in Carus’s Fantasy of the Alps? To begin with, we can note that we approach this image differently: it is not as obvious as in Friedrich’s painting how we are to identify with its figures. At the same time, the view is just as dizzying, exerting the same kind of attraction. One possibility is that Carus wanted to locate his subject in a higher sphere, more inaccessible to humans. His intention in doing so could have been to try to bring about, in an image with stronger religious undertones, a clearer, more literal union of the divine and the earthly world. The art historian Florian Illies has suggested that this painting could be a “friendship picture”, in which the birds represent Friedrich and Carus⁸ – an interpretation that is of interest in relation to the Romantic idea of the artist as endowed with a gaze that sees things others are not immediately receptive to. In a metaphorical sense, the birds represent this sharper, boundless gaze. By arousing the viewer’s curiosity about the country beyond the mountains, they serve as meaning-bearing elements of the image. These eagles can fly and thus easily make their way to that distant land, just like the ships leaving harbour in other paintings by Friedrich. In the Nationalmuseum collection, Carus’s work thus provides a good example of the revolutionary change Romanticism brought to art and our experience of it.

The next painting, Oak and Birch by Carl Julius von Leybold (Fig. 4), is an illustration of how an artist can represent nature in such a way that it comes across as a heightened reality. The status of this work is not entirely easy to determine. It could be regarded as an oil study, painted on paper and provided with an exact date. At the same time, its technique seems somewhat too detailed and worked over to fit that description.¹⁰ What is more, the subject matter appears to be arranged with a view to signalling a metaphysical meaning of the same kind as in paintings by Caspar David Friedrich. A case in point is his Fir Trees in the Snow from 1828 (Fig. 5), one of several paintings showing small segments of nature which he produced at that time. Like Leybold, Friedrich painted with a detailed precision that withstands close scrutiny. Leybold’s image is at once naturalistic and stylised. At the same time, it is as if he has deliberately given sufficient prominence to the actual painting or representation to avoid the illusion being complete. This is most clearly apparent in the silhouetted branches with their filigree-like pattern, reminiscent of Gothic ornament. This balancing act between truth to nature and artistry can be directly linked to Novalis’s classic fragment about how the poet and the artist should treat nature in order to make visible the spirit within it:

*The world must be romanticised. In that way we rediscover its original sense. To romanticise is nothing other than a qualitative raising to a higher power. In this operation, the lower self is identified with a better self. Just as we ourselves are such a qualitative series of powers, the operation is as yet entirely unknown. By giving the common a higher meaning, the ordinary a mysterious look, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite the appearance of the infinite, I romanticise it …*¹¹

Although both Leybold’s Oak and Birch and Friedrich’s Fir Trees in the Snow give the impression of being segments of reality viewed close up, in no sense are they botanical studies. The attraction of what appears to lie beyond the trees is far too strong for us to look no further as we contemplate these images.

The last of the three paintings is Dresden at Sunset from 1838, by Knut Baade (1808–1879) (Fig. 6). Baade spent several years in the city as a student of Johan Christian Dahl, and also came into contact with Caspar David Friedrich during his stay. The newly acquired painting is a small panel measuring only 16 x 22 cm. It shows Dresden at sunset, viewed from the bank of the Elbe just outside the city. In several respects, this work, too, is an example of how the lines of Novalis quoted above were translated into artistic practice. Baade has created an almost magical picture of Dresden. He uses a device often encountered in Friedrich’s painting, transforming the sky into a spectacle that seems supernatural, and yet is in fact based on natural phenomena that are entirely possible. An interesting detail is the two figures standing talking in the lower right of the picture. They appear oblivious to the majestic heavenly display, possibly Baade’s way of emphasising the everyday character of the scene. A way of demonstrating that spirit is everywhere and constantly present, and that we each choose when and where we seize hold of it. Finally, it can be asked whether Baade deliberately opted for the modest format in order to demonstrate the power of his subject, with a grandeur that we perceive despite the size.

With these three acquisitions, the Nationalmuseum will thus be able to show how a new concept of art and a new way of viewing it were formulated by the Romantics of Dresden. It was at this time, too, that landscape painting became a truly independent genre, free from any links to literary or historical sources. It was a genre, though, that rested on a new view of nature and new ideas about what an image was capable of conveying.
Notes:
1. A similar way of viewing art had of course existed before this, but it had not, as it were, been legitimised.
2. We get some idea of how the painting was received from Clemens Brentano’s satirical account of visitors’ reactions when it was exhibited. See for example Miller, Philip B., Anxiety and Abstraction: Kleist and Brentano on Caspar David Friedrich in Art Journal, Vol. 33, No 3 (Spring, 1974) pp. 205–210.
10. The trunks of the trees, for example, appear to be painted in a way that could probably not have been done wet into wet.