

# Death and Transcendence: Starting from Caspar David Friedrich's Images of Oak Trees

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## Abstract

With the purpose of investigating Caspar David Friedrich's view of art and nature, as well as exploring his reconciliation with the shadow of death, this essay will take Friedrich's images of oak trees as the center of discussion. Methods of iconography and literature study will be employed to synthesize and analyse his personal letters and texts, the writings of contemporaneous philosophers, and existing studies. Influenced by his family's Lutheran beliefs and contemporaries' Romantic view of nature, Friedrich utilized landscapes with images of oaks as mediums for realizing reconciliation with finite life by placing his hope in religion and incorporating his personal life into the eternal cycle of nature. Meanwhile, affected by the theory of "Spiel" of Schiller, Friedrich's art aimed at "das Göttliche" and realizing the harmony between inner and outer life in order to achieve freedom. This study will not only establish the connection between Friedrich's artistic conception and the philosophical thinking of his era, but also enrich the academic study on his motif of oak trees.

**Keywords:** Friedrich, oak trees, death, conciliation, freedom

## 1. Introduction

Caspar David Friedrich is one of the representative German Romantic landscape painters. Dead trees, weeds, misty nature, ruins and cemeteries in the North German were subjects he observed and depicted continuously. What's worth mentioning is that images of withered and formulated oak trees ran throughout his art career. They were based on his en plain air sketches and arranged in different scenes imaginatively in his landscape paintings.

Friedrich's preference for oak trees in certain kind of life symptom were influenced by many aspects. Firstly, while studying in The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, he followed paradigm of Classicism, studied his teacher's landscape painting with a withered oak tree, which was Jens Juel's *A Late Evening after sunset. Twilight* (Figure 1). Additionally, in the background of the French revolution and with the rising awareness of national identity in his region, oak tree was known as the freedom tree as the social consensus. They combined with images of Dolmen and man in altdeutsch respectively by Friedrich to construct the historical landscape paintings of a united Germany.<sup>1</sup>

Based on these former conclusions, discussion in this essay will mainly focus on images of oak trees' relationship with Friedrich's personal life experience and his philosophical thinking of art and nature, aim to address how Friedrich took landscape paintings with withered oak trees as the media to reconcile with his shadow of death and achieve the freedom spiritually.



Figure 1. Jens Juel, *A late evening after sunset. Twilight*, 1780s? oil on canvas, Bruun Rasmussen, Denmark

## 2. The Shadow of Death and the Redemption of Religion

Influenced by the belief of his original family and childhood experience, Friedrich depicted the subject of death frequently and find reconciliation in religion. Friedrich was born in Greifswald in Northern German along the Baltic sea. His original family had ten kids, he ranked the sixth, and lived on the production of soap and candles. Friedrich's father was a devoted Lutheran and taught his kids with strict Lutheran dogmas. Friedrich had to face death since young: his mother died in 1781; he witnessed his brother Johan Christoffer drown when skating on the ice in 1787; his sister Maria suffered from typhoid fever and died in 1787. Especially his brother's death left him with deep shadow in his heart, this event always appeared in his friends' description of him.

However, the shadow of death did not mean Friedrich's negative attitude toward life. He explored the way of reconciliation with death and limited life by art. In his poet *Aphorisms about art and life* (*Aphorismen über Kunst und Leben*), he explained reason for his frequent depiction of death: "To live forever once, One must often surrender to death"<sup>2</sup>. As Lutheran, he believed that everyone should find their own way to the God<sup>3</sup>. He followed The Ten Commandments and religious virtue in his daily life, including the traditional family virtue. One year after gaining steady income in Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, he married Caroline Bommer. Friedrich expressed his positive feeling of marriage when he wrote to his relatives: "Since the I has turned into We, many things have changed. We eat more, drink more, sleep more, laugh more, chat more and talk more. We also spend more money, and perhaps we will have no shortage of worries in the future, but that is God's pleasure and will"<sup>4</sup>. After his marriage, he painted *On the sailing Boat* (1819), which atmosphere was tranquil, different from majority of his sublime landscape paintings. In this painting, his wife and him seated in Rückendigur on the sailboat, on the opposite side of the sea was a church. In *Village landscape in the morning light* (Figure 2), the combination of withered oak tree and churches on the distant view symbolized the undefeated faith to the God. Additionally, in *The Stages of Life* (1935), he presented himself as an elderly in Rückendigur, walking towards his youth self, wife and children, the middle view and the distant view are sea, sailing boats and sky. Presenting life in three different stages was not only his perception of passing time, but also his desire to God's the Otherworld.

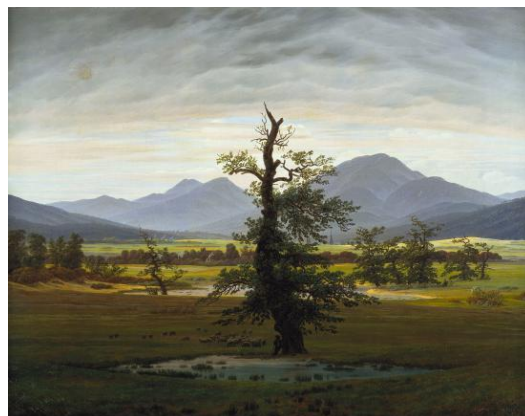


Figure 2. *Village landscape in the morning light*, 1822, oil on canvas, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

The other reason for his frequent depiction of death can be related to his concern over his artistic career

development, because his paintings with this subject were thought highly of by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Friedrich attended the competition *The Deeds of Herculous* held by Weimar with *Summer landscape with dead oak tree* (1805) and *Pilgrimage at sunset* (1805) in 1805<sup>5</sup>. His works did not related to the theme of the competition, but was favoured by Goethe, then winning himself half of the prize and was collected by Weimar<sup>6</sup>. The very low horizon, tiny human figures, composition dominated by withered oak trees in *Summer landscape with dead oak tree* were widely employed in Friedrich's future paintings, *Abbey in the Oakwood* (Figure 3) was included.

Friedrich encountered his father's death in the same year as he painted the *Abbey in the Oakwood*. This painting depicted a funeral procession, walking through the oak forest and ruins of monastery. Heavy mist spread in the middle of the space and covered beholders' vision. Only few branches of oak trees and the summit of the ruin broke through the mist and stretch towards the sky. This work attended the exhibition in Berlin Academy of Art, attracted the attention from the public and the royal family and was sold to Friedrich Wilhelm III in the end<sup>7</sup>. Friedrich can not provide this painting with narrative explanation, but reckoned that he depicted the secret and future of the tomb, which people could only see and recognize it through belief<sup>8</sup>. Although many audiences at that time considered this painting as desperate death, but according to Theodor Körner's Sonnet *Friedrich's landscape of death (Friedrichs Totenlandschaft)*, he pointed out its positive significance in reconciling with the death from the perspective of religion<sup>9</sup>: "Then it becomes clear to me in those melodies: The fountain of grace has flowed into death, And those are comrades of bliss, Who pass through the grave to the eternal light."<sup>10</sup>



Figure 3. *The Abbey in oakwood*, 1809-1810, oil on canvas, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

To conclude, the death of Friedrich's brother was the root of his consecutive depiction of death and the preference for this subject was also aim to cater to his contemporary's taste. He communicated with death in his landscape paintings with withered oak trees, nature and monastery ruins, meanwhile, reposed the hope of reconciliation with the death in God's the Otherworld.

### 3. Friedrich's Nature Turn

When Gotthilf Heirich von Schubert, a natural scientist and Philosopher talked about Friedrich, he mentioned that Friedrich let himself drown in the sorrow of his brother's death, did not want any comfort<sup>11</sup>. Karl Gustav Carus, Friedrich's physician and friend, not only did he mention about Friedrich's childhood trauma, but also pointed out that he had thoughts of committed suicide once. Besides, he was also not interested in taking part in luxury social activities and did not join any professors in Dresden Academy of Fine Arts<sup>12</sup>.

Influenced by his melancholy character, Friedrich explored his art style in a solitary way, which was explained in his *Aphorisms about art and life*: "You call me a misanthrope because I avoid company. You are wrong, I love them. But in order not to hate people, I must refrain from socialising"<sup>13</sup>. His alienation from the public was originated from the disappointment, which he felt when his feelings about art did not resonate with others: "You often praised me for how beautifully this had been done, how deeply and marvelously I thought. Sometimes I was silent, sometimes I smiled. When I felt with all my soul, something free and full of spirit escaped from my brush, however, you remained cold, it could disappoint my soul."<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that he was not into social activities, he loved people: "Fear nothing! Those who still love people cannot hate people!"<sup>15</sup>

The spiritual communication that Friedrich desired can not be attained among social life, responded by the nature instead. Schubert recorded: "Rügen island was the place where Friedrich loved to stay in... When the rain carried with thunder and lightening came over the surface of the sea, he seemed to be the person who made a covenant of friendship with these natural power, rushed towards them on the rocky edge of the coast or followed them into the oak forests. In the place where lightening split the tall tree into two, he murmured: "How great,

how powerful, how marvellous!”<sup>16</sup>. Friedrich’s action showcased the life symptom of Romanticists in the mysterious state of trance, which was incorporated his own life into the nature and found the oneness among all things.

Such oneness between the self and the nature embodied the nature view of early romanticists. In their system, everything was connected, phenomena in nature can be symbolically understood as human emotions<sup>17</sup>. These concepts existed in Friedrich’s contemporaneous philosophers and artists, such as Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller and Philipp Otto Runge. In Schelling’s philosophy of art, the supreme relation between art and nature is that nature is the media of art and our souls are visible in nature<sup>18</sup>. Runge endowed everything with a human spirit: “as with all flowers and trees, a certain human spirit and concept or sentiment abides in all things”<sup>19</sup>. In Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, he used the example of flowers’ boom and fade to explain die Person and der Zustand of man. Specifically speaking, after personifying a flower, blossom and fade are its Zustand. Only when a flower blossoms and fades, it exists as a flower; only when it maintain its nature as a flower, it existed as a flower. As it is with plants, so it is with man. Man is equipped with both unchanging Person and changing Zustand. Although Person and Zustand contradicted with each other, they prove the existence of each other and composed the man as a whole.



Figure 4. *Oak Tree in the Snow*, 1827, oil on canvas, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

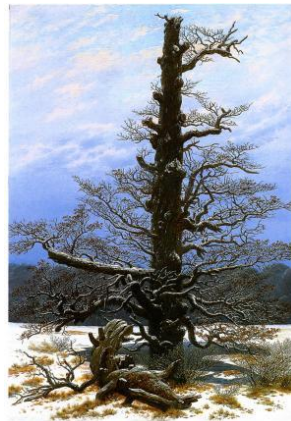


Figure 5. *Oak Tree in the Snow*, 1829, oil on canvas, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne

Two *Oak in the Snow* (Figure 4, 5) by Friedrich in his late years were considered as personified oak trees according to scholars. Helmut-Börsch Supan held that these two oak trees manifested characters and fates like human-beings<sup>20</sup>. Nina Amstutz reckoned that these two oak trees were self-portraits of artist himself. By comparing them with contemporaneous anatomical drawings of human bodies, she suggested that they were embodiment of artist’s conceivment of the body as nature and his search for continuity between the nature and the self<sup>21</sup>. Based on these understandings, the recurring images of oak trees suggested both artist’s view of nature and his life states in different stages. Starting from *the Oak Tree* (Figure 6), he studied classical paintings at the Copenhagen Academy of Art, copied his teachers’ landscape painting with oak tree and followed footsteps of former masters. After starting his own career as a professional artist, he sketched in the wild nature and collected

image resources of oak trees, afterwards, they were employed in his landscape paintings as media to find his reconciliation with death and express his concern over his nation's crisis. Such artworks include *Abbey in the Oakwood* and *Dolmen in the Snow* (Figure 7) separately. In his late years, he presented oak trees alone in the snow and got rid of natural elements in the surrounding areas, meanwhile, influenced by romantic view of nature, which focus on the oneness between the nature and the self, his oak trees were personified into his self-portraits.



Figure 6. *The Oak Tree*, 1798, oil on canvas, Privatbesitz



Figure 7. *Dolmen in the Snow*, 1807, oil on canvas, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

It is in such oneness state, Friedrich was able to transcend human as a limited existence, then realizing “live forever” which was mentioned in his *Aphorismen über Kunst und Leben*. For nature cycles in the change of day and night as well as seasons without an end. Friedrich had also proposed an idea of a room with glass paintings in his letters: when the light shining on the painting, it shows different scenes during the day and night<sup>22</sup>. The painting itself did not change, but its state changed and cycled according to the time. Oak Trees as settled Person in Friedrich's landscape paintings were based stylistically on his earlier en plain air sketches, then placed in different barbaric natural settings. Leave on their branches suggested their vitality. Just like Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem *Ode to the west wind*: “If winter comes, can spring be far behind?”<sup>23</sup> Friedrich's withered oaks did not signify the end of life, but were waiting for spring to embrace new life.

As a human with limited life, the destination of man is the death. However, the oneness between the nature and the self made Friedrich realize that everything was connected and coherent in the eternal nature. By using the images of oak trees as personified self-portraits, Friedrich incorporated himself into the eternal cycle of nature to achieve reconciliation with death.

#### 4. The Pursuit of the Freedom

Friedrich took art as media not just for reconciling with his shadow of death, but rather aim to achieve das Göttliche in art and his spiritual freedom. Such view of art demonstrated meticulously in his essay *Art and the spirit of Art (über Kunst und Kunstgeist)* in 1809.

We could understand Friedrich's freedom in Schiller's system in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*. Because Friedrich wrote: “Art may be a game (Spiel), but it is a serious game (ernst Spiel)”<sup>24</sup>, while the concept of Spiel was the main discussing subject in Schiller's *Letters*. Besides, Friedrich sketched for Schiller's play *The Robbers*. These evidence indicate that he was not unfamiliar with Schiller's concept. The Spiel we discussed here is not material games in our daily life, but rather something that is neither intrinsically nor extrinsically coercive<sup>25</sup>. In Schiller's system, man was born with two natural impulse, they were Sinnlicher

Trieb and Formtrieb. The former ruled life, needs and changing Zustand while the latter ruled the Gestalt, principal and unchanging Person. These two impulse contradicted with each other and cannot unite in man, leading to his contemporary as either Wilder or Barbar. When the Sinnlicher Trieb dominated the man, he was controlled by his nature and sense, constrained his pursuit of spirit and reason which was led by the Formtrieb, vice versa. In order to find the solution to this phenomena, Schiller came up with Spieltrieb. This third trieb changed natural contradicted state of the former two, maintaining balance and harmony between Sinnlicher Trieb and Formtrieb while keeping their force, making the oneness between material and spirit, sensibility and rationality, then realizing the perfection of human nature. Isaiah Berlin's explanation of Schiller's theory of Spiel could benefit us to understand the significant relationship between the Spieltrieb and freedom: as long as we could change the necessity of obeying the law into some almost instinctive, spontaneous, natural operation, we would be saved<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, Friedrich's writing "Art might be a game" could also be understood as "Art might be the game of freedom".

In Friedrich's essay, he demonstrated that art could not lead man to freedom in his era, because it was restricted by academy and rationalism. In his era, influenced by the Enlightenment, rationalism had gained great achievements in the field of mathematics, natural science etc. Therefore, people hoped that this method could be employed to solve complicated problems about aesthetics as well<sup>27</sup>. One year before *Über Kunst und Kunstgeist*, Friedrich's altarpiece *Cross in the Mountain* (1808) received fierce criticism by Basilius von Ramdohr who was the advocate of classical aesthetics and aroused renowned *Der Ramdohrstreit*. He attacked Friedrich not only because he went against traditional rules of composition, but also attempted to utilize landscape painting to present sacred subject. However, Friedrich was opposed to follow the classical formulation and questioned methods dominated by the rationalism in his essay: "Beware of the cold attitude of know-it-all, be aware of sacrilegious deduction, for they kill the heart, and where the heart and mind have died in man, art cannot dwell in"<sup>28</sup>. Art has both Gestalt and life and it is the method to the perfection of human nature<sup>29</sup>. However, rationalism's ignorance of feeling made art hard to stay in people's heart, therefore blocked people's way to the perfection. In terms of experience from previous masters and Academy, Friedrich held the opinion that: "...no one could impose his doctrines and rules on another as an infallible law. No one is the standard for all..."<sup>30</sup>. From his perspective, if academies imposed rules and principles on students, they would undermine students' talents which was needed by man to establish something better.

If the methodology of rationalism and the principle from previous masters did not lead to art, what aims should people have — das Göttliche and das Unendliche<sup>31</sup>. In terms of this problem, Friedrich wrote: "Keep the pure and childlike sense (kindlichen Sinn) within your heart and always follow the voice of your inner self (der Stimme deines Innern), because it (the voice of your inner self) is the divinity (das Göttliche) in us"<sup>32</sup>. According to Friedrich's essay and Schiller's system, kindlichen Sinn was dominated by the sense and corresponded to Sinnlicher Trieb, while the voice of the inner self was das Göttliche and corresponded to Die Person. Feng Zhi, Chinese translator of *Letters*, explained that Man's Die Person corresponded to God's das Göttliche<sup>33</sup>. However, God is the highest principle of rationalism in nature<sup>34</sup>, it existed in his own existence and manifested perfection itself. Man cannot compare to the God, because they have both Die Person and Der Zustand, the former corresponded with rationalism while the latter corresponded with sensibility. Both of them could not exist alone but contradicted to each other. Therefore, the perfection of God was an endless task for a limited man. However, man could get close to God's oneness by maintaining childlike sense and the voice of inner self, so that dissolved contradicted two natural impulses and got close to the perfection. Such process and Friedrich's emphasis on the feeling and sensation responded to Schiller's opinion in *Letters*: the way to das Göttliche was opened up in sensibility<sup>35</sup>.



Figure 8. *The Study of an Oaktree*, 1806, Pencil on paper, Nasjonalmuseet kunst, arkitektur og design, Oslo



Figure 9. *Dolmen by the Sea*, 1806/07, Brush, brown and grey-black inks, over pencil, Klassik Stiftung, Weimar

Following Friedrich's view of art, we can see that his landscape paintings were the combination of meticulous investigation towards the nature and his interior emotion. Almost every natural elements in his landscape paintings can find their corresponding en plain air sketches. Taking *the Study of an Oaktree* (Figure 8) as an example, this sketch also appeared in his oil painting *Dolmen by the sea* (Figure 9), *Landscape with Oak Trees and Hunters* (1811) and *Oak in the Snow* (1827). Additionally, Georg Friedrich Kersting presented Friedrich's painting status in *Caspar David Friedrich in His Studio II* (Figure 10). Except necessary painting tools and spittoon, there was nothing left in his studio. There were two windows there, one is shut, the other was boarded up a third of the way. According to the record of Carus, Friedrich painted without drafts, because he was afraid that these assistant methods were likely to cool down his imagination<sup>36</sup>. As can be seen from above, Friedrich's landscape paintings were the fusion of the interior soul and exterior nature, rather than pure imagination or the record of the reality. Based on his mature painting skills, his landscape paintings were inspired by nature and combined with his feelings, which manifested his view of art: "Artists' missions are not depict the air, water, rock and trees honestly, they should present their spirit and feeling in it"<sup>37</sup>.

To conclude, das Göttliche was an ideal state that man could get close to it by carrying the sensibility with the rationality, which aimed to recall the importance of the sense after the Enlightenment and Rationalism had put too much emphasis on pure reason. Meanwhile, according to Friedrich's view of art in *über Kunst und Kunstgeist* and by practice, he advocated to get rid of the restriction of rules from the Academy, start from people's interior and take art as media, so that man could get close to the perfection of God's oneness and fulfill Friedrich's aim of art — das Göttliches, ultimately, fulfilling the man of perfection's spiel with the Freedom.

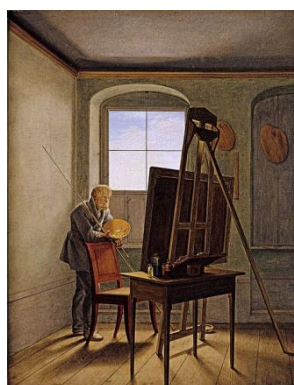


Figure 10. Georg Friedrich Kersting, *Caspar David Friedrich in His Studio II*, 1819, oil on Canvas, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

## 5. Conclusion

Friedrich's shadow of death left him with great spiritual burden since young, however such depression and isolation did not mean his denial of life. He immersed himself into deep heart and nature, taking art as media to depict subject of death over and over again, aiming to figure out the reconcile solution to man's limited life, finally, he found the solution in religion's Otherland and the eternal cycle of nature. Additionally, influenced by

the concept of Spiel in Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, Friedrich's artworks were different from the main stream at that time. He emphasized the personal sense and the harmonious relationship between inner self and outside world, sensibility and rationality, rather than follow the rule of rationalism and Academy. Friedrich took das Göttliche as his ultimate goal of art to realize the perfection and freedom. During the process that Friedrich sought to find the reconciliation with the limited life and realize the transcendence, images of oak trees were his thinking medias. After being personified as Friedrich's self-portraits, they combined with different elements in different paintings in different periods, manifested Friedrich's thinking about the exterior world and his own interior struggle.

## Note

This essay was written based on the last chapter of my postgraduate thesis *the Nature Turn in the Era of Crisis: Centred on Caspar David Friedrich's Images of Oak Trees*. It was originally written in Chinese and translated into English by myself. Attached is the Chinese version of this essay.

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<sup>1</sup> These are the conclusion of the first two chapters of my postgraduate thesis.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 201.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 84.

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- <sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

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