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Werner Busch. *Caspar David Friedrich–Ö?sthetik und Religion.* MÖ¼nchen: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2003. 224 S. EUR 34.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-406-50308-5.

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An Aesthetics That Strives Toward God

Caspar David Friedrich's paintings are ideally suited for historians teaching the early nineteenth century. Several of the artist's works reflect the patriotic feelings inspired by the French occupation and the Napoleonic Wars. Others contain symbols that can be read as the revival of religious faith during the era of Restoration: evergreen trees that reach upwards from barren ground; skies that reflect a shrouded, but certain sun; and massive stones that appear to have been in place since time immemorial. When discussing the connection between early nationalism and Romanticism, I often show students Friedrich's "Two Men Contemplating the Moon" (c. 1819). Two figures dressed in traditional German hats and Frocks look across a haunting landscape toward a moon that glimmers behind a hazy night sky.[1] An ancient, but partially uprooted tree leans against a solid rock, suggesting the eternity of the natural world or perhaps of the national spirit. The art historian Jens Christian Jensen ascribes a clear political meaning to this work. It is an "expression of patriotic fervour" and a commitment to nationalism and liberal political ideas that had to go underground after the Carlsbad Decrees. In 1819, "these republicans were prosecuted as 'demagogues'; the costume was banned. It recurs, however, in Friedrich's pictures after this time, indicating that he was a republican."[2]

"Two Men Contemplating the Moon" also works well in the classroom because it invites interpretation and discussion. Are the two men seeking an escape from the political turbulence of their day? Are they communing with nature in a spiritual way? Is the hazy sky getting darker or lighter, and what would that change indicate? This openness is characteristic of Friedrich's paintings. The artist scarcely populates his scenes of the countryside, the Baltic coastline, and the mountains of Saxony. When figures are present, they are usually small and fuzzy or, as in the case of the "Two Men," they have their backs turned to the viewer of the artwork. An interpretation of the painting requires viewers to supply content to the men's contemplation or to assume the position of the gazing figures and muse for oneself about the distance of the horizon and the effects of the moon's light. Soon the students are talking about nature and feelings, lighting and the sublime, the viewer as a participant in the creation of the painting's meaning, and the class session is a success.

The openness of Friedrich's paintings partially explains the artist's popularity among educators and museum visitors. In *Caspar David Friedrich: Ästhetik und Religion*, Werner Busch agrees that Friedrich's works invite interpretation, and he cites a wide literature by scholars who have taken up this invitation. Most interpretations, Busch argues, use Friedrich as a spokesperson for early nationalism or the revival of religiosity. Yet according to Busch, these treatments of Friedrich oversimplify a critical aspect of the artist's intent and creative process. They provide "partial conclusions" that contain some truth, but they do not deliver an overarching interpretation of Friedrich's oeuvre (p. 7). Busch's book sets out to provide this interpretation, first, by bringing us closer to Friedrich's method of using art to capture and inspire feeling and, second, by offering a much more precise historical notion of the religiosity that the artist con-

veyed. To achieve the first goal, Busch goes into more detail about geometry and aesthetics than the historian may require. Overall, though, the case is convincing, and the reader receives several interesting queues to watch for in Friedrich's works. Cultural and intellectual historians will find Busch's route toward the second goal more interesting. The author recounts Friedrich's contacts with political, religious, and artistic circles in Berlin and Dresden and on the island of RÃ¼gen, and he presents the affinities between the artist's methods and the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Here historians may wish for even more context surrounding this intellectual milieu, but they will certainly be impressed by Busch's careful description of the relationship between art and religion. The book's six chapters could be read independently, but they are certainly best appreciated as interconnected threads that tie Busch's two main points together. As the book progresses, Busch demonstrates that Friedrich's concerns about geometry and aesthetics produced an art form that paralleled Schleiermacher's notion of striving toward spirituality.

The opening chapter on images of Friedrich and his atelier reveals several details that at first appear to be quite minor, but their importance rises as the book proceeds. Friedrich's atelier is quite empty and lit by a single window. This Spartan interior compels the viewer to look outside, or perhaps it inspires the artist to project his creativity onto the canvas without being distracted by his surroundings. This movement beyond the walls of the room and beyond the emptiness of the interior becomes a powerful property of the artwork itself, as it suggests that beauty and spirituality lie beyond the immediate surroundings of the atelier. Busch also draws attention to items hanging on the wall next to the window. One painting has a key on the wall; another shows a pair of scissors. The items are easily overlooked, but Busch notes that both hang on an invisible horizontal line that forms a key component of the paintings' aesthetic structure. The line is part of the Golden Section, a system of proportion that supposedly goes back to Pythagoras and is said to add harmony to a work of art.[3] The Golden Section divides the canvas in such a way that the shorter section below the key or the scissors is in the same proportion to the rest of the canvas as the longer portion is to the entire painting. Busch shows how this structure appears in painting after painting: Friedrich used widow frames, rows of trees, and undulations in the landscape to mark the lines of the Golden Section. The author attributes part of the visual impact of the horizons that dominate many of Friedrich's paintings to the Golden Section. Color changes and shade gradations in the sky frequently build these harmonic lines.

The significance of geometric considerations in Friedrich's art becomes even clearer in a section of the book devoted to the artist's use of ordered and parallel hyperbolic curves that emanate into the distance. "Departing Boats," a sketch from 1816-1818, is structured by a series of sailboats heading out to sea. As the boats go into the distance, they become smaller, but they remain in the line suggested by the boat closest to the shore. The tops of the sails form a set of parallel curves that reach from the furthest and smallest boat to the largest and closest boat. This structure draws the viewer's eyes not only to the center of the painting, but also upward toward the sky. On the left side of the sketch, hooks holding a set of fishing nets suggest the same upward motion. The geometric design of the painting does not depict the final curve (or the destination of the row of curves). It can only indicate its presence above the sea scene. Similar series of hyperbolae appear in other works of art. They are constructed from the arc of a hillside or the colors of the sky. Friedrich also emphasized this structure by placing significant arcs along the lines of the Golden Section. The book's rich selection of images (over forty smaller black-and-white reproductions and seventeen wonderful, full-page color plates) supplies a convincing source base for Busch's claims about the presence and centrality of these geometric features.

Busch's interest in the aesthetic structure of Friedrich's art goes well beyond the hunt for the lines of the Golden Section or other geometrical features in each painting. Mathematical harmony was important to the artist because it reflected a larger spiritual harmony in the world. The sets of hyperbolae suggest a notion of eternity that lies beyond the painting. While the landscape or seascape itself cannot represent infinity, it can suggest its existence and thereby inspire the viewer to seek this space that lies beyond the confines of the artwork. Busch argues that this effect was central to Friedrich's ideas about the relationship between nature, art, and religion.

Busch then proceeds with a detailed account of the connection between aesthetics and Caspar David Friedrich's thoughts on religious experience. He explains that Friedrich would certainly have been familiar with the Moravian Brethren's outdoor religious services and Gotthard Kosegarten's coastline sermons, two examples of the close connection between nature and spirituality that was current at the time (pp. 37-38). Friedrich did

not hold a pantheistic idea of nature as God's presence on earth. Rather, outdoor harmony suggested the possibility of God's presence in nature that one could seek to experience. Busch emphasizes that, for Friedrich, this effort and pursuit of religious experience lies beyond the finite world of earth and individuals. This belief stemmed from Friedrich's strong commitment to the Lutheran concept of mercy attained by God's grace alone, not from the merits or abilities of human beings. Art, therefore, cannot depict religion or salvation; it cannot be a religious service. Instead, it can only point toward the striving that the individual must feel and perform. In self-searching verses, Friedrich explains that "A spirit lives deep inside me" [Ein Wesen wohnt in meinem Innern] and "A desire resides in my bosom" [Ein Wollen wohnt in meinem Busen]. These forces (and not Friedrich himself) direct him toward an experience of Jesus Christ (p. 160). It is this striving and upward motion toward the desire for salvation that the geometric features of Friedrich's paintings can suggest.

Caspar David Friedrich did not explicitly discuss the Golden Section or the use of hyperbolae in his notes about his paintings or in his correspondence. In order to connect these aesthetic features to a discussion of religion, Busch turns to and extrapolates from the intellectual milieu that surrounded Friedrich during his career as a painter. Central to this line of investigation is Busch's portrait of RÃ¼gen. The Baltic island appears here as more than the visual inspiration for some of Friedrich's most famous paintings: it was also the setting for discussions that shaped Friedrich's views on politics, art, and religion. The four Protestant parishes on RÃ¼gen were closely connected, and the homes of local pastors were places of hospitality and stimulation for young artists and travelers. At least two of the local pastors knew Friedrich and bought his artwork. Through these connections and friendships, Friedrich became part of a web of contacts and marriage relationships that included Ernst Moritz Arndt, Gotthard Kosegarten, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. These contacts were maintained and cultivated during Friedrich's visits to Berlin and his time in Dresden.

In a section that highlights the author's creative and careful historical research, Busch analyzes several passages from a *Bildungsroman* by Theodor Schwarz called *Erwin von Steinbach oder Geist der deutschen Baukunst* (1834). Schwarz was the son of one of RÃ¼gen's pastors, and his novel contains several telling conversations among artists. At the very least these scenes record issues that concerned the circle that included Friedrich. Busch argues, though, that they reveal much more when read in combination with biographical details about Schwarz and the close study of Friedrich's sketches and paintings. Busch is convinced that the novel can be read as a reliable communication of Friedrich's thoughts. In one exchange, Erwin von Steinbach and his artist friend Kaspar (read Caspar David Friedrich) approach the cathedral in Lund, Sweden. Erwin sees the stones of the church that rise above the town and describes them as an expression of the character of the land and its people. Kaspar goes further. He explains how the geometric structure of the scene increases its emotional impact: surrounding trees frame the vertical rise of the cathedral and give the scene much more than a monotonous symmetry. Kaspar can no longer find the dividing line between what he sees and what he feels (pp. 136-137). This, Busch says, is precisely the effect Friedrich achieved in pieces that place religious architecture–churches, abbeys, and crucifixes–in mystic landscapes.

The climax of Busch's study comes with the author's discussion of Friedrich Schleiermacher's theology and Caspar David Friedrich's treatment of religious experience in his artwork. Busch details the connections between the two men and the high probability that they had contact around the time that Schleiermacher composed his lectures "On Religion" (1799). In these pieces, the theologian rejected strictly systematic and dogmatic religion and emphasized the genuineness of individual religious experience. These ideas materialized on canvas as Friedrich's stationary figures who are sunk in thought. These individuals are not gaining clear direction for future action. Rather, they pause in contemplation of the divine and epitomize Schleiermacher's emphasis on the humility and passivity of the individual before God. Similarly, Friedrich's paintings break down traditional Christian iconography. Religious buildings are present, but they "do not deliver a religious argument. They are themselves religious" (p. 170). The emphasis is not on the church as an institution, but rather on the feeling of spirituality that resides in these nature scenes.

Busch's attention to the connection between aesthetics and Schleiermacher's theology does more than enhance our understanding of a well-known artist's intellectual context. It explains the desired effect behind the openness of Friedrich's landscapes. Busch's account does not rule out the political information historians often ascribe to Friedrich. It does, however, challenge us to see a personal and religious context when considering the artist's work. This fine book clarifies the intent and effect of Friedrich's paintings without reducing their most alluring and subjective aspects.

Notes

[1]. Busch discusses Ernst Moritz Arndt's "invention" of this dress as a German tradition on p. 174.

[2]. Jens Jensen, "Golden section," *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner, vol. 11 (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1996), p. 780.

[3]. Daniel Robbins, "Golden section," *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner, vol. 12 (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1996), p. 871.