

HISTORY IN ART

Caspar David Friedrich 1774–1840

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1774 – Caspar David Friedrich is born in Greifswald, Swedish Pomerania, now in Germany, on the Baltic Sea. He eventually has 9 brothers and sisters, but three die in the next few years and his mother dies when he is 7 years old. These early experiences of death are said to have contributed to his general melancholy throughout his life.

1790 – He begins studying art, literature and aesthetics at the University of Greifswald. He is a student of Johan Gottfried Quistorp, who takes his students on drawing trips to the countryside. Quistorp believes in the spirituality of nature, and Friedrich is inspired by this idea.

1794 – He moves to the Academy of Copenhagen, where his teachers are adherents of the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) movement, an early version of Romanticism. Friedrich is very much influenced by his teachers but he also undergoes classical training, learning to draw from life. In the Royal Gallery in Copenhagen he encounters examples of 17th century Dutch landscape painting, which also influences his later output.

1798 – He settles in Dresden, far away from the Baltic Sea that he knows so well, but he often visits the coast, the Harz mountains and also the mountains of Bohemia much closer to Dresden. His paintings are created based on sketches he makes on his trips.

1808 – Friedrich paints his first masterpiece, the *Cross in the Mountains*, also known as the *Tetschen Altar*, thought to have been commissioned as an altarpiece panel. It is controversial, as it shows the Crucifixion on a mountain top with only the landscape around and no other people.

1810 – Two of Friedrich's paintings are bought by the Prussian crown prince and he is elected as a member of the Berlin Academy.

1818 – He is elected a member of the Dresden Academy after acquiring citizenship of Saxony. The same year he marries Caroline Bommer – he is 44 and she 25. They will have three children, the first in 1820. His marriage brings him greater happiness and his works seem less gloomy, with more focus on humanity rather than bare landscape. He paints his most famous painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*.

1820 – The future Tsar Nicholas I of Russia, Grand Duke Nikolai Pavlovich, visits Friedrich's studio and buys two paintings to take home to his wife in St Petersburg.

1821. Friedrich becomes friends with the poet Vasily Zhukovsky, tutor to another future Tsar, Grand Duke Nikolai Pavlovich's son Alexander. Zhukovsky helps him throughout his life by gaining commissions from members of the Russian royal family. Friedrich mixes with many other people in the arts, including his fellow artists Philipp Otto Runge, Georg Friedrich Kersting – who sometimes paints the human figures in Friedrich's landscapes – and the Norwegian Johann Christian Dahl. He is also admired by the poet Goethe. But he is now becoming more withdrawn and reclusive, given to

taking long, solitary walks in the countryside. Apart from his friends, who continue to support and believe in him, many people regard him as an eccentric whose art is no longer fashionable.

1835 – He suffers a stroke and his ability to paint is much reduced. Further purchases of his earlier works by the Russian royal family help him financially. But he does manage to paint *Seashore by Moonlight*, considered to be a very influential work.

1840 – Friedrich dies in Dresden and is buried in the cemetery whose entrance he had painted fifteen years earlier.