

Caspar David Friedrich Landscape with thatched roof huts in a forest. Circa 1798



GRISEBACH

100 Caspar David Friedrich

From our auction 19th Century Art, Thursday, 30 May 2024, 3 p.m.

Caspar David Friedrich

Greifswald 1774 – 1840 Dresden

Landscape with thatched roof huts in a forest. Circa 1798. Oil on pinewood. 27,5 × 37,9 cm (10 7/8 × 14 7/8 in.). On the reverse on a label inscribed (historical): Landschaft vom Maler Caspar David Friedrich aus dem Besitz des Kaufmanns Bechly a. Neubrandenburg erhalten. No. 16. Accompanied by a certificate (in copy) by Prof. Dr. Helmut Börsch-Supan, Berlin, dated 27 March 1990. Retouchings. [3130]

Provenance

Private Collection, Baden-Wuerttemberg

EUR 150,000–200,000

USD 161,000–215,000

Exhibition

Caspar David Friedrich og Danmark. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, 1991, cat. no. 9, ill. 30

Literature and Illustration

Catalogue no. 3: Gemälde alter und neuer Meister. Antiquitäten, Möbel, Gobelins, Bücher aus verschiedenem Privatbesitz. Berlin, Dr. Günther Denke, 7.12.1932, cat. no. 88

From Old Masters to New Horizons

This early work on wood, one of the first paintings in Caspar David Friedrich's oeuvre, provides a rare historical record of how he began using the medium of oil paint in the years before 1800. It depicts, in the middle of a somewhat uneven section of rural landscape with scattered trees, a small shed that, like the wooden fence beside it, looks rather dilapidated. In the left foreground, we discern a small body of water with a rowboat and above it, a pair of straw-thatched huts at the green edge of what looks to be a forest, or at least a row of dense thickets. The wide empyrean takes up the upper third of the composition, its left-hand side hemmed through with clouds, while on the right, delicate but unmistakable, a bell tower juts forth – the only feature to penetrate this airy space other than the two tall trees that dominate the picture.

Without a doubt, Friedrich was taking his first tentative steps in the painter's art with this work. He would not seriously resume his efforts to paint in oil until 1807, thenceforth progressing with great strides. It is likely that our painting was created shortly before the artist's period of study in Copenhagen came to an end, where he dabbled only occasionally in oil, particularly since this discipline was not actually taught at the Fine Arts Academy. Thus, what we have before us probably is the work of an autodidact who already felt a strong affinity for natural landscapes, the genre in which he would later stake out his place in art history as an innovator. A small but telling harbinger of his later aesthetic is the church belfry in the distance, which reaches into the sky above the other man-made structures as a proclamation of the Christian faith – over the entire earthly realm, as it were. This suggests that the artist already is using set pieces of this type, like the empty boat, to include metaphorical meanings.

This said, pride of place is given not to the diminutive tower and dinghy, but to the individual trees, particularly the freestanding one hovering over the shed in the middle. These carefully worked out features, so typical for Friedrich's scant early work, spring not so much from a precise study of nature as they do from an admiration for the Dutch painting of the Baroque period. Their coloration alone already speaks this stylistic language, as do the various motifs of huts, bodies of water, and clouds drifting with moody effect. Although the subject has yet to be thoroughly researched, it is known that even a revolutionary like Friedrich saw much of instructive value in the art of bygone ages, particularly that of the Dutch Masters.

Thus, this early work harks back to the style of Meindert Hobbema, who frequently painted just such small rural worlds, enlivening them with brooks, ponds, etc. Another visual hallmark of his are carefully elaborated, towering trees whose outlines stand out distinctly from the backdrop of the sky right down to the individual leaf. These characteristics are also clearly recognizable in the prints reproducing Hobbema's paintings, some of which Friedrich probably got to see – along with a few of the originals – during his time in Copenhagen. He was likely introduced to them by his teachers, among them Jens Juel, who keenly admired the Dutch masterworks and used them fruitfully as models for his own landscape painting – which Friedrich obviously must have seen. That Friedrich also was exposed to other masters of landscape painting like Ruisdael, Rembrandt, and Rubens goes

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without saying. But given such a wealth of influences, it would belabor the point to trace each element back to a particular source. What a joy it is instead to simply see this first blossoming of the creativity of a true genius!

David Schmidhauser