

Caspar David Friedrich "Feuer in einer Kirchenruine". Circa 1800/01



GRISEBACH

103 Caspar David Friedrich

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

Caspar David Friedrich
Greifswald 1774 – 1840 Dresden

“Feuer in einer Kirchenruine”. Circa 1800/01
Pencil and sepia ink on paper. 50 × 72 cm.
(19 ½ × 28 ¾ in.) Catalogue raisonné: Grummt
313. [3087]

Provenance

From the family of Caspar David Friedrich’s brother, Johann Samuel Friedrich, Neubrandenburg (1773–1844), in direct succession to Friedrich Boll, Ludwigsburg (and thence by descent to the present owner)

EUR 200,000–300,000
USD 215,000–323,000

The Path Towards a Landscape of Atmosphere and Sentiment

This unfinished folio is one of Friedrich’s early works. Having studied at the Copenhagen Academy of Fine Arts from 1794 until May of 1798, he arrived in Dresden by way of Greifswald and Berlin in the fall of 1798, there to settle permanently. In 1799, he created a number of detailed studies in Dresden and its environs, primarily of plants, trees, and rock formations, but also tried his hand at landscapes. Most likely, he also took time to explore what was happening on the Dresden art scene of the day. In this context, he hardly could have failed to notice the popularity achieved by Adrian Zingg and his school.

Zingg had come to Dresden from Switzerland in 1776 and had soon found success there with his panoramas, most of which showcased the hills and rock formations of the region known as “Saxon Switzerland.” First drawn in pencil and then colourized in sepia ink, they tended to have a predominantly greyish tone until the 1780s, after which they came to be dominated by brown hues ranging from greyish-brown ochre to reddish brown. Zingg marketed these folios in various formats, and soon began reproducing them as prints showing only the outlines, so that he could then have his students complete the colourized versions. This process was further simplified with the help of Jacob Crescentius Seydelmann, who had returned to Dresden after learning how to draw Classically inspired sepia-ink reproductions in Rome. Seydelmann

had likely been tutored there by Johann Friedrich Reiffenstein, a prominent antiquities dealer and guide for “Grand Tours” of Italy, and also seems to have experimented with sepia ink on his own.

Sepia pigment, which is harvested from the ink sac of cuttlefish and originally was used merely for writing purposes, tended to fade quickly and had to be made more durable, particularly through the admixture of gum arabic. Often, sepia would also be mixed with other types of ink, chiefly bistre pigment. The exact composition of the inks used is hard to determine without scientific analysis. It appears that Seydelmann was marketing sepia ink mixtures of various brightness in Dresden. This greatly facilitated Zingg’s overall production process, since it allowed his students easily to apply *chiaroscuro* gradations in nuanced fashion as they worked from the background to the foreground.

This was the state of play when Friedrich began to use sepia ink in his own work. The role his experience with the sepia technique would play in his overall oeuvre cannot be overestimated, even for the colouring of the oil paintings to which he would devote himself more fully around 1806. Clearly, the subtle and stepwise manner in which Friedrich applied colours so as to make them more blurred and lighter in tone as they approached the horizon line is a method he assimilated from the art of sepia-ink drawing.

In 1801, Friedrich travelled to his hometown of Greifswald, and also paid two visits to the island of Rügen in that year, where he immersed himself in a series of landscape studies, particularly of local landmarks such as the striking white chalk cliffs or Cape Arkona. Back in Dresden, he then translated these studies into large sepia drawings that enjoyed astonishing success right from the start. Until around 1805, he would follow several key aspects of the tradition established by Zingg. For instance, he would often resort to the large format of 50 × 70 cm which Zingg had favoured, as in the case of the folio under discussion here. Like Zingg, he would also devote his sepia drawings, particularly the early ones, to existing landscape panoramas while including staffage elements – although he would dispense with the latter before too long. Intended to showcase easily recognizable views that would be familiar to the buying public, these vedutas were also designed to impress with their technical perfection. Though perhaps not quite so inexpensive as Zingg’s serially produced, colourized prints, Friedrich’s

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sepia drawings followed his example in that they served as less costly substitutes for oil paintings.

Yet they also differed markedly from those created by Zingg in two key respects. For one thing, the latter's folios of Saxon Switzerland include staffage elements such as day-tripping city burghers, enjoying the picturesque scenery and sharing their excitement over the beauty and charm of nature. Friedrich, by contrast, is intent on creating an impression of atmosphere and feeling. Instead of telling a story, he allows the landscape motif to exert its own power over the viewer. From 1805/06 onwards, moreover, his drawings begin to lose their nature of *veduta*: Although a natural motif remains discernible, it is no longer shown for its own sake, and instead is meant to refer to deeper connections underneath the surface. And the details are subordinated to a compositional scheme intended to reveal nature's underlying divine order.

Besides the folio under discussion, there exists another early and unfinished, albeit more developed, large sepia drawing depicting the valley known as the *Uttewalder Grund* (Grummt No. 232). Could the incomplete state of these two folios have to do with the suicide attempt which, according to historical sources, Friedrich appears to have undertaken sometime in January of 1801 and which led him to visit his family in Greifswald immediately afterwards?

Our particular folio proves Friedrich to have been a seeker. Yet even in its unfinished condition, it already conveys a fully fledged atmospheric mood through the use of light phenomena. The center has been left empty, but in our mind's eye we can imagine a fire burning there, filling the space enclosed by the ruined church with blazing light. The shadows on the left-hand side reaching out to the left and those on the right-hand side extending to the right tell us to visualize an evening mood in which the fire provides the main source of light. Those parts of the architecture and landscape which the firelight cannot illuminate remain obscure, while the demolished church wall on the left demarcates the abrupt collision of light and shade all the more clearly. The grouping of trees on the right is rendered in greater detail, with the lit and shadowed sides of the tree trunks already marked out.

It is possible to trace certain details of the architecture and of the trees back to specific preliminary drawings. Thus, one of the series of grey water-coloured drawings that the artist dedicated to the ruins of the Heilig Kreuz

monastery near Meissen uses exactly the same perspective view as the one found in our sepia drawing (Grummt No. 243, fig. 2). Friedrich had learned exact perspective drawing at the Academy in Copenhagen. He would return to this drawing in 1824/25 as a model for a watercolour that now hangs in the Kunsthalle in Hamburg (Grummt No. 867).

In our drawing, Friedrich uses foreground *repousoir* devices to anchor the image within the frame: At the outer central edge, he places, amongst other elements, a large prone cylinder which he originally had wanted to place farther to left. To the right of this, we see a couple leaning against a trunk of one of the illuminated trees, which literally tower over them. But we can also discern another group of three figures, lightly sketched out in pencil, directly inside the radiant glow of the fire. We see them from the back: One is standing, apparently pointing something out, while another is seated and the third one lies prone. This prone figure, too, can be traced – with a certain license – to a drawing from the sketchbook known as the *Grosses Karlsruher Skizzenbuch* which can be dated with certainty to May 19th, 1801 (Grummt No. 258). If we accept this connection as valid, then this gives us the earliest possible date for our sepia drawing. But there is more. To the left of the threesome is a forward-bending figure who is either throwing or pointing something into the flames. Yet another figure is using a ladder leaning against the wall on the left to climb up to one of the ruined church's lower windows. And on the far lefthand side of the picture, outside the ruins, we see staves of wood propped up against a large rock. The trees standing behind it are likely intended to balance out the other trees that merge into the firelight on the far right.

The elements in shadow and half shadow have been elaborated somewhat further, although it safely can be assumed that Friedrich would have made the dark parts even more intense had he completed the work. The elements lying in the direct light of the fire remain in the earliest stage of conception. Thus, our folio allows us to closely follow Friedrich's work process, which basically remains the same throughout. It bears noting that all the groups of figures – even the couple leaning against the tree – have been conceived as being in motion, thereby giving them a narrative dimension – a feature that will no longer present in Friedrich's later work. Any figures that appear there remain frozen in reflective poses, as if to stimulate our own meditations on the phenomena we see before us. Our particular folio therefore closes a gap in

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our understanding of Friedrich's artistic development. It is in excellent condition, since it was held under lock and key for decades as a family heirloom and evidently was protected from exposure to light.

Werner Busch

Johannes Rössler on the work's provenance

This particular drawing was previously known to us only from a 1930 photo bearing the notation *Sammlung Friedrich Boll* (Friedrich Boll Collection). Its appearance on the market gives us cause to reflect on its chain of ownership, which is also part of the artist's family history. The folio first belonged to Caspar David Friedrich's brother Johann Samuel Friedrich (1773–1844), who worked as a blacksmith. One year older than Caspar David, he probably learned his trade at an early age from maternal relatives living in the town of Neubrandenburg, of which he became a citizen by acquiring the civic privileges of the *Bürgerrecht* in 1801. Caspar David Friedrich would visit his elder brother and his large family often, serving as godfather to two of his nephews. Since the folio can be dated to around 1800/01, it may well have passed into Johann Samuel's possession during one such visit in the spring of 1801. Just like Friedrich's parents, the Boll family, too, hailed from Neubrandenburg. Franz Christian Boll (1776–1818), a pastor, baptized several of Johann Samuel Friedrich's children at the Johanniskirche church. Caspar David Friedrich would later design a posthumous funerary monument for him, which was executed by the Dresden-based sculptor Gottlob Christian Kühn and which Johann Samuel Friedrich probably decorated with a forged iron cross. In 1859, one of the pastor's nephews, Alexander Boll (1827–1910), married Henriette Kapheim, a granddaughter of Johann Samuel Friedrich born in 1834. This is how, through direct inheritance, the drawing passed into the hands of the Boll family.