

9. Winter Landscape



Artist Caspar David FRIEDRICH (1774-1840)
Medium Oil
Support Canvas
Size 32.5 x 45 cm
Date Probably 1811

Scientific examination of this painting and its apparent 'twin' in Dortmund has given clear indications as to which one is the original. The very special atmospheric effects are largely due to the artist's understanding of the special properties of smalt.

Two similar paintings

There is a picture very similar to this in a museum in Dortmund, Germany, which until recently was thought to be the original by Friedrich. However, questions about its authenticity arose when another version turned up in a private collection in Paris in the 1980s. The picture (one or other version) had been known since it was first made, as two visitors to Friedrich's studio in 1811 wrote to each other about seeing it there – their letters still exist – and it was



The version of *Winter Landscape* which is in Dortmund



The version of *Winter Landscape* which is in the National Gallery, London

first exhibited later in 1811. It was bought in 1813 and exhibited again in 1814, but that was the last that was heard of it for well over 100 years. This second version was bought by the National Gallery in 1987.

The question to be answered was this: Which of the two versions was Friedrich's original? Might they both be by him, or was one a copy by another artist?

The subject

The picture is aptly named *Winter Landscape*. On a snow-covered hillside, a clump of fir trees and a few boulders stand silhouetted against a hazy winter sky; while the distant shadowy form of a ghostly Gothic church looms like a vision through the freezing fog, its spiky pinnacles echoing the points of the firs. Two crutches, cast upon the snow, lead us to the small figure of a man who leans against one of the rocks (a symbol of Christ, the Church, or of faith generally '... upon this rock I will build my Church', *Matthew 16:18*) and he prays before a shining crucifix half hidden among the trees. The progression of the trees leads us further along the hidden snowcovered path to the gate leading to the church precinct, and finally to the church itself. There are clues all over this picture to tell us that this is no simple winter view, but a picture with a meaning and message: that just as spring follows winter, people who follow the Christian faith will find salvation. And indeed spring is heralded by the small clumps of grass which are beginning to push their way through the foreground snow.



Winter Landscape by Caspar David Friedrich.
Staatliche Museum, Schwerin

This picture is one of a pair, and its meaning becomes even clearer when they are viewed together. The other, also called *Winter Landscape* (in the Staatliches Museum, Schwerin, Germany) contains two twisted dead oak trees and many tree stumps which are reminiscent of tombstones in a churchyard. The small lone figure of a man hobbles among them on crutches, and views helplessly the endless snowy wasteland ahead. This is a scene which symbolises the despair of the faithless in the face of death and contrasts dramatically with its **pendant**, the painting we are now discussing, which symbolises the hope of the faithful.

The painting now at Schwerin was rediscovered in 1941, as was the Dortmund version of *Winter Landscape*.

The Dortmund and London versions of *Winter Landscape* seem at first sight to be very similar, but in the Dortmund version there are no blades of grass pushing through the snow; no gate to the cathedral; and the cathedral itself is indistinct and shows almost no detail, unlike the London version.

Underdrawing examined

According to those who knew him, Friedrich used fine underdrawings, done first with chalk and pencil and then in detail with quill pen and ink. This underdrawing is visible to the naked eye in many of his paintings and often is important in the way the picture looks. Black ink on a light **ground**, which is what Friedrich used, shows up very clearly in infrared photos and reflectograms.

Infrared reflectograms of the London picture show some underdrawing for the rocks and trees, but show also that the underdrawing of the cathedral is *full* of minute architectural detail. There are two layers of drawing. The basic structure of the cathedral was first set out with ruled lines – possibly in pencil; thicker darker ink lines are found on top of these.

Such pen-and-ink underdrawing has been found in many Friedrich paintings, as have the short, hatched strokes used here for the trees and the stippling used for the misty sky. However, in the Dortmund version of the picture, no underdrawing shows up in infrared light; the paint surface is more even, and mostly seems to have been put on with less care than is usual for Friedrich early in his career.



This evidence combined with the fact that only *one* version was recorded in the old exhibition catalogues and by Friedrich's visitors makes it virtually certain that the London picture is by Friedrich. The other may be by him, but it seems unlikely.

Cleaning

When the painting was examined in 1987, the **varnish** had become very yellow; this affected the whole colour composition of the painting.



During cleaning the sun was discovered, to the left of the cathedral; it had been over-painted.

Although it was visible in the **X-ray** and infrared images, it was not until the old retouching paint was removed that anyone could be sure that the sun was intended by Friedrich to be part of the original picture.

The ground and pigments

The ground is in two layers, but both contain chalk and **lead white** with some brown **earth** colour, with more lead white in the upper layer. Both the ground and the paint use walnut oil as the **medium**.

Restoration was mostly straightforward, although there was difficulty in matching parts of the sky because of the translucency of the **smalt** pigment which Friedrich used, coupled with his stippling technique. Only a few pigments, in a single thin layer, are used for the painting, which depends for its effect on variations in tone and texture rather than on colour.

The shades of white, grey and pink use smalt in a range of grades from pale grey to deep blue. The smalt is used alone or mixed with lead white. The pale mauve in the sky contains greyish smalt, lead white, and a little red **ochre** (mostly **haematite**). Paint cross-sections show that the blades of grass are painted on top of the snow layer; the green and brown grass contains a varying and complicated mixture of smalt, **Naples yellow**, **bone black**, ochre and possibly **Prussian blue**.

Since other good blue pigments were known, Friedrich's use of smalt may seem rather odd. But smalt has a low refractive index, and in an oil medium looks translucent. The same translucent effect cannot be achieved with **cobalt blue** (then a new pigment, which has a higher refractive index than smalt) or Prussian blue. Prussian blue in particular can be very overpowering because of its tinting strength. Friedrich used smalt for this effect in several paintings with religious or mystical subjects. A stippled brushstroke enhances the transparency and light scattering at the paint surface, and here it creates the misty, shimmering distance.