

Florian, Illies. *“The Magic of Silence“ - Caspar David Friedrich's Journey Through Time. S. Fischer Verlag GmbH. 2023. 251 pp.*

This year, numerous events have been organized to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the birth of an eminent painter from the Romantic era, Caspar David Friedrich. As a contribution to this significant milestone, the renowned author and journalist Florian Illies has published a compelling book dedicated to this remarkable artist, who is widely regarded as one of the most celebrated and influential German painters in history.

The book is structured into four chapters, each thematically focused on one of the four basic natural elements. This organizational framework allows the author to explore the central theme of Friedrich's oeuvre - the depiction of diverse natural landscapes. Illies adopts a thematic narrative approach to illustrate the story of Friedrich's work across the centuries, as opposed to a conventional linear recounting. This method permits the author to draw connections between a fascinating array of events concerning the fate of Friedrich's paintings. Within the pages of the book, readers encounter e.g. various circumstances that led to the destruction or preservation of Friedrich's works during World War II, which is particularly pertinent to the chapter dedicated to fire. The section addressing the element of water offers an insightful interpretation of one of Friedrich's most emblematic and innovative paintings, “The Monk by the Sea.”

Illies highlights Friedrich's close relationship with the element of water, noting that he spent the majority of his life near bodies of water, particularly in Dresden alongside the Elbe River. Consequently, water assumes a significant role in his artworks, exemplified by “The Sea of Ice.” The elements of earth and wind also play crucial roles in Friedrich's paintings, which, as Illies asserts, resemble reality while primarily reflecting the state of Friedrich's soul.

The author's decision to present Friedrich's narrative thematically can be regarded as a successfully executed endeavor. Illies deftly combines intriguing facts and details from Friedrich's life - such as the death of his brother during his and Friedrich's childhood and key friendships with fellow artists - with an exploration of the afterlife destiny of his paintings and a profound interpretation of his impressive body of work. In this context, the book addresses e. g. the Nazi perception of Friedrich's art as embodying authentic Nazi values.

Friedrich's work continues to captivate contemporary audiences, due in large part to his remarkable ability to intertwine the landscape of the natural world with that of his own inner psyche in a manner that remains partially enigmatic to this day. In this regard, Florian Illies emerges as an insightful guide to the world of Friedrich's artistic mastery in the Romantic Era.

Jan Egerle