

Distraction / Abwechslung

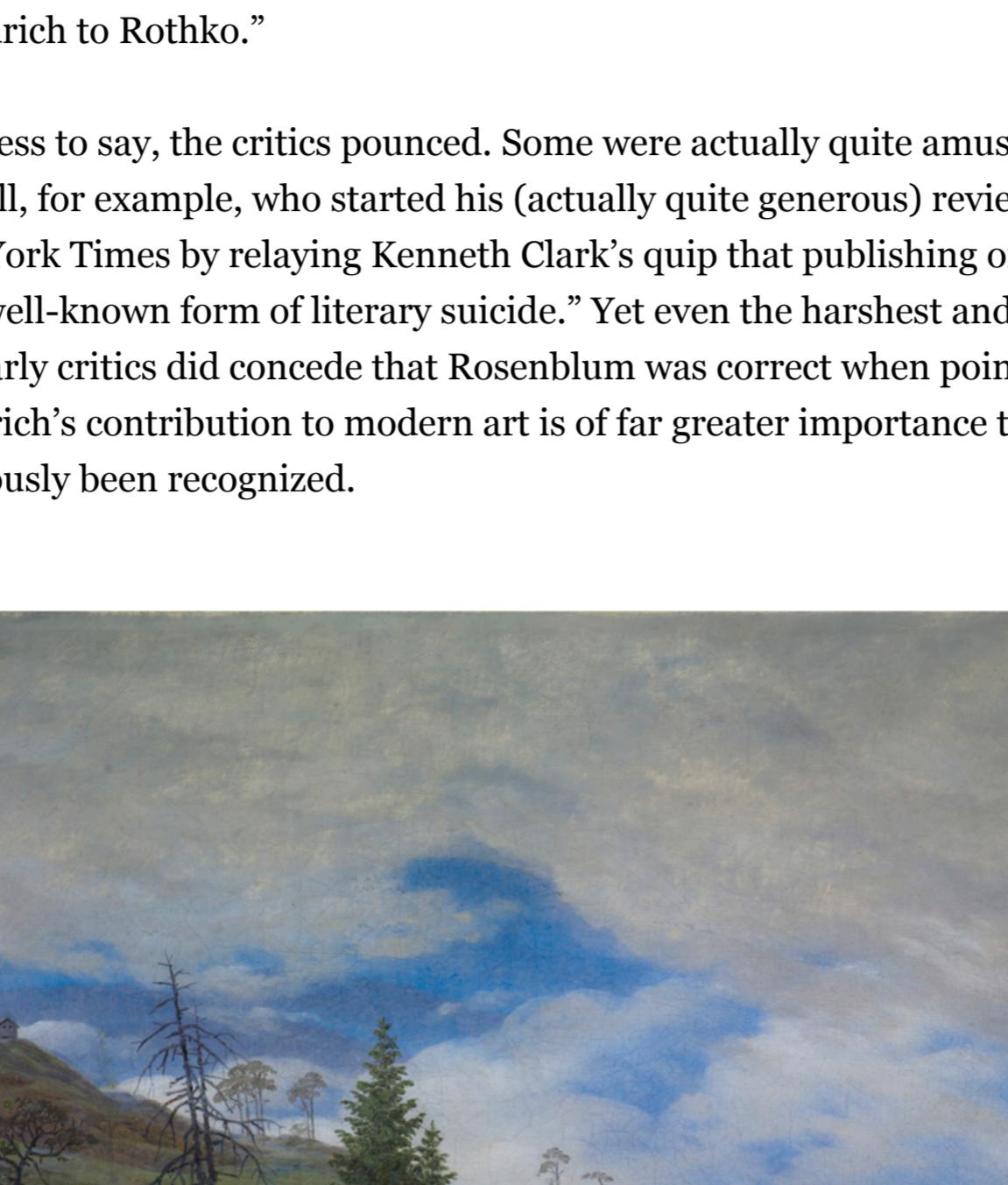
24 April 2020

is an important, alternative reading that well supplement the orthodoxy. Paris, from David and Delacroix's alternate view of modern art,

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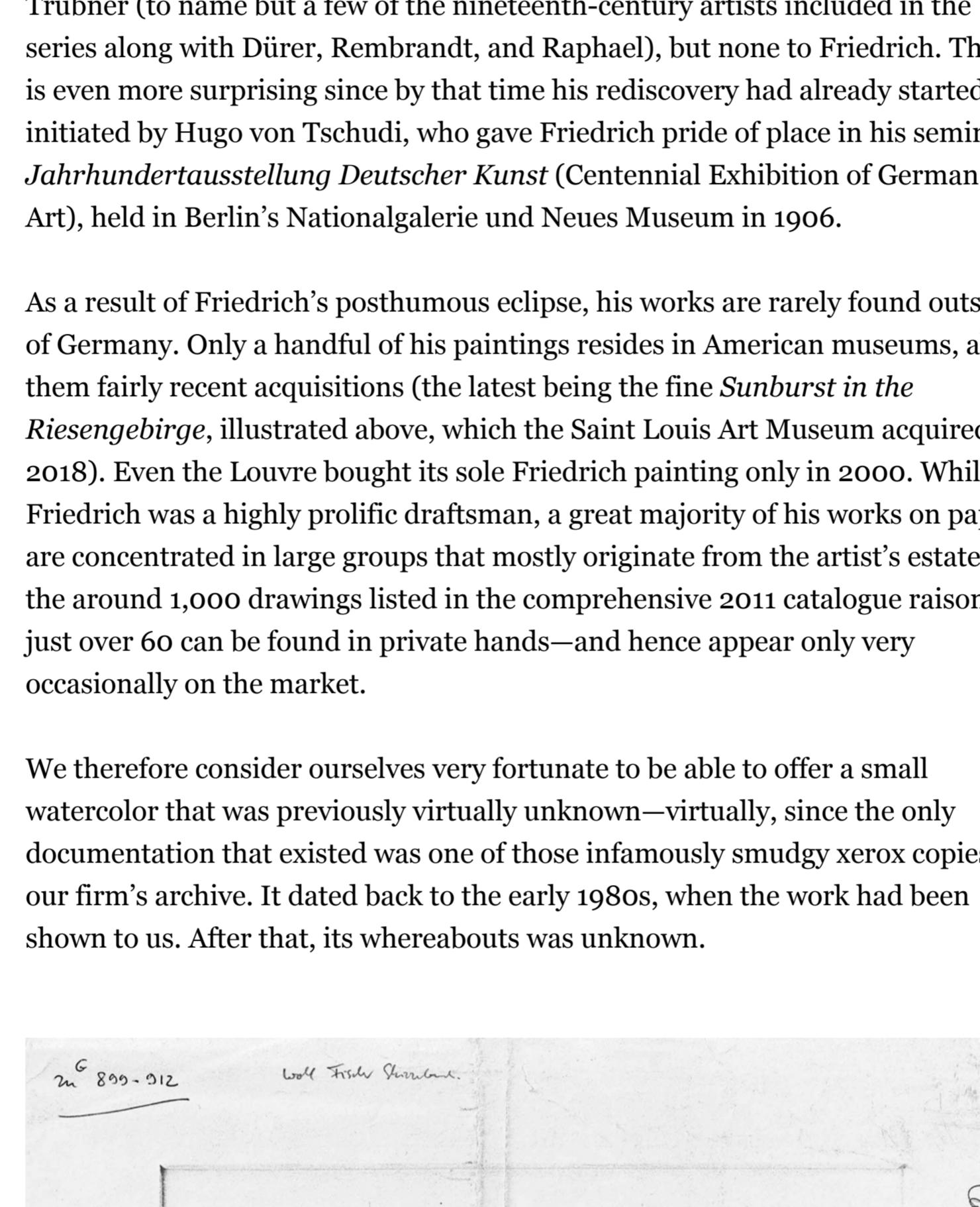
both ends, he ends up with a conceptual arch that reaches from German Romanticism all the way to America's Abstract Expressionism while avoiding the long-established modernist canon altogether—hence the book's subtitle "Friedrich to Rothko."

Needless to say, the critics pounced. Some were actually quite amusing—John Russell, for example, who started his (actually quite generous) review in the New York Times by relaying Kenneth Clark's quip that publishing one's lecture is "a well-known form of literary suicide." Yet even the harshest and most scholarly critics did concede that Rosenblum was correct when pointing out that Friedrich's contribution to modern art is of far greater importance than had previously been recognized.





Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), now considered the quintessential artist of German Romanticism, was pretty much forgotten during the latter part of the nineteenth century, even in his home country. One reason for this was undoubtedly the consistency with which he pursued an artistic vision that fell increasingly out of fashion. By the 1830s, German artists had begun to popularize their landscapes with figures, preferably taken from biblical stories or medieval history. This new, anecdotal style came to dominate painting at the leading art academies in Düsseldorf and Munich. So, during the first decades of the twentieth century, when a comprehensive series of artists' monographs was



van 18.5. Mai 1820

C. f. Boerner varfelsb

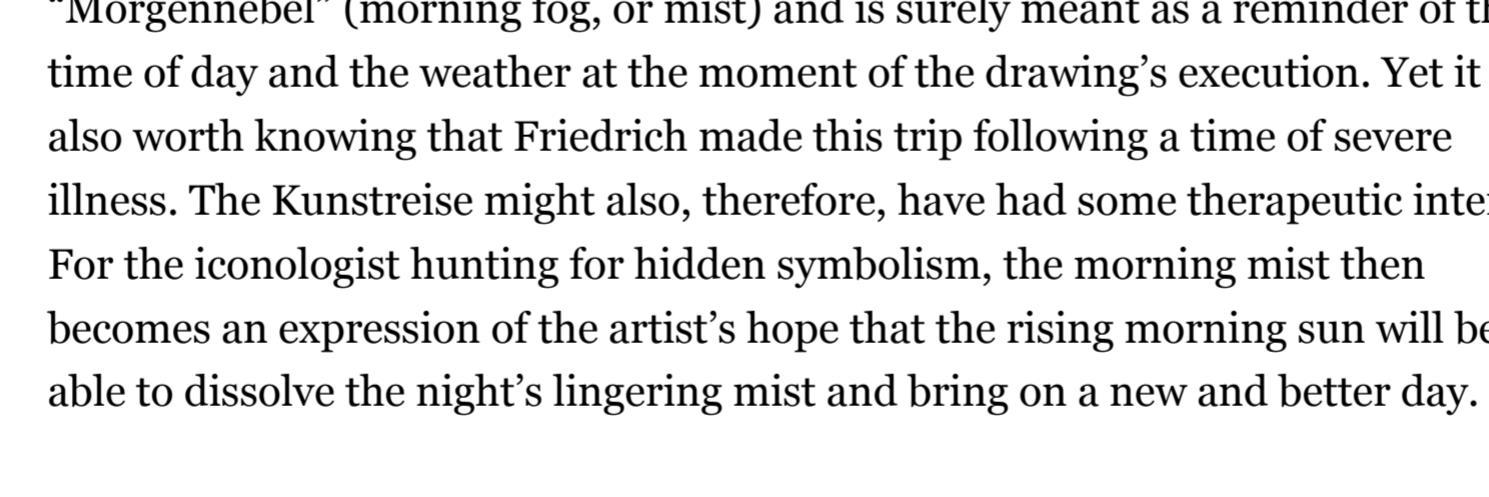
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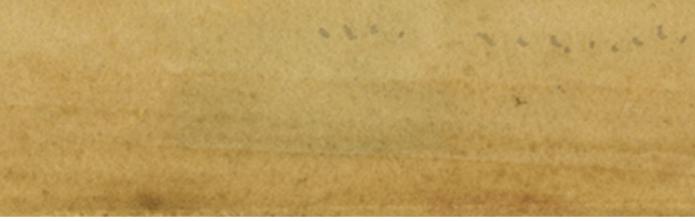
C. f. Boerner varfelsb 1820

So, it was nice—and quite a change—to see it in all the splendor of its well-preserved colors.

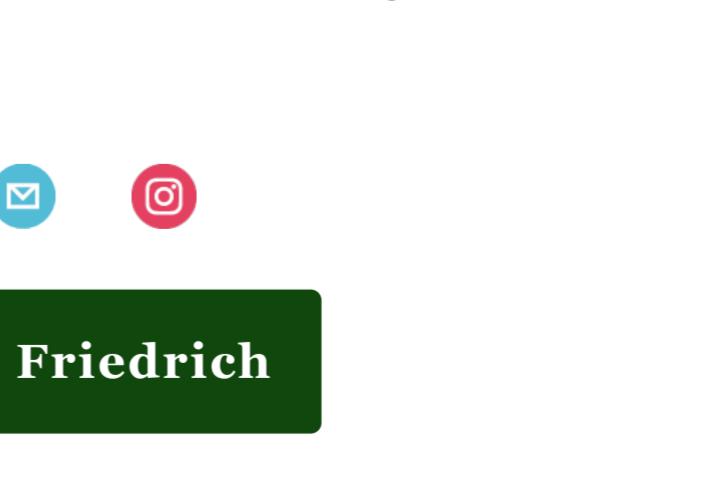
As he often did, the artist carefully dated the work “May 16, 1828,” which allows us to precisely reconstruct the circumstances of its creation. It was made during a short trip Friedrich made with an artist friend to Northern Bohemia. They stayed in Teplitz (today’s Teplice, in the Czech Republic), from where they ventured into the surrounding countryside. When they had to name the purpose of their trip in the town’s register, they wrote “Kunstreise, zufus,” which is best translated as “art hike, on foot”—try this at border control the next time you travel for your art project!



anchors, lonely trees, owls, etc. Compared to these other later works, the small “Bildstock” (roadside cross) in the center of the middle ground of our watercolor is rather subtle. Emptiness itself seems to be its dominant subject. Even spatial depth is flattened out by superimposed bands of color, giving the composition as a whole a nearly abstract quality—exactly the quality that led Robert Rosenblum to construct the daring historical arch of his argument:



The boundless and haunting voids in such works by Friedrich prefigure the “static expanses of dematerialized, luminous color” that Rosenblum observes in the paintings of Mark Rothko. With this, too, one can easily quibble. But Rosenblum was far too sensitive a critic and too intelligent a historian not to be aware of his thesis’s limited weight-bearing capacity. I therefore want to give him the last word and leave you all with the question that he so brilliantly poses straight at the beginning of his book to preempt the expected criticism: “If the paintings look alike in their renunciation of almost everything but a somber, luminous void, is this merely an example of what Erwin Panofsky once called ‘pseudomorphosis,’ that is, the accidental appearance at different moments in



A dark gray horizontal bar at the bottom of the slide. In the center, there are two white circular icons: one with the Instagram logo (a stylized 'IG') and another with an '@' symbol inside a circle, representing email.

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