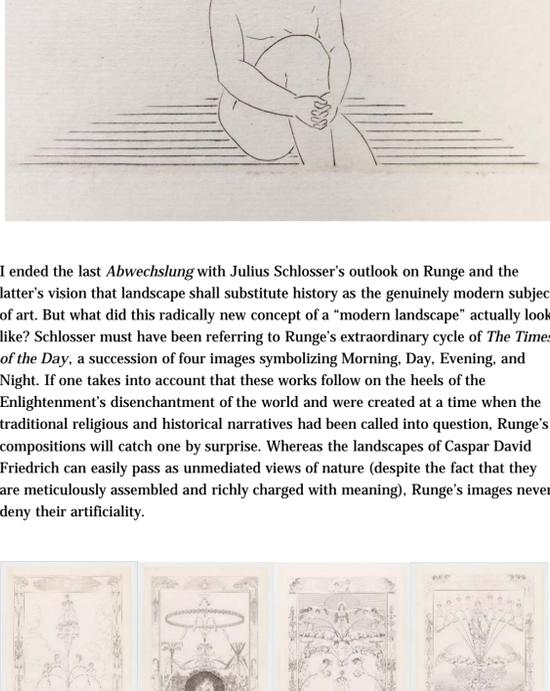


C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
31 August 2021



I ended the last *Abwechslung* with Julius Schlosser's outlook on Runge and the latter's vision that landscape shall substitute history as the genuinely modern subject of art. But what did this radically new concept of a "modern landscape" actually look like? Schlosser must have been referring to Runge's extraordinary cycle of *The Times of the Day*, a succession of four images symbolizing Morning, Day, Evening, and Night. If one takes into account that these works follow on the heels of the Enlightenment's disenchantment of the world and were created at a time when the traditional religious and historical narratives had been called into question, Runge's compositions will catch one by surprise. Whereas the landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich can easily pass as unmediated views of nature (despite the fact that they are meticulously assembled and richly charged with meaning), Runge's images never deny their artificiality.



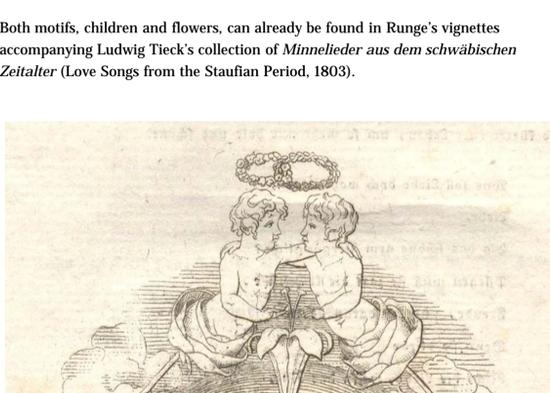
Philipp Otto Runge. *The Times of the Day*, 1803–05, engraved and etched by Johann Gottlieb Seyfert, Ephraim Gottlieb Krüger, and Johann Adolph Darnstedt

And their message is decidedly opposed to the increasing secularization of the previous period. Instead, Runge aligns himself with Romanticism's counterproject of a re-mythologization of nature—a quest summarized in Novalis's call: "Die Welt muß romantisiert werden!" (The world needs to be romanticized!)

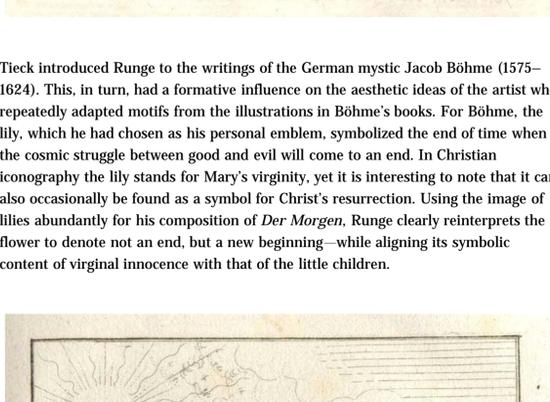
The set of four large-format outline etchings and engravings was published in 1805 and is the only form in which the cycle was ever realized in its entirety. Runge started to work on two painted versions of *Der Morgen* of which the smaller one was completed in 1806–8. The larger version remained unfinished at the time of the artist's untimely death at the age of 33 in 1810.



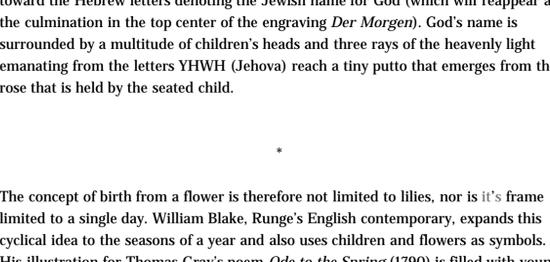
Let's have a closer look at the many small children that populate the compositions, often resting on top of large lily blossoms.



Both motifs, children and flowers, can already be found in Runge's vignettes accompanying Ludwig Tieck's collection of *Minnelieder aus dem schwäbischen Zeitalter* (Love Songs from the Staufian Period, 1803).

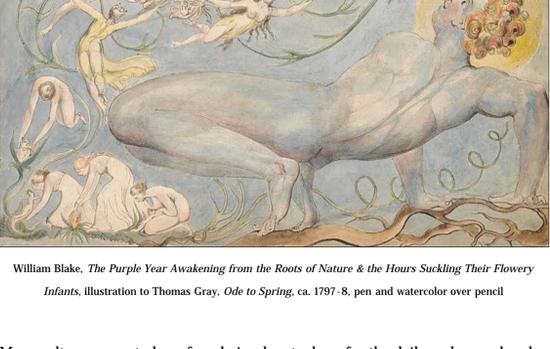


Tieck introduced Runge to the writings of the German mystic Jacob Böhme (1575–1624). This, in turn, had a formative influence on the aesthetic ideas of the artist who repeatedly adapted motifs from the illustrations in Böhme's books. For Böhme, the lily, which he had chosen as his personal emblem, symbolized the end of time when the cosmic struggle between good and evil will come to an end. In Christian iconography the lily stands for Mary's virginity, yet it is interesting to note that it can also occasionally be found as a symbol for Christ's resurrection. Using the image of lilies abundantly for his composition of *Der Morgen*, Runge clearly reinterprets the flower to denote not an end, but a new beginning—while aligning its symbolic content of virginal innocence with that of the little children.



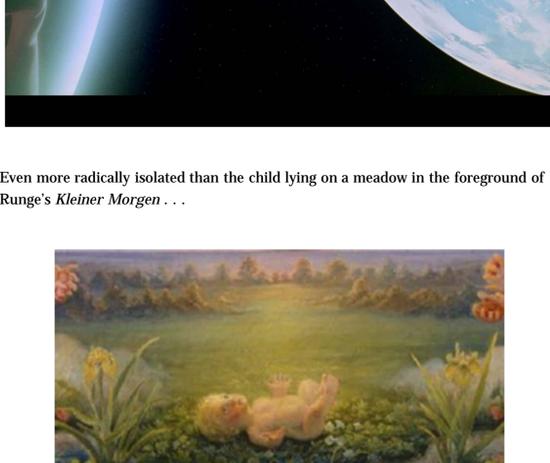
One of the *Minnelieder* prints shows a child seated under a giant lily that points toward the Hebrew letters denoting the Jewish name for God (which will reappear as the culmination in the finale of the engraving *Der Morgen*). God's name is surrounded by a multitude of children's heads and three rays of the heavenly light emanating from the letters YHWH (Jehova) reach a tiny putto that emerges from the rose that is held by the seated child.

The concept of birth from a flower is therefore not limited to lilies, nor is it's frame limited to a single day. William Blake, Runge's English contemporary, expands this cyclical idea to the seasons of a year and also uses children and flowers as symbols. His illustration for Thomas Gray's poem *Ode to the Spring* (1790) is filled with young maidens who pluck tiny babies budding from the blossoms of creepers.

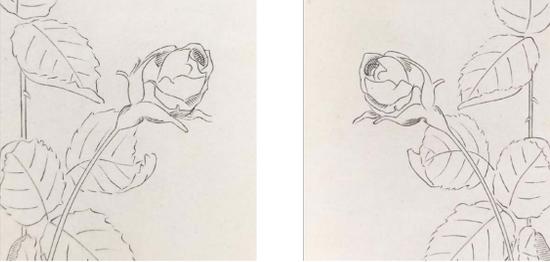


William Blake, *The Purple Year Awakening from the Roots of Nature & the Hours Suckling Their Flowery Infants*, illustration to Thomas Gray, *Ode to Spring*, ca. 1797–8, pen and watercolor over pencil

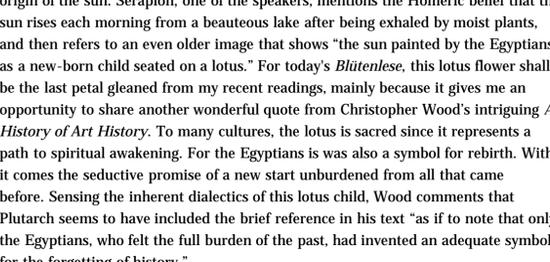
Many cultures seem to have found visual metaphors for the daily and annual cycles that determine our life on a planet that is rotating each day and circling the sun each year. Nearly two hundred years after Runge and Blake, Stanley Kubrick projected this idea of rebirth onto a cosmic scale. To express this, he, too, chose a baby, this time without any greenery, in the final scene of his enigmatic film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).



Even more radically isolated than the child lying on a meadow in the foreground of Runge's *Kleiner Morgen* . . .



. . . Kubrick's "Star Child" is returning from deep space, encased merely in the thin membrane of the amniotic sac and heading toward this blue planet of ours that hovers in the slither of habitability known as the goldilocks zone—and that we are currently doing our best to destroy.



It wouldn't be far-fetched to call the combination of flower and child a quasi-Jungian archetype for birth and rebirth. One can encounter it already in the *Moralia*, a collection of essays and speeches traditionally ascribed to the first-century Greek philosopher Plutarch. One of the pieces is a dialogue titled *The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse* that deals with the changing customs of the Delphian Pythia. Its protagonists, when looking at the animal figures embossed on a golden palm tree in the store-house of the Corinthians, discuss the different stories told about the origin of the sun. Serapion, one of the speakers, mentions the Homeric belief that the sun rises each morning from a beautiful lake after being exhaled by moist plants, and then refers to an even older image that shows "the sun painted by the Egyptians as a new-born child seated on a lotus." For today's *Blütenlese*, this lotus flower shall be the last petal gleaned from my recent readings, mainly because it gives me an opportunity to share another wonderful quote from Christopher Wood's intriguing *A History of Art History*. To many cultures, the lotus is sacred since it represents a path to spiritual awakening. For the Egyptians it was also a symbol for rebirth. With it comes the seductive promise of a new start unburdened from all that came before. Sensing the inherent dialectics of this lotus child, Wood comments that Plutarch seems to have included the brief reference in his text "as if to note that only the Egyptians, who felt the full burden of the past, had invented an adequate symbol for the forgetting of history."



the vignettes are details from Anton Würth's engraving cycle "Essay on Runge" of 2019–20

