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PRESS RELEASE
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The Monk is Back. The conservation of Caspar David Friedrich's "Monk by the Sea" and "Abbey in the Oakwood"

Special presentation: January 22–July 24, 2016
Made possible by the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Stiftung.

With "Monk by the Sea" and "Abbey in the Oakwood" by Caspar David Friedrich, the Nationalgalerie in Berlin is the custodian of German Romanticism's most famous pair of paintings. With a singular radicalism of composition and technique, the artist addresses the relationships between knowledge and belief, this world and the next, life and death. Friedrich has created two pictorial formulae, as simple as they are profound, which today still speak to people the world over. Ever since Clemens Brentano's and Heinrich von Kleist's famous interpretations, they have been the subject of numerous interpretations and treatments, from art through literature to psychology and press photography.

However, soon after his death in 1840, Caspar David Friedrich slipped into oblivion and was first rediscovered at the turn of the 20th century. The Nationalgalerie played an important role here, when in the 1906 "Centenary Exhibition of German Art 1775—1875" it displayed altogether 35 of Friedrich's paintings, thereby bringing him once more to the attention of a wider public.

The Conservation

Fragile painting technique, decades of neglect and historical restorations to "Monk by the Sea" and "Abbey in the Oakwood" had led to changes and material losses, resulting in a considerable falsification of the original image. Severely yellowed coatings of varnish also impaired the pictures. Conservation work on both paintings was begun in 2013, thanks to the generous support of the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Stiftung. The conservation department of the Alte Nationalgalerie conducted technical analyses of the works and produced a conservation plan. After its presentation to a symposium of experts the conservation treatment was carried out in the Alte Nationalgalerie by Kristina Mösl and Francesca Schneider with art historical assistance from Philipp Demandt and Birgit Verwiebe. The conservation advisory board was made up of the conservators Ingo Timm and Peter Most. The project received further support from among others the Rathgen Research Laboratory of the National Museums of Berlin, the Laboratory of Archaeometry of the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts as well as the German Archaeological Institute.

Paintings are structures made up of intricately built-up-layers of organic and inorganic substances with varying physical and chemical properties. As a rule a painting on canvas of the early 19th century is made up of

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the following layers: the stretcher for holding the cloth support (canvas), a saturating sizing, one to three layers of priming consisting of chalk and oil-based binders, the composition's underdrawing, the underpainting as preparation for the mostly multiple layers of paint and finally the varnish, a protective and colour saturating coat.

Modern scientific conservation concerns itself with these layers and is made up of three phases: examination of the materials (Technical Findings) and their state of conservation, the creation of a plan based on these results and the execution of conservation and restoration treatments—all of which is documented in words and pictures.

1. Technical Findings

As support Caspar David Friedrich used a fine fabric made up of flax fibre in linen weave, whereby the original stretcher has not survived. The canvases for both pictures come from one and the same roll of fabric and were adjoining sections. The canvases have three layers of priming. The base ground is pigmented bright red, followed by two light brown layers. Whereas the initial two primings were applied with a palette knife, the third appears to have been applied with a roller: it has a finely-textured structure which Caspar David Friedrich knew how to use to particular effect.

The painter drew the composition with a pencil on this priming. The underdrawings, made visible by infrared-radiation, are rich in detail and played a major role in the painter's composition.

The pictorial design consists of a very thin underpainting. In the "Abbey" this is covered by only a single layer of paint, as opposed to the "Monk", which has two layers of paint, the first dark blue. Friedrich later applied a second layer of paint, light blue, pink and white, to the central sky area. The painter used white lead, a few ochre, green, brown and black pigments as well as the blue pigment smalt, the latter on account of its semi-transparent property. Combined with a particular painting technique, by which a gossamer thin film of colour accumulates in the depths of the structured priming resulting in the finest dots of colour, the artist managed to avoid visible brushstrokes and created almost continuous gradations of colour.

Shortly after completion of the paintings an egg white varnish was applied, of which only the smallest remains can be detected. Whether this varnish was applied by the painter himself in Dresden or by another hand in Berlin is an open question. In 19th century literature temporary egg white varnishes were recommended for freshly-completed oil paintings.

2. State of preservation

The present stretchers can be dated to 1827. In contrast to the "Abbey", the "Monk" was newly stretched at least three times. This led to the stretcher being repeatedly strengthened with wedges and impairment of its function.

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The canvases have undergone momentous changes. As preparation for the 1906 “Centenary Exhibition” both paintings were reinforced with a second canvas. The so called “lining” with an additional fabric, which was glued over the complete reverse side of the original canvas, served as a stabilizer. However, together with the closing of tears and holes, this resulted in considerable stress for the paintings: the edges of the canvas were cut and a new, coarse canvas ironed on with a mixture of wax and resin. Whilst the incompletely melted lumps of wax made the canvas lumpy, the pressure and heat resulted in extensive damage to the primings and the layers of paint. Several imprints caused by irons can be discerned on the front of the “Monk by the Sea”. The surface defects and abrasions and other damage were filled and finally painted over. In this manner surviving paintwork has also become hidden.

A century later the restoration materials had become discoloured and brittle. The dotted retouchings made during a further restoration in the 1920s had whitish discolouration, creating the false impression of clouds of mist over the sea. The “Abbey in the Oakwood’s” blue pigment smalt has partially bleached, a slow chemical reaction, which is irreversible. True, the exact extent of the change of colour cannot be determined, but the picture must have had a distinctly bluer colouring at the time of its creation.
The main defects to the overall appearance of both paintings were caused by the seven layers of varnish which had been applied in the course of centuries. The pronounced yellowing of these coats resulted in extreme shifts in the colour values, particularly in the blue areas. Moreover some patches of varnish were permeated with the finest microcracks, the edges of which reflected strongly and laid a milky veil over the layers of paint.

3. Conservation Plan and Treatments 2013—2016

The results in their entirety served as the basis for a detailed plan for conservation and restoration treatments. The objective was the securing and exposing of the remaining original substance. The extensive reversal of historical restorations served to allow the greatest possible approximation to the original state, inasmuch as it was still extant. For all treatments a requirements specification as to material and methods was drawn up and corresponding trials were conducted. All of the conservation materials are reversible and resistant to aging.

The linings were left intact, as their removal would have presented a major mechanical strain for the paintings. The paint layer was consolidated, the surface cleaned and expertly prepared for the subsequent removal of the varnish. Badly integrated, discoloured fillings, retouchings and overpaintings were removed. The “Monk” was loosened from its stretcher, which was enlarged and so made functional again. After adjusting the tension of the stretching of both paintings the lacunae were freshly filled. A spray-on inter-mediate varnish insulates the fillings and saturates the paint layer. The colour integration of the filled lacunae was then performed on top of this by retouching.

The new retouches were limited to recreating the legibility of the works of art. The numerous micro-lacunae, which had resulted from abrasion of the

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paint layer, have been optically suppressed in only a few areas in which they gave a demonstrably false impression of the paintings—particularly in the areas of the cloud borders in the “Monk by the Sea”, which previously gave the impression of rainclouds.

A further thin coat of airbrushed varnish rounded off the conservation.

4. Results

The 2016 completed conservation of the “Monk by the Sea” and the “Abbey in the Oakwood” unearthed significant findings. The circumstances of the acquisition of the canvas show that right from the start the painter had planned the two paintings as companion pieces. He made use of the latest materials in the form of commercially produced pre-primed canvases. On the other hand he used what by the 19th century was barely still in use— the blue pigment smalt, which he deployed very deliberately for its properties of colour tone and semi-transparency.

The artist’s creative process can be clearly discerned in the underdrawings, for the first time revealed in the infrared reflectograms shown here in the special presentation “The Monk is Back”. In the “Monk” the emptying of the seascape is made clear: the artist painted over three planned sailing ships and so emphasized the “infinite solitude” in that “boundless watery waste”, that not only Brentano and Kleist had never before encountered in painting. In the underdrawing of the “Abbey” the perspectival composition of the church architecture becomes clear. Additionally there are many details of the monks’ procession to discern, such as the cross or the prayer books in the hands of the monks.

The conservation considerably calmed the compositional structure, of which the clear arrangement into horizontals, ellipses and hyperbolas had been disturbed by old retouchings. All in all both paintings were in a better state than had been suspected: around 97 % of the “Monk” and 98 % of the “Abbey” are preserved, whereby through the removal of overpaintings and retouches 11 % and 8 % respectively of the original paintwork could be once more revealed. The removal of the severely yellowed coats of varnish has created the greatest possible clarification and a reversal of the shifts in colour value. After 200 years the primary cool, bluish colour, dominant in the “Monk by the Sea” and after the smalt degeneration only minimally extant in the “Abbey in the Oakwood”, once more reunites this most significant pair of paintings of the Romantic period.

The Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Stiftung

The project was made possible through the non-profit-making Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Stiftung in Essen. The Foundation has already funded significant research projects and acquisitions in the field of Romantic Art. The Foundation is the bequest of Dr.-Ing. E.h. Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, the last personal owner of the company Fried. Krupp. Following his death on July 30th 1967, and thanks to his son Arndt von Bohlen’s renunciation of inheritance, his fortune was transferred to the Foundation. The Foundation charter allows it to fund projects in the

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areas of science, education, health care, sport and culture, both within Germany and abroad. Since the start of its operations in 1968, it has disbursed more than 643 million Euro. Around 146 million Euro of this has been allotted to the area “Literature, Music and Fine Arts”.

In the context of the priority programme for the city of Greifswald and its university, the Krupp Foundation has repeatedly provided means for projects relating to Caspar David Friedrich, one of Greifwald’s most famous sons. In 2005 it supported the Pomeranian State Museum in its purchase of the painting “Woman on the Stairs”. Supported by a scholarship from the Foundation, the Zurich art historian Christina Grummt researched the graphic works of the artist and in 2011 published the result of her research in the two-volume catalogue raisonné “Caspar David Friedrich. The Drawings”.

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