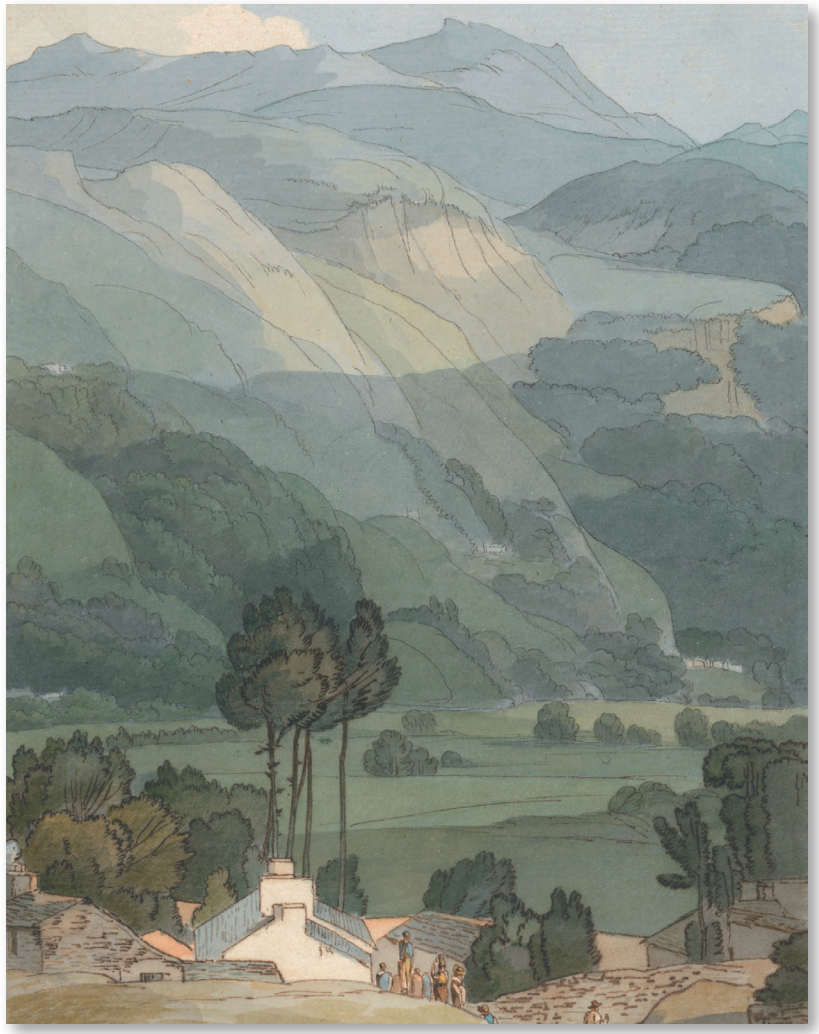
Art & Photography



Ambleside
Francis Towne (1740-1816)
1786. Watercolour and brown and gray ink over graphite on medium slightly textured cream laid paper. 9¼ x 6⅛ inches.
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

DONALD M ORR

Image and Reality: On Three Paintings of Mountains

'Der Watzmann' (1825) by Caspar Friedrich.

Mountains, as subject matter for painters, are exposed to all the theories and philosophies prevalent at the time of their conception as works of art. They are never accurate accounts of geology or topography nor are they simply artistic records of structure and scale, form and colour, and while they may occasionally be peopled to assist scale, emphasise vista or aid a narrative aspect it has always been the mountain's sheer bulk and dominance of the landscape that invited their inclusion into the world of fine art. The Romantic tradition broke from the fixed views of the Classical School's version of landscape as an idealised setting based on the Roman countryside and moved to a more naturalistic sense of colour, an emotional content and an occasional foray into the exotic, as mountains and wilderness were now seen as the work of the divine, and an area of research, meditation and contemplation; they were Ruskin's 'great cathedrals of the earth' and as such he believed they had a powerful influence on the human spirit.

Mountains also have an impact upon our senses whether it is the roughness of granite on our hands or the tether of an ice axe round our wrist, touch is important. Hearing too, especially the silence at altitude, and smell and taste add to the mountain experience but sight has an extraordinary effect on our awareness. Within the mountain environment there exists an enormous variety of scene, a great diversity of features in rock and snow, and an endless permutation of light and weather impressions that can make our mountain days precious and our memories of them enduring. The few paintings discussed here are a point of departure, not a final word: there can be no conclusive statements about the mountain world. We continue to explore it seeking again that which we have known and hoping for new revelations.

'Der Watzmann'

While mountain backdrops had been a continuing feature of the work of Caspar David Friedrich[1], especially in the contemplation pieces such as 'Gebirgslandschaft mit Regenbogen' – 'Landscape with Rainbow'[2], he had been drawn to specific rock formations as dramatic reflections of creation but still with the human element meditating on the grandeur of the scene as in 'Kreidefelsen auf Rügen' – 'Chalk Cliffs on Rügen'.[3] By the mid 1820s Friedrich had a serious interest in geognosy that took him further from his base in Dresden and generated the largest canvases of his career. This concern with the emerging notion of geological timescales inspired by the ventures in the mountains and exploration of the furthest parts of the planet saw the production of 'Das Eismeer' – 'Sea of Ice' also known as 'The Wreck of Hope'[4], motivated by Parry's expedition of 1819-20 to locate the North-West Passage. But it is in the paintings 'Der Watzmann' and 'Die Hochgebirge'[5] that a major change in the direction of Friedrich's work is revealed. Prior to this he had concentrated on the moonlit skies, empty shores and rocky coasts that had made him a central figure of the German School of Painting throughout the Romantic period. In his search for an extreme of nature as an alternative to the classical idyll he turned to the mountains of Bavaria 'although he himself had never visited the Alps.'[6]

The shift in attention was generated by an interest in historical geology then referred to as geognosy, a recently developed science that attempted to trace Earth's history and the place of mountains within that history. James Hutton, wandering in the Cairngorms in 1785, 'found fingers of granite penetrating the sedimentary rocks in a way such as to suggest that the former had been molten and forced themselves into the older rocks from below'.[7] This pattern of rock destruction and renewal became

1. Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). The most purely Romantic of the German landscape painters of this period, most of his life was spent in Dresden where the best collections of his works are housed.
2. 'Gebirgslandschaft mit Regenbogan' (1809-10). Oil on canvas, 70 x 102cmm Museum Folkwang, Essen.
3. 'Kreidefelsen auf Rügen' (1818). Oil on canvas, 90.5 x 71cm, Museum Oskar Reinhardt am Stadgarten.
4. 'Das Eismeer' (1823-4). Oil on canvas, 96.7 x 126.9cm, Kuntshalle Hamburg, Hamburg.
5. 'Der Watzmann' (1825). Oil on canvas, 135 x 170cm, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.
'Die Hochgebirge' (1823-4). Oil on canvas, 132 x 167cm. Formerly in the National Gallery, Berlin, destroyed in 1945.
6. W Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1980, p110.
7. V della Dora, *Mountain*, London, Reaktion Books, 2016, p148.

known as Plutonism but the opposite, Neptunism stated that the earth had originally consisted of water and such materials within it had sedimented over time creating the core of the planet. This latter theory was promoted by Abraham Gottlob Werner a professor at the Freiberg Mining Academy who was comfortable within the Biblical timescale endorsed at that time. 'Der Watzmann' was 'inspired by Werner's theories and classifications of rocks, landscape features as a sequence of geological layers each set on a different visual plane and devoid of human presence.'[8]

Der Watzmann (2713m), the peak itself, is situated in south-east Upper Bavaria in the Berchtesgaden National Park forming the central range of the Berchtesgaden Alps. Within the canvas, the movement, from boulder-field and tor-like blocks, sweeps across intermediate hills to the towering majesty of the twin peaks of the massif. The mountain is portrayed as greater than anything mankind can fabricate and will endure beyond anything constructed by humanity. 'Friedrich's painting is recognisable as a hymn to the universal laws of mountain formation'[9] – as those laws were then understood by Werner and his followers. What is rendered is not a snapshot of the mountain but a composite of several topographies encompassing an entire Alpine scene; a range large enough to warrant the scale of the canvas. 'Landscape is for him a mode of auguring a new Germany,'[10] where natural history was seen as an irreversible process, legible to all, which demonstrated the inevitability of the historical future as Friedrich always painted German landscapes and never indulged in the 'Claudian' or ideal landscape of Arcadia. The Classical landscape, marked by stability of form, intellectualisation and restraint, was rejected for a heroic stance that reflected exceptional courage, nobility or fortitude. His work displays an emphasis on feeling and content, and projects the notion of individuality as an exceptional quality. The light sky, snowy peaks and open aspect of 'Der Watzmann' are a direct invitation to contemplate the majesty of the Alps and to enter this arena, to strive within the mountain environment, relishing its purity and eternal nature. While the scene is devoid of people, as viewers, we are the ones contemplating the mountain, we are the ones challenged to strive for its clarity and wholesomeness and be at one in the eternal perfection of nature.

'Die Hochgebirge', tragically lost in 1945 in the bombing of Dresden, is a far darker, more challenging Alpine scene viewed through a notch-like col, whose precipitous sides hint at the chasms below and whose ice-filled gullies lead to a summit ice-field beyond, which stretch the seemingly untouched, untrodden aiguilles of the massif. Simply approaching this mountain is arduous and strenuous. This is not a place for the tourist, only the strong and resilient, the persevering and tenacious will travel this path and ascend these high peaks. His design for the canvas, with the mountain contained between two ridges, is 'literally a contraction of a sketch of Mont

8. V della Dora, *Mountain*, London, Reaktion Books, 2016, p150.
9. T Mitchell, 'German Romantic Painting and Historical Geology,' *Art Bulletin*, Vol 66, No 3.
10. J L Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, London, Reaktion Books, 1995, p243.

Anvert by Carus.'[11] However the contraction emphasises the steep nature of the terrain and converts the distant snow-capped summit ridge into a remote lustrous spectre. Whatever may have been borrowed, 'the sense of unrelieved loneliness is his own.' For Friedrich, mountains were places of complete lifelessness and silent reserve, sacred places in an age, as he saw it, of soulless materialism. His work was an intricate balance of observation and symbolic meaning yet there is no contradiction here, no paradox nor ambiguity in his painting.

A fine series of mountain studies also exists of sandstone towers in the Elbesandsteingebirge now housed in the Neue Gallerie Kunsthistorisches in Vienna: 'Rocky Gorge in the Elbesandsteingebirge' (oil on canvas, 94 x 73cm) and in the delicate 'The Rock Gates in Neurathen' produced between 1826 and 1828 (a watercolour study over a pencil drawing 27.9 x 24.5cm) housed in The Hermitage, St Petersburg.

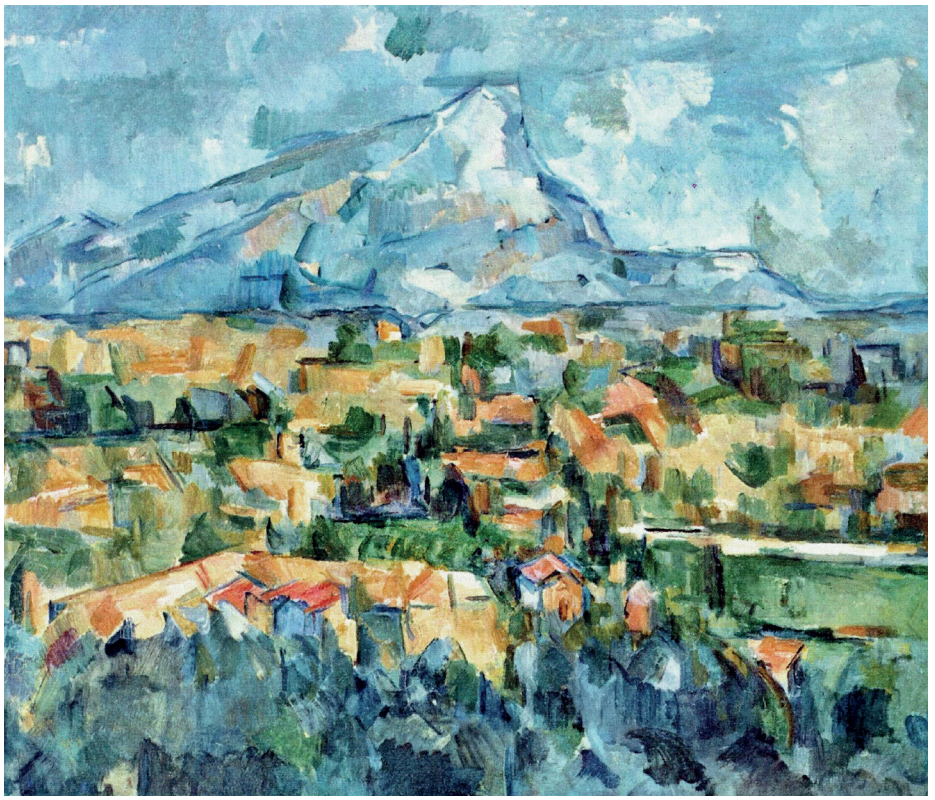
Friedrich's view of nature was theocentric: 'one saw God in what he had made, a diffuse and vast presence behind the screen of natural facts.'[12] The contemplative figures silhouetted in the loneliness of the mystery of nature are often linked to the highly allegorical elements where ships represent the journey through life and mountains the grandeur of God. Broadly speaking the 'Romantic conception of nature as the revelation of the infinite within the finite – of the divine creation in the world'[13] was central to Friedrich's work where his individual response to nature was to combine knowledge with feeling.

Friedrich's particular German philosophy had a great influence on the genre of Bergfilm, most popular in Weimar Germany and promoted and advanced by Arnold Fanck, which drew on the 'aesthetic conventions and iconography of nineteenth-century Romantic landscape painters, such as Caspar David Friedrich.'[14] The Alpine peaks, plunging gorges and eternal snows became projections and reflections of inner forces. In *The Holy Mountain* (1926), *The White Hell of Pitz Palu'* (1929) and in Leni Riefenstahl's directorial debut, *The Blue Light* (1932) sublime emotions and masculine heroic feats were set against the backdrop of the high Alps endorsing the greatest human virtues and named in the closing screen titles of *The Holy Mountain* as 'fidelity – truth – loyalty – faith.'

'Mont Sainte Victoire'[15]

This mountain in western Provence is in fact a massif extending over 18km, the highest point of which is Pic des Mouches (1011m). Its limestone ridge is clearly visible from Aix-en-Provence where Cézanne lived for many years. The mountain landscape of Provence is known as *garrigue*, low, open scrubland with a poor soil that maintains many evergreen shrubs, low trees, aromatic herbs and bunchgrasses and popularised in the films *La Gloire de Mon Père* and *Le Château de Ma Mère*.

11. W Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1980, p110.
12. R Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, London, Harvill, 1990, p90.
13. C Harrison, P Wood, J Gaiger. *Art in Theory* 1815-1900, Oxford, Blackwell, 1998, p12.
14. V della Dora, *Mountain*, London, Reaktion Books, 2016, p102.
15. Cézanne painted some 60 versions of this feature between 1882 and 1906 both in oils and watercolour. One of the most popular is from 1904-6, an oil on canvas, 29 x 36 inches in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



'Mont Sainte Victoire' (1904-6) by Paul Cézanne. *(Alamy)*

In his many paintings of this subject, Paul Cézanne[16] 'transformed a relatively minor peak in southern France … into the most celebrated mountain in Western art.'[17] He presents a mountain as an interaction between the land mass and the environment it is located in. As such the context is everything and any notion of uniformity or stereotypical imagery is lost. Central to his painting of 'Mont Sainte Victoire' is 'a vast curiosity about the relativeness of seeing, coupled with an equally vast doubt that he or anyone else could approximate it in paint.'[18] The relationships of the landscape elements revealed under a shifting light are rendered in broken outlines where the motif of the mountain displays his process of seeing. The hesitancy of his vision is depicted in his invitation to us to look and ascertain exactly what a mountain is, how we perceive it and assimilate all its features.

16. Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) was one of the major figures in European art both as an Impressionist and Post-Impressionist. From 1886, on the death of his father, he lived near Aix-en-Provence.
17. E Bernbaum, *Sacred Mountains of the World*, San Francisco, Sierra Club, 1992, p232.
18. R Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1996, p18.

Cézanne was never interested in the sinuous lines and decorative flatness of Gauguin as nature was never the same; the mountain was different every day. The changing sensations of landscape are rendered anew in the studies he made where the intensity of the landscape's sparse hillsides, the shifting light in the heat of the day and the limestone crags and arêtes are depicted afresh in each study. 'He never painted the same mountain twice'[19], as his scrutiny rendered every part of the canvas as a continually changing scene. To realise these changes meant that Cézanne needed to articulate the varying aspects of light and shadow that angled planes and deepened tones across the landscape to the bulk of the mountain. 'His goal was presence, not illusion.'[20] The enduring existence in the shifting angles of the sun, the altering hues of rock and foliage, the effects of mist or twilight, wind and weather. His paintings of Mont Sainte Victoire are examinations of space and depth and describe a sense of multiplicity as the governing element of reality where what we see is what we see today under these conditions.

His mountain canvases were an exploration of naturalistic truth and would later be developed into abstraction by the Cubists. His use of colour and tone, the telescoping of fore and mid-ground counteracted the enclosed space of previous artists. These paintings were about space itself, not merely as a decorative feature but as a new, stronger relationship between three-dimensional illusion and the painted surface where the faceted planes of the mountain may appear to oscillate back and forth between surface and image yet are bound to both. Thus, illusion and flatness, facet and stroke, space and movement seem to dislimn the picture then allow a re-incorporation of itself.

'He constructs a conventional but tense and highly concentrated landscape,'[21] an emotional yet stable treatment, a lyrical complex of broken features and jagged forms that maintains a spatial harmony and balance. Background and foreground achieve equal status and topographical features disappear from the plain before the mountain until an evanescent sea of colour allows one to sail to 'the heart of the geological drama, right to the undefined core, where apparent and imagined reality is one.'[22] The Classical concept of perspective was enhanced by a change in spatial awareness, observed colour and an emotional and spiritual dimension. Convergent lines and graded colour became obsolete yet there is no suggestion of a motionless world as his paintings seem to move and expand in an eternal interplay of shapes and colours.

'Glencoe, Argyllshire'

The paintings of Horatio McCulloch[23] exhibit a clarity and naturalness that was highly innovative in the 19th century. His many trips to the west Highlands and Islands of Scotland allowed him to render his canvases with an authenticity that maintained the landscapes' grandeur without the

19. R Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, London, Harvill, 1990, p125.
20. R Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, London, Harvill, 1990, p125.
21. F Elgar, *Cézanne*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1969, p216.
22. F Elgar, *Cézanne*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1969, p142.
23. H McCulloch (1805-67) was a Royal Scottish Academician, born in Glasgow, died in Edinburgh.

'Glencoe, Argyllshire' (1864) by Horatio McCulloch.

cloying sentimentality displayed by many of his contemporaries.

'Glencoe, Argyllshire'[24] is unique in is presentation of Buachaille Etive Mòr, the great herdsman of Etive, where Glen Coe meets Glen Etive. The modern view of 'the Buachaille' is characterised in many images taken from the main road from the south, the A82, as it rises over the Blackmount, where the peak of Stob Dearg rises sharply and the mountain ridge angles south-west, forming the northern side of Glen Etive. McCulloch's observation is clearly taken from the east, from the area around the Kings House Hotel. Built in the 17th century for travellers across Rannoch Moor, it was used as a barracks from 1746 but later in the 18th century had reverted to its former role. This watercolour sketch is less well known that the large canvas of the same year and title exhibited in the Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow.[25] The view was well known to McCulloch as his earlier 'The Entrance to Glencoe from Rannoch Moor' of 1846[26] reveals.

In this study, he captures the bleak ruggedness of the mountain and its dominance of the landscape. While the sky is rendered freshly, the clouds shredding themselves over the ridges to reveal the clarity of the blue sky beyond, the weather overshadows the landscape, enhancing the sense of wildness and desolation; the cloud-filled Glen Etive is to be avoided. The small figures in the middle ground, one on horseback, are dominated by the landscape yet travel on using the mountain as a beacon or signpost

24. 'Glencoe, Argyllshire' (1864). Watercolour and body colour over pencil on paper, 13.60 x 21.60cm, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.
25. 'Glencoe' (1864). Oil on canvas, 1105 x 1829mm, Kelvingrove Museum and Art Galleries.
26. 'The Entrance to Glencoe From Rannoch Moor' (1846). Oil on canvas, 34.6 x 60.6cm, private collection.

on their journey. The treatment of the mountain is vague, in part to the weather and changing light but also, one senses, as a simplification of the many gullies and buttresses that seam the north face of the mountain. The painting is not just about the mountain but about being in the mountains of the West Highlands where changeable weather systems still make conditions difficult for the traveller on foot or the mountaineer. The image is at once an invitation to explore this wild environment and a warning that it is no easy tourist experience. Glen Coe is open and approachable but the traveller must be well prepared.

Whatever influences there may have been in his work his highly individual approach to Scottish landscape painting and, in particular, Highland and mountain scenery, with a truth and understanding that hitherto had been absent. During his lifetime 'he was fortunate that his fondness for painting the wilder parts of his country coincided with public taste'[27] but his legacy of mountain landscapes, so thoroughly explored, still exhibits the clear, cold blustery freshness any climber might meet in Glen Coe.

27. S Smith, *Horatio McCulloch 1805-1867*, Glasgow, Glasgow Museums and Galleries, 1988, p22.

JOHN CLEARE

1967: One Old Man Recalls Another

William Daniell visited the Old Man of Hoy in 1815 during his epic journey around the coast of Britain, completed over the period 1813 to 1823. Daniell (1769–1837) was an English landscape and marine painter, and printmaker, notable for his work in aquatint. He travelled extensively in India in the company of his uncle Thomas Daniell, with whom he collaborated on one of the finest illustrated works of the period: *Oriental Scenery*.

It all began 51 years ago in a Holyhead pub. Alan Chivers, 'Chiv', head of BBC TV Outside Broadcasting, joined a group of climbers and television engineers refreshing themselves after the live broadcast from Craig Gogarth.

'Gather round, fellows,' he called, 'the DG's been on the blower. He says well done and he wants another climb for next year. But where? Any ideas?'

'There's a bluidy great sea stack up in the Northern Isles,' suggested that doyen of Scottish mountaineering Tom Patey. ''Tis 400ft high and virgin. I'll do some research …'

Come the autumn and the Old Man of Hoy was no longer virgin. In the summer Tom had persuaded Rusty Baillie and Chris Bonington up to the island of Hoy in the Orkney archipelago, where they had climbed the slender 450ft rock pillar that stands off Hoy's intimidating western cliffs.