

## Article

# Cloudscapes over the Baltic Sea—Cloud Motifs in Finnish, Swedish, German, Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian Symbolic Landscape Painting around 1900

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**Abstract:** The cloud motif, a significant one in the landscape painting of the 1890s and early 1900s, has been usually marginalized by scholars despite the fact that during this (Symbolist) period clouds became independent subjects of landscape painting in many European countries, especially in the Baltic Sea Region. Cloud imagery makes a robust appearance in Scandinavian, Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian art during the decades around 1900. The variety of symbolic meanings and possible interpretations of cloudscapes was impacted by cultural and literary associations that emerged with European Symbolism. There is a surprising resemblance of cloudscapes executed within the Baltic Sea Region, an examination of which reveals the complexity of artistic influence and the presence and wandering of motifs among artists.

**Keywords:** cloudscapes; landscape painting; Baltic Sea Region; Nordic art; clouds



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## 1. Introduction

Clouds in art can have a decorative function and convey mood and atmosphere; although pushed to the background, depicting them correctly has created a challenge for painters.<sup>1</sup> For centuries, artists have pondered over a recipe for a satisfactory representation of this natural phenomenon either in historical painting or genre scenes. Since the nineteenth century, artistic interest in clouds has intensified, resulting from not only a spiritual elation and commitment to scientific specificity but also the autopoietic aesthetics of clouds.<sup>2</sup> In *Essay on the Modification of Clouds* (1832), Luke Howard (1772–1864) explained the nature of clouds and inspired a number of painters to deepen their fascination with meteorology, as evidenced by the cloud studies of John Constable (1776–1837), Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857), and Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) used clouds primarily to convey an emotional connection between man and nature, as well as to represent the transit zone between the earthly and the heavenly realm.<sup>4</sup>

The complex symbolism of clouds has been vastly discussed in art historian scholarship: For example, Hubert Damisch described several cloudscapes from the Middle Ages to the 1800s in his *Théorie du nuage: pour une histoire de la peinture* (1972), starting with a motif of clouds in religious painting of the modern era.<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I would like to analyze cloudscapes painted around 1900 and later, as the turn of the twentieth century was, in my observation, the moment when artistic interest in cloud motifs reached its peak. Neoromantic and Symbolist painters of the fin-de-siècle focused on clouds as single motifs with symbolic value rather than elements of a larger landscape.<sup>6</sup> Instead of situating them in the background of historical events, artists invested meaningful content in their clouds, and rather than elaborate sketches of these technically challenging phenomena, they painted cloudscapes as finished works. The cloud motif emerged as something more than a subject of formal study in works by many European artists at the turn of the twentieth century.

For instance, French artist Odilon Redon (1840–1916) placed clouds against grayish blue, oneiric skies, whereas the Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918) gave his ornamental cumuli an almost transcendental meaning.<sup>7</sup> An exhibition called *Wolken. Welt des Flüchtigen* (*Clouds: Fleeting Worlds*) in the Leopold Museum in Vienna (22 March–1 June 2013) proved that clouds inspired many, such as artists from the turn of the twentieth century and younger artists.

Given the multifarious existence of a cloud motif as a symbol in landscape painting, I would like to extend my understanding of “Symbolism” to examples from the late nineteenth century up to mid-twentieth century. The discussed paintings originated in Symbolism as an artistic movement starting in the 1880s, although not all cited illustrations are chronologically Symbolist. The late examples, both in their content and style, represent, however, the same mysticism, spirituality, and dream-like mood as the paintings from the late 1800s. Therefore, instead of “Symbolist”, I refer to “Symbolic” Landscape in the title of this paper, choosing the broader definition of Symbolism as an artistic way of using symbols to convey a deeper meaning or represent something else.<sup>8</sup>

The cloudscapes mentioned in this paper were executed by Finnish, Swedish, Russian, German, Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian Symbolic painters. With these examples, I would like to suggest a visual kinship among landscape paintings from the Baltic Sea Region, a condition resulting from their geographical and cultural proximity. In *Modern Painting and The Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (1975), Robert Rosenblum claims that Northern artists were the most susceptible to the sublimity of nature, hence the specific spirituality and mysticism of German and Scandinavian art.<sup>9</sup> In my observation, cloud as a single motif was interestingly frequent in landscape painting of the Baltic Sea Region, which can be noticed in a number of exhibitions<sup>10</sup> and publications<sup>11</sup> dedicated to this topic. As shown in these articles, in many cases, artists who were unrelated to each other depicted clouds in a surprisingly similar way. Some of these similarities, especially between Polish and Scandinavian art, were presented during the “Solstice. Nordic Painting 1880–1910” exhibition in the National Museum in Warsaw in 2022.<sup>12</sup> These visual resemblances, in my opinion, can exemplify Aby Warburg’s concept of a “wandering motif” (Weigel 2013), a visual symbol shared among artists who might have met or studied with the same professors, especially in Paris, St. Petersburg, and Berlin. It is however not my intention to prove the real mutual inspiration of the artists listed below, but it is my proposal to include the lesser known cloudscapists in this discussion. My approach is informed by Göran Hermerén’s complex analysis of artistic influences (Hermerén 1975). I hope that it will turn out to be universal and possibly to be applied to many other cloudscapes, for example, by Canadian Group of Seven, which have been omitted in this paper.

## 2. Cloud as Figure

Cloudscapes, or rather the weather conditions they convey, suggest various interpretations. Since the emergence in the mid-nineteenth century of scientific publications about clouds, scholars have based their interpretations of cloud imagery primarily on the utility of meteorological knowledge to interpret such landscapes. While this method functions well in the case of cloudscapes painters inspired by science, those artists investing metaphorical and symbolic significance in clouds require a different strategy of interpretation.

What distinguishes cloudscapes circa 1900 from those produced earlier is the singularity of the cloud itself and its domination of the composition. The motif of a single cloud can also be understood as an example of the figurative technique of Polish literary historian Kazimierz Wyka (1910–1975), which was explained by Polish art historian Wiesław Juszczak (1932–2021) in this way: “Landscape is a figure of man and his psyche, and man is a figure of a landscape” (Juszczak 1972, p. 64).<sup>13</sup> Juszczak developed the problem of the figure with the example of Jan Stanisławski (1893–1973), where the motif of a mallow becomes a synecdoche, distilled and yet representing the rest of the landscape. Each figure is meant to summarize the mood and expression of the whole landscape: “It directs it in terms of content, symbolically (...) introduces spiritual tension into the landscape, throws

psychic reflexes on the rest of it or its opposition" (Juszczak 1977, p. 77). Hence, a single detail becomes a symbol of nature's greatness.

In these terms, a cloud becomes an integral part of the whole and gains a symbolic value. Its singular or dominant presence in numerous paintings by artists of the Baltic Sea Region should be interpreted as a spiritual and pantheistic vision of natural phenomena and a representation of the artist's feelings through the visual symbol of a cloud. What follows are examples that present the diversity of cloud symbolism discussed in the context of Symbolic imagery and evocative painting and that present both singular and more common associations of the motif.

### 3. Metaphors and Shapes of Clouds

In his ground-breaking publication, Luke Howard classified clouds into three types, using Latin names to describe their shapes: *Cirrus* ('curling lock of hair'), *Cumulus* ('heap/pile') and *Stratus* ('layer'). His scientific terminology was therefore based on associating the form of each cloud with something familiar, and this protocol was followed by later meteorologists, who refined Howard's classifications with terms, such as tower clouds, anvil clouds, funnel clouds, and shelf clouds, to mention only the most common examples.

Because cloud-naming is based on resemblance to the natural world, it also indicates the rich imagination of the name givers. Their method required an artistic creative process, an *allusion*, defined by Maria Gołaszewska as "the artistic effect of analogy, association (sometimes very distant), referring to a living creative imagination" (Gołaszewska 2000, p. 142). Howard's creativity inspired many painters and poets of his time, but it was also the scientific finiteness of his classification that deterred artists, such as Friedrich, from painting such identifiable clouds. Friedrich's subjective and irrational attitude to nature (believing it the manifestation of divine creation) and, therefore, to clouds informed later neo-romantic landscape painters, with the caveat that the (universal) sublime was replaced by personal reflections and combined with scientific curiosity as well as striving for creativity and *allusion* that responded to the perceptions of individual artists.

Gołaszewska notes that allusion is not synonymous with symbolism. However, by definition, a symbol is understood as a concept or object that, apart from its literal meaning, attaches to a greater number of hidden meanings, most often associated with various kinds of metaphors: animation, animalization, anthropomorphizing, and personification. These, in turn, are used to represent abstract phenomena in human- or animal-like shapes. The finite set of scientifically classified clouds was, therefore, completed by shapes created by artistic imaginations. This reverse creativity is seen in works by many painters of the 1900s whose clouds are shaped in forms taken from both reality and fiction. For instance, the Lithuanian artist Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911) depicted clouds in the fairy-tale shapes of dragons, castles, and giants. In the triptych *The Prince's Journey* (1907), clouds, although dominating the composition, are not the actual protagonists of the story, although they resemble/represent other objects. Many more cloud metaphors emerge in painting and poetry; clouds thus sometimes allude to non-meteorological phenomena and objects, symbolizing changeability and metamorphosis. A similar transformation of the normative association of clouds taking the shapes of other objects emerges in *Spring* (c. 1900; National Museum in Warsaw) by the Polish painter Henryk Szczygliński (1881–1944), where clouds take the shapes of sailboats, presumably inspired by imagery found in the works of the Greek French Symbolist poet Jean Moreas (1856–1910).<sup>14</sup>

The art and literature produced during the Symbolist era provides examples of both the amorphization of clouds and the 'nubification' of persons. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* contains at least two examples of cloudy transformations: the story of Nephele, who obtained her human form from a cloud, and a myth about Zeus and Io, in which the former seduced the latter in the form of a cloud. In modern painting, such measures were not utilized to present specific characters from mythology, but rather new symbols and personifications that strengthen the message of the painting and evoke the intended understanding of depicted events. In *Tempest* (1925; National Museum in Warsaw, Figure 1) by the Polish



painter Zdzisław Jasiński (1863–1932), human figures on horseback emerge from storm clouds that symbolize war and horror: Several figures have helmets on their heads, and clouds billow like the dust of war. This late work by a Young Poland artist represents the neo-Romanticism strain in Polish landscape painting, which its characteristic connection to nature, which—personified—receives a more emotional dimension.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 1.** Zdzisław Jasiński, *Tempest* (Polish: *Burza*), 1925. Oil on canvas, 253 × 200 cm. Warsaw, National Museum. Public domain.

#### 4. *Känslobild*—Inner Cloudscape

Nineteenth-century landscape painting is usually associated with an emotional connection to nature, either universal–mystical or personal. While Romantic painters used clouds to create a specific atmosphere—from sublime to uncanny—Neo-romantics used clouds as reservoirs of personal memories, focusing also on the decorative potential of the painted phenomena’s shapes and colors. In Symbolist painting, the internal experiences hidden in cloud metaphors extended to the psychologization of nature. The turn of the

twentieth century is thus the moment when the Swiss philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel (1821–1881) proposed his idea of *état d'âme* as landscape itself,<sup>16</sup> and this concept emerges frequently in landscape painting in the Baltic Sea Region. Called either “atmospheric”, “evocative”, “inner”, “subjective”, or “meaningful”, landscape paintings of the 1890s and 1900s often represented personal feelings through nature metaphors.

The Swedish painter and art critic Richard Bergh (1859–1919) introduced the concept of *känslbild* (‘picture of feelings’) in his article *Karl Nordström and the Modern Mood Landscape* (1896), where he revealed fellow painter Karl Nordström (1855–1923) as the model representative of mood landscape painting. Referring to *Storm Clouds* (1893; National Museum of Sweden, Stockholm), Bergh described the formal and visual potential of cloudscapes to present the artist’s singular bond with the described nature. According to Bergh, the development of a painter’s emotional state can be traced through the color scheme of his clouds: Dark colors and jagged forms intensify mood and reflect the nature of the landscape and have the potential to stimulate individual reflections upon nature. The experience of witnessing dramatic changes in the sky and then expressing it with the tonal nuances, light, and shapes of the clouds is for Bergh the best way for an artist to depict his own spirit (Bergh 2017, p. 433). Compared with Nordström’s, *Motif from Tjörn* (1897; Gothenburg Museum of Art), which is more descriptive, the “spirit of nature” emanating from the painter himself is embodied in *Storm Clouds*. Although *Motif from Tjörn* depicts an almost identical scene to that in *Storm Cloud* (in both cases, a cloud hovers over a meadow). In *Motif*, however, the sky is much brighter and clearer than in *Storm Cloud*, the cloud is fluffy and white, and the grass is greener and lusher, elements that, according to Bergh, demonstrate the diverse feelings of the artist’s inner state.

In instances where a specific cloud metaphor was not intended by the painter, it was often interpreted as such by critical texts written by their contemporaries. The concept of an inner landscape has also been discussed by Dorota Folga-Januszczyńska in reference to Polish painting: “The landscape created by these artists at the time obliges them to speak about nature and to define themselves in relation to nature (. . .) With time, artists start to refer to themselves or to their inner world because they do not clearly see the border between the external landscape scenery and natural, immanent observation” (Charazińska 1996, p. 228). For Mieczysław Limanowski, such immanence characterized cloudscapes by Ferdynand Ruszczyk (1870–1936). In the article *On the Immanent Nature of Paintings by Ruszczyk* (1939), the author stated that Ruszczyk’s paintings possess “immanent content: that is, from the inside” (Limanowski 1939, p. 3), by which he meant not only the personal connection with the landscape painted but also the mystical, if not religious, attitude to nature. The strong bond with landscape in Neoromantic and Symbolist painting was, therefore, often linked with pantheistic beliefs in the power of all elements, including the air represented by clouds.

## 5. Lonely Clouds

Cloudscapes possess the power to identify inner states and represent an artist’s feelings. Among the various painted skies that imply particular moods, there is a specific motif that reappears regularly in cloudscapes of the Baltic Sea Region: a single lonely cloud that becomes a symbol of alienation and loneliness, one that implies the inner states of the painter more by its form and placement in the composition than by the atmospheric connotations noticed by meteorologists.

The Swedish painter Prince Eugen’s *The Cloud* exemplifies this situation. Prince Eugen produced at least six versions of *The Cloud*, of which the two most elaborate date from 1895 to 1896 and are regarded as exemplars of the artist’s style and confirmation of his artistic maturity (Widman 1986, p. 29). That Eugen persisted in painting this same cloud seems to indicate a deeply personal feeling toward it. Scholars agree that *The Cloud* is a sign of the loneliness experienced by the artist at that time, a conclusion supported by letters he sent to his mother and to friends, in which he often used the word *disharmoni* to express his situation (Eugen 1945, p. 151). Another word frequently used by the Prince is “loneliness”,

and his personal secretary, Gustaf Lindgren, confirmed that the paintings of that time were “images of memory, created from loneliness in the artist’s heart.” (Zachau 1989, p. 151).

It is the Waldemarsudde’s version of *The Cloud*, however, that is considered the fullest expression of Symbolism in the work of Prince Eugen (Widman 1986, p. 30). According to Inga Zachau, this painting is “not so much a summary of experiments with form and color, conducted over the years, but undoubtedly also the quintessence of the painter’s life philosophy and feelings.” (Zachau 1989, p. 197). While many speculated on the crisis of a young artist (“*ungdomskris*” (Wennerholm 1982, p. 95)), it was more a sense of alienation in the thirty-year-old Eugen that motivated this motif. The cloud interested the Prince especially after reading the poems of Verner van Heidenstam in his volume *Vallfart och vandringsår* (1888; *Pilgrimage and Wandering Years*), in which the symbol of the cloud appears as an expression of loneliness and alienation (Zachau 1989, p. 206). At the same time, the loneliness of the cloud can as well be understood as a symbol of autonomy, if not freedom. The well-documented process of working on the composition, including a number of sketches and letters, proves that the cloud was a product of the artist’s “inner eye”, giving it another dimension of Symbolism.<sup>17</sup>

Comparing cloudscapes by Prince Eugen and Ferdynand Ruszczyc (Figure 2) is revealing.<sup>18</sup> Tadeusz Jaroszyński wrote about this painting, exhibited in the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw in January 1903, commenting that it is “uninteresting as a composition, unpleasant in lines, unattractive as a juxtaposition of color patches and unobtrusive in terms of mood” (Morelowski 1937, p. 143). Significantly, it is these features that make the painting unusual within Ruszczyc’s work. The relationship of cloud to bush is defined by Georg Gruew as a “negative duplication” through which “the viewer is not aware of which elements are being duplicated.” (Gruew 2011). Thus, one can reflect on the solitude exemplified by both the cloud and the bush, but it is the cloud suspended against an undefined, monochromatic background of navy blue sky that seems more mysterious and foreign and also more three-dimensional compared to the flat-painted shrub.

Perhaps the single cloud motif inspired Ruszczyc through his exposure to the work of the Greek-Russian painter Arkhip Kuindzhi, his professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. Kuindzhi painted a series of similar clouds hovering over flat landscapes; while his early works depict the motif in a more realistic way, in the years 1900–1908 the painter returned to the motif of a tower cloud in a less naturalistic way: flat, and often painted in very intense colors (Arkhip Kuindzhi, *The Cloud*, 1900–1905; The State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg). The loneliness of the single cloud is symbolic also in the sense that clouds rarely appear alone; poets and painters, therefore, project their own loneliness onto the cloud, which thus becomes a personification of the artists’ alienation and a reflection of their inner states.





**Figure 2.** Ferdynand Ruszczyc, *The Cloud* (Polish: *Obłok*), 1902. Oil on canvas, 110 × 80 cm. Poznań, National Museum. Public domain.

#### 6. Clouds and Their Reflection in Lakes—Japonisme

An equally subjective motif showing an artist's psychological state is the recurring motif of sky/cloud reflections on a lake's surface. Hodler's Theory of Parallelism, based on repetitions as well as horizontal directions, seems to be fully expressed by means of reflection, where reflections of diagonal and straight lines give a decorative effect and dynamize the composition: "The game of mirrors of the diagonals and lines creates a structure both ornamental and lively to which all the elements of the composition contribute" (Dückers 1983, p. 136).

As Matteo Bianchi states, the mirror–water motif becomes a reflection of the artist’s soul, and a cloud, with its ephemerality and constant motion, intensifies the effect (Bianchi 2000, p. 43). Watching the sky reflected in water gives pause and inspires profound thoughts about fate and destiny; clouds seen from a lake’s perspective seem closer, and the illusion confirms that they are somehow accessible. Considering the depth of the water, however, evokes associations with the depth of one’s own soul, by which the reflection’s symbolic value expands, leading to greater ambiguity. In this motif, one can, therefore, look for inspiration in Neoplatonism and the search for sources for the original idea through its reflections (Sarajäs-Korte 1981, p. 29).

While Hodler focused on symmetry and parallelism, the water horizon in Scandinavian paintings tends to shift towards the upper borders of the canvas, sometimes presenting only the reflection of the sky. Such solutions were used by representatives of the Norwegian artists’ colony at Fleskum, in works such as *Summer Night* (1886; National Museum of Norway, Oslo) by Eilif Peterssen (1852–1928). The motif of clouds and lakes was also painted frequently by the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), whose stylized clouds are reflected in the surface of a lake in *Clouds* (1904; Didrichsen Art Museum, Helsinki). In *Lake Keitele* (1905; National Gallery, London), the horizon shifts so much that we see only a narrow strip of land with trees and the sky, the stretched and enlarged shapes of which reflect on the lake’s surface. Gray zigzags of water splashed by the wind on the surface of the lake cut the reflection, disturbing the smoothness of the water’s surface and reflections of light thrown from the clouds by the setting sun (Robbins 2017, p. 24).

Here, the surface of the lake functions less as a mirror that accurately reflects reality as it does a medium that disturbs the reflection, which leads to an increase in reflections and a deeper symbolic value of the motif. In Gallen-Kallela’s work, perception is completely curved; clouds are not only seen as reflections, but the reflection itself is disturbed, illegible.

Gallen-Kallela’s landscapes with lakes evoke Japanese woodcuts in their vertical formats, perspective shortcuts, and placement of individual motifs, such as flowers and twigs in the foreground. Similar efforts were made by the Polish painter Jan Stanisławski (1860–1907). Decorative stylizations of clouds and their reflections on lakes’ surfaces may also be derived from Japonist objects, which entered the European art market in the late nineteenth century. Perhaps zigzag forms were taken from Japanese ceramics, which would be interesting since this motif symbolizes clouds in Japanese art (Halén 2016, p. 149). Stylized in the form of swirls, clouds inspired by woodcuts emerge in the works of other Scandinavian artists, for example, in *Clouds* by Bror Linge (1906; Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm).

## 7. “Intensywizm”—Towards Expressionism

In 1897, Cezary Jellenta published a manifesto entitled *Intensywizm* (‘Intensivism’), in which he proposed a new movement founded on “intensity”, or the “concentrated expression of a motif created in an artist’s painting, with the maximum reduction in content and formal elements, all to push the attention and give the impression that side effects are less needed” (Lewandowski 1973, p. 123). Thus, intensivism was identified as an intermediate movement between Symbolism and Expressionism because of the painting’s intensity of impressions and existential content, and above all due to its expressive influences on the viewer; it ventured beyond programs of current trends: “Painting should be a reflection, a reflection of reality, not a slavish copy (...) but a statement, an intensified expression” (Jellenta 1897). The elements of, and emphasis on, the strength of natural forces are highlighted: “Intensivism, arising from anti-naturalistic orientation, is creationist and dynamic, it is the art of movement, freedom, and the affirmation of life embodied in the visual-fantastic, monumental and at the same time simplified—in its narrative layer—forms.” (Lewandowski 1973, p. 124).

In turn, Elżbieta Charazińska describes the *intensivism* of Polish artists, such as Stanisławski, Ruszczyc, Kazimierz Stabrowski, and Konrad Krzyżanowski, in terms of a horizon line that “wanders dangerously, sometimes the sky reigns over a narrow strip of



land or a wide spilled river, it is again the earth that obstructs the sky. Sometimes artists intensify the impression by breaking the rules of classical perspective. . . Dramaturgy is often placed in parts of the heavens, resulting in a spectacular theater of gigantic, menacing clouds" (Charazińska 1996, p. 225).

The cloudscapes painted by Konrad Krzyżanowski (1872–1922) were much more expressive than those of others in the Young Poland group. His cloud studies were, first and foremost, subjective, impressionistic experiments. These works, "full of gold dances", "crazy", "drunken skies", as the painter himself described them, take on various shapes; they are either flat, decorative forms that look like balloons floating in a sapphire sky or a golden tower or jagged, impastoed, quickly painted blasts or vibrating yellowish-green flourishes. The painting *Clouds in Finland* (1908; National Museum in Kraków, Figure 3), painted during a study trip across the Baltic Sea, may be his most expressive and decorative vision of clouds: The airy phenomenon is depicted far beyond its meteorologically described nature, yet still identifiable. As Lilja Skalska-Mieczek observes: "The artist maximizes simplicity, synthesizes the selected motif, subordinates it to a violent, spontaneous form of expression, and gives it an emotional, spiritual expression, consistent with its own feeling and mood." (Skalska-Mieczek 1999, p. 97).



**Figure 3.** Konrad Krzyżanowski, *Clouds in Finland* (Polish: *Chmury w Finlandii*), 1908. Oil on canvas, 110 × 125 cm. Kraków, National Museum. Public domain.

The variety of forms and colors of Krzyżanowski's clouds intensifies the expression of observed nature and emphasizes creative freedom in formulating the motif, as well as the influence of elemental forces, which can also be observed in *The Cloud* and Stanisławski's *Grange (Barn in Pustowarnia, Clouds, 1898, National Museum in Kraków)* by Ferdynand Ruszczyc. These images manifest visual intensity by the way the artists conceived their cloud forms. Ruszczyc's decorative arrangement in *The Cloud* and Stanisławski's sapphire sky and varied, fantastic cloud shapes suggest not only their symbolic qualities but also the power of color and a heavily impastoed technique to express emotion.

Charazińska lists the painters connected with the St. Petersburg Fine Art Academy whose way of depicting skies might have been influenced by their professor, Arkhip Kuindzhi: Krzyżanowski, Ruszczyc, and Stabrowski. Thus, the category of *intensywizm* can also refer to other painters associated with the St. Petersburg community, for example, the Latvian painter Pēteris Kundziņš (1886–1958). Unfortunately, not much has been written about the cloudscapes of this Latvian artist, but according to Dace Lambergā, he belonged to the most talented group of Latvian Symbolists (along with Vilhelms Purvītis and Janis Rozentālas). Lambergā draws attention to an important aspect of Baltic and Scandinavian art in which—in contrast to the art of Western Europe—Symbolism “is not related to mysticism, but shows a balanced expression of feelings with lots of introspection” (Lambergā 2018, p. 61). This “expression of feelings” may be the key to understanding cloudscapes by Kundziņš, which are often composed in the same way, featuring a sky with decorative cloud formations over a flat patch of land.

Saturated pinks, purples, and the oranges of the setting sun imbue Kundziņš's imagery with drama and intensity. In *Clouds* (1943; Mūkusalas Mākslas, Riga, Figure 4), the shapes and colors of the cumulus clouds communicate a kind of formal power as well as the weight of the rainclouds. Kundziņš's favorite cloud shape is the cauliflower cumulus, which covers the entire sky and hovers heavily over the ground, overwhelming the composition with a multitude of budding forms that heighten the landscape's expressiveness and hint at the inscrutable forces of nature. Everyday human life seems insignificant by comparison. Even when Kundziņš's forms are painted in a more realistic way than those painted by Krzyżanowski, they gain in expressiveness through their intensified color and ominous size.

Peculiar, dramatically shaped clouds even appear in the work of the Expressionist precursor Vincent van Gogh. He represented clouds in a decorative manner in works like *Olive Trees* (1889; The Museum of Modern Art, New York) that may have been inspired by Japanese woodcuts, then popular among avant garde artists and collectors. Similarly ornate, completely unrealistic shapes also characterize some clouds painted by Gallen-Kallela and Krzyżanowski. A departure from Naturalism and the stylization of clouds through simplification often led to a synthetic expression of the diverse emotions that arise in celestial observers. This approach to depicting clouds was also adopted by members of the German Expressionist groups *Der Blaue Reiter* and *Die Brücke*, especially Emil Nolde, whose windswept North Sea landscapes with dramatic skies are often associated with Scandinavian, Neo-romantic ‘mood’ painting (Gryglewicz 1998, p. 11).



**Figure 4.** Pēteris Kundziņš, *Clouds* (Latvian: *Mākoņi*), 1943. Oil on canvas stuck to cardboard, 37.3 × 41.2 cm. Riga, Mūkusalas Mākslas.

## 8. Conclusions

The symbolic and evocative meanings of clouds in Northern European landscape painting around 1900 originates in the Romantic tradition of the sublime. However, Romantic-era clouds, which contributed to and sometimes determined a landscape's mood, were generally painted in a naturalistic way, and can be identified meteorologically. On the other hand, the forms and shapes given to the clouds by Symbolist painters became an important component of their symbolic meaning: If the cloud does not resemble a cloud, then perhaps it is meant to suggest something more. Certainly, in this instance the mind and imagination become starting points for interpreting the artist's intentions and symbolic content, his experiences and inner states. It seems appropriate to consider the Norse origin myth, in which the three gods, Odin, Wili, and Ve, created the world from the body of a slain giant Ymir, using his skull to build the vault of heaven and his brain to create clouds.

Symbolists were fascinated by clouds as atmospheric phenomena in themselves, usually regarding scientific knowledge about them as irrelevant to their purposes. Rather than nephology, the branch of meteorology that studies clouds, their interests led them to the Greek myth about Nephele. She was created in the image of Hera so that Zeus could test Ixion's integrity after he displayed his desire for her. Thus Nephele, a cloud nymph, became the patron of spectacles, deceived senses, and illusions. The extensive and more personalized symbolism of clouds appearing in landscape painting at the turn of the twentieth century reflected the cognitive uncertainty we experience in relation to clouds, in their constant variability and instability, and the dictatorship of the imagination, which allows only a subjective description of the phenomenon.

The regional variations within Symbolism and Neo-Romanticism found in the Baltic Sea Region countries—particularly Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Poland,



and Russia—are relevant to this consideration of cloudscapes. Due to their geographical and cultural proximity, as well as to their similar historical backgrounds and/or analogous political situations, evocative landscape painting, including a symbolic value ascribed to the cloud motif, plays a pivotal role in the way the symbol was interpreted. Although the examples presented here evidence individualistic, personal approaches to landscape, with clouds symbolizing the inner state of the artistic soul, this emotional bond with nature might also relate to the fostering of patriotism and generic national identities. Still, it was not only the symbolic depictions of homeland that evoked national identity for artists, but also the ‘home sky’ that incorporated shared emotions about one’s native land and strengthened the connection with the clouds hovering above one’s beloved, native country. This factor is especially relevant in the case of national Neo-Romantic (or, national romantic) landscape painting, which was popular in these countries in the decades around 1900.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In his *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci analyzed the process of the formation of clouds in nature and the way they are perceived by the human eye. Several pages of his notes contain information on physical aspects of the phenomenon, including color changes depending on the weather or time of day. Leonardo focused on the various forms, shapes, and weights of clouds that determine their transparency and the variety of shadows they cast. He advised painters to show these shadows, as well as observing the colors of the clouds approaching the horizon (da Vinci 1956).
- <sup>2</sup> As presented by (Stückelberger 2006, 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> The relationship between artists’ meteorological knowledge and characteristics of their cloudscapes have been studied by, for example, (Thornes 1999).
- <sup>4</sup> The sublime of clouds in Romantic landscape painting was described in, among others, (Jacobus 2012; Glaudes and Anouchka 2017; Thi Diep 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> Contrary to the title, however, the book is not an art historian’s interpretation, but a deep philosophical discourse on cloud iconography. It starts from understanding a cloud as a graph, an element of semiotics image. In Damisch’s orthographic arrangement, the cloud is analyzed in three ways as /cloud/, *cloud* and “cloud”, i.e., depending on its function: significant, denoting, or signified. See (Damisch 2002).
- <sup>6</sup> Although this symbolic reading resulted from general interest in the landscape in Symbolism; see (Thomson and Rapetti 2012).
- <sup>7</sup> “Montagnes et nuages ont une valeur autre que de simple phénomènes naturels au apparitions atmosphériques devenant en quelque sorte à ses yeux des créations du Dieu tout-puissant” (Stückelberger 1998, p. 88).
- <sup>8</sup> As it is also understood by (Hofstätter 1965).
- <sup>9</sup> He points out, however, that it was not the latitude determining such conditions but a special “mentality” of northern countries, associated primarily with Protestant values (Rosenblum 1975, p. 122).
- <sup>10</sup> Such as *Sky in the art* (The State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, 12 August–8 November 2010), *Moln/Cloud* (Skissernas Museum in Lund, 10 June–7 October 2012), *In the clouds. Clouds in art from the 1800s to our own time* (Stavanger Art Museum, 20 March–18 October 2020). They showed cloudscapes of younger artists, both the turn of the twentieth century and contemporary, and followed with broader publications on the subject.
- <sup>11</sup> Just to mention a few: (Wistman 2003) about Prince Eugen’s Swedish cloudscapes; (Paasonen 2018) about Finnish and Russian cloudscapes; (Haglund 2020) by the curator of the 2012 exhibition in Lund.
- <sup>12</sup> The curators Agnieszka Bagińska and Wojciech Głowacki mention a visual kinship between paintings of, among others, Ferdynand Ruszczyc and Prince Eugen, Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Konrad Krzyżanowski; see (Bagińska and Głowacki 2022).
- <sup>13</sup> Kazimierz Wyka uses the Polish word “*figura*” in the same sense as in “figure of speech, representation”. All translations are made by the author, unless stated otherwise.

- 14 The Symbolist poet Jean Moreas, in his *Nuages qu'un beau jour à présent environne*, called clouds "sailboats on the calm of the seas" (*semblables aux voiliers sur le calme des mer*) and "space runners" (*coureurs de l'espace*).
- 15 As Jan Kleczyński described it in 1934: "motifs of airy figures composed of clouds and so connected with the elements merged with nature"; see (Kleczyński 1934, p. 4).
- 16 His famous words "every landscape is a state of mind" (*Chaque paysage est un état d'âme*) published in *Journal intime* in October 1852 has been given a new meaning in Symbolism; see (Cogeval and Lochnan 2017, p. 17).
- 17 Hans Henrik Brummer analyzes the painting in frames of Swedish nationalism; therefore, his interpretation includes moral and political dimension of the singular cloud; see (Brummer 2013, p. 201).
- 18 The two paintings are also juxtaposed by Bagińska and Głowacki: "Prince Eugen and Ferdynand Ruszczyc went even further toward synthetic forms in their views of individual clouds in the sky, directing the viewer's attention to the paintings' symbolic sense. Both artists combined a dynamic composition and expressive manner of painting with simplified forms and colours. Thanks to synthesis, their works turned into metaphors. As subjective visions, they became mental landscapes, symbolic representations of a state of mind." See (Bagińska and Głowacki 2022, p. 57).

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