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Frederic Edwin Church

One of the most significant American artists of the nineteenth century was Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900). Many of his works reflected the attitudes and concerns of people involved in the dynamic changes that occurred throughout the ensuing century. Church successfully captured the time periods and movements of romanticism, westward expansion, the Civil War, industrialism, and nationalism in his paintings. In addition to painting the United States, he traveled to South America and the Middle East and created illustrious images. No matter what theme or place he portrayed, Church's masterpieces contained religious overtones. It was particularly romanticism and his Middle Eastern sojourn that inspired Church to create the Hudson River Valley estate of Olana. Church's embracement of romanticism in his paintings was influenced by Hudson River School painter Thomas Cole and to a smaller degree the famous scientist Alexander von Humboldt. Eventually Church established his own style of artwork that has been described as both highly realistic and imaginative.

As an apprentice of Thomas Cole, Frederic Church was influenced artistically and politically. Creatively, Church learned how to select the correct oils, canvas, effectively layering paint and the application of light. Thus the early years of Church's paintings (1845-1853) closely resembled Cole's style. Young Church also shared Cole's criticism that industrial growth endangered the natural landscape. This criticism was tied on the religious ideology that the United States was God's chosen kingdom on earth. God's covenant with America was symbolized by the bountiful and majestic landscape. Industrialization then served as a destroyer of the covenant as natural settings were cleared in the name of progress. As the bountiful landscape continued to disappear so would the moral fiber of the country because the Creator would be replaced by materialism. Materialism then put the United States in serious jeopardy of loosing its national identity. A response to material progress was the Romantic Movement which emphasized the significance of the individual to explore nature and experience God as well as

stressed the importance of religious values and the glorification of the past. Thomas Cole was able to capture this movement in his drawings and was now about to pass it on to Frederick Church. [1].

One example of Church's work was *Hooker and Company* (1846) that clearly resembled Cole's 1836, *The Pic Nic*. In regards to the proportions of the trees and where the people were situated. *Hooker and Company* was a prime example of electing the religious past of Church's home state of Connecticut. Thomas Hooker, a Puritanical cleric, helped to establish Connecticut as a colony in 1636. For the artist, Hooker embodied the idea of the individual exploring an unknown wilderness while encountering the Divine to establish a dwelling. At the National Academy of Design, the aspiring Church designed the *Valley of the Shadow of Death, Pilgrim's Progress* (1847). This particular image indicated the Puritan background of America and possessed two possible interpretations. The first meaning was the darkness inferred the encroaching industrialization threatening to cause a decay of morals causing many to fall into sin. Another probable definition is that the arriving Pilgrims (God's chosen people) symbolize the light of God penetrating a dark and unexplored land mass. Church desired to have his artwork close to his master because he felt a debt of gratitude to his master. [2]

Although Frederic Church's work appeared to reflect Thomas Cole's there were some minor differences in style and his ideology began to depart as well. The creative break from Cole was in regards to the lighting. Cole preferred to have the light concealed whereas Church desired to have sunlight break through the clouds to give off a divine aura, evident in the image *Above the Clouds at Sunrise* (1849). Also within the painting, the rising sun pierces the morning clouds forming a divine apparition because the clouds surrounding the light source gives the feeling of something surreal. It is here that Church was communicating the Biblical passage of Genesis of God's light shining upon the world each morning. This also tied into the growing notion that the United States as a unique democratic country created in the likeness and image of God. Church further elicited the Puritan roots of America with the idea of Plymouth Rock in *the Beacon* (1850). In this image, the rocks symbolized a place of refuge from the stormy seas for those chosen by God to live. As selected individuals the Puritans established the Divine Kingdom on Earth and proclaim his word. To perpetuate the Kingdom, individuals had to be fruitful and

multiply and in the United States this meant expanding into new territory. Essentially Church was now tying into the concept of Manifest Destiny which justified the expansion of American boarders in the name of God. His *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1860) directly supported Manifest Destiny with the portrayal of the American West as being an endless land of bounty of resources. The sunset sky captured the vastness of the west as streaks of oranges, reds, and purples converged on a barely noticeable mountain top in the far distance. Frederic Church's paintings were noted for their beauty but also the ability to communicate with the individual viewer. In other words Church sought to unite the subject and the viewer whereas Cole created distance between the two.[3]

Another feature that set Church apart from Cole was his ability to combine the real with the ideal in his artwork. Whereas Cole mainly focused on landscape scenes that involved ancient ruins, goats, and/or peasants, Church chose ones in a modern framework with settlers and grazing cows such as his *New England Scenery(1853)* As opposed to Cole, Church did not mind progress so as long as there was a balance between nature and civilization. This idea is communicated with the *New England Scenery:*

> The viewer sees a calm body of water extending into the distance, cows watering at the end of a sandy pit, a rocky waterfall with a mill beside it, cleared fields and groves of trees, a white church with a columned porch and steeple, gently rolling hills leading to distinctive mountains, and, finally a sky filled with majestic cumulus clouds. [4]

The *West Rock* (1849) was another image of Church that enforced the concept of the unending bounties of the New World but also exalted the common man. During this time the common man was central to democracy; the idea that anyone regardless of individual background had an opportunity to advance in life. At the time moving west was the prime opportunity for advancement and thus the *West Rock* encouraged the individual to go out into unsettled land and create a new beginning, something that Cole was weary about. Art scholars Franklin Kelly and Gerald Carr suggest that *Mount Ktaadn* (1853) was Church's attempt to reconcile the past and the present with the painting. In *Mount Ktaadn* he portrayed oak trees as antiquities of the past while the elms represented the present. Both tree types served as an integral part in the drawing by contributing to its beauty. Here Church attempted to balance progress with traditional values of the past and demonstrated that they influenced one another. As such, this marked a

major philosophical turning point for Church as he now supported industrialization and westward expansion as long as the Christian values of Calvin were not compromised for the sake of progress.[5]

Since Frederic Church supported a moderate western movement, there were a number of drawings that sought to challenge British claims in North America. His piece *Niagara* (1857/1858) expressed an expansionist sentiment. Here Franklin Kelly and art historian John Howat believe, the raging waterfall symbolized America's power and strength in which many sought to make this North American gem a part of the United States. Church's *The Icebergs* (1859/1860) questioned which country had territorial rights and supremacy in Canada. In this image the artist painted a piece of broken ship signifying the failure of the British to possess a definitive foothold on the on the continent. This idea is conveyed again through Church's *The North* (1860) was his belief that the Northwest Passage (the States of Washington, Oregon and Canadian British Columbia) was open to anyone who sought to claim it. In other words, people had to settle an area in order to lay claim to it. This notion was emphasized further with the various twilight scenes completed during the early 1860s portraying the vastness of the American West. According to Church he believed that since God looked with favor on the United States it was justifiable to claim the rivers, valleys, lakes, and mountains of the west. Essentially, Church painted the mood of the country during this time period; divine justification for expansion and hegemony on the continent while simultaneously utilizing the beauty of nature to lure people out to the west[6].

Church justified nature's beauty with the help of German scientist Alexander von Humboldt, but in turn used nature to criticize the new science associated with Charles Darwin. Humboldt helped to reveal the natural settings of the United States to Church thus inspiring him to travel with his knowledgeable person to Central and South America. Whatever rock structures and fauna types Humboldt wrote down and categorized in his journal, Church translated it into a sketch, becoming a naturalist in addition to his career as an artist. He drew the details of the flowers, orchids and bromeliads that were native to the tropical regions of Columbia and Ecuador that eventually culminated into his most exquisite work, *The Heart of the Andes*. It was precisely at the same time, 1859, that Charles Darwin published his *Origin of Species* relegating nature to a biological process as opposed to a Divine creation.

Frederick Church believed, however, that science could be reconciled with religion and he sought to demonstrated there interconnectedness with *The Heart of the Andes.*[7]

The Heart of the Andes is regarded as a religious symbol because the barren and frozen mountains along with the jagged hills and valleys represent inhospitable conditions not conducive to sustaining life. In other words there is an absence of God in these regions which is indicated by the snow and ice. The hills and mountain essentially are the places of banishment for the wicked. Juxtaposed to the wasteland is a lush tropical jungle full of bountiful plants clearly representing the Garden of Eden. When viewing the tropical part of the images, a sense of mysticism is present because the sunlight does not penetrate all of the vegetation. There is the element of not knowing what lies in the dark regions and thus Church successfully portrayed the idea of exploring nature. The tree by far is the defining subject matter of the jungle region because of its large size in proportion to its surrounding. It is interesting to point out that the tree appears suspended in air, almost looking as if it could topple over, but there are some roots that are firmly in the ground. This was a reference to Church's knowledge of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve and the tree was an inference to knowledge which can be used constructively or destructively. This was Church's warning about the new science emerging from Darwin that threatened to remove God and man from one another possibly leading to man's destruction. In between the tropics and the mountains is a land mass that strongly resembles a pastoral landscape this serving as the temperate zone indicating ordinary life. Within this area sunlight directly beams down upon a person standing in front of a cross creating the effect of Divine presence. Here, Church sought to perpetuate the idea of an omnipotent God casting his eyes down upon the world.[8]

Immediately upon Church's return home, he became involved in the politics of the American Civil War. *Our Banner in the Sky* (1861) is clearly propaganda for the Union cause. "The clouds were arrayed in alternating streams of red and white, while an opening in them revealed a patch of blue sky with starts. Jutting upward in the left foreground the spar of a dead tree acted as a staff for the flag." [9] At the time when this image was displayed, it evoked a strong sense of patriotism in the mindset of the North and bitter hostilities against the South to come to a head. Northerners deemed Southerners as government

violators and desecrators of the American symbol of democracy, the flag. As a direct result, many people joined the Union army to crush the lawless rebels in the South. *Our Banner in the Sky* also demonstrated his belief that the wicked South had to be punished because of its abominable sin of slavery which threatened to spread westward and undermine Calvinist values. John K Howat suggests Church confirmed the North's victory and triumph over the rebellious south with the work entitled the *Aurora Borealis* (1866). The electrical lights of reds and greens gave the appearance of fireworks at a celebration. Since the Aurora is found only in the northern regions it was appropriate then to express the superiority of the North with a show of lights.[10]

During the middle to the late 1860s and early 1870s, Frederic Church made a pilgrimage to the Middle East to experience the birth place of the Christian faith. The first place that the artist visited was the Holy Land. In his image, the *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives* (1868), he stressed the Biblical significance of the olives as it related to the aftermath of the flood. The olives indicated a sense of peace and tranquility but also a rugged plant that endured the wrath of God during the flood. In other words the olive was a chosen plant to live and thrive in the new world created from the receded waters. Church paralleled the story of the Olive with that of the Puritans; these individuals weathered a tempestuous storm to thrive in the New World. The favorite part of Church Middle East trip was the city of Petra in the nation of Yemen. Petra was associated with the Old Testament story of Moses leading the Israelites (God's chosen people) to the Promised Land away from Egypt. At Petra, Church was inspired to paint the image of the structure of El Khasneh because of its location near large rock dwellings. *El Khasneh* (1874) evoked Church's sense of the Puritan past with the foundation of God's City on Plymouth Rock. Upon arriving in the city of Damascus, the artist commented on the architecture of a place he stayed:

> On one side a room entirely open on the court side, with raised dais, divans and decorated, then many other rooming opening by smallish door on court. All these rooms have fountains, dais's divans, mirrors etc. Walls and ceiling, highly and gorgeously decorated, and mirrors everywhere, amid the decorations, little bits of mirrors, doors and all woodwork, inlaid with ivory and mother of pearl[11].

All of what Church witnessed from his Middle Eastern journey found its way into the blueprints and eventual design of his Olana estate.[12]

After completing his Middle East travels an array of interesting artifacts followed him back to the Hudson. According to art researcher Kevin Avery, "fifteen crates of … rags amours, stuffs curiosities … old Clothes, stones from a house in Damascus, Arab spears-beads from Jerusalem-stones from Petra and 10,000 other things".[13] The artist believed that the exterior of the house should be designed to have a thick fortress like wall while the interior should be decorated with an intricate ornamental pattern characteristic of Moorish homes. There were two Persian architectural books used to design Church's home. Pascal Coste's *Monuments Modernes de la Perse* was used in the design of the piazza columns, water tower and stencils for the arches and *Les Arts Arabes* served as inspiration for the eastern window and decorative wood screen and interior design of the doors. Olana's two towers were designed as a two-story cubical structure projecting above the roof top. The stone wall of the first story were made of dark brown while the second story façade was arranged in geometric floral designs with red, yellow, and black bricks reminiscent of an Islamic garden. The unadorned western façade allowed the Church's to view the natural beauty of the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains. Inside the home, Church used bronze and aluminum powders in the creation of the stencils. The colors of the halls, arches, and walls are adorned with yellow, purple, salmon, red, gold-brown, green, and coral. Church sought to link each room by color as he saw in the Middle Eastern structures. He successfully brought back the Syria, Israel, Lebanon, and Yemen to his estate.[14]

Franklin Kelly claims that the landscape of Olana was designed as if Church was constructing a painting. Located between the house and the park was the southern portion of the acreage which provided a far view of the mountains and river. "The lake formed(s) the park's southern boundary, providing a visual plane where the eye could rest and illuminate the park with reflections of the house trees, and sky."[15] On the north and west sides of Olana there was a quick transition to woodlands. Roads were constructed to make their way through an array of natural settings ranging from pastoral to dark hemlock forests, to sun-dappled woodlands, and serene bodies of water. All roads led to the center of the property

but each road evoked a pleasurable drive for the Church's. Frederic Church deliberately arranged the landscape of the property to experience God and nature everyday. In other words, the setting was a painting that came to life which provided a natural dwelling for Church himself. Essentially the artist was seeking to carve out an image he could actually dwell in and experience God with nature everyday.[16]

Frederic Edwin Church was by far one of the most distinguished artists of nineteenth century America. His various paintings brought American nature to life but also evoked the feelings of American society throughout various times of the century. Although he was trained by Cole, Church's artistic and political views began to separate from his master but what remained constant were his religious themes that continued to be an integral part of his images. Church decided to expand his artistic career by traveling to South America with Humboldt and the Middle East. Olana also came to symbolize a meeting of romantic landscape with housing architecture foreign to the United States. This place was his own private dwelling located in the region where he began his artist career with Thomas Cole.

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[1] John. K Howat. *Frederic Church* (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 3-6; Franklin Kelly. *Frederic Edwin Church and the National Landscape* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1988), 1-6; Franklin Kelly, Stephen Jay Gould, James Anthony Ryan, and Debora Rindge. *Frederic Edwin Church* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 34.

[2] Franklin Kelly and Gerald Carr. *The Early Landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church* (Fort Worth Texas: Amon Carter Museum, 1987), 31-44; Kelly, "*Frederic Edwin Church and the National Landscape*," 6-13; Howat 35-36, 25,29; Kelly "Frederic Edwin Church," 30-33.

[3] Howat, 37-38, 40-41; Kelly and Carr, "*The Early Landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church*", 35-47; Kelly, "*Frederic Church and the National Landscape,"*14-28, 102-118; Kelly, "Frederic Edwin Church," 33-38.

[4] Kelly, "*Frederic Church and the National Landscape,"* 53.

[5] Kelly, "*Frederic Edwin Church*," 38-46; Kelly and Carr, "*The Early Landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church*," 47-76; Kelly, "*Frederic Edwin Church and the National Landscape*," 28-56. Howat, 64, 39-40.

[6] Howat, 69-74, 91-96; Kelly, "*Frederic Edwin Church*," 46-48, 51-52, 58-61, 63-64; Kelly, "*Frederic Church and the National Landscape,"* 67-79; Robert Hughes. *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Alfred, 1997), 159.

[7] Kevin Avery. *Church's Great Picture: The Heart of the Andes* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993) 14-23; Howat, 43-66, Hughes, 160; Kelly, "*Frederic Edwin Church*," 66-67.

[8] Kevin Avery. *Church's Great Picture: The Heart of the Andes* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993) 23-39; Howat, 83-90, Hughes, 161; Kelly, "*Frederic Edwin Church*," 94-107.

[9] Howat, 107.

[10]Howat, 105-108, 133-140; Kelly, "*Frederic Church and the National Landscape,"* 118-121; Kelly, "*Frederic Edwin Church,"* 57-65 Hughes, 161-162

[11] Howat, 143.

[12] Howat, 140-147; Kelly, "*Frederic Edwin Church,"* 130; Hughes 162.

[13] Kevin Avery. *Treasures from Olana: Landscapes by Frederic Edwin Church* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 27.

[14] Howat; 157-164;Hughes 163-165; Kelly and Carr, "*Frederic Edwin Church,"* 131-144. Kelly, "*The Early Landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church,"* 3-8.

[15] Kelly, "*Frederic Edwin Church,"* 147.
[16] Kelly, "*Frederic Edwin Church*,"147-149.